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SKEWED MOVES AND TENDER MERCIES: A MEMOIR OF ALCHEMY, CLARITY, AND GRACE

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: This is a work of creative nonfiction. The events are portrayed to the best of the author’s memory. While all the stories in this book are true, most of the names and many identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.
To Family and friends

And the housemates who entered my life and in their special way

To jumpstart a long-delayed journey towards my true north.
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humor, and unwavering support

and

Professor Brian Clements

Whose kindness and patience, offered many years ago,

kept me hopeful that I would complete this story
ABSTRACT

*Skewed Moves and Tender Mercies: A Memoir of Alchemy, Clarity, and Grace*

At age 54, when Nickie was heading to divorce court, she also began a fantastical inward journey to revisit her pivotal past experiences. Now at 60 and regrouping from a few setbacks to her planned move to California, Nickie has a quixotic, exotic dream about Craig, her remarried ex-husband. She learns that he has returned to New Haven and is getting divorced. Attending their daughter’s graduation and wedding over the past two years, they were cordial to each other, so Nickie hopes that Craig will finally answer one of two questions that plague her. “What really happened that had made you want a divorce? The second question will wait until she moves to California, where she plans to ask her elderly mother, “Did you ever intend for me to return home?” The answers to each of these questions can’t change her past, but the answers might help her better understand herself as she moves towards her future.

Craig’s news confuses Nickie, who has finally released any hope of learning the truth of why he left. She has grown and begins to review the past five years of moving in and out of shared spaces and how these moves have supported her spiritual and emotional evolutions. Renting her extra bedrooms to Modani and three couples is the first step that helps Nickie to better understand the nature of relationships, sacrifice and purpose. The subsequent homes she moves into and out of also rekindle her natural social-justice instincts, and cause her to be evicted from the house and leads her to Woodland Street, where she feels that she has come full circle. The idealistic couple who live there, challenge her last nerve and inspire her to release her fear of abandonment, and move toward a more rewarding future by seeking her True North.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ................................................................. iv

Abstract ................................................................................... v

Prospectus .............................................................................. xi

Refuge ..................................................................................... 1

Why Him? Why Now? ............................................................... 2

Audry ..................................................................................... 9

Flotsams ................................................................................. 16

The Elephant in the Room ......................................................... 21

The Poke .................................................................................. 24

First Light ............................................................................... 27

Forgiveness .............................................................................. 32

New News ............................................................................... 44

Send in the Cards .................................................................. 48

Love and Murder .................................................................... 52

School Dazed .......................................................................... 63

Kismet .................................................................................... 69
A Paper and a Straw on a Camel’s Back.................................................................78
Mother’s Day...........................................................................................................87
Providence Calling...................................................................................................98
A Knock at the Door...............................................................................................103
Meals and Tales.....................................................................................................115
Gimmie Shelter......................................................................................................124
Jane, Invisible..........................................................................................................131
Heroes and Villains...............................................................................................138
Blue Skies...............................................................................................................147
Father’s Day............................................................................................................154
Pit Stop....................................................................................................................162
Love and Dessert....................................................................................................166
Bing Go...................................................................................................................181
France.......................................................................................................................188
Friday the 13th.......................................................................................................196
Oliver Road.............................................................................................................203
Whitney Avenue...................................................................................................214
The King’s Highway or My Way.......................................................... 229
Sheldon Terrace............................................................................. 243
Read Street.................................................................................... 256
Woodland Street.......................................................................... 275
December 23, 2014..................................................................... 301
Epilogue......................................................................................... 302
Bibliography.................................................................................. 307
INTRODUCTION

For five years, Nickie has been meeting and living with people who have wittingly or unwittingly ignited in her some of her most painful past and current memories. Re-visioning old hurts through fresh eyes serves to help her to help them and herself resolve their problems. Fresh perspectives convert her usual arrogant arguments into calmer compromises. New friends, a new job, graduate school and substitute teaching also contribute to her new confidence. Preparing to move to California in eight weeks and live with John, her little brother, because “family has to take you in,” she faces unexpected financial hardship. Then she must change her plans when John refuses to let her bring her intrepid cat and companion, Audry, . After searching for other alternatives, Nickie feels that she has no choice but to leave Audry with a new family she finds on Craigslist. Feeling distraught at having abandoned her comadres Nickie collapses onto her bed, considers the irony and falls into a coma-like sleep.

Inside her dark bedroom, a radio announcer awakens her from an unsolicited and steamy erotic dream with Craig, her remarried ex-husband. The combination of her confusion about her dream and her longing for a new love, troubles her throughout the morning. Usually such vivid dreams portend something. Does this portend something? After she emails Craig about his items he left with her after he moved away, they agree to leave them at the home of mutual friends.

The following afternoon, an email from Craig reveals that he is getting divorced and has moved back to New Haven. Now the dream makes some sense.

Aware of her heightened intuition, she begins consulting a few metaphysical tools for some insight. At the same time, she begins to remember those memories that have been leading
her to fresh perspectives and behaviors. Dispassionately, she reviews in their entirety, including present day, those encounters and their impact on her life. She still has feelings for her ex-husband, but she also understands that she was and is different. Still, she would like to have some kind of friendship with him.

Looking back, Nickie recalls her divorce’s warning signs: songs while she gardened, Craig’s sudden interest in new clothes, Rhea’s two-year-old Tarot card warning about a huge shakeup the year Craig asked for the divorce.

Beginning with Modani, the first visitor, Nickie recalls what she has learned about compromise, respect and showing affection from living with three couples, a young child and Ceres, one of her closest friends. All of these people move into her home where she becomes more than a landlord and her tenants more than renters.

After selling the house, she and Audry move into and out of six more spaces where she meets new housemates who also ignite memories, require her advice, challenges her patience, and at one place, forces her to summon the police. Surprisingly, these encounters are mutually beneficial, resulting in wisdom gained for everyone. At the final Connecticut residence, a mixed-race couple presents her with phenomenal insights. Shelli deliberately provokes Nickie’s worst instincts but also reminds her to retain her integrity and, when necessary, fight, while Antony reminds Nickie that she is never alone in wondering about missing answers about her life.

As Nickie contemplates moving to California to live with her eldest daughter Charmaine, she considers that her needs will impact her daughter and young granddaughter. Nickie’s relationship with Charmaine’s father, after a period of friendship, falters. When she refuses to
compromise on what she considers as his silly rule, she suddenly realizes how passive she had been when they were a couple.

After going to Florida to attend her niece’s graduation ends in frustration, and both her eldest brother and older sister attack her character, Nickie is no longer silent about how she was treated by their mother and will not let her siblings use her living with her grandparents as a way to belittle her positive self-image.

The epilogue reveals that Nickie’s plans are completely scuttled a week before her major move. She will instead, visit her youngest daughter, Phoebe and her new husband over Christmas vacation, and welcome 2015, with a visit to Jillian, her former mother-in-law. Not until August 2016, does Nickie move to California after an unresolved loose end with Craig is tied up. Then she and her cousin Jerome begin the drive to California and a new beginning.

Nickie no longer seems to need the answers to her question from Craig regarding their divorce and, from her mother, the one question that has nagged her for decades: “Did you ever want me to come back home?” but she reserves the right to reconsider.
SKEWED MOVES AND TENDER MERCIES:

A MEMOIR OF ALCHEMY, CLARITY. AND GRACE
REFUGE

Once, I believed that inside of

each wooden and concrete home

I would find refuge

and be saved from the often

difficult and diffident

outside

Mostly, I was wrong because

it would take a long time

and much discomfort

to realize and embrace

my refuge

within.
Why Him? Why Now?

I’ve been trying to get down to the heart of the matter

“Forgiveness,” Don Henley

Woodland Street, New Haven, Connecticut

Sunday, November 2, 2014

The full moon’s amber glow streams through my bedroom window, and, like honey, spreads across the rumpled quilt. Slightly aroused from dozing, I sense his shadowed presence gathering up my flotsam—the writing notes I left on the bed that he is carefully placing on the dresser. I love his sweet resignation to my worrisome habit. A gentle breeze amiably lifts the sheer panel high enough above the candle flame to prevent it from catching fire. Anticipating his tanned arms slowly and deliberately joining me in sensuous recline, I inhale deeply and close my eyes to hear his movement towards us-ness. The back of his fingers delicately grazes my tawny neck. Aroused, I smile and open my eyes to see . . . Craig, my ex-husband, leaning over me!

“This is BBC radio, and you are listening to Hard Talk,” the intensity of the Englishman’s voice startles me awake from the steamy dream. There is no soft candlelight glowing inside the bedroom Craig and I no longer own. Only predawn blackness cloaks the inside and outside of my third-floor bedroom in the shared apartment I moved into eighteen months ago.

“Noooo,” I protest and reach over to click off the radio and scramble back into an unsolicited titillation. Instead, I sleep dreamless and reawaken later to early morning sunlight snaking through the mini-blind slits of three large windows and silently meandering along the sage green knee-wall customary in top floor apartments. 5:45 A.M. glows red next to my bed. A little
miffed, I am also a bit embarrassed and perplexed by my outrageous dream. “Why this dream? Why him? Why now?”

Instinctively, I reach behind me to rub Audry awake from her usual soft-snore slumber, but I touch her bare pillow. “Oh, God!” Audry’s absence was my catalyst for falling into a coma-like sleep. Yesterday I made what I hope is the best move for her. I took her to a new home and a lovely couple five blocks away, but the boulder weight of that move comes into focus.

Curling into a fetal ball, I crawl beneath my heavy down comforter, surrendering to despair and contemplating the unconsummated passion. At age 60, I anticipated neither. Neither had I anticipated my divorce from Craig five years ago nor, four years ago, when he and Tina held a small, elegant-looking wedding inside a spacious San Francisco church, the day after I had closed on our house. “Hmmph!” I remember that Friday the 13th and my struggle to get the house ready for the closing. I was incensed by the snarl in his voice when he explained why he would not be at the closing.

“I am getting married tomorrow” was a reasonable excuse, but, like so many other times in the last few years, I had felt like the proverbial last one to know! I saw the photos on Facebook because, unlike me, Craig does not restrict his page to only family and friends. I had felt better knowing that neither Phoebe nor Charmaine or the few close friends we still had in common would attend. I wasn’t so sure about Paulo—his son. At least my daughters had expressed a sense of loyalty to their mom. For twenty-five years, Craig was Charmaine’s stepfather, and yet our families maintain our relationships.
Last August was his fourth wedding anniversary to wife number three. In June, he had finally moved to Chicago to live with her and her children. So my dream and that desire feel inappropriate and weird.

I hate drudging up the past, but here it comes and, with lyrics from ancient songs. I force positive lyrics—“Gone are the dark clouds that had me down; it’s gonna to be a bright, sunshiny day”—hopefully true, until frustration intrudes. I still don’t know exactly what happened to make him declare so abruptly that our twenty-three-year marriage was over. “The answer my friend, is blowing in the wind.”

Craig is re-married.

I have never fully understood or totally agreed to our trek to divorce court, but, after I returned home from our daughter’s quickly-decided-for-the-last-day-in-May wedding, I had actually sung, “I can see clearly now the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that had me down. It’s gonna be a bright, bright, sunshiny day.” It was true. The memory helps for a minute. So, why him? Why now?

I have not remembered many dreams this vividly since my “dark-night-of-the-soul” dream in the middle of the afternoon in our the downstairs bedroom on Woodlawn Street. I am one of those precognitive dreams, visionary people.

“You are an Empath. You most likely have psychic abilities,” Korah had revealed to me in 1976 when I was pregnant with Charmaine. We faced each other across a small table, and Korah read my astrology chart. It was my first foray into metaphysical teachings, and she was correct. My empathy and somewhat psychic sense is not something that I can help. It was one reason I had stopped being a Jehovah’s Witness after one of the bishops had said that precognitive
dreams were Satan inspired. I am not evil! I wonder what they would say about last night’s dream. *Fuck you folks.* I did not ask for the dream, never saw it coming, but I remember every scintillating detail.

Scrunching my face I summon up the last time I saw Craig. *Six months ago, at Phoebe’s wedding.* Phoebe is our child. Charmaine is mine, and Paulo is Craig’s son, but they all remain close. *At the wedding in Berkeley, time and distance had disappeared, although they live in different regions. And that was such a gorgeous, sun-filled Saturday.*

The wedding was in the most romantic section of a popular park. Watching it had transported me back to the bright afternoon that Craig and I had stood underneath the shade of a towering oak tree, as Phoebe and Barry exchanged their vows in front of a humongous stone fireplace. We all witnessed their exchange while sitting around festively decorated picnic tables. It was *déjà vu* all over again.

“Sitting directly across from Craig at the picnic table in the patio where the wedding reception was held did seem fascinatedly destined,” I whisper. It was dark when Charmaine and I had arrived, and Craig’s sister had waved us over to their section and the few seats left. This was the bride and groom’s favorite Mexican restaurant, and it had felt like old-home week. I had not seen Craig’s family since Phoebe’s graduation last May. Before that, it was Christmas 2007. I think about that. 2007, wow. *I had suppressed that rabbit hole of hurt in favor of kinship. Craig had lied to me about telling his family why he would not be with them for the holidays. The long-planned, weeklong stay was bittersweet. What he did was thoughtless, but I felt that their concern and confusion were genuine. In some ways, I am glad that I went and had a fabulous time with them and Charmaine.*
I remember hiding my free-floating anxiety when I realized I would be sitting directly across from my ex-husband and his wife, Tina. I acted like it was the most natural thing in the world because we had been very cordial and exchanged friendly banter at Phoebe’s graduation from U.C. Berkeley last year. Long gone was my shocking discovery that Craig had first introduced me to Tina three years before their marriage. The past is past. Like old friends, we sat together and Craig and I talked about cooking, which felt a little bittersweet because Craig was our family cook. *I miss his cooking. It just isn’t as much fun cooking for one.*

Phoebe asked both Craig and I to each say a toast at the reception. I stood up at my seat, and Craig stood at the front of the room. He spoke with eloquent nervousness that I was sure his late father, whom I’d adored, would have been very proud of his speech. As he returned to our table, I suddenly felt cold and pulled my jacket tight around my arms.

“It’s so chilly in here,” I blurted out while staring at the red coils on the electric heaters high above my head. The heating coils were aimed at the people sitting across, but not directly beneath them.

“Well, it’s pretty warm over here. Why don’t you take my seat?” Tina quickly offered. The chatter and laughter at our table seemed to stop and then resumed.

“Thanks, but that’s okay,” I replied and ignored a sense of domestic distress.

I flew home the next day and surrendered all expectancy that Craig would explain to me why he had abandoned our marriage the moment we had time, freedom and money to enjoy being empty-nesters. By this time, I have figured out much of it myself, but my sense of injustice wanted him to talk to him about it. I wanted to know if we were on the same page.
Underneath the comforter, I hear a truth. Early on, your intuition was keen, but you kept ignoring it. Then you finally realized that all the signs had begun appearing a few years earlier! I know this. But be honest, would I feel this distressed if I were dating someone? What about William? I wonder and then miss Audry even more. “Wait. Am I serious? The last time I saw William, he was scary. All kinds of warning signals had blared: do not drive to Sky King Art Center with this man even if you did have a blast there a few years ago. Until I had flipped that coin, I didn’t trust even him. Wow! Gotta trust your coin.

I am different than I was on June 17, 2009, our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and the date of our divorce. At least I was entitled to a decent alimony.

Last week Craig’s doppelganger was walking on Whitney Avenue. Yesterday, I was sad because I had said goodbye to my Audry. The ease of finding her good parents makes me feel like I am being guided to leave behind all of my most precious possessions in order to move forward in my life. They have been moved into storage units, sold at tag sales, consigned, especially my never-uttered hope to rekindle the spiritual link that Craig and I had once shared.

The eighteen months that I have lived here have been a comedy of frustrating errors but usually followed by some mind-blowing epiphanies. All of my past and present housemates have stoked a prescient memory, and, since family has to take you in, moving back to California seems to makes sense, well, at least until John said, “You can’t bring your cat!”

Of my three sisters and five brothers, Earl, who died years ago, was my favorite, but I realize that, for better and worse, John, my younger brother and I are the most compatible. And I do mean for better and worse because we, as Irish twins, share a lot of the same traits. Although he is a minister, we are more spiritual than religious. People who seek our advice seem to believe
that we possess wisdom. I believe John is wise except when we stubbornly argue philosophically. Maybe my honesty is accepted as wisdom—it’s flattering. John and I are generous with our time but not with money, which neither of has in abundance. What I do recognize as our best shared trait is our capacity to forgive and forget, at least with some people. We have learned that it is better to actually forgive and remember. We have lengthy telephone conversations, and he seemed glad that I was going to live with him until we disagreed about Audry.

John was unapologetic when I complained that I did not see his pit bull when I had spent the night last year. “That was because I put him in the garage. I used to have two dogs but one died. I can’t believe that you did not hear him,” he said in perfect defense of his objection to my bringing Audry. What a long, strange trip it’s been so far.

I spent most of Thursday evening failing to debug my laptop before I remembered that I have a netbook, I was feeling defeated on so many levels that not dragging Audry to yet another place where she had to remain inside our bedroom guided me to my decision. Bleary eyed, I clicked on the Seeking Pets link on Craigslist, sure that I would fail in those efforts, too. “October was a wearing-out-my-nerves month. November has to be better.”

Hopefully, I have resolved all of my recent glitches. The gas and food money from the tag sales and consignments paid for my car damage after I collided into my very nice former math teacher’s late-model Mercedes Benz. If I have to use my credit cards, so be it. John’s decree has put the final nail in the coffin of my original plans. Audry will not be riding shotgun. I confront and comfort my exhausted betrayer feelings. Audry might think that I have abandoned her. So why am I dreaming about my remarried ex-husband? I don’t know.
Audry

“Those who are abandoned, abandon,” I reread the haunting words in Steve Jobs’ biography of the same name. Reading them shortly after his death had resonated with me in such a way that I felt him a kindred spirit. Although Jobs was well cared for and loved by his adopted parents and I by my maternal grandparents, the same unresolved sense of being abandoned by our birth parents had impacted our sense of belonging and we were too afraid to admit it. A few years before he died, Jobs finally realized that many saw him as rude and shallow, difficult, opinionated, and distrustful of authority, even if he was a marketing genius. And who he had become probably originated with a seven-year-old neighbor girl’s saying that his “real” parents did not want him. As he faced his death, he finally admitted what those who knew this story had long ago concluded: feeling that he might have been unwanted had made him distrustful of adult authority. His story sounded like my story, and he was exactly twelve months younger than I, but it was not Audry’s story.

Last Friday night, Audry sat calmly while I clipped her mass of mangled fur. To her new family, she would look well-groomed and loved—not abandoned. Sitting snug inside her carrier, she probably thought I was taking her to Rick’s house for a few days, but I had taken her to the Craigslist couple who had posted “wanted, mature female cat to share home with loving couple.”

After sitting comfortably on a wooden kitchen chair inside the couple’s small but comfortable living room, I opened Audry’s carrier door. She did not step out. Instead, she stared at me, confused and hesitant as if asking, “Where’s Rick?” Did he move?” I waited for her to decide when it was safe to come out and instinctively begin exploring the house. I trusted Audry’s new people. I told them how special she is.
“You can visit her anytime. We can email you photos,” the young man had said. When I saw that they had a balcony where Audry could sunbathe, any hesitance that I had regarding her comfort had evaporated. As much as I loved my cats, I could not entertain having another.

Out of all the cats I had owned before and with Craig, Audry was one that I had chosen. Most of my cats were thrust into my arms by panicky owners. All were beautiful and well cared for. Most had eventually died of old age or gone to homes of my cat-lover friends. There were never more than two or less than one. Their personalities had reflected their names. Miss Lillian was like Scarlett O’Hara, and Craig’s mother, Jillian, had discovered her in her backyard when we first arrived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the summer Phoebe turned five years old. My own mother had mistakenly thought that we were moving to Mexico. I reassured her that New Mexico is actually in the fifty states. Jillian kept Miss Lillian and then gave her to us after we moved into our own apartment about a quarter of a mile from her house.

Craig and I liked the idea of cats having company, so when we saw Maia, a kitten, sitting in a cage in the center of a nearby pet store surrounded by barking dogs, we were startled. “She’s brave, but please take her,” the store owner had pleaded. Maia would birth two litters, and we kept one of her kittens that we named Babe. He slept on Phoebe’s bed. After we moved to Connecticut, Leslie, a friend and neighbor, had pleaded with us to give her friend’s white Persian cat a home.

The cat was neither Persian nor solid white, but he was cocky like Elvis Presley, the king. For two years, four cats, two parents and two children lived on the second floor of a roomy two-bedroom apartment until Babe died after being hit by a car. We buried him in the backyard, a sad ritual that would be performed for all of our beloved pets when they died.
After we settled on Woodlawn Street, Phoebe and I were shopping for food at the pet store when the orange tabby kitten with the kink at the tip of its tale, was placed into Phoebe’s twelve-year-old arms. “He’s the runt of the litter,” said the owner. Phoebe, not me, walked into the house with yet another cat. Elvis never accepted Elmo (the name we chose for him). A year later, when Elvis died, Craig had lost a hammock mate.

Audry was not Elvis’s replacement, but she would be a really bright light in our now-empty nest. Elmo wasn’t the snuggle-cat we hoped him to be. He looked adorable but could be finicky. Maybe he missed Phoebe, who had left home to attend college in Maryland. A lot was going on. I had quit my job at Yale but was hired by one of the professional schools to do event planning. The money could come in handy for some renovations that I had in mind for the house.

“There is a really brave kitten climbing though that pile of lumber over there, and it is the cutest little rascal I’ve ever seen,” said the carpenter who was remodeling ours neighbors’ garage.

I had crossed the street to see what the carpenters were doing. Since our friends were architects, I might hire their professionals. I greeted him and asked to see their work. I walked around the project, asking questions. The contractor had pointed to a kitten scampering through the discarded wood.

“She lives next door, and her owner is looking to give her away. I wish I could take her,” he sighed.

Pocketing his business card, I walked over to the pile. Fearless gray eyes blinked from behind a pile of lumber. Then like a tease, she scurried in and out of the pile, daring me to catch her. Instantly, I was smitten by her moxie and knocked on the owner’s door. She was pleasant
and average looking, standing on her front porch wearing stretch slacks and a loose shirt. Her son had married and moved away but had left his pooper-dog, the scourge of the block, with her.

“She’s eight weeks old and weaned,” she said, heading to coax the kitten out from the pile. Smiling, she placed the mischievous, bodacious, warm, and snuggly kitten inside my arms. This time, I was the one to thrust a cat into Craig’s arms. He was hooked.

Audry was named not after the Oscar winner Audrey Hepburn, as people always assumed but, for the charming and giant man-eating plant in the play *The Little Shop of Horrors*. Her inauspicious first weekend at her new home would further define her as feisty, flirty, and flighty.

Like a tease, my dream seeps back in although I force it back so I can continue to reminisce about Audry. Maia had immediately accepted Audry to mother and train, while Elmo, just as quickly, had rejected her with similar snarling and swiping to what Elvis had done to him. Her second day at the house, Craig and I had to drive to Baltimore to attend parents’ weekend at Phoebe’s college.

Carefully preparing for the trip, we decided to leave Elvis entry, food, water, and litter inside the basement, where he could come and go as he pleased. Maia and Audry would remain inside the house with enough food, water, and litter for the weekend. As a backup, we hired our neighbor’s teenager to bring in the mail and look in on the cats.

Upon entering the house after the trip, we found Maia sitting outside of and listening to a deathly howl coming from inside the closed office. Somehow, the office door had shut and trapped Audry inside with water but no food or litter. Maia, ever the mom-cat must have been trying to reassure her that she was not alone.
As if warning us that all was not right with the new cat, Maia glared at us and walked away. When we opened the door, Audry, livid, raced past us and ran all around the downstairs, successfully ducking and dodging any attempts to catch her. Finally, Craig and I guarded an entry, and as she attempted to dodge him, Craig grabbed and held her tightly against his chest. She wriggled, howled, and tried to scratch him until she seemed to realize that we were not the enemy. We begged for her forgiveness. Maia looked disgusted with us. Elvis had been Craig’s intrepid companion until he died a year before Audry came to live with us. He still missed him, but, Audry’s fearless-character had made our loss easier to bear.

Maia, who was quite elderly, must have taught Audry some survival skills and social graces. Maia died a year later, and Audry seemed to be channeling her. She became my constant companion but with her own style. Unlike Maia, who usually curled up by my head on the bed, Audry preferred to sleep anywhere else in the house and was now balled up at the foot of my bed. She, who had favored chasing butterflies and salamanders in the backyard, now napped in the flowerbeds while I gardened. She had even tried hunting, something Maia had mastered, even keeping some of her prey alive and placing it at my feet. Audry had tried but had the good sense to stop failing. Maia and I had a special bond. For years, her soothing company on my lap when I relaxed on the sofa was a wonderful comfort.

Elmo, always moody, had never bonded with Audry, and he had begun staying downstairs, perhaps waiting for Craig’s return. After the breakup, divorce, and selling of the house, Audry’s companionship had been my harbor on difficult days and my delight in triumphs.

Yesterday, while walking down the stairs from Audry’s new home, I had crumbled into a heap of muffled sobs. Back inside my car, I had bawled like a baby behind rolled-up windows
while slowly driving home. It was midafternoon and sunny with a light breeze, but I felt dark and ragged. At home, the stair railings helped me pull myself up the three flights of stairs. Neither of my two apartment mates was home. Inside my room, I flung myself across the bed and fell into a deep, unexpectedly sensual sleep.

What if the radio had not awakened me? Stop. This is about Audry. I don’t think I abandoned her, not like Charmaine’s father, who moved and left me with our one-month-old. About six years ago, when I was told the story of how I went to live with my grandparents, I had wondered if Mother had abandoned me, but I was too startled by the story to ask my uncle. And remembering Mother’s voice at the table, I was terrified by her possible answer. The irony is a sharp knife in the gut.

None of my past seemed important until I faced divorce, and then it all seemed to come roaring in waves that carried all these foreign strangers to my domestic shore. After they left, so many other strangers, both domestic and foreign, have forged new insights on my memoires of my past, and the philosophies I relied on began shifting to cope with my present challenges. Even if my mother had never intended for me to return to the fold to live with her and be the seventh of her eight children, I did return. But for years, that fearful question haunted me, restrained my trust.

“Audry, I am sixty-three years old, and I have been sharing living spaces with other people and I have learned a lot about myself through watching and interacting with them. I am a divorced graduate student, and I am moving on without you because I gave up searching for a place where we both could live and I am sorry.”
Like a Craigslist explorer, I had searched in Sacramento, Santa Cruz, and Venice Beach, California, from my bedroom until I was bleary-eyed. At 1 A.M., fighting sleep and feeling hopeless, I had considered the unthinkable and clicked on People Seeking Pets.

Clearly, it was destiny because the first posting read, ‘I am seeking a mature female cat.’ I rubbed droopy eyes and reread it. “When I was a kid, my grandmother had a lot of cats. I hope to find a mature cat to live with me and my partner in a good home.” Everything I was attempting to do to prepare our move was blocked, and then this beacon appeared.

At the new place, Audry seemed to relax after scoping out the rooms, but I know her so well. When I last left her at Rick’s house, he reported, “I know she is comfortable here, but she sometimes waits for you at my front door.” I know that she will wonder where I am. Maybe, she will feel abandoned, at least until she feels how much they love her. “I hope it doesn’t take you too long,” I whisper to her pillow. John had said I could not bring her. It was a difficult decision, but I believe serendipity stepped in. I have not abandoned her. When my father left and Mother needed help, her parents took me around the corner to live with them. But no one had told me that John’s mother was my mother. I have to know, was she abandoning me? I have to know; I will ask her when I get to L.A. So why this dream why now?
Flotsams

Sitting up on my bed, my meditation on abandoning Audry reminds me of a long-ago summer visit with my widowed mother when I was 31. We are standing inside her living room. Married and pregnant with Phoebe, on weekends I liked driving from Santa Cruz to Los Angeles to visit the family and friends that I missed. Leaving my home just after daybreak meant that the lengthy and leisurely drive gave me time to rehearse questions I planned to ask my mother about my childhood. It was my way of trying to bond with her because I had never really felt that warm, TV-commercial-mom love from her. Later, as a mother of three, I think that my children did feel from me what I had sought from her.

Only after becoming a mother have I come to understand how raising so many children can drain your energy, your personal dreams, as you service the needs of others. That day, I drive and remember my mother as always looking for and finding the main chance for her children to elevate themselves. She was PTA president and Cub Scout den mother; she had enrolled us in the majorettes and charm school. Unlike my older sisters, I had resisted becoming a debutant, but her intervention with? the sponsors guaranteed that I would be one at age 17. A year later, I would understand the usefulness of that event on a job resume.

The first time I felt bottomless love was for my grandparents, whom I was allowed to believe were my parents. I would have sacrificed my life for them. They were wise and generous and calming and funny. I think I am like my mother, who played piano and would have been a great teacher. She was ambitious, but her ambitions were stunted because of the needs of her children. My own choices had been constrained by being a caregiver on all levels for my own family, and now they are adults and taking care of themselves.
My visits to Mother were generally fun. I would usually ask a question or two about my childhood because it helped me better understand my emotional distance from intimacy—it was fleeting, negotiable.

During my last visit, I ask her, “Why did you marry Dad? We are sitting next to each other on her blue satin, French provincial sofa, chatting about nothing in particular but enjoying each other’s company.

My question must have surprised her because she pauses before responding. Maybe I am the first of her children to ask about their courtship. I realize that I know more about my grandparents’ courtship than my parents’. I want to know something about my mother’s love life when she was young.

“Oh honey, he was tenacious,” she says, proud of his pursuit of her. “There were two other boys coming around, but your dad outlasted them. He was committed. He had told me, ’You gon’ marry me. Eventually, the other guys just faded away,’” she laughs. I recognize her nature. She admires commitment, especially to family. She was committed to our welfare because it was her duty. But to me, she always seemed more attentive to my two sisters, as if the energy she put into them was a better investment.

I remember their marriage as occasionally violent. I watched him pull her hair one afternoon as she napped on the sofa, but mostly his violence was with wounding words, denigrating her cleaning, cooking, jealous of her love for her siblings. His criticisms began every payday or the day before. Dad was not my brothers’ and sisters’ favorite parent—often buying him a small token gift on Father’s Day and forgetting his birthday even though it was on April Fool’s Day It was Mother who received a loving bounty on special days.
But, Dad and I had forged our bonds while I lived with my grandparents. I remember him visiting me when I was sick. He brought me Sprite and Lays potato chips. He sat and we talked. It is interesting that I do not remember my mother there, sitting with me, trying to soothe me. I remember hearing her and my grandmother chatting in the kitchen as if she came over to visit her. It is probably why I did not think she was my mother. She had not told me to call her Mother. I had not called the man who visited me whenever I was ill, Dad, because I did not understand that he was my father.

I remember that for a while, after I moved back to her home, Mother still sent me to my grandparents’ house whenever I became ill. My loyalties were confusing, and I had to learn to live with emotional and adult contradictions.

“Mother, why did you have so many children?” I ask next because money had always been in short supply, and Dad, who worked at a factory, did not happily part with “my money.” The fights were his pretexts to not give his wife the money she needed to pay the bills.

“We always wanted a big family!” she says decisively. Now I understand why my generation is called the Baby Boom.

Digesting puzzling answers takes time. Months might pass before I fully grasp their meanings. Years later on another visit, this time standing next to each other inside her living room on a sunny afternoon, I ask a question that has plagued me for a long, long time, “Mother, why was I the one who went to live with Mommy and Daddy?” This time, she looks away when answering.
“Mama and Daddy always wanted you,” she says, sounding as if their choosing me had reflected badly on her. The bitterness in her answer reminds me of her answer to a question at our dinner table on John’s sixth birthday. I was seven years old. I do not ask her anything else.

Years later, I will decide that her parents took care of toddler and seventh child, me, to ease my mother’s burden of raising eight children after our father left home. But on that particular afternoon, her answer made me want to know if she had ever intended for me to return to her house. Like at that dinner table, my voice mute, I swallowed my hurt and loved her for who she is.

The question is never far from my thoughts when I hear the harsh words some parents heap on their children. The adult world can seem pretty intimidating to small children. Those commercials of loving parents do not fit. At age seven, I has experienced my first sense of abandonment

It was informative how I had experienced my first emotional from my mother and began forming my first emotional barricades against adult insensitivity. I began to see some adults as hypocrites and liars.

My bullshit detector grew keener as I grew older, so did my cynicism. When I asked for truth and heard lies, my heart surrendered to my intellect. I still am not the warm, fuzzy, flirty, pleasant girl that men find attractive. Still, I enjoy fairy tales and a romantic comedy can drench my handkerchief.

I have become much more willing to give people the benefit of my usually obvious doubts. I love that I can trust and enjoy being more emotionally and physically present. The last time I saw Craig we had had such a good time chatting about the kids. That was six months ago. I am
looking forward, starting over in California. Still, I had that dream, and such dreams are, to me, for a reason.

Feeling better, I emerge from the rabbit hole of my past with a better perspective of the past two weeks, glad that daylight arrives later and leaves earlier, because I sleep better, well, not last night.
The Elephant is in the Room

My focus shifts to the glossy, lime-green shopping bags standing against the wall. Some are full of Craig’s “left-behinds,” and others are filled with my “must keep.” Inside one of Craig’s bags are photos of him, alone and with his and our families and friends. Not knowing if he wants photos of me or of us together makes me sad at how easily he could banish me and us from his memory.

I always keep the photos of friends and, if I have them, of former lovers. Tyrone is a part of my life. The reason Craig could enter my life was because I had finally left Tyrone. Five years of our fire-and-fury love affair had ended because of his infidelity. Three times, I had called off our engagement, and letting go had created a space for Craig to eventually enter my life. Tyrone and I will always be friends. He attended our wedding and knowing him, he has kept our photos.

Tyrone is Aries, but Craig is Scorpio, and I had read that once a Scorpio is finished with a relationship, there is no going back. The resolute tone of his “I’m done,” as he had described ending his relationship with his first wife, had reassured me when we were falling in love. When I was the subject of his ire, it was shocking.

I wonder what he will do with Paulo’s photos. Craig had practically ignored the photo album that Sarai had created for their son. I had chosen to see it as her record of their life before, during, and after their brief marriage. They had looked so young on their sunny wedding day at a park. Craig’s fat-curl blond hair framed his face. He and his groomsmen wore white tuxedos. Underneath her white lace gown, Sarai’s belly was swollen with Paulo. A few babies lay safe inside of a portable playpen. The words “Just married” were written in shaving cream on the
trunk, and tin cans were tied to the bumper of the black sports car. Unlike a less secure wife, I had admired the album. I wonder about his current wife’s attitude about me.

Next to that bag is another one holding a fraction of our once extensive album collection. Years later, he invested in CDs and then an iPod. I loved listening to vinyl. I sold the bulk of our combined collection at my first tag sale after we had found a buyer for the house. I am undecided about his CDs stored alphabetically inside four shallow bins underneath my bed. I had considered selling them on eBay but the postage and setup sounds like a hassle. Thankfully, he took his books the day he moved out. *It was on Mother’s Day. What a jerky thing to do.*

This situation is ironic because legally his things belong to me. The judge said so, but I don’t want to keep his most precious photos or music. He had asked for his CDs years ago, but I had already combined them into CD holder bags before the breakup, and at the time, it would have been a huge hassle to tackle the project. He had volunteered to do it, but I did not trust him to be careful with my belongings since he had not been careful with my heart.

Hundreds of my own sorted photos of my family and friends occupy two other glossy shopping bags. As a fun project, I had created an album for each of our children to look at when they visited us. Now I will deliver both Phoebe and Paulo photos on my way to Los Angeles. Charmaine received hers during my visit to Los Angeles as a new grandmother. Thinking about this makes me sad. My original plan had been to present each of them their albums when they and their children visited us.

*Photographs and blood cement family links. I love Craig’s family, and I scanned copies of his photos for them just in case. Craig does not harbor sentimental memories about his exes, I remember, so I am keeping our wedding photos, and I have to trust that he will give Paulo his*
photos and the baseball mitt that he gave him when he was in Little League. I tear up. My greatest challenge is to resist becoming upset.

Across from the bed is my messy antique golden-oak office desk where my favorite framed photos sit. On one, taken in May 2011, Charmaine, Phoebe, and I are bent over in a huddle above the cellphone. They had flown into Connecticut to attend my master’s degree graduation. Along with the streaming sunlight, my thoughts shift back to Phoebe’s wedding reception.

*I know I intuited something when Tina offered me her seat. But what was it? Craig was fidgety and kept leaving. “We all had a great time.” The coolness between us had thawed last year at Phoebe’s graduation. “But why did I dream about him?”* I am puzzled and frustrated by pleasure and pain.

Vivid dreams are often important. I began to understand this at around age 9 when I could easily recall them. As I grew older, I began dozing off, only to be awakened with a soft or violent twitch. Within a few days, I would hear about someone’s death, someone rich and famous like John F. Kennedy or someone whom I knew, like when my grandmother or my brother died. In this case, I decide to enjoy the tender sensuality of the dream. After all, it is kind of recent that we have been more than just amiable.
The Poke

Like a resentful hoarder, I glare at my small mounds of stuff against two walls, and I must decide on what to keep and let go. This morning has slowed me down. I had expected to be energetic and tackle this stuff.

“I guess I should at least see if Craig even wants his things. I can’t imagine that he doesn’t, but I never know when it comes to him.” Sitting up on my bed, my back against the wall, I embrace the silence of the apartment that I share with two other women. By this time, I would have been outside meandering around in my old Hamden neighborhood but not so much in New Haven. It is more interesting than Hamden, but in a way, I sometimes feel less safe here.

Perhaps, I should have given more thought to Craig’s suggestion to move to New Haven after Phoebe left for college. Now that I have lived in several neighborhoods of this small city, I clearly understand the charm and the variety of places to go, things to do, and people to see. Now, I couldn’t think of living anywhere else but New Haven if I were staying in Connecticut. But I am not staying.

My Craig dream hovers in the background while I seriously consider what to do with his “left behinds.” A flashlight memory occurs. Sharon’s information that I had no interest in a few weeks ago is now relevant.

“Well, you know that Craig stays with us whenever he is in town,” Sharon casually said as we ate dinner at the Yale Cabaret. I don’t remember how or why it came up. Craig talk is always a guest at our get-togethers and she always introduces the topic. I know she misses him and me together. I think she should matchmaker me with one of her hundreds of acquaintances.
Our relationship is interesting because I was friends with Sharon first. Craig and she were graduate school classmates at Yale University, when Sharon had come into my office one afternoon. As the Undergraduate Registrar for the American Studies Program, I knew most of Craig’s classmates from their parties. That afternoon, Sharon rather timidly introduced herself to me saying had heard from other students that I was a good person to talk to.

I was flattered and a willing ear, but I sometimes felt like a psychologist sitting at my office desk.

“You should hang one of those ‘THE PSYCHIATRIST IS IN; signs,” one of our undergraduate students had joked. I wasn’t so wise. I was just older than most of the students.

That day, I did not have much work to do and for two hours, Sharon and I chatted, first at my desk and then inside my boss’s office which offered us more privacy. I have no memory of our talk, but it was important enough to her that she stayed until late in the afternoon. After that day, she occasionally stopped by my office to chat, and eventually, we met off campus. She had suggested that Craig meet her husband, Donovan, and thus began our couple’s friendship.

Divorce means that life as you know it ceases to exist. You divide inanimate possessions like the house, furnishings, cars, and animate possessions like joint friendships and beloved in-laws. The rules surrounding these relationships are murky. Some friends become yours, some his, and some dissolve. The choices we all make are painful. Craig had taken the time to cultivate a deep friendship with Sharon and her husband.

Over the years, we all sat together at dinner theater and even a concert or two. We were always invited to each other’s parties. Our friendship with them is complex and complicated. Because of his Yale affiliation, Craig had more access to Sharon and Donovan. I was unaware of
Craig’s many of accomplishments until his colleague who was unaware of our separation said, “You must be so proud of your husband being elected to head the board of the Cabaret.”

I had expected to hear from Sharon soon after Craig had obviously informed them of our separation, but months had passed before I was invited to give them my bewildered account. At one of our dinner dates, Sharon cryptically mentioned meeting Craig’s new love. I nearly choked on my appetizer because it was the first time she was confirmed. Sharon’s friends began fishing for information and her opinions of the new woman, while I sat in stunned silence. So many tidbits of news was discussed that, like cotton, I just absorbed it. I don’t think Sharon ever meant to hurt me. I do think she was acting out of frustration with Craig and that she and Donovan are concerned about my welfare. Now, I can use her tidbit of Craig’s unsolicited information. Maybe our shared friends will be the conduit for moving his “left behinds” out of my bedroom and into their home. How it gets to Chicago is not my concern.

At 6:30 A.M., I type, “Craig, Sharon said that you stay at her and Donovan’s home when you are in town. I would like to leave your CDs and photos with them.” After making sure my email says exactly what I mean, I push Enter at 6:35 A.M.

Inside the shower, hot water crashes onto my flesh. I was not one-hundred percent sure that I was alone at home as I walked nearly naked through the living room to get to the bathroom. I feel lighter just knowing that I am moving forward. Audry is safe, and my car is repaired. It may take me a little longer to figure out where I will live in California, but I plan to begin driving across the country on December 23rd.
First Light

Sometimes, when I feel like I am being pulled in a new, unknown direction, I consult my Numerology Diamond Report. I use an online numerology program to see what cosmic influences have camped on my shoulder. I was introduced to serious metaphysics by Drew late in my pregnancy with our daughter, Charmaine. I still have no idea why he wanted me to meet the owner of the Crenshaw Metaphysics Center, but meeting Korah turned on the switch that lit my dormant psychic senses. With Korah, I discovered which astrological influences have shaped my outlook and my behavior.

My big-picture idealistic idea of saving the world, my habit of pointing out obvious hypocrisies of those in authority, my inclination towards solitude, and my fight for the rights of my friends describe me in my astrology chart, but I would not fully grasp their meanings until I was drawn to study numerology. It is interesting that I am inclined to study numerology because I am awful at math. If not for a chance meeting with a former college classmate, I would have completed every course except math and not received my undergraduate degree.

When my most vivid dreams require answers, astrology and numerology are what I read for insight when it is too late to telephone my friend Rhea, an astrologer I first met in the anthropology course that she was teaching. In mid-November 2007, a week after Craig moved into the downstairs bedroom I began reading my numerology reports to try and understand the domestic turmoil I was experiencing. I had never been that serious about the cosmos until that year.

Now, I regularly read my Diamond Report to determine my spiritual and human evolution for the year. Each year reveals the vibration of the four numbers that describe my Challenge,
Root, Action, and two possible outcomes. I was representing my identity, 19 is the catalyst of the quest, 11, described the guidance offered on the path. 3, described both the negative and the positive outcomes. Because I have given up Audry and suffered some serious setbacks to my plans and finally, because of the dream, I decide to review this year’s report.

The 1 Challenge is to my inner identity that allows me to maintain a separate reality. Events can force me to consider my feelings of closeness and love or separation and pain. It is a common yet important challenge, appearing many times in one’s chart. The oldest universal struggle is between heart and mind. I must determine which will be master and which, servant.

The 19 Root tells me that I am in a position of power and dominance that affects others (my family) in two ways, by being either financially or emotionally dependent on me or, my dependence on them, which means their lives are controlled by my needs. It is an unbalanced twist of fate and requires resolution.

An 11 Action or Help key requires that I use my sixth sense. “You are in a heightened state of awareness that is visible in deep-sleep, vivid dreams when I do not fight my intuition. Your dreams are more graphic and, with your reflection, more revealing. Rely on your “gut” to recognize subtle signals to help you respond to the current Root challenge well and efficient. Be sensitive to obscure messages people emit. You may become emotionally vulnerable and criticize may sting as if you’ve lost several layers of your tough-girl skin. Take advantage of your heightened intuition but reign in your emotions. Intuition, faith, and emotional stability are the keys.

A 3 outcome presents both a positive and negative potential. I will feel less inhibited and more optimistic and have a newly awakened creativity. This most desirable of outcomes affects
one’s ability to experience childlike simple joy and happiness. I may dress less conventional and more colorful. My sense of humor is expressed and my health can improve.

Or, the rare outcome is that I will feel more self-conscious and insecure, shy and withdrawn. At its worst, I could develop phobias or an obsessive behavior.

Reading the chart at the beginning of the year does not let me revel in the harvest of information. By now, I can pinpoint an issue and continuing resolutions relating to each number. Regarding the 1 influence, I feel deeply sad about Audry. If ever there was a recent painful separation, this is it. Overall, I feel close to people I care about and I care about people whom I am not close to because it’s my nature. With my 2 influence I now recognize both my dominance and dependence on my children. Their desire for me to be well and happy is expressed in many ways. Last year, Charmaine requested my input on her sperm donor. There were Phoebe’s requests for my input on her wedding and my visit with Charmaine in September to meet my new grandchild.

On the other hand, what had been a pleasant and fruitful visit with Charmaine and my new grandchild had ended with an illogical argument that her father, Drew, had instigated.

There were the fights I had with Flo and then Tony, my older sister and brother, in Florida last May.

Meditating on the 11, regarding Action, is the most compelling because it is seems to be unfolding, referring to not only last night’s dream but what I had intuited at Phoebe’s wedding and reception. When I returned home from the wedding, I had released all thoughts of Craig and I ever having that serious conversation he had promised and I moved on. Today, I offered to give him his belongings. The report seems solid, and I feel that I am on the right track for the best of
the two 3 outcomes. I need a release from the sadness of yesterday and the confusion of this morning. Sort of satisfied with my take on the reading,

Hoping that I sound matter of fact, I will wait for Craig’s reply since there is a one-hour time difference between us. I remember him as an early riser.

Both buoyed and reflective about this morning’s ruminations, I turn the knob inside the bathtub, and water whooshes past my arm to crash onto the rear shower wall.

“Yikes, it’s cold!” I shriek, after stepping underneath and turning up the hot water. Hopefully these old pipes wash away my lingering doubts. After a few sputters warmer water bursts through, coating me in a silky moist baptism and releasing a pleasant childhood scene.

*Laughter coming from inside of Mommy’s kitchen makes me stand up inside my crib. A three-year-old bundle of sensuality, my fingers squeeze the jailer bars that protect me from moving too far, too fast, and too soon. Touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight inform my budding world and view. At the moment, sight and sound dominate. Mommy’s voice, warm like sweet milk, resonates from the kitchen at the rear of the house through the hallway and into the front bedroom where I stare, mesmerized by the tiny sparkles floating inside streams of sunlight streaming through the three windows directly across from me and landing on the oak floor.*

*Attention to the laughter fades as I reach out to grasp the sparkling swirls inside the nearest sunray. Momentarily, my gaze is interrupted by the colorful braids in a small, rag rug lying in front of my crib, braids that muffle Mommy’s shoe clicks on my bedroom floor.*

*For now, I desire to hold those innumerable twinkles inside the yellow rays, so I stretch my arm up and open my hand to grasp them. I fail, but my resolve is strong. Expanding my reach, I strain my naked toes, leaning my torso dangerously forward in rapt desire when, I flip outside of*
my crib. Landing face up, I scream my shock, pain, and humiliation. Anguished screams muffle Mommy’s footsteps in the hallway as she hurries to my bedroom, passing by the dining and living room, and halting next my flailing body lying on the floor.

Mommy bends over and scoops me up. Embracing me like a newborn, she secures my head to her cushiony chest, cooing comfort and security. I grow quiet and trusting. She places me inside my crib, encourages sleep that I refuse. After she leaves, I face the bars, and I return my gaze up toward the tantalizing horizon.

I release my memory because it has done its job, granting me comfort from a past filled with love, before I returned to my Mother’s house and a complicated self-image of who I was. Next, I remember that day, not long after the divorce when I was in Barnes and Noble. I had opened a numerology book describing family life based on one’s birth day. “You will be raised by someone other than your birth parents,” it had read and I was stunned. How could the book know? Then I remember reading in my children’s horoscope that, “You are filled with wanderlust. The grass on the other side will always appear greener to you.”

Both are true. Three-year-old me had been reaching for her wanderlust, my first effort at moving toward something I believed was better. The reach had left me hurt and humiliated, and yet, I have never given up the search.

Reaching for my shampoo, I replay the past two weeks in light of my Diamond Report. The warm water comesling with fresh tears as I rekindle a long-past assurance of the mother love I had felt half a century earlier. My shampoo smells like vanilla. A new memory of Mommy unfolds as I exit the tub and surrender my thoughts to her spirit. I begin her ritual begun in my childhood. Rubbing my hands, I now rub a generous amount of mineral oil onto my towel-dried
body. Her oily palms had smoothed the oil gently onto my flesh. I can hear her voice inside my head, and my heart aches from missing her, missing my grandparents. The ache incites tears of gratitude and the knowledge that without reservation, they loved me.
Forgiveness

Towel wrapped around me as I head to my bedroom, I see evidence that Patience, who works graveyard as a 911 dispatcher, is home after working another double shift. The evidence includes her cellphone lying on top of today’s unwrapped Sunday New York Times, which she tossed on the coffee table before slogging down the hall to her rear bedroom to sleep until she wakes up, cleans up, before preparing some breakfast and her lunch.

The double-time pay is great,” she has said. Like me, she is taking courses at the junior college. Mostly, she and I talk about politics, the current state of news reporting, our job woes. I assume that she is about fifteen years younger than I am, but I consider her wiser for her ability to focus on her goals and employment decisions.

Patience is helpful, having driven me to retrieve my repaired car, and focused, training to do something other than her current job. She is single, no children. She is my opposite sun sign, and we agree on just about everything. When we do disagree, we agree to argue our positions just as passionately. She exposes to me my own character challenges and prejudices against making the dull but necessary choices that pay off later.

For the two years I have lived here, I realize that Patience and I are the tenant anchors that our landlord relishes. Six months after I moved into the spacious, front bedroom, she moved into the smaller, rear bedroom with its deep, slant ceiling. Leland had offered to pay me to prepare the furnished room for showing prospective tenants, and I fully engaged. Patience insisted on providing her own king-sized bed. Where I am neat, she is cluttered, and we both laugh at her failed attempts to organize her forever-tumbled bedroom. “I work too much, study too long, and
rarely have spare time,” she often laments over tea at the kitchen table. We both need to balance our weak points: me—setting and sticking to goals and she—staying organized and neat at home.

Leland had slept in what became my bedroom after he purchased this building and while he figured out how to renovate his new investment. He explained that this floor used to be the servants’ quarters when New Haven’s wealthy class lived in the mansions along and in proximity to Whitney Avenue and Prospect Street. Some mansions have been converted into multifamily houses and others into condominiums.

On my way to my room, I grin, thinking how Patience’s staid Virgo work ethic is tempered by her wicked sense of humor about the human condition. It complements my often drifting and preachy Sagittarius rising. She accepts humans as fatally flawed creatures. I accept that utopias are imagined societies with obvious flaws, but they are also the harbingers of hope.

Opening the door to my bedroom, I hear a familiar acoustic-guitar rift of a rock classic that deflates all of the emotional fortitude I have harvested this morning.

“I heard the news today, that I didn’t want to hear, but I knew that it was would come,” Don Henley sings. Like the dream, the song seems untimely. Ironically, Charmaine had used India Arie’s version of “Forgiveness” on the mixed CD she had created and played for me during her visit from Los Angeles, in late spring 2008. Craig had moved out by then, and as we sat at the kitchen table listening to her mix of songs about starting over, accepting myself as I was, and it being okay to recall the past, “Forgiveness” had prompted what I might eventually face in the future.
Feeling deer-in-headlights exposed, I close the door. Like the dog on an old RCA poster, I rush to sit next to the radio. Absorbing the words and melody, I wonder, “Why this song, why now?”

“And I thought about the bad times, all the troubles we went through, how I lost me and you lost you. What are all those voices outside love’s open door, make us throw off our contentment and beg for something more? I’m learning to live without you now, but I miss you, baby,” he sings and my tears flow. “The more I know, the less I understand, and all the things I thought I figured out, I have to learn again.” My head nodding, arms wrapped around my midsection, I sit entranced. “I’m trying to get down to the heart of the matter, but the will is weak and my thoughts seem to scatter, I just think it’s about forgiveness, forgiveness, even if, even if, you don’t love me anymore,” I belt out the refrain, and as he begins another verse, I lean against the wall in complete surrender to the song. It ends, leaving me feeling emotionally vulnerable as a newborn, but I heard a wise old voice guiding my understanding of the dream.

*Have I opened Pandora’s Box only to harm myself?* I just don’t know. Another acoustic version of a different classic begins. Glancing out the window at the sunny morning entices me to release bewilderment to a meandering soft-stepping walk to the reservoir a quarter-mile away.

After pulling on jeans and a sweater, I see an unread email alert. It is from Craig. I note the time, 10 A.M., and steel myself for anything. Phoebe’s wedding had brought Charmaine and me together with Craig and his family, and I knew I would forever be a part of it. I also remember how Craig can be cold and calculating, like breaking his promise to return my antique table and the antique twin bed taken when he moved out.
“Thanks, Nickie. I’d appreciate that. I’ll let them know right away. Craig.” I read it, looking for a submerged double entendre, little pokes to my ego. I had expected some snarky reply, but he sounds ecstatic to me. “Thanks” and “appreciate” raise my eyebrows. I am glad to unload his dead weight. However, I’m not used to his being so agreeable. Never mind how amicable we were sitting across the table from each other at the wedding reception. I should give him the benefit of the doubt. Last year, at Phoebe’s graduation, it felt like all the sore feelings between Craig and me had evaporated. The other social gap was closed when I had formally introduced myself to his wife of three years.

Three words, “I’d appreciate that,” make me give him the benefit of doubt after a few hours of walking. Maybe it’s because over the past five years, I couldn’t trust anything that he promised me. He had seemed to be holding invisible strings that sprang new traps that left me feeling vulnerable and humiliated.

“He has no more reasons to set you up,” I say. Still, I feel wobbly about his enthusiasm, and at 3:53 P.M., I finally reply to his email.

“You or she should let me know if this is okay. Nic.” I do not include “I guess I can understand why you are so happy, but I don’t want to be embarrassed when I knock on Michelle’s door and she doesn’t know what the hell I’m talking about.”

While organizing my desk, I locate yellow sticky notes filled with words of wisdom, writing prompts that sound pertinent to the moment. I make up my bed and meditate on Craig’s bags.

Glancing out the windows, I notice gold, russet, and apricot treetops swaying in autumn’s breeze across the street. In eight weeks, I am leaving Connecticut and a life that I’ve known for
twenty-four years. Not wanting to hear my inside voices, I turn the radio dial to NPR and ignore the talking.

But the lyrics of “Forgiveness” linger, haunt, and remind me of long-past losses in love, family, and friendships. Five years of meeting people who have inspired me to excavate my memories and microscope them has helped me form different narratives of my past for this present. At times, it has felt like I was walking a tightrope over a minefield. I seemed to have no choice in who entered my life to help me understand how and why I had erected stubborn protective barriers. How I learned to see and experience “move” as more than a verb and see it as my nouns, adjectives, metaphors, and my alchemic Siddhartha.

Meditating on moving timelines I recall moving on my own when I turned 21. Before that, Mother had moved me back and forth between her and my grandparents’ homes six times. I was twenty-nine when I met Craig and had moved another four more times. He and I moved seven times during our marriage.

I linger on moving because of who I became and who I am becoming. Before our wedding, we discussed completing our undergraduate degrees. “I want to go fulltime. I have a history of starting and having to stop. You finish yours then it will be my turn,” I told Craig. He intended to apply to UCLA, but without telling me, he applied to UC Santa Cruz. After he was accepted, he described the wonderful life waiting for us in that beach city. I disliked his not telling me what he had done and later, would do again, but at the time, I was excited.

Our move to Santa Cruz was hampered by my complicated pregnancy. Craig moved to San Jose, found work and then rented us an apartment, while I moved in with Flo. I flew to San Jose a few weekends until my pregnancy was stable enough to move. I registered at the local Kelly
Temporary Agency and was immediately assigned secretarial work. Maybe it was hormones but it took me a while to get acclimated to our shadowy, rear apartment and driving to my assignments in heavily congested traffic. San Jose roadways were puzzling so I often took the wrong exit and became lost driving home and arriving exhausted and cross. More awkward was being the only black person at my temp assignments. Until I began work on a long-term assignment at a local Red Roof Inn, I was usually one of a few black women working at the smaller companies. Eventually I began to relax and even became friends with our apartment managers, an elderly couple who invited me the movies where the husband worked at the ticket counter. That summer, things were going well and we began looking for a place to live in Santa Cruz where Craig would begin school in the fall.

In July, 1985 the Lexington Reservoir fire began and about 15,000 acres had burned in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Jose. It threatened at least 2,000 homes and forced the evacuation of more than 4,500 people. One afternoon, Craig drove us around the university campus to see the family housing complex.

There were eight sections of single and two story unit flesh-toned, stucco apartments. The landscape looked scrappy and “It looks like the housing projects in L.A.I don’t want to live here,” I complained as we drove around the complex. We began looking for an apartment in town. Failing to find an apartment by the time of my next pregnancy appointment in Los Angeles, I left the search up to Craig.

“I found us a nice two-bedroom apartment a short drive from campus. It has onsite parking, and there is a park across the street,” he said. It was two stories with an eat-in kitchen and
comfortable living room downstairs and two bedrooms, bathroom, and a balcony upstairs. Craig had not mentioned our pregnancy to the managers, but when we met, they were very supportive.

I continued working at the Red Roof Inn, driving on Highway 17 to San Jose. One afternoon, I could not stop vomiting in the bathroom at work, so my doctor placed me on medical leave for the duration of the pregnancy. I was not eligible for Craig’s new health insurance and we applied for government cash, food, and medical assistance. A few weeks later, I began receiving disability insurance through the temp agency and no longer qualified for cash or food assistance.

Santa Cruz is a sprawling county with the famous Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. The city is considered liberal, but the county is more conservative regarding town and gown disputes. Weekend traffic was horrific with visitors from San Jose and the surrounding cities. Sitting outside that summer, Paulo and I smelled the thick smoke from the fire miles away. I was smitten with the town’s cozy and friendly feel until I ventured into the stores and endured the stares since there were few black people living in the city.

Paulo, now four, visited on most weekends, but until September, when school began and Charmaine arrived, it was mostly Craig and me. Craig job, driving a forklift for a restaurant supply company, paid well, but he hated his boss. “The supervisor is racist. He is always giving me and Rocky a hard time,” Craig said. Rocky is black; his wife is white, and they have a son.

After Phoebe’s birth in early August, and to save money, I changed my mind and we moved into a townhouse on campus. On a clear day, we could see the entire Monterey Peninsula from our townhouse. As the seasons changed, so did my initial feelings about living there. Craig had been right about living on campus. Overall, it was a good deal and friendly community of mostly graduate students and their children. After four years, we moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico,
to live with his mother, Jillian until we could find a home to purchase and settle with our young family.

It was in Albuquerque that our relationship challenges surfaced. Wages were low in the “right-to-work” state. Craig hated his job as a telephone bill collector at a local bank. We argued a lot. I returned to Los Angeles to decide whether I wanted more back, but, after a few days, I realized that I wanted to be with my husband and family, and I began to experience Albuquerque like I had Santa Cruz, from a fresh viewpoint. After a few months of marriage counseling, Craig and I found a nice apartment and settled in with Charmaine and Phoebe. Craig was happy to return to driving a fork lift and applying to the local university but, just as he did not tell me he was applying to U. C. Santa Cruz, he did not tell me that he was also applying to Yale graduate school until he had been accepted.

Every instinct in me said no to his suggestion that the children and I join him in New Haven after a year, but eleven months after moving to New Mexico, we were moving to Hamden, Connecticut, and into a four-bedroom house that Craig had leased from a professor going on sabbatical. The four-day drive, me driving our van and Craig driving the rented U-Haul, was nice. In the evenings, we spent the night in a motor hotel or an inn. I appreciated how Craig had thoughtfully mapped the trip, and we arrived at the new house close to midnight.

We both had conducted research before the move, but a gremlin lurked inside our lease agreement. We could rent the extra bedroom only to a Yale student. We lived four miles from Yale and only a quarter mile from Quinnipiac University. After three months, our credit cards maxed out; Craig, Phoebe, and I were moving into a second-floor, two-bedroom apartment in a transitional area of Hamden. There, sneakers dangled curiously from telephone lines and the
police regularly raided the second floor of the two-family house directly across from us.

Apparently, the renter, a blond, reed-thin husband with a neighborly wife and a beautiful preschool daughter, was growing marijuana on the roof. Nevertheless, the two years we lived there, we met new friends as did our children. Bad management forced us to look for another house to rent. Both of us were working, and the time was right.

Call it serendipity, or God’s will, but perusing the local newspaper for rentals, I read the ad for the house on Woodlawn Street, a street I had visited once two years before and had imagined living there. The current tenant was anxious to move. “You have to come within the next hour. I am packing to leave for Israel tomorrow, and the landlord needs my decision on the new tenant tonight,” she had said.

Craig had raced home from has student-employment at the Yale Law School Library. It was dusk when we arrived and dark by the time we looked out of the kitchen window of the house on Woodlawn Street. We could not see the backyard where our children could play but we took a chance and signed the lease to rent the small, two-story Cape Cod. The five years that we rented, the owner, a film professor, never raised our rent, and we took excellent care of his property, even suggesting home improvements that he implemented. On my forty-fifth birthday, we purchased the house, and our occasionally, unsettled future was finally looking settled and bright.

In total, we lived on Woodlawn for fifteen years, where we became friends with our neighbors, and invested in the community welfare. We had lived through the 911 attacks when Craig worked in New York, watched the O.J. Simpson murder trial on television, nursed Tom back from a serious car accident, celebrated his returning to New Haven to work. We were
ecstatic when Phoebe graduated from high school and sad when Charmaine and Paulo returned to California and their other parents.

A year after the divorce, on the Friday the 13\textsuperscript{th}, the house was sold, and while I was moving to New Haven to live with Clara, a good friend, Craig was in San Francisco, preparing for his wedding the next day.

Just six month ago, while at Phoebe’s wedding, the context for all of our moves came into focus for me. Returning home, I immediately began imagining living back in California and closer to my birth family.

In September, after my granddaughter was born, I flew to visit her and Charmaine for ten days. Charmaine originally resisted my idea of taking the photos and mementos of her that I had brought, but seeing her life in review changed her mind. In December, when I visit Phoebe while on my way to California, she and I will also sit and look at her life in pictures and achievements.

Ruminations on the last dream are replaced with things like sorting and taking clothes, household items, books, and DVDs to consign in Hamden at the shop where I volunteer and to Goodwill a few doors away on the same street. Feeling exhausted when I return home, I relax a little and study the checkmarks on my dry-erase board taped to the closet door.

To-Do lists had been Craig’s way of working, not mine. Until we began working on the house to sell it, I had resisted such lists. Why had I? What was I afraid of? Now, not list-making leaves me fearful that I will forget and leave behind important items. Moving to Connecticut, we had left one of Phoebe’s stuffed bears in the hotel room in Oklahoma, and I left a new plant in the Inn in Vandalia, Illinois. At the first house we moved into in Connecticut, we forgot to remove Craig’s charcoal drawing of a jacket from the wall.
My cell phone beeps a new email from Craig.

4:48 P.M. “I sent them a note but haven’t heard from them. I’ll let you know when I do.”

I realize that in spite of our camaraderie in Berkeley, messages lack greetings and closings. Why am I nitpicking? Because when we were married, our messages had both.

His emails are words that describe his job and where he works. I no longer know about his projects. Until I reorient to what is my focus, I admit that I miss it. Like a slap to the face, I remember how carelessly he had left the downstairs bedroom for me to clean up the day he moved out. I am giving him the responsibility of making sure that I don’t look like an idiot regarding his things.

“7:52 P.M. Hi Nickie, Sharon got back to me and said that she’d be seeing you at the Cab this week and you could hand off that stuff to them then. I’m currently in New Haven, staying with Carlie J. The annual conference is next weekend, and I have a teacher’s workshop scheduled for Wednesday. I’m looking forward to seeing the photos especially. Thanks for sharing them with me. Craig.” Other texts have been in quotation marks?

Wow, a greeting and a closing. Wait, he’s in New Haven? Is that why I had that dream? Sometimes, and I do not seek it, I sense when Craig is in town. Sometimes, I swear I see a flicker of him on the street. Grinning, I remember reading our numerology chart that had concluded that our meeting and marriage contained fated qualities. Fated was not all bad.

Craig is taking responsibility for getting his stuff. Good. “Because, tomorrow is another day!” I say in my best Scarlett O’Hara drawl.
Monday, November 4, 2014

By 2 P.M., I feel like the day has been generously productive, balmy, and promising. Having divided most of my not-moving-with-me items, I need to drive to Hamden’s U-Haul store to buy more book boxes. Craig had neatly boxed his numerous books when he moved out. While we waited to close on the sale of the house, I had donated many books from my library to the Women’s Studies Program and the English departments on campus. I also donated books to Goodwill and consigned others to The Barn Sale, the non-profit consignment shop where I have volunteered for years. However, I have restocked my personal library.

To think, I almost did not move into this great room, but Leland, the landlord, had asked if I was still interested. I live in the Yale ghetto, and this room was not my first choice until the second glance. Like the bedrooms that I had rented to scholars, Leland makes sure that whatever furnishings his mostly academic renters need is inside their bedroom or in the basement. Stepping outside my bedroom door to go buy boxes, I hear my cellphone beep.

Craig’s name appears, and expecting his confirmation of our plans, I step back inside, close the door, and stand in front of the windows.

2:14 P.M. “I don’t know if any of the kids have told you, but Tina and I have separated. I’m in New Haven trying to get my career going again and may be moving back to New Haven, although I have other prospects as well. Donovan and Sharon know, of course, and I don’t want to put them in the position of keeping information from you. Craig.”
Speechless, I go sit on the bed, stand up, walk a few steps, turn around, sit back on the bed. My head is spinning like on that night Craig had declared that he was never again going to sleep in our bed. I did not believe him. Now I do, but I am of two minds, and one of them hears me yell “Woo hoo!” for my vindication from feeling I had failed him.

The other mind starts thinking about that serious talk he promised we would have when he moved out. Until I returned from Phoebe’s wedding six months ago, I had held onto that promise. Then, like releasing white doves, I had let go of any hope that we could achieve complete closure.

“You’re too serious. I just want to have fun,” he had said was the reason he wanted a divorce. Like me, our children, and our friends were shocked. I have never told Mother that we are divorced. I know who will be interested in this turn of events, but that can wait.

With annoyed curiosity, I reread his message. “Wait, did he say he’s been here since August?” You mean those split-second sightings I thought were his doppelgangers were real? My inklings are still intact? Damn!” Now I feel really upset. Why in the hell would he think that our children would tell me, “Oh, by the way, Mom, Dad’s marriage is over”?

“2:18 PM I had no idea,” I reply to Craig’s message, and I leave.

Driving slower than usual to U-Haul, I am fuming. Rightfully, the kids had said nothing. I yell at the front window. “It’s not their job, you fracking coward,” I had yelped at home and presented a sheepish grin when Vickie was standing inside the living room, grinning at me as we both left the house. “I just heard some news that made me feel vindicated,” I told her. We high fived and as we walked down the two flights of stairs I nearly floated to my car. Thinking that
now, the ex-wife is the last to know makes me curious about this failure. “Wait. What did I see at the reception?” I say then bury the thought.

After parking my car at the U-Haul, I sit for several minutes, inhaling deeply before I telephone Charmaine. “Hi, sweetheart, it’s Mom. I just heard about Craig’s news, and I was wondering, how long have you known?”

“Since August, I think,” she replies.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I carefully ask without judgment but hoping she says what I want to hear.”

“Mom, it wasn’t my place,” she says like she is not ready for a reprimand from me. After all, she is a brain doctor. Charmaine is cool that way, just says what needs to be said and leaves it alone. “You know, Mom, you have ADD. I have it, too,” she said nonchalantly last year. I brushed it off, but I did not forget.

“Ok. Actually, thank you because that’s what I hoped you’d say. I gotta go and buy more book boxes,” I say and hang up. I grip the steering wheel and decide if I should telephone Phoebe or Paulo. “No, they are not Craig’s messengers.” I rub my temples. Surely, Donovan and Sharon know but, like our children, probably believe that Craig has told me. He isn’t staying with them, but I know met woman he mentioned he is staying with. I like her and her husband. It feels strange because Sharon, Donovan, and I have a dinner date on Thursday night.

In a daze, I pay for my boxes and begin driving home, which feels like an eternity because I think and drive in a highly emotional state. I need to share this news with Rhea. I need her empathetic ear. “It probably won’t last; they rarely do,” Rhea had told me after I told her that
Craig had remarried. I flash back to us standing inside of our old kitchen on that snowy December morning.

“I want a divorce,” he has finally said, making clear his intentions after a month of vague behaviors. Distraught, I drive along the Connecticut River to arrive on Rhea’s front porch in Bethel. Before she opens her screen door, I blurt out, “Craig wants a divorce.” Then I fall into her arms. She and her husband silently listen while I describe the last month of life at home since November when Craig had told Phoebe, home for short visit from Berkeley, what I could not.

Jim offers incredible sympathy, and they both hug me while I cry tears into hot tea and toast. Sitting at her table, Rhea describes how men begin moving away and as I listen, I absorb only a fraction of what will be revealed about men moving away, a few months later when I watch *Hannah and her Sisters* for my graduate school homework.

Craig had sat inside the kitchen watching Hannah and Her Sisters, but I had fallen asleep halfway through. The next morning, I restarted the movie, and watched in disbelief, as Rhea’s words and Craig’s words were spoken on the screen.

“We’re going in different directions; we want different things,” the actor and Craig had said. And like the clueless wife in the movie, I had stared quizzically at him because I had believed my marriage was solid. Craig had said so a month earlier to our friends at dinner. I replayed the scene several times, wrote my paper, and returned the movie without mentioning what I had seen to my husband. We still shared meals at the kitchen table and talked but not about getting back together or what had happened to get us to this point.

Now, I could dispassionately review the incident that seemed to be the straw that broke the camel’s back of our marriage.
Finally, I believe that I have clarity about the dream. Reviewing some memories, both pleasant and awful, of our marriage and parenthood is helpful, but what now? There must be a reason for this turn of events, for Craig and for me. I am leaving, and he is returning. How weird is that? Still, I wonder if we are destined to try again. Would I even want to? I imagine that had we remained married, I would be employed and doing work that did not feed my soul. It was a long time coming, but, as an empty nester in my fifties, I discovered divorce unexpectedly granted me space to focus on my needs and training for an occupation I would love.

When I initially began substitute teaching, I had failed miserably. My students were unruly, and some student was always asking to leave the classroom. At the end of the day I would arrive home feeling defeated. On the verge of quitting, I decided to chuck the classroom management manual that I had been given and teach from my heart. Now, I enjoy it, especially the affection I experience from both students and staff, and I learned much about my strengths, weaknesses, and self-imposed limits.

In June, I had agreed to teach a summer fourth-grade class for a local non-profit. Utilizing the confidence that I gained working as a graduate student at Southern, I had negotiated a good wage. The first week of my six-week contract, my class was full with students eager to debate whatever philosophical statement I wrote on the chalkboard. Like fish to water, the nine-year-old girls and boys were eager to dive in and share the stories their elders told them about their own childhoods. The assignment provided the students with a chance to see grandparents and parents differently. The job felt purposeful. Then, all of a sudden, the owner demanded that my class size
increase and that I take a salary cut. Respectfully, I had refused and said goodbye to my students and colleagues, and I left without feeling remorse.

“How is it that Craig and I are at the same sort of crossroad where I am leaving and he has returned?” I wonder aloud. Emotionally and physically, I like where I am. As I age, I realize that although I have precious friendships here, my roots and rocks are in California where my new granddaughter, sisters, brothers, cousins, and my oldest friends are waiting for my return. I miss California, a sprawling state where two hours of driving delivers you to the beach, the mountains, forests, or desert. Yet I will miss the beauty of Connecticut, its forests and trees, the seasons, the first two weeks of winter’s, virgin snow, balmy early summer when the weather is walk-able but not the suffocating, humid heat waves. And fall, like now, with its jewel tones and weather that beckons one to walk into morning mists past the vegetable gardens that Yale’s foreign students’ grandparents have harvested.

Also, I will miss New Haven’s nightlife and theater, especially going to the Yale Cabaret and Repertory productions, and the Long Wharf. Unlike Los Angeles, I often walk or take a short drive to these venues and they offer sliding ticket prices. For students, the prices are even lower.

Although I have experienced spectacular failures and accomplishments in here, my marriage had been my cupped-hand safety net.

Taking courses at Gateway Community College is useful but sometimes frustrating. I love my recipe writing class while I am weary of my technical-writing instruction. And dating has been disappointing and intriguing. Heated political debates with Stewart, a retired military man and devoted conservative, has left me feeling exhausted. Now, Tim, the libertarian lawyer for a local gun manufacturer who brags about how many guns he owns, frightens me. I no longer
answer his emails. Both of these men are unsuitable for me as romantic partners, at least I have not given up dating.

Both Craig and I grew up, married, and birthed our children in California, but I have been away for twenty-four years, and it is the twenty-first century. Barack Obama is the first mixed-race president of the United States, and the Republicans are obstructing his campaign promises. Connecticut is a mostly white state, and although I sometimes feel uncomfortable driving alone outside of New Haven County, none of that matters now.

Still, why him, why now?

Usually, I call Rhea, to pick her brain about my feelings and fears. Sometimes when I telephone, she will consult her Tarot cards or intuition and tell me what planets are influencing my life. Lately, I click on a website that provides a variety of divination tools for free: Tarot, Astrology, Numerology, and the Celtic Runes. I use all of them, hoping they provide a context to my dream and, now, Craig’s return.

Tarot tells me that I am in a period of change. Numerology tells me that, for the next several months, I will be moving in a direction toward important changes and that people will enter my life while others exit. Astrology describes the planetary conflicts influencing my recent and present moving-plan hiccups. When asked if I should stay or go, the Runes answer is a vague “wait” that I take as my sign.

After Craig left, I had to learn to say goodbye to so many things. I was forced to say goodbye to many of our shared friendships. I said goodbye to travelling with Craig on some of his work-related presentations. Even before he left, like a tortoise who timidly sticks his head inside and outside of his shell, I was beginning my own journey toward the future I am designing. I enrolled
in graduate school, and I did the unthinkable, I chose to sit in a window seat on my flights to and from France, and by choice, I invited foreign scholars into my home. After that, I moved in with my friend Clara, rented a fantastic apartment over a bank, began housesitting for a friend, and finally, for the past two years, have lived here. By now, whatever negative challenges my housemates present to me, ultimately lead me to an epiphany that I embrace as their skewed gift.

“For every five years of marriage, it will take you one year to figure out what your unique issues were,” said Beau, my thrice-married, Zen-practicing therapist, on the day of our final session. It was sage advice, a pat on the shoulder of hope. This year, as I finally commit to a major move, I face my true feelings. I still care for Craig, and I remember the good times, which vastly outnumber our difficulties. Those good times included living childfree our first year of marriage and listening to Craig read chapters from “1001 Arabian Nights.” I remember his sneaky introduction of artichokes and eggplant into my diet and his goofy sense of humor, and his romantic impulses. Now, I love artichokes and eggplant parmesan. Thinking about this makes me wish that I had been a more reciprocal person but natural reciprocity is not in my astrological profile.

What I have learned about myself, in five years is how my childhood and early adult life fomented my earliest fears of being abandoned. I have learned over the last five years while revisiting these periods in acute detail that, like a ball of purple, exquisitely soft, mohair yarn slowly unwinding, most my housemates and other new friends unleashed my new insights about my most pivotal life events; wonderful, magical, and terrifying as those sometimes were.
Love and Murder

Meeting Craig in September, 1983 was both a fluke and fate. Falling in love with him was easy only because of a murder and the married man I met that March.

I was a single mother with a freshly printed shared custody agreement for our seven-year-old daughter Charmaine. That year she was living with her father, only a 10-minute drive from our house. Also that year, I had decided on the three things I wanted to do with my freedom, re-enroll in college, find work I enjoyed, and get married.

I was a single mother with a freshly printed shared-custody agreement, and, Charmaine, then seven years old, was living with her father, a 10-minute drive from our house. The job was the first and easiest accomplishment. In July, I became an executive assistant at a small public relations firm in Westchester. The first goal was more dicey and the third goal had required a leap of faith, the words of fortune teller, and loving a married man.

With my new wonderful job going well, late August found me standing in line at the admissions office at Southwest College, waiting to register for creative-writing courses as I tippy-toed back into academia and hopefully a college degree. Talking to the admissions clerk, who sat behind a thick, ceiling-high Plexiglas window, was eerie and indicative of the dangers that were becoming more prevalent in urban American culture. The glass was her protection from robberies, bullets, or enraged students receiving bad news. After a ten-year absence, I was returning to that campus. I had abandoned Los Angeles City College when I had heard about Southwest College, a new but well-regarded, mostly black junior college, in Inglewood. That forty-minute bus commute to both campuses had been about the same, but now, driving to Southwest would be only a ten- or fifteen-minute drive from 84th Street and Normandie Avenue.
The admissions clerk pushed my completed enrollment form under the glass and back to me.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t enroll here. This is not your district. El Camino College is your district.” I did not believe her. She was mixed up, but when I asked her why, she said, “They changed the rules.”

Mouth agape, I stood in silent confusion because I had never heard of El Camino College. She told me that it was in Gardena. I liked Gardena. My debutant boyfriend had lived there, but it was three towns away from my house. This was crazy! I did not want to drive that far at night because I might be carjacked.

A few days later, after work, I decided to do a drive-by of El Camino College and discovered it was a five-minute drive from my job and fifteen minutes from home. I was incensed that Creative Writing was filled. I could try to enroll if someone dropped that class during the shopping period but I decided to enroll in the Wednesday evening Poetry course, thinking it would be a writing course instead of an analysis course. I liked poetry. For years, I wrote poetry in my journals. It was some of my poetry to Flo had discovered when she said, “You’re going to be a writer.” I felt this would be a good class to begin on the road to a degree after many years of signing in then dropping out of college.

I thought I might be the eldest student at twenty-nine years old. I thought I might meet someone special. I was slender, shapely, and I had an interesting job. Being a young, single mother was not a dating obstacle for many of the men I had been meeting because I was also friendly and approachable. Since I did not have to worry about babysitters or school pickups that year, dating became more spontaneous, but finding a husband was like searching for Sasquatch—legendary but unseen.
Until June, 1982, I had been engaged three times to the same man. We broke up because he would not stop cheating on me with the same woman. Last August, he met and married another woman, but we remained friends.

Having grown up witnessing two distinct types of marriages, I wanted a loving and stable marriage like my grandparents marriage, not the sometimes verbally abusive and unsupportive marriage of my parents. My father worked at a manufacturing company and would pick a fight around payday. That was not what I wanted. My dream mate would be tall, handsome, trim, kind, generous, well liked, intelligent, funny, like people, spiritual, love children, emotionally mature and available, doing work that he loved, and generous. Simple, right?

It seemed that Women’s Liberation had made it easier for men to avoid the sex toll. Actually, I had begun a relationship with Norman, who I had met at a murder in March, but our relationship was shaky by August, when I contacted Belinda, the psychic that Korah had recommended to me to get a reading on my prospects for marriage.

Although Norman and I met at a murder the day my washing machine had stopped working, only later would I understand how Norman, like John the Baptist, would be my precursor to meeting my future husband.

It was midafternoon in March, 1983. Charmaine and I had driven a quarter mile from home, heading to the nearest laundromat in a nondescript, stucco, mini-shopping mall, the kind that was being developed all over the country. It was built on a corner and its businesses included the beauty supply and the record store where I had occasionally shopped. The anchor businesses were a liquor store and a laundromat where the washers, both top and front loading, as well as
the dryers were all kept clean and working. The building was well lit and invited in ample natural light.

That day when two heavy-set, middle-aged men entered, I noticed them because they carried no laundry bags and seemed out of place in an area utilized mostly by women, often with children in tow, as was I. They walked over to the wall of dryers and stood talking in front of the large sink. My clothing was in a dryer not far from them. I was sitting in a chair next to a folding table and reading a magazine while Charmaine was playing with a younger girl. When I heard loud shuffling, I looked up to see the men shoving and then “pop, pop.” I watched one of the men slump over and disappear from my view. The other man stood still, clutching a small-caliber gun in his limp hand and glancing downward. For a few minutes, everything froze. When we realized what had happened, we yelled for our children to come.

Two other times in my life, I faced a gun. The first time, I was thirteen, sitting in a chair inside my Aunt April’s beauty salon late in the afternoon. There had been rumors about local robberies. My aunt and I faced the gunman, who took her day’s earnings and left. The second time, I was nineteen and working evenings near downtown Los Angeles at Occidental Insurance. Payday robberies of some evening employees had been occurring and reported. We nightshift workers, mostly college students, began walking in groups to cash our paychecks and to our cars and bus stops. One evening I waited for my very pregnant co-worker, and we left work after most of the others were gone. After cashing our checks and walking to the bus stop, two men walked past us, turned and faced us with guns pointed at our chests.

“Give us your money,” said the taller, thin one. Silently, we dug into our purses to get and give them our wages. As they were tucking the bills inside their pants’ pockets, the taller man, still pointing his gun, said, “You two come with us.”
“She’s pregnant,” I protested. We had no idea what might happen, but we complied.

“You go with him, and she’s coming with me,” said the gunman. For what seemed like an eternity but was probably no more than five minutes, the man with me had fumbled to unzip his limp penis and seemed frustrated, had failed to have sex with me as I stood stoic with my back to a brick wall.

“You can leave,” he finally said as we pulled up our underpants. I returned to the crime scene first, and my friend arrived a minute later. We were crying as we raced back to the insurance company and reported the robbery and assault. A week later, still traumatized, I quit and returned to an old employer at a popular record store.

Ten years later, the gun shots and the man lying on the floor had brought that night back to me. Surprisingly, I was calm and in protective-mother mode, but I knew that we could not leave until the police arrived. Several minutes after the shooting, most of us stood, quiet, confused, but turned our attention back to our children and chores. The shooter had neither moved nor uttered a word. The man on the floor lay silent, and until the doors opened, we all were like mannequins inside a department store.

I am reminded of the song “You’re So Vain” when I think of that day Norman entered the laundromat, silently surveyed the room, walked over and removed the gun from the hand of the clumpy and confused-looking shooter before introducing himself to the people still inside the room. He was tall, milk-chocolate complexion with perfect, chalk-white teeth, clean-cut, close-cropped nappy hair, large masterly hands, slender build, swaybacked, and mesmerizing but refreshing, like a Hawaiian breeze.
“Everybody, stay calm. My name is Norman, and I am the manager of the record store a few doors down. I have telephoned the police who are on their way,” he spoke with Dragnet authority, which made him look very sexy. His eyes studied the room of witness women and children. “Everyone who was here should stay, but if you have to go, leave me your contact information for the police, okay?” he instructed.

A few women had approached him and left. I had decided to stay, and only after I felt it was safe, did I walk over to the other side to see what had happened. Norman, leaning against the washer, a safe distance from the shooter, had tucked the gun, wrapped in a towel, into a bag and was writing down information and watching the shooter like he dared him to leave. When I saw the injured man lying quiet on the floor with his eyes open like he was thinking about what had happened to him, I grabbed a towel, folded it, and placed it underneath his head, just like the day I had gently placed my grandmother’s head in my lap. It was the last day that I would see her alive. “Help is on the way,” I said to him, offering us hope.

Walking over to Norman, I said, “I did not see the actual shooting, but I heard pop, pop, and I saw him slump against the washing machine, and then, I guess he fell. I don’t know anything more.” After half an hour, I realized I needed to drive Charmaine back to her father’s house, so I told Norman my contact information and left.

The sun was sinking, and I was settling in for the night when I heard a knock on my front door, and, looking out of the peephole, I recognized Norman.

“Hi,” I said.
Looking back into the peephole, he said, “I was just wondering how you were doing, and since you gave me your address, I just thought I would stop by and give you an update.” Opening the door, I saw his Marvin Gaye grin and his arms filled with goodies.

Stepping inside my living room and unveiling his gifts, he said, “I bought you a bottle of wine and Michael Jackson’s Thriller for your daughter.

“Thank you. She will love this. Thanks for the wine,” I replied, smiling and a bit confused as he stepped fully into the living room while my heart raced. I offered him a seat and left to get wine glasses from the kitchen.

“That was an awful thing that happened today. The police didn’t show up until maybe an hour ago,” he said, sounding weary. We sat on the side chair. His words were weighty because I had wondered what happened, and the news from him was sad but welcome.

Thinking it interesting that he would just stop by without notice, I saw that he was not wearing a ring. Though I don’t remember flirting with him, I appreciated his presence.

“I thought you might want to know, the guy died. He was the owner of the shopping center and a nice man. The shooter was his wife’s lover, and the husband found out about it. The man said that they had wrestled with the gun when it went off,” Norman said, shaking his head in disbelief.

He poured wine into both of our glasses, and we sat and talked for an hour, sharing our reflections on life and dying that way, infidelity and consequences as two people who had witnessed a tragedy. We acknowledged one man’s mortality, thinking that anything could happen at any time. After a while, Norman walked over and set down and hugged me. Then we
kissed like tomorrow was not promised to us. I had never done anything like it, but I invited him to spend the night.

Waking up, he did not rush home to feed his roommate’s parakeet or fish or cat or dog. That Sunday morning was leisurely like our breakfast and drifted into Sunday afternoon before he left. I felt no remorse because last night had felt right, ordained. Every day that week, we talked on the phone, and he spent a few more nights at my house. Early, the third Sunday morning, he telephoned. I was groggy, but he sounded like a wounded man.

“I just got kicked out of my house. My wife kicked me out. I don’t know where to go or what to do,” he sounded tortured. “This just sucks because I don’t want to leave my little daughter.”

My head felt balloon-lite as the magnitude of his words sunk in. “You’re married?” I learned the perils of adulterous affairs from my girlfriend who was hospitalized with an ectopic pregnancy by a married man who was never going to leave his wife. Usually, I asked any mature-looking man seeking my company, “Are you married?” If yes, I would suggest he work out whatever excuses he was giving me with his wife. My thoughts were spinning with this turn of events on this wheel of fate.

“You’re married?” I asked again, deafening his initial answer and plugging in the playback of our past weeks. He had not behaved like a married man or one in a serious relationship. I had felt like I hit the lottery jackpot. Now, like suffocating underwater, I was struggling to breathe.

“I have relatives in San Bernardino, but I need to work here until I figure out what to do. Would you mind if I stayed with you until I get on my feet?” he asked, sincere and pitiful.

I was incredulous but not heartless. We had connected, and although I could not foresee a future with him, I said, “Okay.” It was an arrangement of convenience with a man that I loved.
He moved in but was so wracked with guilt that he changed, became morose. Over the next weeks, we settled in but our feelings were shifting. I was supportive and patient with him. We were romantic and respectful, but emotional crevices appeared. He missed his daughter. I dared not ask anything about his marriage, but he admitted that they were divorcing.

After a few months, he moved to live with relatives in San Bernardino, found work, and enrolled in college. To me, he was a good man with a good heart, but like many handsome men, he was unfaithful and he paid the price. I never felt like the interloper, and he seemed happier when he visited me most weekends that August. It was one such visit that I said, “When I ask you to return my key, it will mean that I have met someone and we are serious.” We were sitting inside his car outside at my house. Norman did not admit it, but I suspected that he had met someone else. I harbored no jealousy. Our relationship had transformed into one that was warm and respectful. We both had changed. He was back in school, and I would enroll the following week.

“Okay,” he said, as if he knew this day would come. Meeting Norman would change me in ways I had not yet imagined until I met Belinda, who told me what I had longed to hear.

I met Belinda because more than anything else, I wanted to be married. “I assure you, Belinda will answer your question,” Korah had said of her fellow psychic.

Sitting on Belinda’s sofa inside her comfortably furnished Leimert Park living room, I could see that the answers to my question were literally being heard inside her head. She was sitting with one leg tucked underneath the other that clear and bright Saturday, August afternoon, giggling and turning her head while conversing with her invisible spirit guides.
I sat across from her, grinding my teeth and sipping fresh mint tea. Belinda’s consultation was not held inside one of those cramped and curtained rooms where the psychic and client face each other and stare at a crystal ball. I had been there, done that when I had visited the psychic I found in a newspaper ad. She had required a hundred dollars and a frozen turkey to remove my “blockages” she said that someone had placed between Charmaine’s father and me. I never returned.

Belinda, chubby and cheerful, was a polar opposite of the thin, older, ethnic-voiced psychic I had once visited. “Yes, you will get married,” she said at the onset of our session. Her Tarot cards had verified it, and now she said her spirit guides were giving her more information to share with me. “Girl, he’s really cute; he has curly hair and light eyes. He’s very fair skinned, too. Whatever kind of relationship you want, he will give you.”

As if anticipating my next question of when I would meet this amazing guy, she said, “Within three months, you will meet.” After a few minutes of quiet, she laughed again. “Oh my, really?” she said to them. Turning to me she said, as I was packing up to go, “I assure you that you will have the kind of relationship you want.”

I left Belinda’s house and calculated that mid-November would end her three-month timeframe, so I began watching for that cute, curly-haired, fair-skinned, light-eyed man she described. I started meeting them at gas stations. I met Pierre who said that he was related to the author of *The Three Musketeers*. He offered to remove the gasoline hose from my car and as I watched, I noticed that he was fair-skinned with light eyes and short, wavy hair and handsome smile. I assumed by the sports car he drove that he well-educated, and financially well off. Our only date was fun but no sparks. Next, I met Peter, a tall, handsome, easygoing, budding
photographer. He had pulled in behind me at a different gas station, walked over and talked to me as I was filling my tank. We dated a while, and I liked him but as a friend.

Norman had moved to San Bernardino when I consulted Belinda but we saw each other on the weekends. He understood when told him that I did not want to have sex anymore until I was married but I had not yet asked him to return my key.
Writing poetry in my journals was how I expressed my feelings even as a young child. Now that I was analyzing excellent poetry in college, exhilaration became my Wednesday night emotion. Inside the classroom, I felt happy, sad, anger, empathy, sympathy and powerful feelings listening to our selected poems being read by the professor that first meeting. I was aware that time running out to find Mr. Right was probably not in a junior college poetry class.

Entering the first class, I felt overdressed compared to the sea of mostly sun-bleached blondes wearing beach walkers and denim cutoffs. Amused at what I seemed to have gotten myself into, I compared their clothing to my own Dress for Success garb, white blouse, dark skirt, black blazer, panty hose, and sensible two-inch pumps. My hairstyle was a neatly cropped Jeri-curl over a light application of makeup, and I spoke proper English. Glancing around the music room, where half the class faced the other half across the divide, I saw only one other person who looked older than eighteen and not like he had hitched a ride to class from Malibu. He was a middle-aged, African-American man who would, drop the class.

Individual introductions of classmates who mostly mumbled their name, rank, and major at the demand of the instructor were forgettable until I heard my nemesis say. “Hi. I’m Craig, and the only reason I’m taking this course is because Creative Writing had nothing new to teach me.”

While everyone else said, “Hi Craig,” I shot darts at his glum pale face, half-covered with fat, blond ringlets. How dare he throw my preferred course under the bus! “Cretin,” I muttered. He was dressed in a plaid cotton lumberjack shirt, loose Levi’s blue jeans, and tan work shoes. To me, the way he slumped back into his seat, he thought himself more intelligent than his classmates.
I was seated next to Todd, the cutest guy in class. He looked like a teenaged Troy Donohue. He was tall, well-proportioned, muscular, and tan with blond hair that framed his face and sky blue eyes. When it was my turn I stood and said “Hi, “I’m Nickie and I work at a PR firm, and I’ve been writing poetry on and off for years. I hope to learn a lot in this class.” After I sat down, the eyes of most of the girls fixated on, Todd. I figured I would not meet my special guy before the three-month timeframe that Belinda had predicated, so I settled for work and school.

Sitting next to the class hunk made my transition fun. Todd lent me pencils and pens. He and helpful and laughed when the girls flirted with him. Talking to him was easy and although I think Belinda was wrong at least her consultation did not cost a turkey and a lot of money.

At the beginning of the semester the professor mechanically said, “Your class participation is twenty percent of your grade.” It did not matter because at the beginning, Craig, another student, and I were already the constant contributors. In fact, I was immediately surprised by Craig’s mature answers even though I was still smarting about his tossing my prize course. By the third week, the professor, a crusty, but well-versed former hippie, directed us to form discussion groups and meet during the second half of each class.

Todd and I stayed put while a few girls raced to sit on either side of him in our circle. I snickered at the spectacle, and did not notice that Craig had dragged a desk from across the room and plopped it next to mine. After our group introduced ourselves, Craig began the discussion about poetry and was a surprisingly good facilitator. We were in a heated debate about Daddy by Sylvia Plath when we realized class was over, and he suggested that we continue our conversation as he walked me to my car. Intelligence is an aphrodisiac to me, and forty minutes after dismissal, we still stood in the moonlit dark, next to my car and talking about the poetry and the class, and probably, silently analyzing each other.
Mentally I noted that he was tall and slender but not skinny. His unruly, blond curls covered his forehead to just above his light-blue eyes, giving him a bad-boy kind of look and, and his snarky remarks in class fed that image. I imagined him to be maybe twenty years old only because his answers sounded mature. That night, as I drove home, his face was glued to my eyelids. Nothing like that had ever happened to me, not with my first legitimate boyfriend or Charmaine’s father. Belinda’s timeline prediction came to mind, but I shushed it away. Craig was too young, and the middle of November was the deadline to meet “the one.”

“I knew my marriage was over when I stood on the bridge and removed my wedding ring,” Craig said as he analyzed “Wedding Ring,” the poem by Denise Levertov. The entire class set mesmerized because his being married was the last thing any of us had imagined. I stared at him, my mouth agape. “He’s divorced? He looks too young,” I whisper.

The next week, Craig revealed even more about himself. “Sometimes, when I am in the pool with my son” was all I heard him say in class that night. My mind wandered. “He’s divorced and a father? He has a son? They have a swimming pool? Is his family rich? How old is this guy?” That night, standing across from him and leaning against my car, I asked him.

“I am twenty-six,” he began, “but in November, I will be twenty-seven.” Silently calculating our age difference, I felt that I could date him if that was his plan. This was our third after-class chat, and it was the second week in October. Before he left to walk to his car, he told me he would miss the next class because as a union shop steward, he had to attend a meeting. Feeling disappointed about his planned absence surprised me, and once again, his face was plastered inside my eyelids as I drove home but this time I wondered, could he be the one I was waiting for?
“There’s Craig!” Todd said during our group meeting the next week. My back was turned away from the door and when I turned around, I saw him leaning just outside the door, unshaven and wearing a different lumberjack-plaid shirt. My heart began beating faster as I approached him.

“That three-day growth looks good on Don Johnson,” I teased. He was the macho detective on *Miami Vice* who wore no socks with his white suit, kept his blond hair neatly cropped, and introduced the trend of copycat three-day-growth stubble. Craig laughed in recognition. “I thought you weren’t coming to class,” I said serious but I secretly delighted.

“I decided to skip the meeting. It’s the same old stuff,” he said, describing his job and being a shop steward to me during the break. To me, it sounded important.

By the fourth week our walk and talk after class, was routine. We knew each other’s age, what kind of work we did, we had a child, and that we enjoyed reading and writing poetry. “We should take our kids to Chuck E Cheese. You should give me your phone number for when we set a date,” he suggested a week before Halloween. Five days later, he left four snarky messages on my answering machine.

The Saturday before Halloween, he left four snarky messages on my telephone. He sounded annoyed that I was not answering the phone, but I had been out all day and at my niece’s fifth birthday party. There, Mother had plopped the kitten I had given my niece a week ago, into my arms to take back home.

“She’s too young for a pet. She tried to wash the poor little thing in the toilet,” Mother laughed and told me at the party and out of earshot of my niece. Now, I had to reorient him and
his mother, Harmony, while also preparing to go to a Halloween party with Sandi my next-door neighbor.

Clicking on the answering machine, I put the kitten down and began listening to Craig’s messages. “Where are you?” This was question followed by, “call me back as soon as possible.” I was tickled and a little annoyed. “That’s none of your business. You sure are bossy,” I replied as the telephone rang.

“Where have you been? I’ve been trying to call you all day,” Craig asks as if I owe him an explanation.

“I’ve been out all day. I just got in. What’s up?” I ask at the beginning of a three hour conversation. We chat like we are the oldest of friends catching up on our week. Finally, I tell him that I am going to a party after he asks me about my plans for the evening.

“Do you like Spanakopita? “I am making it for a party we are having here tonight. You should come,” he says like it is the party to end all parties.

“I have never heard of it. Thanks, but I told you that I have plans.”

“Can you cancel them?” he asks.

“No. I’m going with my neighbor and I am not sure what time we will get back, but I’m sure I will be too tired to come, but thanks for inviting me. In fact, I need to get dressed. We’ve been talking all this time,” I laugh.

“Wait! What about tomorrow? Can you come for breakfast? Then you can have some leftover Spanakopita!”

“Would this be our first date?” I tease, and we both laugh. “Of course not,” he says laughing.
“Okay, I say. How about 10 A.M.?” I did not tell him that I was annoyed that he waited a week before telephoning and inviting me to a party at the last minute. So far, our conversations have been friendly, nothing romantic, but I have always been tone deaf with love talk.
“Tomorrow is Halloween and I am taking Charmaine trick or treating,” I told Carra, who had picked me up in her green Chevy Vega at 8:30 A.M. to go clothes shopping with her. “That party was so boring that Sandi and I left after an hour. I have a breakfast date at 10 this morning at my classmate’s house, so I need to be back by 9:30 A.M. okay?”

“That party was so boring that Sandi and I left after an hour. I have a breakfast date at 10 this morning at my classmate’s house, so I need to be back by 9:30 A.M. okay?”

“That guy I told you about invited over me last night, but I had other plans. I told him I would have breakfast with him but I’m not sure I want to go. Usually when I go to a guy’s house, I end up being chased around the table like I’m dessert,” I laughed although I was serious.

“He’s a white guy? That’s so funny since I’m the one that white guys approach,” she reminded me. It was her annoying brag. She, like Norman, was milk-chocolate dark, but Carra, with her bushy, waist length hair, stylish clothes and six-inch stilettos, resembled like Chaka Khan, and she took no guff from men. Neither did I but I don’t seem to attract some of the well-off men who invited her to dinner at trendy restaurants or drove her around in their late model sports cars. We have been friends since our first day as college freshmen in journalism. She was a recent transplant from Corsicana, Texas who had changed from geek to chic over the summer before enrolling in the journalism course and sitting next to me.

“It’s just for breakfast, and I’m sure I’ll be fine. Probably be out after an hour. He’s divorced, and he has a little son,” I said to appease her and then reminded of her my date with her former supervisor several years ago. It began well with dinner and ended with me refusing his sexual advances and finally falling asleep. “Remember when I stole his manual drive sports car and hiccup-stopped all the way home?”
“Well, Louis did have a reputation but I thought he would be act like a perfect, gentlemen because I set you two up,” she said in her deep voice before laughing at the memory. After purchasing a new skirt, she delivered me to my car and at 9:45 A.M. I was on the road to Craig’s.

His address was not the mansion I imagined but an apartment house with a swimming pool. His apartment was on the first floor in the rear, next to the heated swimming pool.

Opening his door, he stood above me straight, barefoot, shirtless, and wearing blue-jean cutoffs. “He certainly is not trying to impress me, I thought while standing outside of his apartment. My eyes were drawn to a curly-headed, fat-faced baby with a million-dollar gap-tooth smile, sitting in a highchair and wildly waving his arms in way that charmed me.

“Hi. Um, I have some bad news.” Craig said before inviting me inside. “All of the Spanakopita is gone. Everybody ate it up at the party. All I have is an egg and some cheese. I can make you a nice omelet,” Craig offered, standing like a sentry and did not offer to go out for breakfast.

Staring at him, I considered leaving but, I decided to seize the day. “Okay,” I said, stepping inside and following him to one of two barstools in the living room and set at the kitchen counter while continuing to watch his son’s highchair antics.

“I make a mean omelet,” he said as I see him crack the egg into a bowl, add salt and pepper and beat it before pouring the mixture into a sizzling skillet. After a minute he placed sliced cheddar on one side and folded the omelet with a wide spatula.

“Your apartment looks really nice,” I told him as I began eating the omelet that tasted dry and bland. “This, tastes very good,” I say, still enamored with Paulo wiggling in his highchair and smashing his food into his smiling face. Usually I would be annoyed at such undisciplined
behavior and Craig’s dress yet, everything about this moment and place felt familiar and comfortable.

Technically this was our first date, and I still considered eating and running but when Paulo needed his diaper changed, and Craig chased his naked son around the house and then outside around the pool before he catches him, I cannot remember laughing so hard. I felt completely comfortable and like had known this man my whole life. Instead of eat and run, he and I spent the morning and most of the afternoon talking and getting to know each other better. Playing his guitar, he sang a few original songs, and later we listened to Van Morrison albums on his record player. “So, what is your sun sign?” He asked out of the blue.

“My sun sign is Pisces, but my moon is Scorpio. What about you?” I ask.

“My Sun is Scorpio and my moon is Pisces,” he says.

Now I feel that is something very special but I have to leave because it is almost 5 P.M. and, like Cinderella, I say, “I must leave.” We hugged and I drove home to meet my movie date.

All I did while sitting inside the dark movie theater with a perfectly nice man was think about Craig and the amazing time I spent with him and Paulo. After the movie, I decided to skip dinner and go home because I was exhausted. The next day I invited Craig and Paulo to come and go trick or treating with me and Charmaine.

“It’s nice of you to ask, but I already have plans. But I will call you later, okay?” he said. I was disappointed and maybe a little jealous, but ten minutes later he telephoned. “My plans have changed and we can be at your house at dusk.”
Paulo, dressed like a miniature Tom Sawyer in blue coveralls with one shoulder strap hanging loose, raced ahead of all the other children to knock on the doors, and with a huge smile, this little white kid was yelling, “Treat or Treat!” Craig and I stood on the sidewalk to watch the expressions of the mostly African American candy givers, and it was amusing, but they were gracious. Charmaine and her friends running behind Paulo and yelling “STOP!” looked like a slapstick comedy. After Charmaine’s father picked her up, Craig lay Paulo in Charmaine’s bottom bunk and we sat on the sofa. All that night, we talked about everything imaginable, listened to music, drank wine, kissed, and then I realized that it was nearly 4 A.M.

“What time do you have to be at work?” I asked, moving away from his embrace.

“At 5A.M.,” he replied.

I was shocked that he did not leave earlier, but I could not kick them out in the dark cold.

“I guess you can stay here. You can even sleep in my bed, but I will split the sheet,” I say.

“Oh. I understand,” and that was how we slept together that night. I was still in bed when he kissed me goodbye and left with Paulo.

All day my head was in the clouds. When he telephoned, we both confessed that we hated have to leave each other. After that day, we saw or spoke to each other every day. When he was sick with a cold, I gave him a little plant present. He let it die.

“The professor is my buddy. He said he wasn’t surprised that we would like each other since we were the only two talking in the class,” he told me. A week before his twenty-seventh birthday in mid-November, he telephoned to ask, “How many children do you want?”
“Wow, that’s out of the blue,” I laughed. To most men the subject is like krypton. “I think three more,” I said without hesitation. “But I want to be married,” I added more serious.

“What about you,” I returned the question. “I want three more, too. I come from a big family. I’m the eldest of five.”

“I’m next to the youngest of eight,” I bragged a little. We had not been sexually intimate, and although there has been heavy petting, he has tried to go further. There is heavy petting. Since breakfast at his house, we have seen or talked to each other almost every day.

“Hmmm, so, you want to be married before you have more children, huh?”

“Yes, I really do. Being a single parent is hard, and I would want any other children I have to live with both parents in a solid household.”

“What would you say if I asked you to marry me?”

“I’m not sure. Why?”

“I was just wondering,” he said.

In a teasing voice I ask “Wondering what? I mean, is this some kind of quasi proposal?”

“Maybe it is. What if it is? What would you say?” he asked, sounding cornered.

“I guess I would say yes,” I answer. We both laugh and hang up.

Telephoning me the next day, Craig sounds a little more guarded. We laugh about yesterday’s weird proposition. Our conversation, which was pleasant, and animated, became more somber. “I have something to tell you,” he Craig.

“Hmmm. I don’t like the sound of this, but go on. Do you have some serious disease?” I joke.
“No. But I have to tell you something. “I’m still married, but we’ve been separated for a while. She lives in Virginia,” he said cautiously waiting for my response.

“I don’t know what to say,” I answered, remembering my last meeting with Norman. He returned my key the weekend after Halloween.

“The brother is a lucky man,” Norman had said while unhooking the key.

“Actually, he’s not a brother,” I had said laughing and watched his expression. The few black men I had told about Craig were upset at me, so I loved it when Norman laughed at his assumption and said he was happy for me. Now I sat mute and thought about being in love and quasi-engaged to a married man and his son. Clearly, Craig was Belinda’s prediction, but he is married.

“I’m sorry, but I meant it when I asked what you would say if I asked you to marry me.” He sounded somber. I do not want to know anything about his wife, but he tells me anyway and it is not attractive. “She’s a liar and a con artist. She lied about her age when we first met. Anyway, she wanted to get back together last Christmas in New Mexico at my Mom’s house, but I told her “I’m done!” She left Paulo with me and I had to scramble to find childcare.

Suddenly, I felt tired and wondered about their attraction to each other. Choosing to focus on the present, I believed him although I had unwittingly broken my vow to not date a married man and one who let his classmates believe that he was divorced. On the other hand, I know in my bones that he is Belinda’s prediction come true.

Loving a married man did not mean a death sentence or wearing a scarlet letter. “I forgive you but I hate being lied to, and I hate liars because you don’t know what to believe,” nearly in tears I told him.
On his twenty-seventh birthday, Craig and Paulo moved everything they wanted to keep into my house. We would blend our furniture later, but we had a lunch date for him to meet my mother.

Craig had sat quietly in the Mother’s living room while I went into her bedroom to help her dress for our lunch date. “Mother, I wanted you to meet Craig because we are engaged. He is white,” I carefully reveal while buttoning her blouse.

“Really? When did this happen? You know, white people should just stop trying to keep black people down,” she said in rapid succession. Mother, a political animal had been relishing recent elections of black politicians but at the same time, local the police were busting through into homes of black families and looking for drugs or guns, and too often harming innocent black families.

“A few days ago. His name is Craig and Mother, he’s white,” I say gingerly.

“Oh my goodness! Do you think he heard me? Well, ok. At least he’s not in one of those religions that have a lot wives,” she said while pulling on her stretch slacks. We were going to lunch at Clifton’s Cafeteria in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles. It is popular and affordable with good food and Craig had never been there.

“Uh. Mother, actually, he comes from a Mormon family,” I whisper.

“What? Oh my god,” she says and her eyes grow big but her mouth stays safely shut.

“He’s not a practicing Mormon and the religion forbids polygamy,” I assure her. I do not tell her that Craig’s grandfather is the product of a polygamous family. That would be too much.
Mother and Craig are genuinely enjoying each other’s company over lunch. They talk easily about the current news while I am satisfied watching them interact. After we take Mother home, Craig and I high-five the day then retrieved Paulo. Sandi had been watching him next door and wanted to hear all the details. She held her stomach while laughing at my conversation with my Mother.

On Christmas, with one knee bent, Craig formally proposed to me a few days after Sarai had come to town to see Paulo for the holidays and begin divorce proceedings. Our introduction was a bit awkward and she walked around my house, removing the community property that she wanted. Craig said nothing when as she removed the Rose painting from the wall. A friend painted as their wedding gift. Sarai left the house with her copy of the divorce petition, and Paulo. Craig said he would be back in three weeks. We would not see Paulo again for three months and twenty-six years would pass before I knew why.

Not everyone in either of our families was overjoyed with our inter-racial engagement. Interracial marriages were more prevalent among sports and entertainment celebrities. Mostly black men married white women. Quincy Jones had married Peggy Lipton, Sammy Davis Junior had married Mai Brit and O.J. Simpson had married Nicole Brown. Some of our family’s reservations were historical and some were racist, but not surprising the skeptics among our family and friends would attend our wedding.

Craig and I exchanged wedding vows on a warm Father’s Day, June 17, 1984. We stood underneath the shade of a huge oak tree on full blooming park like grounds of a historical mansion on Adams Boulevard.
Nearly six years later, when our family had settled on Woodlawn Street, Craig and I had moved seven times with and without Paulo and Charmaine in tow, but always with Phoebe.

Six months ago, we all attended Phoebe’s and Marshall’s whirlwind weekend wedding at Live Oak Park, in Berkeley, California. Sitting at picnic tables decorated with white plastic tablecloths and colorful spring bouquets nestled inside sixteen-ounce Mason jars, we fifty or so guests listened to them exchange vows while standing in front of a huge stone fireplace.
“He is late,” I said, a bit worried and glanced at the clock on the microwave above the stove. It was dark outside on November 13, 2007, the day after Craig’s fifty-first birthday. “We’ve been married for twenty-three years. Our children are all doing well. Phoebe is at U.C. Berkeley, Charmaine is in medical school and Paulo is in art school. Now it’s our turn.”

I imagined my husband’s surprise belated birthday dinner at Union League, our favorite French restaurant in New Haven. It was postponed yesterday when he invited me to hang out with his boss, co-workers and their spouses in New Haven. Now, his tardiness provoked twinges of anxiety—a reminder of the late-night telephone call from a hospital nurse saying, “Your husband has been in a serious car accident.”

I was relieved to hear the front door open and with my back facing the hallway opening, I awaited his usual greeting kiss on my cheek. Instead, he walked by and standing on the other side of the kitchen table, turned to face me wearing a scowl instead of a smile on his face.

Before I could ask, “Hi, Honey, how was your day?” his baby-blues glared at me, and like a bewildered child, he blurted out, “Bob said he was only joking.” Craig was referring to last night’s gathering at Bar; the popular brewery and restaurant not far from Union League Restaurant where we should soon be driving. Bob is Craig’s new best friend, but I was confused about the joking claim. Was he talking about our drive home when I told him that Bob had seemed upset with him?

*Yesterday was beautiful, sunny, fall, and lighthearted when Craig telephoned me at home with great excitement. “Terrance is giving his book talk, tonight and all of the office staff is going to support him. Afterwards, we’re going to Bar, a restaurant and Brewery for dinner. I*
think you should come." He says, his voice is drowned out with background yelling. “Oh, JoAnn made buttons with my picture for my birthday and everyone here is wearing one.” he says laughing. JoAnn, the office manager, can be counted on to orchestrate fun events at the small office where Craig works as an education outreach coordinator. I do not mention my plans and cancel the reservation. I like his co-workers and Terrence, his boss. JoAnn hands me one of her buttons. I think it looks goofy, but I join in the fun. We all park our cars close to the bookstore and after the Terrance’s talk, we walk five short blocks to Bar.

Bar is popular for their hand-crafted pizza and specialty beers. Standing inside the doorway and shouting to be heard, the waitress, with practiced precision, seats us at connecting picnic tables in the crowded dining room.

“Isn’t it funny that our menfolk are all at one table, and we womenfolk are at another? It’s like that at parties, too, men in the living room and women in the kitchen,” I joke to JoAnn and Martha, Bob’s very pregnant wife and the office administrative assistant. Ice-cold crunchy lettuce has never tasted so good, and between the spinach and the pizzas, the seven of us picked our platters clean.

“Martha, get all the sleep you can because you won’t know a deep sleep for the next eighteen years,” I joke and glance at her swollen belly. From behind, this thin, blonde-haired woman does not look pregnant. “Oh, and JoAnn, don’t worry; no matter what you and Doug to do to your new house, it will take three times as long and cost three times as much,” I caution, and we burst out laughing at our shared home-construction woes. JoAnn is a walking advertisement for successful, middle-class, married women, tall, blonde, well-educated, and committed to noblesse oblige. Talking home and children, we women ignore the man-talk at the adjoining table.
Gathering our purses and jackets to leave, I gently grasp JoAnn’s elbow. She suffers from night blindness and I promised to help her walk her to her car. On the walk, I realize that our pairings seem odd. Craig and Martha walk ahead of everyone, laughing and shoving each other like children. Bob, Martha’s husband, walks silently behind them but ahead of JoAnn and me. Doug, JoAnn’s husband and her boss are walking behind us and most likely talking academics.

Halfway to our parked cars, Bob steps backwards until he is walking beside me. Without warning, he leans over and whispers into my ear. “Your husband is acting like a child,” and causes me to glance ahead at Craig and Martha, who are gleefully laughing and shoving each other.

“Uh, okay?” I reply unconcerned. Bob returns to his original space until a few minutes later when he is back at my side and interrupting my conversation with JoAnn who, probably does not see or hear him.

“Your husband is a jerk,” Bob, sounding like a jealous child whispers into my ear. For a brief second, I consider that Bob is the odd man walking and does not like it.

I want him to leave me alone and say, “I’ll mention it to him.” When he leaves, I realize that I have made him a promise and I feel the dread of putting Craig on the defensive.

On our drive home, I silently consider how to broach Bob’s behavior without damaging his friendship with Craig. I do not want to do this, but I made promise so carefully I say “Craig,” Bob, seemed to be, a little upset, with you tonight.”

“Really? Oh man,” Craig replies surprisingly remorseful without asking for details. “I’ll send an email as soon as we get home.” It sounds like a perfectly logical remedy and I am
surprised and relieved. He goes into his downstairs office to email an apology while I wait for him, but I am asleep by the time he comes to bed.

Now, sitting at our kitchen table, my surprise dinner is again, relegated to the back burner. “Craig, I don’t understand. What happened?” I ask.

Instead of him giving me details of their conversation, he snarls, “Bob said he was only joking. He pauses, gathers invisible grit and says. “When I got to work, Martha started laughing at me and said that they thought my email was funny.

I have never seen my husband look so upset, and I wonder what Martha thought was funny. I imagined her guileless mockery but I knew that she and Craig felt genuine affection for each other.

The dim light from the lamp hanging over the kitchen sink slightly illuminates a room darkened from fall’s early sunset. Earlier, I thought that light gave the kitchen an amorous aura. Now it reflects my dark confusion as I wait for more information. “What did Bob tell you?”

“All day, at work I felt like a fool, and you owe Bob an apology,” is the demand he wants assuaged immediately, but not an answer to my question.

Suddenly, I realized I was playing defense to his offense. “Why should I apologize to Bob?” I ask softly, waiting for Craig to ask to hear my side of the story, but he does not.

“You need to apologize,” he again insists. This scene feels familiar and fearful. I ignore the fear because we have grown beyond Craig’s taking the sides of “others,” haven’t we? I know that when I tell him my side, he will realize that Bob should apologize to me.”
“Craig, I didn’t approach Bob. Bob approached me, twice in fact, and he was upset with you. I told him I would mention it to you. He said, ‘Okay.’ I kept my promise.” I told Craig, expecting him to ask me “Exactly, what did Bob say to you?” But he does not.

“Martha said that Bob was just joking!” Now, I am sure that Bob and Craig are not that close because it does not sound like he spoke to Bob, only Martha.

Still, I want him to ask me “What exactly did Bob say to you last night?” Slowly, my caged-animal defenses engaged, I reveal the conversation. “Bob approached me! He said that you were acting like a child and that you were a jerk,” I shout. I want to recapture Craig to my side. Now he has to understand this wacky quandary and protect me.

Staring at me like I have two heads, Craig shouts “He said he was only joking, and I think you should apologize because I looked foolish!”

Gob smacked, I stare at him. This is us, standing defiant on opposite sides of our kitchen table and arguing about a nonsensical issue. My mind digs deeper for answers to his impudence towards me and his curious loyalty to Bob.

Still standing and facing me, his eyes narrowed in condemnation. “You know what you really are? You’re a buzz kill.” His slight slur alerts me that he is a bit drunk. “Nobody likes you,” he snarls. His words seem carefully cultivated to excavate my deepest fears of rejection. He knows me well enough to go there, and after all the time we had spent in marriage counseling, examining and binding this creature he could become, he had resurrected Dark Craig.

Years earlier, Dark Craig would stand behind me and without provocation, venting his repressed anger or anxiety to my back. I might be reading, working at my computer, or watching
television. I do not believe him when he says that nobody likes me, but I do believe that he intends to hurt me emotionally, and still, I do not know why.

“Bitch,” is uttered slowly and guttural, his opening salvo that used to unleash our verbal fights laced with *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, vulgarity. He landed sucker punches by withdrawing emotionally and physically. Unlike my father, he was never physically abusive, but, like my mother, I had learned to avoid confrontations with Dark Craig, by withdrawing and waiting for him to calm down and talk. Years ago, I had threatened to take Phoebe and leave him if he did not seek help.

“Okay, what is this really about?” I ask calmly instead of sulking or fighting. I believe that we have come a long way from that time but that night, all learning feels forgotten.

And it is strange, totally unexpected because last month while we were at dinner at his colleague’s home, Craig, had responded to another guests’ supposition about the strength of our marriage after I had told her I had finally completed planning our three-week Christmas break travel plans.

“It sounds wonderful and hectic. That’s a long time together. Your marriage must be really strong,” the older woman whom I respected had said without acrimony. Hers was an unexpected appraisal of a marriage’s success based on how well a couple traveled together. I had never considered it until that evening but Craig had stood up and announced, “Our marriage is strong,” Her own marriage was a long term interracial marriage so I had felt great respect for her insight and I left that night feeling grateful for her comment that elicited Tom’s response. Until tonight, I was confident that our marriage was unshakable. As empty nesters our expressions of love and affection had increased but tonight, Dark Greg stood inside our kitchen.
“You know what else you are? You’re a party-pooper. You always get into fights with people, and nobody likes you. You’re no fun to be around, always so serious and shit,” he snarls and stares at my face.

I hear him. I thought about the last party we attended at Sharon and Donovon’s home a few months ago. I had parked myself in a comfortable chair while Craig mingled. Before long, a small group of people approached me, and begin a lively and intense conversation about politics and education. “It looked like you were holding court over there,” Sharon teased me. “You’re good these parties and my friends like you,” she had said. I dismissed Craig’s absurd accusation.

“I still don’t understand why you think I should apologize to Bob.” To me, my integrity was being questioned. I wanted to clear up his misunderstanding although I began to sense that something else was really going on. But I sense that something else is going on with Craig.

Now I wished Bob had never whispered into my ear. I wished that I would have said, “You need to take this up with Craig.” But, I had promised that I would mention his concern to Craig and now, I am in trouble. “Craig, why didn’t you ask me what Bob was upset about?” I hope he answers, because it might help get to the real issue.

“You need to apologize,” he said.

I wondered if maybe I should have apologized but listening to Craig, I do believe his anger with me would end. I want Craig him on my side and upset with Bob for causing our fight. I wanted us to go out to dinner, but see it was not going to happen.

Finally fully frustrated, I walked over to the sink, and leaned my waist against the granite countertop that he and I had installed. I survey the kitchen that I love. I had loved planning his surprise fiftieth birthday weekend of surprise gatherings with his friends and his family, who had
secretly flown to Connecticut. As I study my reflection in the darkened window over the sink, I recall something Craig told me unsolicited shortly after we moved here.

“When Sarai got mad at me, she used to throw the dishes,” he had said it with neither humor nor reflection. I had wondered then and still wonder now what he did to make his ex-wife that angry, as I hear him move a chair behind me.

Stilling facing the window, a strange thought bloomed when I noticed the large butcher knife on the kitchen counter. *I think I understand how homicides can take place in kitchens.* Gingerly, I slid the knife inside the butcher’s block. While Craig spoke to my backside, I filled a small glass with water and drank it then, I refilled it and turned to face Craig. He was talking; I was not listening when I tossed the water at him, but he jumped away and I missed drenching him. In anger, I hurled the glass at his feet, smashing it into sharp, little shards on the oak floor.

“You tried to hurt me,” he said. Backing away and feigning injury, he pretended to be shocked and moved to the other side of the table while I remained standing at the sink.

“I’m sleeping in my office tonight. I deserve better. I am never sleeping with you again,” his words sounded practiced.

Later some of those words would help me understand his decision to move out but that night, when I said, “I deserve better.” I did not believe we would not make up. The fight seemed too ridiculous, and I was too tired to continue and left the house hoping things would be better the next day.

Returning from the movies, I felt better. Seeing that he had waited up for me, I felt hopeful. “So where did you go,” he asked with the care I had loved. But, he just wanted to be sure that I was alright and he was going to bed, downstairs.
The following day I emailed him at work. “The fight over Bob was stupid. It should not affect our marriage like this.” His reply made me realize that I have handed him an opening.

He replied that Bob wasn’t the problem in our marriage and that he has not been happy for a long time. He loves me but . . . Without me as a part of it, he wants to be happy and to live his one wild and precious life, a reference to the Mary Oliver poem, *A Summer Day*. Where I had understood our fight as a grave misunderstanding, he had utilized it a small and fragile straw to break our camel’s back. He never slept in our bed again.
Mother’s Day 2008

I was awful at gift-shopping. I lacked the gift gene that Flo and my friends possessed. Growing up, shopping for gifts with my big sisters had been fun. Mother’s and Father’s Day meant buying gifts like cologne or flowers and candy until I at age nineteen, I was baptized a a Jehovah’s Witness, the religion that does not celebrate anything except the “Memorial” of Jesus’s death. After a few years, I left the faith, but I retained many of the teachings, specifically the one about holidays. Craig, loved presents—giving and receiving them. Watching my expression from his surprise bouquet of flowers or an unexpected poem made him feel good. Gifting was natural to him, awkward for me.

Living with my grandparents until I returned to Mother’s house at age seven, I learned from their examples to conserve, to recycle, and not to waste money on frivolities. They were prudent but by no means stingy. I was too young to understand the concept of buying gifts but I happily received presents. At Mother’s house, shopping for and wrapping presents was an established ritual, though our cheap gifts were often token.

After getting married, slowly and clumsily, I returned to the ritual of shopping for presents and looking forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings. Now, our grown children receive gift cards instead of gifts, but everyone knows that I love them to pieces.

Craig decided to move out on Mother’s Day. What a jerky thing to do. Standing at the window and watching him perform the U Haul truck, parking-dance in front of our house, I know better than to expect a Mother’s Day present from him. In fact, I am insulted that Bob is helping him move out, but I say nothing as they enter the front porch.
Midmorning is lush and warm with a bright, blue sky and cotton-ball clouds. On this Mother’s Day Sunday, I am thinking about the husbands and children who will be watching Mom open her presents and treating her to breakfast in bed or at IHOP. Our children live in California, and I will receive nice cards with gift certificates. This is the first Mother’s Day that I do not have breakfast in bed. After decades of caretaking, gone are the hamsters, chinchilla, ferrets, mudskippers, and aquarium with friendly fishes. Also gone are my children and husband.

“Hi, Nickie and Happy Mother’s Day,” says Bob. He is a new dad and should be home with his Martha instead of with Craig. “I thought you might like this,” he says and hands me a crumpled, white Dunkin Donuts bag with a warm bear-claw and a cup of coffee.

“Thanks, Bob, that was very thoughtful,” I say and think about how many times we have entertained friends on this porch and inside of our kitchen. Last summer, Bob, Martha, Sharon, and Donovan came for dinner and we all sat around our farm table inside our kitchen, savoring and then scarfing down Craig’s Osso Bucco and drinking several toasts with the premium wines and Prosecco furnished by our guests. Long after eating dinner and my simple dessert, we remained seated at the table, talking politics, work, and our dreams.

Today, I do not confront Bob, my designated divorce-inciter, about that night. Bob should be my nemesis, but lately, I know enough about Craig to realize that Bob was probably his ruse for our fight that night. Craig says as little as possible to me as he directs Bob in helping him. I feel nervous uneasy sitting inside my own house to watch them move out. Instead, I remain at the table on the front porch. Then I move to the futon and finally settle on one of two blue wicker side chairs. Whenever Craig does ask a question, I answer it without emotion. It is as if I am a stranger in a strange house and helplessly watching its dismantling.
After loading his belongings into the truck, Craig returns to the porch and makes a few aggressive-sounding demands. “I want to take the twin bed. I also need a table,” he says, looking at the antique table given to me by our neighbor before moving to a retirement village. Craig’s demands sound rehearsed. I have been reading our Couples Numerology Composite, and I feel that I better understand how he had experienced my controlling impulses concerning the house, the finances, and the children. Reading that sentiment written inside his notebook was also illuminating.

“That bed is an antique,” I say calmly, remembering how excited we both were to find the white, iron-framed twin bed. The original wire springs were the deciding factor that day in Albuquerque. “I would really like it back when you are finished with it,” I tell him.

“Okay. What about this table?” he asks, sounding less hostile, and points to my prized possession.

“George gave me this table,” I say. It, too, is an antique trestle table that he had used for his starter plants. I painted it white. “I guess so, please return it when you buy a new table,” I say, looking at him and hoping I sound reasonable.

“Okay,” he sighs. “I don’t have a couch. I want the futon. Phillip gave that to me, you know,” he says as if we are haggling, which we are not. And Phillip had offered it to both of us, but reminding Craig of it will not help. I am surprised at how timid I have become around him. It seems as if he wants us to fight in front of Bob to prove how controlling I am or was. I had not expected Craig to take anything that reminded him of us. We often napped on the futon, and Phoebe’s college graduation friends had spent the night sleeping on it.
Bob attempts to strike up a conversation with me, but I am not in a mood for chit chat with him. I want a serious discussion but it is not the time. Silent, he is standing in the doorway, watching us. Although I don’t believe that Craig will take care of the bed or table, I choose to trust him. It is Mother’s Day, and I want to trust and after they leave, I enter his now-empty bedroom. Gone is the beautiful oak antique office desk I found when Yale was selling used office furniture. Excited about the find, I telephoned him and we rented a trailer and brought it home, waxed it, and Craig loved it. One desk drawer had also harbored a terrible secret.

Last February, when Craig had disappeared for two weeks, I began searching for clues to his whereabouts and discovered the last photograph that we had taken together for the congregation directory. Since I was never notified to approve it, I had forgotten about it. I studied our photograph. Craig looked natural, relaxed. But like a Dorian Gray portrait, my face looked splotchy and muddy as if it was hiding my pain. I would never have approved that picture, but seeing it made me feel that perhaps it was revealing something hidden inside me. I returned it to its folder and never mentioned what I found.

Craig has not left behind much, but what he leaves is significant. First, on the windowsill is a small, smooth, walnut wood carving of a human figure sitting in contemplation. It was Craig’s gift from Charmaine, who brought it from The Gambia, where she had spent six weeks working in a clinic to strengthen her medical school application. Second, the closet floor is dirty and a large, empty gin bottle is lying in the corner. “He was hiding his drinking in plain sight,” I shrug my contempt at his half-hidden drinking problem, the same one I had discovered after his car accident in Poughkeepsie.

Now, officially living alone, I move about the house, zombielike, cleaning, rearranging the front porch, and thinking about how to prepare two bedrooms for potential tenants while hoping
like hell that I am awarded this house in the divorce that I do not want. Finally, resting on the sofa, I think back to the day when I had telephoned and asked our landlord, “Would you be willing to sell your house to us?” After I explained that only my salary was considered for the loan, he said yes happily and suggested we all use his real estate agent. We completed the sale on my forty-fifth birthday, when I signed my name on the mortgage deed. I also remember my omniscient, inside voice saying, “If I ever have to, the mortgage is low enough that I can pay it by myself.”

It was such an eerie thought that it prompted another foreboding thought from my wedding day. As we stood in the receiving line I heard it. “If this doesn’t work out, we can always get a divorce.” It was that same voice that had said, “You will figure out your life in your fifties.” Two years ago, when I worked for a real estate attorney, I wrote a new deed and added Craig’s name. It felt wonderful to file it at the court house. I never actually expected to pay the mortgage and taxes by myself.

It was almost comical, Craig’s departure. “Because tomorrow is another day,” I say in my best Scarlett O’Hara voice, from “Gone with the Wind.” It was when she began her struggle to rebuild her life.

I begin with the yard. For years, I have struggled to transform the quarter acre lot into an oasis. I invested time and money on plantings that, year in and year out, produced both bounty and famine, and until a few months ago, I stubbornly resisted good neighborly advice. Craig had created the raised beds for the vegetable garden and like most things he worked on, it had been a success each year.
The more I began accepting that Craig was leaving, the more the yard became my refuge to release stress and sort out my thoughts. Now that he is gone, each morning, after taking a brief walk, I return home to water and prune the plants before leaving for work. Talking to my plants is meditative, although their growth is often disappointing. One morning while I gate the peony stalks, I suddenly recall the series of songs that, two years ago, invaded my thoughts while I was working with these same plants.

Like a jukebox filled with quarters, the refrain of the songs began playing inside my head. “It’s Too Late” by Carole King, “Just Once” by James Ingram, “Neither One of Us” by Gladys Knight and the Pips, “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” by Paul Simon had all plagued me until I willed them gone. Sometimes, Craig and I struggled to communicate our frustrations, but those songs had made me think about working harder to heal our rifts. For two people who had once been perfect-fit, crazy in love with each other, I sometimes felt like we had lost our communication mojo. We had been in and out of couple’s therapy to help us clarify our frustrations, and then something else would occur with the kids or work or money, and I would realize that we still needed professional help to talk to each other in ways that soothed and solidified our commitment. Those songs were either mocking me or were an omen.

At the beginning of 2005, the year of the lost love songs, Rhea and I sat inside her living room over a small table where I lay several rows of Tarot cards. Getting a reading at the beginning of the year made was a fun ritual. Driving to Bethel where she lived seemed an adventure. The snow was light that January, so my drive along the winding Connecticut River felt leisurely. We sat inside her kitchen drinking tea sweetened with maple syrup and eating toast with nut butter.
Studying my Tarot spread that day, Rhea cocked her head, “Well, this is nice. Craig actually likes you.” She apologized after I frowned. “What I mean is that things are going pretty well for now.” Closing her eyes, one hand on her forehead, she inhaled deeply and said, “In about two years, you will experience a great shakeup in your life. Pluto will be in Capricorn, and what is no longer useful will have to be discarded.” Playing the taped reading of the reading while I drove home, I had dismissed Rhea’s dire prediction, but stored the cassette tape.

The garden is my balm in Gilead, my Siddhartha quest for meaning, but it has required a lot of back aching and filthy work most of the day on the weekends. A month after Craig left, I finally took my neighbor Jim’s advice.

“Look,” he had said in his Florida drawl, “You just need to put down newspaper over the exposed ground, then pour three inches of mulch on top and be done!” Between school, homework, and my job, I was too tired to continue gardening the way that I have been doing. After four trips to Home Depot to buy mulch and weed block, my yard is transformed. No more filthy and exhaustive ripping out dead plants, transplanting dying plants, and turning over rocky soil. One afternoon of mulching has created the wonderland where I now relax underneath the shade of a forty-foot maple tree in the hammock we had bought Craig for Father’s Day.

And the trees! Trees are special. I remember the palm and the banana trees in our yard in Los Angeles on Vernon Avenue, and the redwood forest one hundred feet from our townhouse in Santa Cruz. And the forest behind our rented house on Eramo Terrance, our first place in Connecticut, and where we discovered that I liked dogwood trees.

“The only dogwood that will survive the blight is the Kousa,” George, our other neighbor, an avid gardener and retired mathematics professor, had said. After we purchased the house on
Woodlawn Street, George and his wife surprised us with a gift certificate, and Craig and I bought a Kousa dogwood. Craig had dug the hole and planted the sapling in the front yard. The yard had become my petri dish. The first raised flower border I had built with stones from the yard had killed a pear tree. Craig pushed it over, and I recycled the riverbed stones to outline more legitimate borders in the backyard. Meanwhile the Kousa, which was growing quickly, became my special project.

No matter how much I fertilized, pruned, or coaxed, it always bloomed later and with fewer blossoms that dropped sooner than all the other trees on our own and the surrounding blocks. Since Craig moved away, the plantings in the back and side yards, have blossomed as never before, as if finally, they can breathe, especially the Kousa which bloomed early and abundantly.

A month after Mother’s Day, Craig telephones. “I need to get my other books from the basement.”

When arrives I wonder if he will notice how the yard and especially the dogwood blossomed like an invisible veil was lifted. I wonder if he will notice that I lost the 25 pounds I gained eating his amazing cooking. I wonder if he will notice how I have blossomed.

I work full-time in summer and I am taking an online creative writing course through the Gotham Writers Workshop. The front porch is excellent for my writing assignments. I am in a platonic dating relationship with Charles, a handsome man I met on Craigslist. “I feel like I am suffering from estrogen overload from my well-meaning girlfriends,” I told Charles when he telephoned to set up our first date. Standing behind the porch screen, I watch Craig walk to the front door.
“The dogwood tree looks, wow! I have never seen it so full,” he says as I let him in the house. His recognition verifies to me that for all the good I have tried to do with him, letting him go is opening up new vistas and the best is yet to come. “What did you do to it? The side yards also look great!” I suggest he walk around and see for himself. When he returns, he is more excited, but I do not answer his question because it does not matter what I have done.

After retrieving his books, he decides to take the brick and wood plank bookcase he and I put together. With it nearly dismantled, he faced me and said, “You know that I like to keep things light but I promise you, we will have one of your deep conversations soon.”

Lying In bed that night, I reviewed my Numerology Diamond Chart for the year’s numerical influences. I have memorized the single-digit numbers’ influence but some of the double-digit numbers require a refresher. I liked 2 and 3, but 8 was one of my Karmic numbers, and 14 seemed interesting.

Your 2, challenge is about pushing your perception boundaries. If you are like most people, you probably identify with your mind each and every day. Sometimes, you are the mind and there is no perception of a different consciousness until you sit very quiet. When you quietly focus inward, another kind of consciousness enters that you recognize as your true self, which has been listening to your noisy mind. When you grasp the full understanding that it is your true self, it will be a first step towards real freedom to listen to that true, hidden self.

Your root is the catalyst, and 14 explores your fear of freedom. Sometimes the freedom looks like a void or an abyss, and until you fill it with plans, goals, and expectations, you can feel lost and purposeless. Set practical goals that require time, focus and effort. Consider returning to college or improving your career.
The action or helper key is 3. Watch as children say exactly what they think when responding to adults. It’s not considered healthy for adults to do and can get you into trouble. And yet, we can all probably use at least some bluntness. In your case, you should be less inhibited, allow yourself to come from behind your carefully crafted façade. The more you are Nickie, the more people will respect you and the more rewarding and satisfying your life will become. Be courageous; respect your feelings, your urges to hug, laugh, or to be angry. It takes courage and the reward is proportionate to the challenge. Become less self-conscious by taking yourself less seriously, and see what you have in common with others instead of your differences.

The possible outcome is my Karmic number 8 and one that is most obviously recognizable as either very positive or negative. There is no middle ground. A positive result is more common and results in career advancement, more authority and responsibility, and improved finances. A negative outcome is a stagnated, if not diminished, career and financial difficulties.

Reflecting on the reading, I realize that Craig’s moving out and facing divorce had found me facing a time of relative emptiness but, I have been filling it with projects and activities, so I no longer feel frightened by the freedom.

My numerology profile is full of creative and chatty 3s. Being blunt has often gotten me into trouble so I learned to control the inclination. The night Craig said, “Nobody likes you. They think you’re a deadbeat,” I knew that he wanted to hurt me, to make me feel the pain he must have been feeling from thinking that I controlled him, something he felt strongly enough to write in the composition book that I found while he was disappeared for two weeks. I am a talker who has been mute, but now I wanted to speak, but I also wanted to be considerate when I offered my opinion and listen better to others. Before he moved, I had begun listening more intently to Craig’s wants, but I guess it came too late.
The 8 outcome reads I have a good job that utilizes my writing skills and pays what I had negotiated. As an older student, my professors have told me how valuable my contribution is to the younger students in my Women’s Studies courses, and finally, I am preparing the house to rent to foreign scholars. The 8 outcome seems to be working in my favor.
The kitchen telephone rings fire-alarm loud and jolts me awake from my extended catnap. Instinctively, I glance at the analog clock on the side table. In late August, 5 P.M., means that the sunrays on the soft-green walls inside my bedroom will gift me several more hours of precious daylight. Naps are necessary since my summer means full-time graduate-student employment. I am looking forward to September, when I return to part time, but I am conflicted about my graduate program in Women’s Studies. I love the program and the professors and what I have been learning. I just don’t feel like I know what to do with the degree. I would have preferred Urban Studies, but I remember the director was a jerk. Feeling foggy, I race to answer the phone.

“Hello,” I say, less groggy but hesitant. These days, I do not get many phone calls or visitors. I am prepared to slam down the phone if this is a sales call trying to talk me into purchasing another crazy-expensive vacuum cleaner that I do not need for my oak floors. “Note to self, strangle Lena.”

“Hi Nickie,” a friendly female voice says. “This is Grace Edwards from the Unitarian Society of New Haven. I hope I didn’t interrupt you. You sound like you might have been asleep.”

How could she know that? Did I yawn?

“Did I wake you?” she asks. At least she isn’t a pesky a salesperson. Grace Edwards is a fellow congregant at the Unitarian Church that I refuse to join but, until recent events, Craig and I have attended. I suspect she wants to ask me to teach Sunday school in the fall. I am not in the
mood to teach. I have not attended Sunday services for months, and although I cannot place her face, I know her name.

“Hi, Grace, you aren’t disturbing me,” I fib a little, unable to repress a deep yawn. “How are you? What’s up?” I ask and glance outside at the shadows stretching on the patio.

“I saw Craig on the bus on my way to work, and he told me that you are looking to rent out your bedrooms. I work at Yale with foreign scholars, and we have a history professor coming from Congo. We are desperate to find a room for him to rent through November when his fellowship ends. His original plans fell through, and in fact, we’re still working out his funding and travel. I would understand if you require a longer commitment, but he only needs it for three months. I was wondering if you can consider renting him a room.”

She has caught me off guard. I have fallen in love with the first bedroom I had planned to rent. It is one of a few things I am really sure about for now. I have been doing some truth telling to my soul today. I admitted that my graduate school goals are vague, but I love my graduate student job and the great wage I negotiated with the Connecticut Women’s Hall of Fame. Now that I love my living arrangement, I was reconsidering renting out the bedrooms.

Grace sounds genuinely concerned about her scholar who needs a room. Glory be. Craig has shared my plan. He has recommended me—the same as I had done for him when he was seeking on-campus work after we first moved to Connecticut, all starry-eyed and filled with hope and faith. I wonder if he mentioned our separation. My emotions begin shifting but I steady them and focus on Grace’s request. She wants me to rent a room to a man from Congo. It sounds interesting. But I love sleeping in this room. I would have to move back upstairs but into which
bedroom? Ours, I mean mine, or Phoebe’s? I am finally feeling comfortable living alone and coming home to my cats and some peace and quiet. She is waiting for my answer.

“Grace, I’m sorry, but I changed my mind. I actually like living in a peaceful house,” does not come out of my mouth. Instead, I reply, “Okay, I can make this work for him.” My answer seems to emanate from that familiar force that knows me better than me, maybe always knew me better than me. It is that voice I heard while standing in our Albuquerque, New Mexico, bedroom that had said, “You will figure things out in your fifties.” I remember feeling so calm. She sounded so sure. I am in my fifties and I feel like I am figuring out some things and screwing up others. Does the voice, that inside, omniscient voice, think that I need to rent out the bedroom?

I have just said “Okay” to a woman whose face I cannot place.

“That’s wonderful news!” she replies. “I have talked to him on the telephone, and he is excited to come back to the U.S. to complete his book. His name is Modani. How much will you charge for rent?”

Since I had reconsidered renting out the rooms, I had stopped thinking about a rental amount. Suddenly, I recall the amount Craig’s friend was getting for rent of her bedrooms. She had divorced and was determined to keep her home. “It works well for me, asking one thousand dollars per month,” she had said and had encouraged me to do the same.

I feel a slight panic. I do not know what I should charge, but I need to feel good about whatever I charge. “Five-hundred fifty a month,” the same mysterious internal “finding my life’s path” voice has made my decision for me. I have no choice but to continue.
“The rent includes all utilities except for heating in the fall and winter. That will be evenly divided. He will have his own downstairs bedroom, a semi-private bathroom, his own kitchen cabinet, and dedicated space in the refrigerator. He will have access to the common areas and the yard. He can invite friends over to visit but no overnight guests without advance notice. It’s a great house on a great street near two bus lines that stop near campus,” I say almost breathless from explaining his benefits.

“I think that’s a great price. I know your house and the neighborhood. My husband and I often walk down your street. I think Modani will be pleased. I will contact you with all of the information you need and his arrival date. Goodbye, and thanks so much,” she says.

I hang up knowing that I could have asked for and gotten much more money, but I feel satisfied with the amount I asked for and I am sure why. I remember that feeling of satisfaction I had felt after negotiating for my current salary, even though the job isn’t permanent. I have committed to rent a room to a man I have neither met nor spoken to because I trusted Grace. I feel my faith in people creeping back in baby steps. I have been crying a lot of ugly tears in those beds, but the just right “Goldilocks” bed is special. And I hope my tenant arrives with new and interesting adventures.

I expect that Craig will hear about the rental, but it will not be from me. I remember how he had left that room for me to clean. Now it is a beautiful and magical room. For the most part, Craig had been a wonderful husband and father, and then he suddenly stopped. I stand still, remembering the two marriages I witnessed as a young child. I have accepted that the man I married is a little bit like my father and a little bit like my grandfather, and for valid reasons, I had loved both of them.
I telephone Rhea, my former anthropology professor and current astrologer. Actually, she also teaches art at a junior college, and I own a few of her paintings. She will tell me if I’m making a mistake and whether I should back out.

“ Nope, this is the right thing for you to do,” she says in a raspy authoritative voice. Rhea is another friend who had been divorced. I adore her husband. They were the people I raced to when Craig had finally said that he wanted a divorce, and they fed me and counseled me. We have known each other for years, and for a few years, she has been telling me, “You need to begin working on a latent talent, and it is definitely something creative.” I love that Rhea believes in me. “Look, you need to move forward. You have some good friends; you are intelligent and resourceful. This will be a good thing for you.”

Rhea is as reliable as that voice in my head, so I listen to her and feel better about my decision. She is not selling me an expensive, multi-gadget vacuum cleaner that I do not need. I am providing a clean and safe place for someone to live, and who knows? Maybe he will become a future friend from another country that I can visit.

I hang up the telephone, and on my way back to my nap, I glare at the vacuum cleaner box.
A Knock at the Door

“Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.”

James Baldwin

Late August 2008

Pacing back and forth inside the living room I am irritated because I have been waiting longer than I had expected. He should have arrived by now. I do not like waiting for people who are late. Modani had telephoned me at 3 P.M.

“I am in New Haven and on my way to your house. I am taking the bus. I will see you soon,” his soft voice spoke carefully in French-lilted English.

I live twenty minutes by bus from the Yale campus. At 5 P.M., as the cooling sun begins slow dragging to the west side of the planet, I puff up living room throw pillows. I don’t like being late to anything, and I am impatient with people who do not respect my time. I am sure that I annoy a lot of my friends when I arrive early to their parties, but I always offer to help with the preparations. *Where is he?*

Hunger pangs my growling stomach. Anxiety about the whereabouts of my tenant pushes his rude tardiness into the background, and I tussle with deciding on food or pacing. Food wins. I take my time eating a tuna sandwich and mescaline salad. *Where is he? I don’t know if I am going to like this guy. Does he know about CP time?* CP time, that code for black people who arrive late, always, like just before an event is ending. My mother arrived late to my high school graduation. She seemed to always arrive late to only my events, none of my sibling’s. I know it is why I have always had little patience for other’s carelessness about another’s time. Feeling tired, I consider taking a nap. *He’ll arrive when he arrives.* I walk toward the back bedroom, his
new bedroom, when I hear the soft knock on the front door glass, and rushing back in my socked feet, I pull back the curtain. Hamden is a safe town, but a single woman living alone needs to be careful.

He looks tall and reed thin, like those refugees about whom some, usually white and well-fed, spokesman says, “He needs your financial help.” His face looks delicate, coffee dark, worried. He is the post-doctorate professor from Congo. I look past him and see two bulging, oversized pieces of blue, well-worn luggage that he must have struggled with. Now I feel embarrassed and open the door.

“Hello, I am Modani from Yale,” he says and extends his hand. “Are you Nickie? I am so sorry to be late. I took the Dixwell bus,” he sounds tired and worried.

“Hello, Modani,” I say, smiling. “It is nice to meet you. Welcome to my home. Wow! You took Dixwell.” I know that walk. I walk that walk early on most mornings. In some parts, it goes up then slightly down a long, slightly, twisty block that levels off at a lengthy street before arriving at Woodlawn. I imagine him hauling his two hefty suitcases then, pulling each one up four steps and into the enclosed front porch. I imagine his frustration with maneuvering everything and wondering what he had agreed to. And yet, his knock had sounded timid on the glass.

“Come in,” I say, grasping his warm hand and glancing at a man wearing an ill-fitting plaid, double-knit sport coat and baggy Dockers. I suppress a grin at his fashion sense. I remember Craig hanging his red and blue, double-knit plaid suit inside my bedroom closet when he had first moved in. All of my tension has dissipated. Modani stares at me blankly like he might faint, but he doesn’t.
“Leave your bags here for now. They are safe. I expected you a while ago,” I say and open the door wider. My tone is altered by new knowledge of his journey. His handshake is warm.

He leaves everything but himself on the porch. His computer bag, briefcase, and luggage all are safe. He is taller than I first thought, not quite six feet and his head looks too small for his height. Discreetly, I study him a little more. The jacket is out outdated. The white, button-down, cotton shirt is nicely pressed, and his khakis are not as baggy as I first thought. His dark, very coarse hair is closely cropped and will remain so during his three months stay. He is no stranger to this country and will later tell me “it often seems strange” when we sit across from each other at the kitchen table.

For now, I admire his skin, smooth and chocolate while mine is a little splotchy from gardening. He has bright almond-shaped eyes and high cheekbones. I notice his smile of brilliant white teeth like my little brother John’s. I am glad that Grace telephoned me. I am thankful that Craig had mentioned me to her. A wave of missing him washes over me and fades.

“Let me show you your bedroom,” I smile and guide him through the hallway, giving him a quick glance into the freshly painted bathroom and the bright and spacious kitchen. A huge smile, relief I hope, spreads across his face.

“I love this bed,” He says and notices how bright the room is during the evening sun setting.

“I left the curtains open to show off the beautiful yard that you will wake up and see each morning,” I say, aware that he will leave in December, maybe before the snow. If not, I hope he has brought boots if he has to wait for his bus. “Let’s go into the kitchen, have a chat.”
He seems very pleased at the layout. The sliding glass doors allow the sun to stream through and set a nice mood. “This will be your cabinet.” I open the doors of the light-maple wall-standing cabinet. It is one of five against the galley-kitchen wall. “Dishes are in the cabinet opposite these. Utensils and cookware are in the drawers below. You are responsible for washing your dishes and putting them away.” He nods, says nothing, and follows me to the refrigerator at the wide, opposite end of the kitchen.

Opening the French doors, I say, “Yours will be the middle shelf, and a shelf on each door. This is your drawer and, you will have your own section in the freezer.” He nods his head. “Everything except your food is included in the rent. I will give you the code for the internet. You are welcome to sit inside the front porch or use the back yard for entertaining. You can invite friends over, just let me know ahead of time,” I say, watching him for a response. I suspect that he is exhausted.

“Can I pay the deposit and rent in cash?” he asks when we return to the living room.

“Yes, of course,” I reply. “Let’s get you settled, okay? Again, welcome.”

Evening is fast encroaching, and I take his briefcase while he drags in both suitcases at the same time. I am impressed with his determination and glad for the company. Immediately, I see the efficacy of safety in numbers. It will be nice to have some male energy in the house, too. I suspect that my cats will be curious, too.

“I forgot to ask you, are you allergic to cats? I have two. Audry and Elmo.” I confess.
For the first time he laughs out loud. “No, I am not. I like cats. I look forward to meeting them,” he says. His luggage sits inside his bedroom, and the door is closed. He stands in the archway of the kitchen as I pretend to putter and consider dinner.

I love hearing him speak. It is not rushed. His responses sound sincere. At this moment, I feel relief about many things. This afternoon, I finally hauled my books, clothes, and tchotchkes back upstairs and into the master bedroom. His bedroom has no TV, something Craig had wished gone from our bedroom. Modani can watch TV in the living room. I think about how Grace’s phone call had gingerly guided me back toward my initial reason for purchasing a new bed in the first place. I could have told her, “Craig was mistaken,” but everything inside me of pulled me toward answering her request. It might be nice to share this space.

Modani, now settled, joins me on the front porch where my thoughts are winding down along with the sun.

“Thank you for renting your room to me,” he says, sounding less tired. I offer to cook us something easy like spaghetti with bottled meat sauce. We head into the kitchen. He drinks a glass of water while I chop fresh ground beef for the meat sauce.

“I am married. I have four beautiful daughters, and my youngest is my son,” he says. It is the most that I have heard him say.

“My wife works too, and takes care of the house. I will cook our special meal for you one day,” he says with a furtive glance.

Dropping the noodles into the boiling water I say, “That sounds wonderful! I appreciate a man who likes to cook. My dad liked to cook, especially during family holidays. His specialties
were ham and barbeque ribs.” I anticipate sharing a meal with this friendly stranger. I still miss Craig’s cooking. A fresh pang pokes my stomach. “It must be difficult to be away from them, your family,” I say as the fragrance of browning ground beef envelope the kitchen. Normally, I prefer to chop peppers and onions but bottled is good enough. Craig had been such a purist, but it was always worth the wait.

“Actually, I am glad to be back so that I can concentrate on my research,” he answers. “I have been working on my book at different universities, and I am glad I was able to come to Yale. It would be difficult to do this work at home,” he says after finally sitting at the table to watch me work.

So, this place was where he longed to be. He has come to another country, not sure what will occur on this trip. “Each visit is different,” he says. “I know a few people from my native land who live in Cheshire,” he says with reserved excitement about the town that borders Hamden. It is convenient and good that he can socialize.

“Tell me about your wife. Does she take care of everything at home?” I feel a little offended about what I imagine is her burden of holding down the fort, his fort.

“Actually, she works at a good job. I do the cooking when I am home, but I have to let her cook when my family is over. I like cooking, but in our culture, the wife has to take care of her husband, children, and home,” he says. He speaks softly, respectful of this custom in his culture.

Tell me a little about where you are from. It’s the Belgium Congo, right?” I say, hoping that I sound intelligent and worldly. Keeping the spaghetti separate, I combine the sauce, meat, and vegetables in one pot to simmer for a while, and then I join him at the table where he has placed two glasses of water. How thoughtful of him.
“Actually, I am not from the Belgium Congo. I am from Congo. There are two Congo’s,” he ruefully corrects me, but his voice is soft, cautious. I hope I have not insulted him.

I do not defend my assumption because I understand that that Belgium is a beautiful place. It can go on my Bucket List. Why wouldn’t I think he was from Belgium Congo? His English comes out in a French-lilted baritone. I love hearing him speak. Now, the reason I had intended to rent out the rooms is becoming even more meaningful. I am learning something new, something important, something from a direct, educated source.

Suddenly, like a knock on the door of my heart, I feel a deep resonance for the kind of longing that had brought him to my door, the same longing to be somewhere else. Suddenly, I am transported back to when I was four years old and desperately longing to be somewhere else. A journey I had forgotten until the Sunday afternoon, while sitting around her dining room table, Mother laughingly recounted the end of the journey and on my drive home, I suddenly remember the beginning and the great risk I had taken to be somewhere else.

My grandparents, who I believe are my parents, I call Mommy and Daddy. We live around the corner from a little boy named John, his mother, and six older brothers and sisters. On most days Mommy and I take a shortcut through the alley to John’s house, where she leaves me to play for the day. To get there, we walk past the Thomas’s’ house to take the shortcut through the alley. Their chain-link fence begins at the alley and ends slightly past the end of John’s house.

At the beginning of the alley is a parking lot. We walk past it and the rear of a tall red-brick theater with two dark alcoves in the rear. On hot days, John and I sit inside those alcoves for shade.
John looks like his mother, dark with bright teeth. His six older brothers and sisters are usually at school when I arrive, but some are light skinned, like Mommy and me and, dark skinned like Daddy.

“Our Daddy don’t live here right now, but he brings us donuts on da weekends,” John says in his baby-talk way that I sometimes tease him about while we play war with his little green plastic soldiers on his living room floor. He always wins, but I don’t care because I beat him at jacks. I can’t remember when I haven’t played at John’s house.

His mother is always in the kitchen cooking. I like the fried bologna or Spam sandwiches on white bread with sandwich spread and Kool-Aid for lunch before we nap. Then we go outside to play in John’s huge wonderland yard with its slide, monkey bars, and my favorite, a red, four-seat, merry-go-round. If it rains, we stay inside and watch Engineer Rick or Bozo the Clown.

I love riding around on the merry-go-round, gripping the iron handles and my feet on the foot bars. He and I take turns pushing. John’s house is fun. My house is quiet and lonely for me.

One day, when John stops pushing us and jumps onto the merry-to-round, I let go of my handlebar and fall off. My head hits the dirt ground, and his mother, who must have been watching us from the kitchen window, rushes out, scoops me up to her chest, and carries me into the kitchen. After she feels my head for lumps and rubs some wet, red stuff on my elbows, she sends me back outside, and I remember it is the first time she has ever hugged me.

On another day, John’s big sister Liz, who is usually at school, is standing in front of the monkey bars watching us ride. When John jumps off to go on the slide, my hands are still gripping the handlebars. Climbing off, I look up and see Liz standing in front of me with her
arms crossed and so close that I notice one eyeball is slightly crooked behind thick eyeglasses and that her light-skinned face looks like someone has thrown black pepper all over it.

“Those are not your real parents. My mother is your mother, and I’m your sister. You have brothers and another sister,” she says to me, and then she turns and walks away, leaving me confused. “It is bad to lie,” my parents say. What does she mean?

At home, I say nothing about what she told me lying alone in my bed, I think about it. I keep wondering, am I supposed be around the corner with those kids? The night that I decide to go be with them, I climb off my bed, step into my slippers, pull on my robe, and tiptoe to my door.

A full moon lights up my bedroom, but the hallway is dark. The slivers of light behind the front-door shade are enough for me to tiptoe past the telephone chair, and sidestep the metal floor-heater grate, and past Mommy and Daddy’s bedroom until I arrive at the front door. Quietly, I twist the cool, brass knob, open the door and screen to step outside onto our wide moonlit porch. I am going to be with those kids!

As I walk across the lawn, streetlights, crickets, and the man-in-the-moon are my companions. At the sidewalk, I step onto my long shadow and hop-skip past the Thomases’ house and halt at the entrance to the alley. A street lamp illuminates the parking lot, but behind the theater all is dark. I am terrified of the two alcoves, and my heart bangs inside my chest, imagining that someone is hiding in them and yet I cannot get to John’s house without walking by those alcoves.

Studying the Thomas’ chain link fence, I think, “If I mash my whole body into it, nothing can pull me off!” Curling my fingers and thumbs into the link, I crab-walk and stop just before the first alcove, lean over and look inside. Still, I imagine someone waiting inside the next one as I
crab-walk to the second opening, lean over, and see nothing. Walking behind John’s house, I notice that the boys and the girls’ bedrooms are dark. “They’re playing in the living room,” I tell myself.

Finally, standing in front of the mostly glass door, I realize that the house is completely dark. “They’re probably playing hide and seek.” I comfort my mind and knock on the glass. No answer, but I am not going back into the alley. I knock again. A light comes on, footsteps and John’s mother peeks out from behind the curtain, glancing above me, side to side. Looking down, she opens the door.

Her voice sounds surprised. “Oh, my lord! Nickie, what are you doing here? Who is with you?” Her eyes search the spaces around me. “Come on in. Oh, my lord!”

The house is quiet as I look around, listening for the kids. Walking over to her mussed-up sofa-bed, I feel my expectations deflate like a balloon because no one else is up. I ignore his mother’s low chatter on the telephone, and I fall asleep on her bed. The sound of cartoons is what awakens me, and I walk into the boy’s room to see Liz, John and most of the other kids watching TV. No one seems surprised to see me, and I join them. This feels normal.

Later that morning, John’s mother and I walk through the alley to my home. Mommy looks happy because I am safe and sends me to the living room to watch cartoons. I smell coffee and hear cups and saucers clank on top of our green Formica table. The grownups are speaking low before Mommy calls me into the kitchen. She is sitting at one end of the table, and John’s mother sits at the opposite end so I sit between them. Watching me, Mommy pours some of her sweet, creamy coffee from her up and into my saucer. I slurp some before John’s mother asks, “Nickie, who did you say brought you to my house last night?”
Years later, sitting at her dining room table, Mother is laughing as she recites my answer.

“You said, Uncle Solomon. Honey, he died before you were born.”

Mother had been intrigued by my answer because Uncle Solomon was Mommy’s younger and favorite brother. Whether or not his spirit had escorted me to her house to be with those kids, I am grateful that I wasn’t harmed. Yet, my journey had failed. I was not invited to move home, I was not asked why I had to her house, nor did she say, “I am your mother.” A few years later, she moved my clothing and nothing else to her home. Decades passed before I learned the reason that I did not live with my birth family—not from Mother but from her younger brother, Edward. Finally, I had moved back home but it was no fairy tale.

Imagining Modani’s yearning and hearing that his original plans had been canceled influenced my initial misgivings. After a week, I expect to see him putting groceries away. Instead, I see packets of Ramen, a stick of butter and some eggs in the refrigerator and a small bottle of cooking oil inside his cabinet. I am puzzled by his diet, and yet I am hesitant to offer him any dinner or to volunteer to cook or shop for him. I wonder if he was serious the night he said, “One day I will cook a special dinner from my native country for you.”

He can drive, but he does not have a car. I will happily take him to any one of the four nearby markets, but he has not asked. Sometimes, he comes home late and retires into his room. I like him. I appreciate his company and the few chats we have had sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. “I have made contact with my friends in Cheshire. His wife is a very good cook,” he says. I laugh with him because, apparently, they drive him home.
Before the weekends, he lets it slip that he plans to continue his research with another fellowship after the current one is completed. He has been gathering research for his textbook for a long time and has been in the U.S. on fellowships for several years. He longs to be elsewhere.

Do you miss your wife and children? I wonder but do not ask.

Modani tells me it may take several more years to complete the history book he is researching. I have heard of people taking years to complete their project, so I won’t judge. In fact, I am proud to support his dedication and challenges to get to the finish line. I try to think of anything extraordinary that I have completed, besides growing three children into productive adulthood and getting into graduate school, though it wasn’t well thought out.

Modani’s arrival has reminded me of a first and long-forgotten longing. For three months, I can be here to support him on his journey in whatever way I can. Even now, there are times when I feel like I am just visiting this planet and my clear landing is disappearing and yet whenever I am feeling unmoored, Mommy and Daddy’s values anchor me. They never punished me for sneaking out.

In a week, after we have settled in nicely with each other, a change is on the horizon. My semester in Women’s Studies will begin in two weeks and the rent is a godsend. I am not that larcenous six-year-old sneaking into my grandmother’s little boxy cast-iron bank underneath my bed, picking the little lock with a hairpin I pilfered ice-cream and Twinkie money. Now I have my own little savings can, and if she were still alive, Mommy would be proud. The phone rings.
Meals and Tales

“Men are taught to apologize
for their weaknesses,
women for their strengths.”

Edith Evans
From The Quotable Woman

It has been only a week, but life at home with Modani is interesting. I feel safer with him in the house. He is neither muscular nor aggressive, the traits that define men in our culture. His mostly quiet presence is like a soothing balm. His responses to my questions about his country are sincere and thoughtful. I feel more like my old self, needed—not for everything, just important things like deciphering his confusing bus schedules and Connecticut etiquette. “Here, the natives act rude, but once they like you, it’s forever,” I tell him, what my co-worker had told me and has proven true.

In a few days, I need to select my courses for next semester. Although I feel like Women’s Studies is a spiritual guidance that clearly provides me intellectual and emotional supports, I do not feel it is my endpoint. But it’s just like me to jump in fast only to slowly back away.

On the other hand, life seems to be firing on all fronts at school, and work and with my few stalwart friends. Two of my closest girlfriends are divorced, and their recollections of the process are a cautionary tale for my own journey to that vast unknown. When I am not confused or heartbroken or escape-sleeping, my life does feel purposeful and forward moving.

Wednesday is the middle-of-the-week day when I assess and plan. Modani and I are sitting at the kitchen table, updating each other on the coming month’s expectations, when the wall telephone rings but I ignore it. I have a cell phone, but I rarely use it. I still don’t completely trust
cell phones. You can lose them. Besides, I am not sure I want surrender my telephone numbers and addresses to a machine. I am no Luddite. I own a snazzy Sony laptop and I am a user of flash-drives. Phoebe and her brother use Apple computers, but I am too cheap and too untrusting of most advertising.

Modani’s bare cupboards concern me. He says that he likes to cook, but he never cooks. I never see him eat, and I do not intend to be his kitchen maid. Until I remember my meals around the table, I am hesitant to offer to share my meals.

Mr. Willis, someone who is surely long dead, was one of my grandparents’ upstairs tenants when I lived with them.

What strikes me about him, in my four-year-old mind, is that like ants at a picnic, he always knocks at our front door just as the sun begins setting and when Daddy and I are preparing to eat dinner at the dining table filled with buttermilk cornbread, roasted chicken, green beans with potatoes, and peach cobbler Mommy has just removed from the white O’Keefe and Merritt oven.

“Take what you want, but eat all you take. There are kids starving in India,” Daddy always warns when he recognizes my eyes are bigger than my stomach. Not wasting food or most other things I learn from watching him and Mommy. After she sets down our glasses of Carnation buttermilk and Carnation Extra Rich Sweet milk, I hear the knock and her walking toward the front door.

Predictable as the seasons, Mr. Willis’s greeting is “How do, Miz Cora,” said as she opens the squeaky screen door.
“Good evenin’, Mr. Willis, Won’t you come in?” she answers. Carrying his hat in his hand, I hear his soft-soled shoes on the oak floor leading to our dining room opening where he stops.

“How do, Mr. Richard. Nice evenin’,” he greets, waiting for Daddy’s formal invitation.

“Good evenin’. Would you like some dinner?” I am no fan of Mr. Willis. Daddy, sitting at the head of table, never asks what I think about this habit.

“Why thank you, Mr. Richard, Miz Cora, Nickie. I’m ah only gon’ eat ah little,” he always replies and sits in the chair across from mine.

Expected as his arrival, so is his eating two helpings of everything while the grownups make small talk about the weather or baseball, which Daddy likes, and never about the news, which Daddy watches every night.

“This sho is some good cookin’,” Miz Cora, he praises Mommy. After finishing, he politely wipes his mouth with one of her cloth napkins and says, “Ah thank ya fo tha meal, and I’ll be headin’ upstairs. Miz Cora and Mr. Richard. You all have a good night.” He leaves through the kitchen.

Another memory intrudes into my thoughts about manners. Shortly after I turn seven, Mother moves me back around the corner, where I eat at her kitchen and dining room tables. There I learn quickly that my older brothers get first dibs on most things, especially the meat. Mother chooses meager cuts for John and me. “Your eyes are bigger than your stomach,” she explains. Even though she is often right, I think it is unfair. The chatter around the table is usually name-calling, meant to hurt feelings and mine get hurt a lot. I often felt unprotected by my mother, vulnerable, and like an unwelcome visitor. Another memory eases into view.
When I lived with my grandparents, breakfast was shredded wheat or fried eggs and bacon. Sometimes, it was a plate of Karo dark corn syrup sopped up with white bread. Like everything else I remembered before moving here, my transition was sometimes rocky.

One morning, out of the many cold mornings that we eat hot cereal, I cannot swallow one of my favorites that mother set in front of me. The corn meal mush, yellow like our kitchen, is making me gag. Usually, I like it better than the gooey oatmeal we often eat for breakfast on weekdays. It tastes good with sugar and evaporated milk mixed in.

Already, Mother is annoyed with me because I took longer than usual to get to the table. I am still getting used to all of the people in the house, even though my parents are separated. Liz and Flo were leaving when I arrived and John was finishing his bowl. I put a spoonful into my mouth and as I swallow, I gag it up and back into my bowl. It does not taste any different from the other, so I wonder if I rushed. Once again, I put the spoon into my mouth, once again, I gag, but this time, the back of my mouth tastes strange. I am hungry, but I cannot swallow my food.

“Mother, I can’t eat this,” I tell her, hoping for sympathy.

She looks at the bowl, it is full. Mother doesn’t like to waste food. “Well, you need to eat so you won’t be hungry before lunch, and you need to hurry up so you won’t be late,” she says without looking at me. Only John, who is in first grade and is leaving, and I are left. Gregory is probably waiting for him outside. I am certain that Marie is waiting next door for me.

“I tried Mother, but I can’t eat it. When I try to swallow it, I gag,” I say, frustrated.

“Like I said, you better eat your breakfast because I’m not cooking you anything special,” she says. “Goodness, you are already skinny as a banana,” she adds. It is a cruel thing to say to
me. They are the same words my brothers and sister tease me with because I’m the new kid.

Sometimes my big brothers say, “You are spoiled.” I reply that I am not spoiled. I don’t even know what it means.

“Mother, can I just go to school?” I plead. She will not hear of it. I have to eat all of it.

I am distraught. I do not want to be late to school. I hope Marie has not left me. “Can I please, please go?” Marie lives next door and is my best friend.

“No, you need to eat so you don’t waste food,” she says. The battle of wills continues for a few more minutes. “You have to eat half of it,” she counters.

“I can’t eat any of it,” I reply. I really can’t. I have tried. I am distraught. I do not like not being believed. I am not a liar. Mommy and Daddy taught me that lying is bad.

I cannot change her mind so I swallow hard and put half a spoon of mush into my mouth. I gag. I try again, I gag. I try a third time, and I vomit onto the kitchen floor and begin crying out of my frustration at being thought of as liar.

Mother comes back into the kitchen and sees the mess on the floor. She does not say anything, does not ask what happened or how I feel. She grabs a towel off of the kitchen counter and stares at the floor. When I look up at her she says, “You can go.” It is not sympathetic.

Marie has already left, so I walk the two blocks to the elementary school alone and wondering why doesn’t she like me?

There were times went home for lunch and she was not home and there was no food. On those days, I walked around the corner to Mommy’s house, where I first learned that you always offer your guests something to drink or eat. On those days, she fed me warmed leftovers and
sometimes walked me back to school. She never said anything bad about my mother. At Mommy’s house, I felt welcome. Mother sent me there whenever I became ill but she stopped the morning I woke up with Mumps and I refused to go around the corner. To lessen the stings of being called “spoiled,” I started calling my grandparents what my brothers and sisters called them, Big Mamma and Bid Daddy. It felt unnatural, but I practiced.

Many years would pass before I again called her Mommy. I was fifteen when Mother shook me awake in my middle bunk shortly before midnight. “Daddy had to go to the hospital. You going stay with Mama,” she had said as if it was the most natural thing in the world. It was early spring the night I crawled into the full-sized bed next to my grandmother because my grandfather had been rushed to the hospital. I did not return to my own bed around the corner for five months. Mother had moved many of my clothes into my old closet, although I still slept with my grandmother.

A week before his birthday, Daddy came home from the hospital, and I was back sleeping in my middle-bunk. On his birthday, I surprised him with his favorite dessert, a birthday cake with coconut icing, eaten with Carnation black walnut ice cream. A week later, he died from the cancer no one had told me he had, and I moved back around the corner and slept with Mommy until I turned seventeen and my Aunt April moved in and took my place in Mommy’s bed. I did not return home that year, the year I graduated from high school and began college and found a part-time job at a popular record store, began college where I met Carra, and finally made Mother happy by becoming a debutant. My grandfather died in 1971, the year we lived through the San Fernando Valley earthquake.
So many pivotal events occurred in those years, moves back and forth between two homes and two sets of parents that shaped the way I came to understand my world. Many of my philosophies, formed at the dinner table had impacted my life and yet I continued yearning for my mother to tell me what I saw in my grandmother’s eyes, that she loved me and was glad when I had returned to her fold. What I saw in my grandmother’s eyes, heard in her words of humorous wisdoms and uncanny observations about human behaviors. We both missed my grandfather, and I was glad to still be there for her. She no longer cooked. My aunt’s cooking fed us, but it did not feel nourishing or taste like love. That had been Mommy’s cooking, my mother’s cooking.

The day before my grandmother died, I held her head in my lap. She had fallen or fainted, I wasn’t sure which it was because by the time her youngest daughter, April, knocked on my kitchen door, Mommy was awake but not able to talk. She, Aunt April, and April’s grandson had been eating dinner in the kitchen, and my grandmother had fallen down next to the refrigerator.

Holding her head in my elbow, I opened her mouth as she watched me in silence and using my fingers, I fished out the un-chewed wiener from inside her mouth. She could not speak. As we waited for the ambulance, I read her trusting eyes as I said soothing words. “Mommy, you are going to be alright.” It had been years since I called her Mommy, but it was as natural to me as being born, as my giving birth.

Mommy had laughed when she hinted to clueless me that I was probably pregnant. She was happy when I had moved into the cottage behind her house, with Charmaine, who was now two. She and Aunt April babysat while I was at work. I could tell by the way she looked at and talked about my child that she adored her. “When you come home, we’ll eat Colby cheese with ginger
snaps on the front porch. I will buy you a six pack of Diet Rite cola,” I promised her and myself.

“You will be okay. The ambulance is here.” I surrendered her to the attendants, showed them the meat I had retrieved and waited as they wheeled her onto the front porch. I was twenty-five years old. The next day would be March 18, and Liz’s twenty-eighth birthday.

I did not go to the hospital with her. Aunt April went, and I babysat her grandson. The next morning, April knocked on my kitchen door with sad news that I had already intuited. I thought about growing up around my large, extended family and then I remembered those dinners at her table, those afternoons that I pushed the glass jar into her biscuit dough and licked the spoon clean when she made coconut cake for dessert.

Carra, who loves to cook, had cooked the first dinner that I fed Charmaine’s father and pretended was my own. I began falling for Craig while eating a rather dry egg and cheese omelet instead of the spanakopita he had promised me. Craig had enjoyed cooking and surprising me with his amazing tasting meals. I still used my mother and grandmother’s recipes for my Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas meals. I am a pretty good cook, a masterful meat sauce maker, but I have to admit, I do miss Craig’s, Carra’s, my mother’s, and my grandmother’s cooking.

Someone else’s food always seems to taste better. I enjoyed throwing dinner parties and potlatch gatherings, but also thinking about all of these good and not so good memories makes me weep out loud at my losses, fresh injuries, and my hurts. I never want anyone I know to feel unwelcome in my home or at my table.

Last night, I invited Modani to join me for dinner at the kitchen table, and he had accepted. He emerged from working in his room just as I was sitting down to eat. Living alone, I cook to stave off starvation. Last night, I realized that neither Daddy nor Mommy had ever said anything
bad about Mr. Willis’s visits. Clearly, he enjoyed, maybe even preferred, sharing a home-cooked meal with people who cared about him.

While enjoying sharing a meal with Modani, I see how he is and is not like Mr. Willis. I notice that he eats like a man on a permanent diet, and that unless he has the world’s fastest metabolism, his slacks will always be baggy on his pole-like frame. My frame of mind is influenced by what is in front of me and the best examples of hospitality learned from my past.
By midsummer, I feel more emotionally stable. Two months ago, I was upset when I needed to buy another car after our black Honda sedan (Craig drove without getting it maintained) had died on the freeway off-ramp in Westport, two blocks from my psychotherapist’s office. “Thank you, driving angel,” I had whispered after literally rolling it onto a side street. Two weeks ago, I agreed to rent a bedroom to a foreign scholar who has promised to cook me a native meal. “Thank you, Grace,” I whispered. Two days ago, I registered for my fall courses, “Thank you student loans,” I whispered.

My course schedule is looking solid by midafternoon. Paperwork is strewn over the kitchen table and I have decided to remain on campus after work instead of driving home and back for my classes. Returning to work half-time means I can eat a full meal and study before my evening classes. While considering that Modani and I will arrive home around ten most nights, I am a bit disheartened thinking about our evening chats possibly ceasing when the telephone rings.

“Hello?” I say, and glance outside of the kitchen window at my Peonies in full bloom.

“Hello Nickie, I hope I didn’t interrupt you from your day,” Grace says.

“Hi Grace. No, you didn’t. How are you?” I ask, wondering if she is checking in to see how Modani is adjusting.
“I’m doing fine. I have another favor to ask. Do you have another room available?” she asks, more apprehensive than when she had pitched Modani.

“Well, yes, I do. I have an upstairs bedroom.” I go into the living room to sit in a comfy position on the sofa where Audry usually naps. I am so glad that Modani likes cats. I think I will take a catnap after I hang up.

“Well, I have a student from China. Actually, it’s a professor and her eight-year-old daughter,” she says and pauses.

I join the pause and then break the silence with a cautious, “Okay. So what do you need?”

“The scholar is from China. It’s unusual for them to bring their family, and it was a last-minute decision. They having been staying at the New Haven Hotel,” she answers, hesitates, then continues. “Most of the students stay there until they find a place. Our student’s name is Sunny, and she and her daughter have been looking at rooms in different places for a few weeks. The last place she went to see was in East Rock.”

“Oh, I know that area but not very well,” I say. Last December, I had driven a colleague of Craig’s home from their office Christmas party. She was renting a house in a hilly area of the small, working-class neighborhood behind East Rock Park not as close to Yale as it might seem. I wondered what Sunny had thought about the neighborhood.

“If they move there, then her daughter will have to take the school bus and she doesn’t speak English, so it could be problem,” Grace says like a worried parent.

Immediately, instinctively, I am horrified at the potential harm to a young girl, as memories of Phoebe come into view. In her senior year in high school, Phoebe’s track team had left Maltby
Lakes without her. After asking two men who were there fishing, she had used their cellphone to call me at home, upset and crying. I told her to telephone the police and give them her location. It was not the first time she had gone missing from people in authority.

She had also disappeared from her nursery school in our student-housing complex in Santa Cruz. Craig and I happened to be home for lunch when she had knocked on the door. Forty-five minutes later, the school’s office telephoned. Then, there was the afternoon that Charmaine had gone missing on the day of my father’s funeral. My cousin, who was supposed to be watching the children while we were at the funeral, had no idea where my three-year-old had disappeared to.

My nephew, riding his bike, had found her on the elementary school playground two blocks away. Then there was, Mike, only two at the time, who could have experienced the worst tragedy while running naked behind an ice truck because my friend and next-door neighbor had forgotten to lock her screen door. She had the good sense to knock on doors to see if anyone had seen him. A woman, who had thought it strange to see a white child in a predominantly black neighborhood running naked behind the truck, had taken him home and called the police. Each of our children was lucky that no one had harmed them. I shudder when I imagine another mother experiencing that anguish.

“That hotel is considered a way station for the new students until they find suitable accommodations. But staying there can get expensive, and I know that her daughter needs to begin school somewhere soon,” Grace says, sounding dismayed.

“I know this might be asking a lot, but would you consider renting your bedroom to them? I can understand if you only want adults. They are willing to share a bed, but if there are twin
beds, that’s fine, too. I spoke to the mother, and she is frustrated. She is exhausted. I thought of you. Like I said, if you say no, I will understand. I just thought I would ask,” she sounds desperate.

I know my answer. I am a mother. I moved from California to New Mexico and then to Connecticut, and I worried about the schools that my kids would attend. I worried about where we would live. Until they were grown and gone, I was there to rescue them. Of course, that mother and child should come here. “The bedroom has a full-sized bed. This is a great neighborhood for kids,” I tell her and remember when Craig walked Phoebe to her new school. He stopped doing so when she walked with her friends. “I can consider twin beds,” I offered.

“Thank you so much. That would be fine, but they can share the bed,” she interjected, interrupting my accommodation plans. “They will be here for a year and at some point, her husband is supposed to come,” says Grace.

“I’m a little concerned. I’m not comfortable with renting a bedroom to a family. But for now, I can help out. Since she is looking to rent for a year, we’ll see what space is like when he arrives. First things first, let’s see if she is interested in living here.” The rent I quote for Sunny is higher because there are two people. “If her husband lives here, it will be further adjusted,” I tell Grace.

She replies, “I’m going to telephone her now with your news. She doesn’t have a car. Are you able to pick them up? They have been taking the bus or a cab to the other places. I imagine they both will be glad to get settled somewhere.”
I had not planned to go into New Haven but this is important and time is running out. School is starting in a few weeks. “Of course, give her my phone number and tell her to call to tell me where to pick them up,” I say.

Grace, the eraser of my loneliness and supplier of additional income, needed me to come to the rescue again. Another wayfarer was going to see if she wanted to live here. I had not anticipated children as tenants, but I begin to think how interesting an experience it could be.

Before we hang up, I tell her, “By the way, I want to thank you so much for sending Modani. He is settled in, and I am enjoying his company.” I don’t say how his arrival linked my past to the present because I do not yet understand the full implications. Once again, I have linked a past memory to a useful purpose, and it feels nice to step outside of my too often, too serious concerns. A final memory cements my decision. Years ago, Craig and I had invited my nine-year-old niece Melanie to live with us for a school year. My sister Flo, had needed time to look for a house to buy. Melanie became wildly popular at the school with her classmates and teachers. This has to work.

Upstairs, I eye-sweep their bedroom, remembering that I forgot to ask if her daughter is allergic to cats. Charmaine is allergic to cats. We had to keep her downstairs bedroom door closed to Elvis and Maia. I hope she isn’t. A few minutes later the phone rings.

“Hello. My name is Sunny, and I understand that you might have a room for me and my daughter,” a woman says slowly and in clipped Chinese-English, careful like she wants to be clear in her purpose. “We are at the bus stop across from the New Haven Green,” she tells me like I will know their exact location at a park that encompasses two city blocks.
“Hi, Sunny, it’s good to hear from you. I need more information about what you need and where you are,” I reply, already driving to New Haven. Outside it is sunny and slightly breezy. Driving into downtown New Haven means navigating construction and turtle-slow traffic.

I first time I drive around the New Haven Green, I miss seeing Sunny. After I miss her the second time that I drive around. I pull over and park, thankful that I asked for the telephone number of the phone booth.

“Hi. I have no idea where you are. Can you give me something concrete to look for?” I ask exasperated. The street and park are crowded with walkers and drivers and, as expected, construction that requires skillful maneuvering.

“We are on the corner of Chapel and Elm. We have not left the telephone booth. I do not know why you do not see us,” she sounds as annoyed as I feel.

“I see you now,” I tell her after she describes what she is wearing. Driving over the curb to park, I notice her daughter looks tired and skeptical as she climbs into the backseat. Her mother looks frazzled as she sits a large shopping bag next to her daughter before settling into the passenger’s seat next to me.

“Thank you for picking us up,” Sunny says, and inhales deeply to release her frustration. “I am so tired. I was told that you might have a place.” She says straight to the point.

“Well, welcome to Connecticut,” I reply, smiling. “I live in Hamden, the town next to New Haven. There are two places to take the bus to Yale. I live four blocks from the elementary school and in a friendly neighborhood. The shopping center is only a few blocks from my house.”
She emits a furtive, we’ll see, smile. “Thank you for picking us up. This is my daughter, Jane.”

“Hello, Jane. Welcome to Connecticut,” I say. They both are exhausted. I know that look. I remember feeling such confusion and fear when Craig and I began looking for a new place three months after moving here.

Our lease had turned out to be flawed, and we moved into a second-floor apartment on First Street. We lived there two years before moving to Woodlawn, where things just seemed to fall into place. I am hoping it will be this way for Sunny and her daughter.
Jane, Invisible

“It has been difficult finding a place to live. I did not want to bring my daughter with me, but my husband changed his mind about her staying home. He is a doctor and is sometimes on call at the hospital,” Sunny says, sounding frustrated.

Her words cause me and everything in this moment to shift to slow motion as I absorb the tone of this mother’s frustration at being saddled with her daughter. Glancing into my rearview mirror, I study the reaction of a little girl who is silent and looks sullen. I am appalled at the force of her mother’s careless, almost cruel tone and words. That she tells this to a stranger is shocking. What I hear from her is that she is forced to contend with the needs of her child instead of her own. I remember the question I want to ask my own mother, “Did you ever intend for me to come back home?”

Ken and Earl, fraternal twins and two of my four older brothers, sit across the dining room table from Liz, Flo, and me. Our little brother John sits at one end of the table in front of the windows. The other end leads into the kitchen. Today he is six years old. April’s fading sunlight sinks golden and warm through the dining room windows. Inside the kitchen, Mother is baking a birthday cake that smells like candy and fills me with excitement. We kids have just finished eating dinner, and bits of juicy red meat sauce from the homemade tamale pie, John’s favorite, lingers inside my mouth. This is my first time at a party like this.

A few months ago, I turned seven, and a few weeks ago, Mother finally moved me from around the corner, where I have lived with my grandparents for as long as I can remember. Here, I am seventh of eight and still getting used to not being an only child.
Before I discovered that Mother was my mother and I had brothers and sisters, I would come to this house to play with John almost every day until I began kindergarten. We like each other even when we tease each other. Today he is getting special treatment.

“John is king for the day,” Mother says. Our father does not live with us, but we see him on the weekends. I did not know that the nice man who often visited me at my grandmother’s house whenever I was ill was my father. I don’t remember him saying he was my father, but he was very nice and very funny.

I still call my grandparents Mommy and Daddy. I love them like there is no tomorrow but everything is still kind of confusing to me.

After we finish dinner and lick our plates clean, we wait for the birthday cake and ice cream. I watch Mother moving into and out of the kitchen with a big smile on her face. Although she treats me differently from Mommy, I think that she is a good mother.

She is pretty, slim and very dark—like chocolate. John and two of my older brothers are very dark skinned. Two other brothers and my sister, Flo are brown skinned like our dad. Liz, my eldest sister, and I have the lightest skin. Mother has short, shiny curls that frame her smooth, round face. I like listening to her talk; she always tells us to speak clearly. Sometimes she is impatient with me, like when I was four and came over to play with John for the day, and I fell off of the merry-go-round in the yard. She rushed outside, picked me up, and sat me on the kitchen counter. I was crying more from embarrassment than pain, and she told me to stop as she put red medicine on my elbows and sent me back out. It is the first time I remember her touching me.
“On our birthday, Mother cooks our favorite food and a birthday cake,” Flo tells me. She is two years older than me and pretty in a way that’s different from Mother. All of us girls are skinny with long limbs and short hair that mother plaits into braids at night. Flo sucks her thumb and her teeth stick out. My brothers and sisters tease each other; call each other names. They call me “skinny banana,” Mattie “freckle-face” and Flo, “buckteeth.” I don’t like my other nicknames “yellow, toothpick, or banana,” the boys call me. Mother tells them to stop name calling but they don’t. Flo makes me feel special and seems happy that I am here.

Sitting here, I wonder why this is the only birthday dinner I have attended. I was living just around the corner, but I do not remember being at any other birthday dinner, so I am confused. It seems like I have missed my seven birthday dinners. I am afraid to ask Mother because sometimes, when she says that I ask too many questions, I feel bad.

Mother is smiling and bringing a white-frosted coconut cake with seven lighted candles to the table. She places it in front of John. The lit candles sway as we screech the lyrics to “Happy Birthday to You.” Looking up, I admire how the sunlight creates rainbow prisms in the crystal chandelier while John waits to blow out candles.

“Happy Birthday, John,” Mother says and hands him the first slice of cake and a dollop of white, imitation-vanilla ice milk—from the box she must have hidden in the freezer—away from my greedy teenage brothers.

Flo leans over and whispers into my ear, “While we eat, Mother tells each of us about the day we were born.” I am seated between both Liz and Flo. Liz is only eleven months older than Flo. She was the one who told me who my real mother is. Every night when we girls are all in the big bed, she tells us a made-up bedtime story.
Everyone at the table is quiet when Mother sits down at the head of the table and faces John.

“John, I remember the day you were born. I was rushed to General Hospital. I really don’t remember who drove me or if the ambulance came,” is her tender apology for her incomplete recollection. The way she looks him is how I wish she would look at me.

“This is the best part because Mother tells each of us about the day we were born,” Flo says. I am excited to learn about my birth day.

“Your daddy was there, but he wasn’t allowed in the delivery room,” Mother begins telling John’s birth. “I wasn’t sure we’d even make it in time but somehow we did and, John, you came out kicking hard and screaming so loud,” she says and laughs. Everyone laughs and repeats, “You were ‘kicking so hard and screaming so loud.’

Without their asking, Mother shares her memories of Liz, Flo, Ken and Earl’s births. I sit patiently, waiting to hear my story. Her details are the ones that a deep love instinctively stores away to keep treasured and secure. It does not matter that I missed those other birthday parties because when Mother tells my story, I know that she will say how glad she is that I am home, so I remain quiet, my heart banging inside my chest, because I want to hear every detail.

I realize that Mother has been quiet for several minutes. Only the sound of spoons clacking on the plates of melting ice milk and soggy cake are heard. Eager, I ask, “Mother, what happened on the day I was born?”

Mother turns to see me sitting between my big sisters but does not answer. For what seems like an eternity. I again ask her, and this time, as I can best recall her answer and voice, which is cold and dismissive, she replies, “I’m sorry, Nickie. I just don’t remember anything about when
you were born." I become mute. My ears clog from her denial of her special knowledge about my birth, and I think she should have remembered; should never have forgotten, about me.

I sit frozen in my seat. Spoons clanging, no one utters a word while my mind wanders. Was it because I was gone for all those years that she forgot about me? Was I gone too long for her to remember my birthday? What if I had and never been moved, would she have remembered? Fighting back tears creates anxiety. Can her memory be fixed?

Feeling alone and bewildered, I find my earlier happiness fades to gone.

I had imagined a tear-filled welcome home. Her arms tightly wrapped around me. None of that ever happened. I still believe that it will happen.

Silently I calculate our birth order. My birthday is the first, in February, before Flo’s, then Liz’s birthday in March. John’s birthday is today, April 10. How did she miss me? Did she miss me? Did she want me to come back home? Invisible is how I feel at the table. More questions which I dare not ask, like quicksilver enter and leave my thinking.

I come from a family that has harbored some quixotic secrets revealed years too late. I was forty years old when my mother’s brother, Edward, told me the story of my parents’ separation and how the uncles stepped in to accept certain responsibilities for certain of their sister’s children. He did not tell me why I was sent to live around the corner with my grandparents. He did not tell me why no one had told me that Mommy and Daddy were not my parents. The day I learned what had happened I was too numb to ask the hardest question that I had been harboring for decades.
Jane’s mother looks beat and Jane, silent on the drive to my home, looks sullen as we step out of the car. “Your yard is beautiful,” Sunny says, looking at my full-bloomed yard. “We will be able to play badminton in the front,” she says, smiling for the first time since the drive.

My initial shock with Jane eases, although I suspect that her daughter is hurt and that her hurt, like my own, will result in future spirit-survival rebellions. I began erecting my own protective barriers from hurtful names and Mothers’ seeming indifference to me. For years, it was nearly impossible for me to trust her decisions for and about me. the clothing she picked, the days she was absent when I went home for lunch, her forgetting my milk money, and always, my birthday.

Though my empathy is for Jane, her mother’s palpable resentment toward her husband is appropriate. He had reneged on their agreement to allow her complete her fellowship unencumbered. I recognize Sunny’s reaction to the impact of altering her original plans. Hadn’t Craig promised to support me when the time and space to develop my own dormant talents became available? He too, reneged, making it been more difficult to navigate my soul’s journey. Like Sunny, I moved forward. I understand her resentment of their agreement being like a salad-tossed inside a cracked bowl. But my empathy is for Jane. She did not ask to be moved from home.

Jane, though quiet, seems to like the house. I watch her smile when she enters the back yard. It is spacious and yet, harbors private spaces. I want them both to see it as a haven. “Your yard is so beautiful. You have a vegetable garden!” Sunny’s eyes widen while walking over to the raised beds. Her continence has changed. Her voice sounds like she wants Jane to be able to adjust and enjoy what living in a different country can offer both of them.
“You are welcome to whatever grows there,” I tell her as we return to the house and walk upstairs to their bedroom. Feeling some relief, I sense how, like me, she is calculating how to make things run smoothly for her and Jane. They will share the bed. Before we drive back to New Haven, I drive Sunny to see the school Jane will attend. She is pleased. I tell them about Modani. They are looking forward to moving and meeting him. Our futures loom brighter.

Later that night, recalling Sunny’s hurtful words said inside my car, I had felt immense pain for Jane. To recall the day that I first felt invisible was while sitting at my mother’s table, was horrifying and then, liberating. Today, I was able to see both sides and to me, there is some reason not yet fully revealed, for Sunny and Jane being in my home.
Heroes and Villains

Whenever I follow my gut, there is always a reward even if that reward is simply refuge from chaos.

Patricia Bell-Scott

Early most mornings, Sunny and I meet in the kitchen to prepare our breakfasts. Mine is usually three ounces of cooked oatmeal, and hers is boiled potatoes. We mothers chat about what we hope to accomplish that day, but Sunny is able to focus clearly on her goals, which is a struggle for me. She walks with Jane to school and then rides the bus to Yale and her office to work on her fellowship, researching author Edith Wharton. Although I shy away from my tenant’s business, her and Jane’s interactions are concerning.

Jane is physically aggressive with her mother. A few times, I have witnessed her shoving Sunny in defiance of her directives to turn off the computer until she completes her homework. Jane is learning speak English at school. Sometimes when we are all inside the kitchen, I hear her whisper “No” as she presses her body against Sunny. Other times, I can hear through the bedroom door, Sunny telling to Jane to obey her wishes.

Last December, after Modani moved out, I had suggested that they move downstairs for more privacy. Over the past few months of watching their strained interaction, I have reconsidered my initial feelings about Sunny being thoughtless. I think I was correct to predict Jane’s rebellions, but I also realize that I might have been wrong to see Sunny as the bad guy. I was not present at the conversation between her and her husband when he quashed her plans original plans to leave their daughter with him. I do not know how Jane, who would be leaving behind her friends and
routine to come to America with her mother, is expected to behave with such a life disruption. It seems easy to blame mothers for what our children become. We forget to look at the fathers.

Sunny works long hours on her research at Yale. Then she rides the bus to pick Jane up from school. She helps her with her homework while dinner is cooking. After Jane is in bed, Sunny returns to her research. Usually, I am at school, working or in my graduate classes until close to 10 P.M. Those times that Sunny and I interact, I feel a growing respect for who she is and what she is trying to accomplish. I can see in her what Mother was trying to do for me. Often a mother’s expressions of the expectations for their children sound loveless and judgmental.

When Sunny purchases one of those rolling carts for shopping, she visits our local grocery stores and harshly judges the freshness of food. “In China, I get to choose the fish swimming in the tank that I want to buy. In China, the fish is really fresh,” she tells me, rejecting our frozen selections. Sunny sees our American food as inferior to the variety of fresh food found in her province. “Back home, my husband would be picking what you call weeds and we call greens to eat,” she has pointed to the dandelions, my backyard nemesis.

On the other hand, she and Jane laugh while playing badminton in the front yard, and my neighbors love them. Still I am disturbed by what I see and how I feel about not stepping into a regular mother-and daughter fray.

On some days when Jane is at school, Sunny works at home. When Sunny takes a break from work, we both may be in the kitchen preparing lunch and I feel comfortable about asking about her life. She is the youngest of four children, born in a country that decrees only one child per family, unless it’s a female. Only then can you try once more for a boy. I have read and heard about the abortions of females. This rule seems to be for city dwellers. “The families who live on
farms or in rural areas flout the rule. They don’t even register their births, and the government knows it. Many are poor, so the help is needed,” she tells me while we drink the chrysanthemum tea she has found in a Chinese market in New Haven. I now love chrysanthemum tea.

I watch the boiled flower float inside my cup, careful to avoid ingesting it. This tea is delicate and delicious. “It is the most popular flower in China. It is a flower of luck and good health,” she says as I learn more about her homeland.

What I have heard about Communist China is mostly negative. “We have good healthcare and giving our children the best education is extremely important. Parents invest a lot into their children’s education. We want our children to make a lot of money when they grow up,” she tells me with pride. I have been told that China is not such a friendly place to people who look like me, but I have not verified this with her. I understand her point about education. My mother wanted us to earn a good living with a government job, regardless of natural talents or other interests but as opportunities for African Americans increased, I had resisted and rejected her guidance.

Jane’s parents are still alive and live quite a distance from her home in Nan Jing Province. She teaches American Literature at her university, which is not far from their government-subsidized, two-bedroom apartment. “In China, we do have job security.” The amount she tells me that they pay in rent makes me jealous. Our government’s economic relationship with China has encouraged more Chinese students to attend U.S. colleges and tourists to travel inside our country. “In June, when my husband comes, we will travel by train to Washington, DC, and maybe Disneyland,” she tells me. I am looking forward to meeting George, his American name. Sunny had explained these names. “When we go to school to learn to speak English, we are
given American names because our own would be too difficult to pronounce or even remember.”

We both had laughed at the irony of names. I do not think “Sunny” fits her personality.

“When I was twelve, my parents sent me to live in the city with my older brother and sister, so that I would get a good education. In China, education determines what kind of job you have and how much money will earn. There is a lot of testing to get into the best schools, so our kids can make a lot of money” she says with seriousness that I rarely hear from American parents. I fear that our public school will not live up to her high standards. “What about you?” she asks.

“Well, I am fifty-four, separated and getting divorced.” This is not information I offer to my tenants, but I feel okay telling her. She appreciates that I am in school, says that I should consider teaching in China for a year before I turn sixty-five. She smiles when she says it. I am more comfortable talking about our children than about my husband. “I have two girls and a boy, and all of them are doing well.” We refill our cups with tea. I place two Thomas’ English muffins inside the toaster.

Friday afternoon is proving to be an interesting and productive day. My tea sits cooling as I eat the muffin and Sunny, in a kind of frenzy, begins gathering pots and cooking utensils to prepare her dinner. The intensity of her movements and the scowl on her face cause me to sense that something is on her mind, and my former and, more blunt self, would have said, “Look, just spit out whatever is bugging you.” I have become more tactful and wait until she is ready to share, which happens after a few silent minutes. Watching her cook reminds me how much I loved to watch Craig wield a butcher or paring knife on a chopping block.
Her eyes focus on chopping her vegetables when she slowly and carefully says, “Nickie, I would like for you to help me discipline Jane. She has been disobedient, and she refuses to follow my rules.”

I have witnessed Jane pushing against her mother. I am relieved that Sunny has revealed the ram inside the kitchen. Since Modani left in December and they moved into that bedroom, I have heard Sunny saying, “You are not to play games on my computer until you finish your homework.” And, a few times in the kitchen, in my silent presence I have watched Jane challenge Sunny’s authority and smash her body against her mother in physical defiance. I have said nothing because it has not been my business. Today, Sunny wants Jane’s behavior to be my business.

Because I want to consider two people and their needs, I carefully consider my response. I believe that Sunny is embarrassed, but I also think that she is seeking an ally. I am proud of her.

Before I speak, Sunny continues, “She has been difficult. She does not do what I ask. When she does not do her homework, she is not supposed to go on my computer to play games, but she has been sneaking and going on the computer. I am not sure what more I can do.” She sounds frustrated, as if she has been practicing her prosecution.

“What do Americans do when your children misbehave?” she asks and moves to look at her boiling potatoes on the stove. She avoids looking at me as she and rolls up her sleeves to reach over inside a cabinet and take out her wok.

Silently, I assess her. As usual, she is dressed like a peasant woman in beige baggy cotton pants and print blouse. Her stick straight, black, shoulder-length hair is pulled, as usual, into her simple ponytail that lets me better study her perfect oval face. She grasps half an onion left on
the cutting board and rapidly chops it into smaller pieces as her slender fingers scoop it up and she tosses it into the wok. I fixate on our similarities: height, love of learning, curiosity about other cultures and desire to travel. We could be sisters in spirit. I now understand why she had hoped to come here alone. Mothering can be difficult, time-consuming and thankless work.

“I’m curious. If you were back in China, what would you do about Jane’s behavior?” I ask because I think how parents discipline their child is as varied as the bushes that produce spanking switches. The last time I spanked Charmaine was over the hamburger that she had pestered me into buying. I knew she wouldn’t eat it, and I didn’t have money to spare, but I had relented. When she refused to eat it, I had spanked her with a belt to release my frustration. Spanking her had made me feel awful, but I thought that I needed to assert absolute authority and put fear into her about wasting people’s time and money. Like a mule, Charmaine was stubborn and refused to cry. The strikes from my belt had intensified until I recognized that her will was stronger than my own. I still feel ashamed of my behavior because it was just a hamburger, and like most children, her eyes had been bigger than her stomach.

“Back in China, her father would never stand for such behavior. He would whip her with his belt,” she replied, sounding frustrated and jutting out her jaw.

“I have friends who still do that,” I say calmly and watch her eyes widen in disbelief. Finally, she is looking at me. I wonder what she thinks we Americans do to punish our children. “To my friend Carra, no amount of logic will dislodge her belief in spare the rod, spoil the child. Some parents kick their children out of the house,” I say. As challenging as Paulo had been, we would never ask him to leave. I realize that Sunny must have believed our hypnotic “live your
American dream kept us from having to discipline our children,” mantra. I have been thinking about her predicament since the first time I watched Jane shove her.

“I have an idea that might help. Understand this, I can’t discipline your child but I can set some ground rules in the house that she has to live with. She is never to push you or anyone in this household. I consider pushing violence, and I will not tolerate violence in my house. I think it will be better for me to tell her,” I say.

Jane, looking relieved, says, “That is fine, but when my husband gets upset with her, he whips her with his belt, and when he comes here, he might want to do that when she misbehaves.”

“Well, he will have to follow my house rules. He will have to find a new way to discipline his daughter, and you will probably have to convince him that there is a better way.”

George sounds like a traditional man and father. Leave the training to the mother and discipline to the father. My father never laid a hand on me or my sisters. My grandfather punished me once with a thin switch he sent me to find and give to him. Eventually I understood that he was sad and disappointed with me. Lesson learned.

I will have to think of a way to help Sunny help her husband to enforce the rules. “For now, we can focus on getting your daughter to be more cooperative. Then you can figure things out with your husband,” I say and offer her an offbeat aid, the television in the living room.

“Have you ever watched the television show, Supernanny? This woman moves in with a family for a week or two to help the parents, usually the mother, change the behaviors of unruly, selfish, lazy children, and often, an unhelpful husband and dad. Mom usually does everything for
everyone except herself. By the time Supernanny arrives, Mom is ready to leave or kill them all,” I say while laughing. But sometimes Mom is the culprit. But, by the time she leaves, they are changed people. Like Wife Swap, it’s one of my favorite shows.” Laughing at what sounds absurd to her, Sunny agrees to watch the show.

Later, when Jane is home, I lay down my house rules and watch the expressions on both of their faces. “Jane, there is no violence allowed in the house. That means that you can’t push or shove your mother or anyone else,” I tell her after she sits at the table to eat her dinner. I want to sound resolute and reasonable. Jane glares at me, but Sunny smiles.

The following day and out of Jane’s earshot, Sunny begins watching my recordings of Supernanny and taking notes. At first skeptical of the premise, she changes her mind. “I think the show is good. I like the nanny, and I am learning a lot of things to do with Jane.”

I feel like a big sister-friend. Jane is more cooperative, but I grow suspicious when I notice Jane watching Supernanny and taking her own notes. I inform Sunny who doesn’t seem alarmed.

“Actually, Jane is doing much better here, and at school she is making new friends,” Sunny tells me. I suspect that Jane is thinking about how to circumvent our rules, but in time, as her English improves, and, Jane is more cooperative and Sunny and Jane’s relationship is improving. Their personalities are so different that I think problems will continue to crop up. At least they are willing to do the work.

The day Sunny first asked for my help, I had said, “You and I are going to partner up. So, know this, I will have your back.” Sunny’s watching Supernanny was one answer to her seeking a way to discipline her daughter. It is not lost on me.
Mother never punished us children. But, when my Aunt April moved back to California from Chicago, newly divorced and with a shapely preteen daughter, she had been filled with Christian vigor to punish her sister’s rowdy brood. My aunt believed in group punishment, making us girls sit against the wall to await our turns to be struck with her brown extension cord.

In what must have been a tacit agreement, Mother watched from the side while we guilty and innocent girls, never the boys, were punished by her younger sister until their brother Junior, had threatened my aunt with the same brutality if she ever again laid a hand on his daughter. She stopped whipping us all, but her belief in her punishment never wavered.

Years ago, I had spanked Charmaine. Then I had decided to never do it again. Craig had set the “no whooping” rule for our children, and our kids are all fine. I hope that Sunny understands that a small village is helping her influence her daughter’s behavior.
By the time we leave to pick up Sunny’s husband George at Kennedy Airport in New York, every person in the household has been changed. Modani, who moved out in at the end of November, was a gracious and cooperative guest who invited Sunny, Jane, and I to dinner at his Congo friends’ home in Cheshire. His friend’s wife had cooked and treated us to their traditional foods as we learned about their friendship and homeland. I better appreciated how much his friends valued Modani’s research. I valued his quiet nature and the conversations.

After Modani left, mother and daughter move into his old room and are less stressed. Jane disappears into her bedroom to do homework without coercion. She enjoys school and has become friends with her classmates, who are teaching her American slang. I think Sunny is concerned about the Americanization of her child, but she is changed, too. She is less critical of our supermarkets, and she likes the school system. Because of my houseguests and school and work, I, too, am changed. The more I learn about women’s earlier struggles, the more I feel myself buoyed by their sense of purpose, the braver I am speaking my truth; there will be no violence in our home. Sunny has told George the rule, but he still believes his punishment is best.

George is here for three months. I insist that the parents have a private bedroom, so I move Jane back upstairs. I do increase the rent. Sunny and I have discussed a strategy to bring George on board.

“Let me tell your husband what is allowed and is not allowed in the house regarding punishment,” I tell her over breakfast the morning of his arrival. George isn’t on board, but we women have had time to get used to each other and become friends. Sunny and I have gone on
several outings together, grocery shopping and even to a movie. Driving her to a few of the historical landmarks useful to her research has enriched both of us.

After Sunny and I spent a wistful afternoon in Massachusetts at Edith Wharton’s historic mansion, we both wished to be wealthy. Last fall, shortly before Modani moved out, our household took a trip to Liberty Island, which was new to all of us. We were having a great time until Modani disappeared, and we spent half an hour looking for him. “I wanted to see the other side,” was his explanation. I was upset because we needed to leave to avoid the worst of the traffic home. Otherwise, harmony existed in the household on Woodlawn Street. While Jane visits at a friend’s house, Sunny and I may go to the Yale Art Gallery and the Whitney Museum, or we might go grocery shopping at the newest Chinese market someone has told her about.

She understands and supports my decision to transfer from Women’s Studies to Urban Studies, where I feel more attuned to its social mandate. Transferring most of my credits mean I will still graduate in spring 2011. I cherish the friends I have made in my current program, and I look forward to making new friends.

Traffic on the I-95 South is thick but steady as we drive to Kennedy Airport. “The traffic is much worse in China,” Sunny says, which is one reason they do not have a car. During George’s stay, their family will spend a week in Washington, DC, in early August, and a week later, they will return to China.

Jane has changed the most. In May, she celebrated her ninth birthday at the house with a party and her friends from school. Like years earlier, when my niece had lived with us for the school year, Jane is very popular. Her English, especially the slang is nearly perfect, and I see her artistic talent, but most important, she stopped disobeying her mother.
In September, I will begin working with Kelly Services as a substitute teacher because my current job, courtesy of the Women’s Studies Program, will end. In March, when I took one of those personality tests, the counselor said teaching was most suitable because of the autonomy and authority. It was weird because I had just signed up to substitute teach. The pitiful pay is nonnegotiable but I do value my autonomy and authority.

Along with the blue-sky contentment I have been feeling, I am dating again William, who is witty and curious, handsome and adventurous, likes to stare at me from the corner of his blue eyes, and we laugh a lot. When we see each other, he automatically hands me a cloth to clean my eyeglasses, and I adore him because of it. We have been dating for a month and meeting him makes my visits to my divorce attorney more tolerable.

After our slow slog to the airport, we find George, a thin man of average height, standing at the terminal looking annoyed. Jane is at school, so I wait inside the car as Sunny jumps out to hug him. After tossing his luggage in my trunk, he sits in the back seat. Driving to and from New York has given me a new sense of personal power. I used to get lost every single time I drove here, but since the separation I take the Metro to see Manhattan on foot and walk to the New York Public Library and MOMA. I have to credit Geena, too, who uses any excuse for us to head to New York, so this turnaround trip is not a hardship.

George, up close, is looks studious but, is jovial and says, “Welcome to the United States of America where you can be whatever you want.” The first thing I notice is his wide and sincere smile. He is happy to see his wife and daughter. He is happy to be here and is raring to see more.

“He thinks America is the greatest place on Earth,” Sunny says, as we begin the ride home. She, on the other hand, has grown weary American wastefulness and racism.
Driving safely to exit New York means paying close attention to the signs but I turn on the radio so that George can hear some of our music. Looking in the rear view mirror I see a strange sight.

“George, what the hell are you doing?” I shriek. His head is hanging out the back window, as he points his new camera at the sky while moving at sixty-five miles an hour.

“I am taking pictures of your sky to show my friends back home. We only see gray,” he laughs and leans in to answer. Then he resumes his pose, safe enough to avoid being hit.

“It’s true,” Sunny says. “In China, the smog is so thick and gray we do not see a blue sky. Let him take his pictures.” George is anxious to learn as much as possible about America and the people. George’s childlike wonder and surrender to his impulses are charming. I wonder what he will think about my house rule of no whipping.

Before George arrived, Jane and I took a few day trips. A few weeks later, we are all visiting the Massapequa museum and skipping the casino close by. Eating our lunch in the cafeteria, I watch his expression when I tell him my house rules.

“Yes, my wife told me about the rules, but I don’t agree with them,” he answers as if he has been expecting the conversation. “You have to be firm with children,” he tells me over cold pizza. His voice and stare tell me that he does not like to be challenged. Sunny told me that he comes from a large, close-knit, farm family in China. The one thing he does not like about America is how disrespectful children can be to elders and their parents.

“I am not concerned about other people’s children. I am concerned about the people living under my roof and with my rules,” I say resolutely. “I respect your position but these are the
rules.” He may or may not be aware of how his daughter was treating his wife. Whether or not he knows or cares does not matter. “I am the boss in the house,” I tell him as our eyes meet.

“Okay, I am willing to try. I will try,” he says after he has taken some time to think.

“That’s all we ask you to do,” Sunny, who has been quiet, finally says, as we pack up and return to touring the museum.

A few weeks before the family returns to China, they ride the Amtrak to Washington, DC, to see our monuments to greatness. “Your trains are you so slow. In China it would have been a three-hour trip,” Sunny brags on the phone after they check into their hotel room.

“Well, I love my leisurely five-hour train ride, but I get your point,” I laugh.

“Hello,” I say groggy, answering my phone and looking at my clock. It is 11 P.M.

“Nickie, My purse was stolen today while we were eating lunch in the cafeteria. I am so upset. We are all very upset. All of our passports are gone. And someone took George’s new camera,” she says, distraught. They are still in Washington, D.C..

I sit up, alert now because my friends, my tenants, are in trouble. I hear the panic in her voice.

“Nickie, this afternoon we were in the cafeteria. I set my purse in a chair on the other side of the table, and someone took it. Our passports, credit cards, and some of our money are all gone. Our identifications are gone! I don’t know what to do. We reported it to the police, but there is not much they can do. They told us that this happens all of the time.” she says. Calling George to the phone, he repeats what she has told me, including that his camera was also stolen. He sounds angry and disillusioned.
“This is the dark side of America. I am so sorry,” I tell George. “Look, I can’t do anything to help you now except maybe verify that you are who you say. First thing in the morning, I will telephone your program and let them know what happened. Sunny must also contact them. I am sure that they will figure out what to do. Look, this will all work out. We will talk tomorrow.”

Hanging up, I envision the steps I will have to take to help them get back to Hamden. I feel as violated as they must feel. Later, I learn that tourists’ bags and purses are targets for thieves.

I have been robbed twice. More than material things are lost. I had felt a sense of personal violation and helplessness. They must be feeling the same vulnerability. At 8 A.M., I telephone Sunny’s program and give them her contact information.

Within two days, Sunny and her family receive enough identification to return to Connecticut, and with emergency passports, they begin packing to leave. As is their country’s custom, they had gone shopping for gifts to give to their bosses, family, and close friends. All of this is safe.

George’s countenance has changed since being betrayed in an American cafeteria. His camera, filled with the photos he had planned to share, is gone. I do not know how the Yale foreign scholar’s program orchestrated their leaving, but I learn that we do not have to believe someone who says, “It can’t be done!” That night they telephoned me from Washington, D.C., I kept my cool, confident things would work out. I had their back.

After they arrived in China, Sunny and I used Skype to keep in contact with each other. George, who can be very funny, likes to get in the screen. I think I can understand why they love each other. “Jane has returned to school with a new outlook and focus,” Sunny told me. Jane
seems to have learned how to talk to her parents in a way that everyone can understand what each is trying to say. Every Chinese New Year, we email each other.
“You have a court date on June 17,” Seth, my third divorce attorney, informs me during my late afternoon appointment in May.

“You’re kidding, right?” I ask him. Is this some cruel joke? He knows that June 17 is my wedding anniversary. Brow furrowed, lips pursed, I had forgotten a divorce date was coming.

His answer matches my dour expression. “You would be surprised how many people get divorced on their wedding anniversary, but unfortunately, I do not assign the court date.” Seth, chubby and gregarious, has a large photograph of his three, smiling, daughters hanging on his office wall. I believe it is to remove any suspicion of a bias against women. Glancing into his open briefcase, I recognize my original financial statement, the one he claimed to have lost during our first appearance in court and he charged me for a new one. The discovery annoys me. I say nothing but suspect that he is as crooked as the first attorney, whom I fired. In midstream, it’s too late to change this horse’s course. I remember karma.

“You have a legal karmic debt,” Rhea has often reminded me. “In a previous life, you probably held a high position and abused your authority.” I believe her. I have worked for attorneys who have proven untrustworthy. Briefly, I regret amicably leaving my second attorney, but in a few weeks, my life and marital status will change.

This will be my first and Craig’s second divorce, and I need to trust the expert to help me through this maze. Going to court was a last resort after working with a mediator (Craig’s suggestion). I gave up when he continued to withhold information, as Lena, my lawyer friend, had predicted he would do.
Seth has announced a sucky court date. Wednesday, June seventeenth will be our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. We were married on Father’s Day, in Los Angeles. Standing beneath a huge shady oak, facing our metaphysical minister, we had declared our love in the presence of our families and friends. We had dancers, flower girls, a ring-bearer, bridesmaids and groomsmen, and the ushers who had mistakenly separated the guests by race, believing that all of the white guests were Craig’s and all of the black guests were mine. We had laughed then cleared up the mistake on that perfect-weather day.

Dressing for court, I decide to wear nondescript clothing, (a white blouse, black slacks, a black waist-length jacket and black pumps) sparse makeup, a wristwatch, small gold hoops in my ears, and my hair in a French twist. I have been inside this courthouse as a juror in a medical malpractice lawsuit. I had argued passionately for the plaintiff, who won. Usually, I don’t wear black because I think it’s too dramatic, but Lena said that wearing black makes people take you seriously. I do not know what to believe.

During a three-minute telephone call to Seth, we agree to meet outside the courtroom and enter together. I feel anxious. Although I wish this day had never arrived, I hope to convince the judge to grant me my home and, like Seth says should happen, lifetime alimony.

Craig and his attorney are seated on their side of the room. Craig glances at me with relaxed smugness. I still cannot fully understand why or how we arrived at this place. What I do know is that I will owe my attorney more money for court fees, for his appearance, and for today’s telephone conversation. These additional expenses are uppermost on my mind, and yet it is important that I appear calm, reflective, and truthful. After three hours of our testimonies, the judge declares, “I am not ready to issue a ruling.” I exit the court relieved that a different date will be on our divorce decree.
There had been acrimony inside the courtroom, both expected and unexpected. When my attorney questioned Craig, I learned not only his girlfriend’s name, their plan to marry and the date they first had sex. I told the judge that Craig had offered to let me keep the house. His attorney, seeming surprised, supported this in his summation. Having not felt as awful testifying as I had expected, I had thanked Seth as we parted the courthouse and counted on a favorable outcome. The courtroom drama had been bittersweet.

At home, I search the web for information about Craig’s girlfriend. She is attractive and a well-regarded Women’s Studies professor. The broken-off bits of Craig’s covert confession of another woman to our marriage counselor finally fit, when I learn that last year she was a fellow at the institute where he works. Another piece of the puzzle is the email alert from my Classmate.com account that I stopped using a year ago. A man from her city had found my name. I recognize the name as her ex-husband’s. I am curious about what he knew, so I leave a message that is never answered. I guess it is too late.

Flying to Los Angeles for ten days is my great escape from a divorce decree I expected on Wednesday, but Friday morning’s flight is smooth and Charmaine is happy to see me. Packed for warm weather, I include books and my journal. Since 2007, I have been recording ruminations on my dreams, fears, triumphs, discoveries, hopes, and failings. Charmaine’s two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in Mar Vista is as welcoming and wonderful. Her male housemate is out of town for the weekend. His bedroom is entered through an outside door. Instead of showing them the bedroom upstairs

The next morning I walk and explore my daughter’s neighborhood, walking along streets with mostly modest and remodeled Spanish-style bungalows. I am enamored with tall thick-
trunked ficus trees on both sides of the street, and how their dense leaves create a stunning canopy on street after street.

Returning home, I freshen up and drive my rented car to take Mother to lunch. I last visited her in early 2008, before my renters came into my life. Mother, looks thinner but still has energy to walk on her own, albeit slower. When she calls me Liz or Flo, I laugh because Mother has called each of her children by another child’s name for as long as I can remember, especially when we were irritating her. Sitting across from her, I remember doing the same to my children. Flo and Liz as the names of the people she sees every day.

Sitting across from each other in the crowded soul food restaurant, I record our conversation on my cassette player and take a few candid photos with my camera. “I had Tuberculosis when I was a child. I was in a sanitarium for two years but I kept up with my studies. I remember for a long time, there were no other children there and then there were a lot. I became friends with one girl. Then, they were all gone. I loved to write and I kept journals. One day, they told me that I was going home and I did not have time to pack my journals.”

As the replay the tape that captures her voice and memories, I remember the suddenness of my own return to her home. Only my clothing was taken with me. Left behind were my books and toys, as if they had not sustained me or shaped my perspectives. Watching her expression and hearing the sound of profound loss in her voice, my mother’s reactions to her own childhood uprooting helps me make sense of my own. I hear a woman whose own childhood had been interrupted by circumstances beyond her control.

I remember supplying my own explanation for why I lived apart from my birth family. I had decided that her parents took me because John was a baby, and the others were a little older.
and could help each other. Perhaps I was a precocious toddler who my grandparents could provide the attention I would need. This explanation made sense to me then and now.

Mother insists on saving some of her lunch for later. On the drive home, I consider asking her, “Did you ever intend for me to come back home?” I decide to embrace what made our lunch so special. The question or answer can unlink my sense of connection, so I do not ask it.

“Give Charmaine, your husband, and children my love,” Mother says as leave.

Driving her home, I remember my life before Mother began saying “I love you,” to us children, before the Jehovah’s Witnesses had stressed that parents tell their children they loved them. Better late than never, she had said. Now she says it all of the time. I tell my children all of the time. I think that Mother, long widowed, would understand if I told her that I am divorced, but I have just recently begun to understand some of it myself.

Monday afternoon while taking a walk, Craig telephones me.

“Hi,” he says, sounding relaxed. “I was just wondering what you thought about the settlement.”

Mid-step, I stop walking because, since I have not heard from my attorney, I had assumed that the judge was still carefully considering the division of our assets and my alimony.

“I, uh, I haven’t heard anything,” I say, embarrassed and feeling ambushed.

“Your lawyer hasn’t told you? My lawyer gave me the papers on Friday. I thought you might want to talk about it,” he says, sounding a little bit concerned.

Moving from the middle of the sidewalk, I lean into the shade of a building. My head feels light, like how you feel when you realize that what you think is true is a lie. Like when Craig
stood up during dinner at his friends’ house and declared “our marriage is strong” a month before he left our bed. “No, I have not heard from Seth. Can I call you back? I’m out walking, and the noise is making it difficult to hear you,” I say. “Just breathe,” I tell myself. I am upset and I need to gather my bearings before I telephone Seth.

“Oh, hi there, I was just getting ready to call you,” he says.

I am sure he is lying. “My ex-husband just telephoned and told me that he received his copy of the decision yesterday,” I reply as my worst suspicions about my lawyer nestle in my thoughts.

“I know you are out of town, and I thought I’d wait until you were back.”

He can’t be serious; he was going to wait? “Seth, what is the date of the decree?”

“It’s June seventeen. Really, I was just going to call you. If you want, I can email you the decision, and I will mail it along with my final bill.”

Pausing, I tell him to email me the decision. As I read the summary some of my worst fears are realized. The judge liked Craig. Lena and Rhea had warned me that judges favor one person over the other, and usually it is the husband. Nate had told me to emphasize my duties as a wife and mother in my written narrative. The judge had decided that during our marriage, I had worked only part-time. She ordered us to immediately sell the house that Craig’s attorney told her I should be awarded. The majority of the proceeds will be given to me. Craig will pay my health insurance for one year. Instead of the lifetime alimony my attorney assured me, I will receive twelve years. The current amount will be halved after two years. My earning a certain amount of salary, or prize money can stop the payments. Her conclusion reads, “The defendant just wants to be happy.”
I shake my head in despair and disbelief. Is she not aware that our country is in the midst of an economic recession? That people are selling their homes at a loss? That people have been losing their jobs and retirement savings. What the hell was she thinking? That, because I am in a graduate program, this fifty-four-year-old, black-woman will find a high paying job. “Damn, I must have been a horrible authoritarian in a past life.”

Over and over, I review her decision, trying to decipher her thinking. The conclusion is the same. She liked him better. All I can see is what I am losing. Finally, I telephone Craig and ask if we can talk about the decree tomorrow. Tomorrow, I should be less emotional.

The next day, we talk. He is also surprised at the settlement. When I suggest that maybe we sit down and work on something that is more equitable, he agrees to come over to the house in a few weeks.

I introduce Craig to Sunny, Jane, and George, who are leaving to go grocery shopping on the Sunday afternoon that he arrives for our sit-down. Over two hours, we work at the table on the front porch, reviewing and revising the official divorce settlement. We agree to sell the house next year. The preparation will be too much while I am in graduate school. He offers to pay for two years of my health insurance instead of one year. Craig agrees to give me his portion of our shared stock. What surprises me is his agreeing that the judge’s description of me and my contributions to the marriage is harsh and unfair. We revise her opinion. To me, our project feels bittersweet. Working together, we were unstoppable. The truth of our marriage’s demise still evades me. A
As we finish or meeting, William telephones me and my voice changes from business to flirty. Talking on the phone, I smile and sweetly say that I am busy and will call back in a little while.

“Who was that?” Craig asks.

I pause before I answer, “William.” I hope he is a little jealous. “I’m going to print our copies.” I note his reaction in his narrowing blue eyes. He is calculating something.

“I will have my attorney look at this, and then I will get back to you in about a week. I’m sure it will be okay,” he says and leaves.

Two weeks later, I telephone Craig to ask about our filing the changes.

“Well, I talked this over with my family, and they don’t think it is in my best interest. My attorney also doesn’t believe it is in my best interest,” he says. The answer sounds rehearsed, as if he had no intention of letting me know that he had changed his mind.

“Not in my best interest,” is the mantra he first uttered to me a week after he had suggested that I keep the house, then a week later, denied ever suggesting it. Showing him his notes on the subject did not matter. “I realize it would not be in my best interest,” he had said and refused to take them. Instead of keeping them, I had returned them to his desk.
“Once again, Craig has flipped a switch and made this about him instead of us,” I say this to Martin, my psychotherapist. I began talking to Martin a few weeks after Craig moved out.

“Tell me again, how long were you married?” he asks. We are nearing the end of our talk-therapy sessions, my life jacket for this sad voyage.

“Twenty-five years to the day,” I mumble and force back tears that break through. I probably need Martin more than ever, but I also believe that, exploring my past has helped me to understand how I have shaped my present. It has been an interesting shared journey to recognize my part in our road to divorce. Mostly, we have been talking about how I am shaping my present and future.

“We therapists have a saying, for every five years of marriage that ends in divorce; it will take one year to figure out the issues that led to the divorce.” I appreciate his fatherly sounding counsel, but shudder at the thought of my continuing to excavate our marital demise. I had wanted a candid conversation with Craig. He has remarried and I do not think his wife would approve.

At the beginning of the divorce sessions, Martin asked my permission to contact Craig. “I want to see if there is any spark from him.” After they met, Martin had shared only his conclusion. “Craig has no interest in staying in the marriage.” The road to helping me to navigate that present and then a new path was clear.

I trust Martin’s knowing my intimate fears and my failures and self-deceptions, my confusing childhood, single parenthood, social insecurities, employment disappointments, and tripped-over hopes. Just having someone to carefully tweeze out my ingrown anxieties without judgment has
helped me figure out for myself how defensive I can be about imagined secret agendas. To me, the crux of my perceptions and misperceptions comes from a lack of clear communication, intent, and honesty. Craig knew how important telling the truth was to me. Without it you are only shadowboxing.

The more Craig’s lies were slowly revealed, the more I wondered about my earliest reactions to handling them and him. There was his secret drinking, random bank withdrawals, sudden interest in his appearance, reneging on promises to support my goals. I began replaying my own broken promises to him, my spending on the house but squeezing the money belt for the treats he had wanted. Then there was my menopause. It had a deleterious impact on our sex life because my body was changing. Even our lovers’ language was different; he said relationship I said partnership.

The incongruities had encroached into a once simpatico relationship. Our moving upheavals and rough patches that we had thought were repaired would reopen. My epiphanies about all of these dark paths and patches, I shared with Martin, instead of Craig.

Divorcing at age fifty-five allowed me a softer landing than it would if it happened at age fifty-three. I am completing a master’s degree, which had been part of our marriage master plan. Through the twists and turns of parenting and work, years passed and Craig did not complete his dissertation.

Years earlier, when my employer had offered to reimburse employees half of our college tuition, I boarded my education train and engineered an Associate’s degree. By the time I resigned from Yale, our children were old enough to take care of themselves, and I completed my BS degree in Liberal Studies.
Looking through a more mature lens, I recognize my responsibility for chipping away at the loose shingles in our marriage instead of polishing the marble. After I told Martin that I had signed onto a dating site, he offered to be my consigliore. Wearing big grin he said “You have to be careful on those sites.”

I am learning. It took a while for me to realize that many eligible men my age have lost their sexy muscles and are sporting thinning, gray hair. Still, I want to love and be loved in return. Dating at my age can make you believe it will feel walking along a country road, only you look up and realize that you are standing in the middle of Manhattan. It’s daunting.

The best part of my life is meeting people whose presence cajoles me to review past episodes in my life and recognize fresh interpretations. I consider them the tender mercies of past hurts and present healings. At our final meeting, I leave Martin’s office feeling confident that I am on a good path.

Late that night, with the house quiet, I lie in bed and review my current Numerology Diamond Report. When I realize the energies of 2, 14, 3, and 8 are a repeat of last year numbers, I think I can gauge how far I have come this year.

*The 2 root says, “You are pushing the boundaries of your perception. You mind is not your true self. Understanding the difference between you and your mind can change your life. When a person is unaware of this separate identity, they have no choice but to obey the mind—no questions, choice, or freedom. With no separation, the person is arguing in front of a mirror,*

*One of your issues in life has to do with a fear of freedom. A divorce or getting laid off can produce a similar result. You begin to face a time of relative emptiness; empty space-time you are free to fill however you want. We may not see it as freedom but rather as a void, an abyss,*
and we fear it, fear that freedom, or better yet, see it as a fear of time; time you have not yet filled with plans, goals, and expectations. Find a way to establish new purpose in your life by setting practical goals; the kind the require time, focus, and effort to reach. Consider going back to college. When you allow the true “Nickie” out in the open, the more people will respect you and your life will be more rewarding and satisfying. Laugh out loud, be less self-conscious, and take yourself less serious in order to see the things you have in common with others. Be courageous, honest and open-minded. If you do, you will find career advancement, authority and responsibility, improved finances; success, respect, and money.”

All true, and it began last year not long after Craig moved out and he took notice of how much the Kousa dogwood and how the yard has blossomed. My blossoming began after I enrolled in graduate school and new people entered my life. Others moved into my home, and some of their problems compelled me to relive past events that are inform my present life. Finally, I let go of the idea of soul-mate Craig after he lied about the furniture he had taken on Mother’s Day. “I don’t remember promising to return those things. I set them out,” he said. Instead of yelling at him, I let go of my useless anger.
Love and Dessert

Astrodienst Relationship Horoscope

August 2009

Grace telephoned me in mid-July to ask, “Do you have room in September for a couple from Poland? The scholar is an economics professor, and his wife is coming along.” I am pleased to be her choice for placing her foreign scholars.

“Your timing is perfect because Sunny and her family are leaving at the end of the month. I have really enjoyed having them, and I appreciate you recommending me,” I replied.

With the house to myself before I begin classes in my new graduate program, I savor both the quiet and the company of Audry and Elmo. Changing disciplines meant that I surrendered my job and the pay, but the earnings from renting the rooms more than makes up for the loss.

In the silence, I hear myself saying “pay attention to what these people are doing in your life; their gifts of company and commerce are complementing all the ways that you are transforming. They have given you reasons to explore your past to see how it fits with your present idea of who you think you are.” I don’t think I have any say in the matter.

Modani entering my life helped me think about my earliest memories. He was gentle and determined to complete his research. He reminded me how much of a questioning adventurer I used to be. He inspired me to see more of the world. Mr. Willis at our dinner table allowed me to see I saw how gracious and generous my grandparents were to their guests. Living with them, I learned my earliest values when sitting at their breakfast and dinner tables, inside their car, and inside Daddy’s basement workshop.
Sunny and Jane living in my home allowed me to review parts of my life through the lens of both a mother and a daughter. Sunny’s brusque manner did not mean that she did not love her only child. She was focused on her duty as a parent concerned about June’s future. Jane’s, response to her involuntary journey was probably natural since her voice was not given consideration. After admiring Jane’s creative talent, I hope Sunny encourages its development.

I better understand how much I must have infuriated the adults in my family with my incessant “why” questions and unconscious rebellions. Although our children are grown, I wish I reacted differently to some of their behaviors. I still have time to be better as a grandmother.

George was me as a young parent, thinking about my interests and blindly believing in outdated parenting practices. The belt had been a tool in China but in my house, he could not use it. Craig had decreed “no spanking” for Phoebe as she ran away from my palm. Charmaine did not have her champion against my belt. I was bullied in elementary school. I tried to bully a girl I thought weaker than me. I had miscalculated and got my butt kicked. I have no respect for bullies, especially people granted power over weaker people.

Sunny had inspired me to require that she discipline differently. Realizing how naïve I had been, and maybe still am regarding discipline is helpful. Those six weeks that Craig and I took care of Paulo’s toddler, I never spanked my grandson. I am grateful George and I walked and talked. When he told me a something about his upbringing, I better understood him. It also made long to know something, anything about my own father’s childhood.

The last time I saw my Dad alive, I was twenty-five, mother of a two-year-old daughter, and unaware that he was dying. He was in the hospital. I had rubbed his hands with alcohol and cleaned his fingernails. Rubbing his hands and feet had been our bonding ritual when he moved
back home. I enjoyed massaging Dad’s feet when I was a child. Diabetes had finally claimed his feet and part of one leg. Not one of the people who knew how much I loved my father and grandfather had told me that they were dying. I did not have a chance to say goodbye.

Sunny and Jane’s presence had unveiled some of my agonizing childhood memories. Their relationship had reminded me of my relationship with Mother. The difference was my desire to help Sunny and Jane develop the kind of mother-and-daughter relationship that would not wound either of them. I am grateful that she asked me to help her. There was George. He was like my father and grandfather; humorous like my dad and industrious like my grandfather, when picking the dandelion greens. Now that they have gone, I wonder what insights I will gain from my new tenants.

“Sunny said nothing but wonderful things about her stay. Their being robbed was terrible. Fortunately, we were able to resolve their dilemma fairly quickly. I am sure the incoming scholar will be happy at your home. I am sending both of you each other’s contact information. Let me know how it works out and, again, thanks for being such a good resource.”

On July sixteen, I sent Jason a copy of my standard six-month rental agreement. Before George moves in, I decide the downstairs bedroom will be perfect for adult privacy and I move June back upstairs. She is delighted to have her own space.

Reading Jason’s reply the next day, he notes, “The main thing I noticed is the term; we’re leaving at the end of December. I hope that is not a problem.” He is also concerned about their monetary share of the utilities and their deposit. “We can’t cash an American check back home” he writes, and makes me laugh.
The timeframe of their stay is a little confusing. His grant is for five months, but they will be travelling in August, which means the only need they room four months. This is not a problem for Jason and his wife, who seem to be eco-friendly. I find it interesting that I do not resist, but instead, appreciate having a married couple rent my downstairs bedroom.

At the end of August, after the awful theft of their property, Sunny, George, Jane and I say our goodbyes. We promise to email each other. I promise Sunny that I will look into teaching in China. She says they are looking for American literature professors under age sixty-five.

September’s, weather is perfect the day the new couple park their rented car in my driveway. Sitting inside the front porch, I walk out to greet them. Jason is tall and thin with an angular body and light-tan complexion. His black hair is cut conservatively short, and he is wearing jeans, a button-down shirt, and casual shoes. Like his smile, his hands and handshake are large.

“Let me introduce you to my wife, Sarah,” he says as she walks over to stand next to him and extend her hand. Her smile is friendly but a little reserved. She is small-framed with dark, probing brown eyes, black slightly wavy hair and skin, darker than Jason. Her outfit, tan slacks and a white, sleeveless shell, reveals her soft curves. Her body language, her hand clasping his elbow, her face turned to his, shows me how much she loves him.

“It is so nice to meet you,” she says, her voice has a soft, feminine tenor and her handshake is firm, and yet I sense protectiveness. She need not worry. I do not flirt with married men.

Leaving their baggage inside the car, we go inside to get better acquainted and see where they will be living. Jason is pleased with the bedroom and the proximity of the bathroom, their kitchen cabinets and their shelves inside the refrigerator. They ask about inviting guests over and use of the backyard. Sarah likes that the television is in a different room. I explain how the utility
payments are divided and when payment is due. I assure them that if their bedroom is left as
found, I will return their deposit before they leave.

All of us are satisfied as we sit down to talk. “I will be at the School of Economics, and Sarah
is going to look for work through the Yale spouse placement center.” We will bike to and from
school,” Jason says. They are adults but I worry about their safety on a segment of the bike route.

We talk after about their country they have settled in the house and New Haven. “Our young
people are beginning to feel more freedoms in my country. The workers are finding more
opportunities and our economy is finally expanding. It is a reason I chose this field and I am here
to learn more about the American economy.” Jason tells me.

In a different conversation Sarah says, “We haven’t been married very long, but I am taking a
leave from my job to be with my husband,” I feel that she is a very smart woman. I remember
Craig’s suggestion after his acceptance to graduate school. “You stay here and come out next
year.” Like Jason, Craig was young, attractive and outgoing; a magnet for women. My instincts
said that letting him go on his own would be courting disaster. We had overcome recent
relationship and moving hurdles.

Sarah’s ability to find work at Yale might be different from my own search as Craig’s
spouse. After submitting my application, I never heard from the employment office. I began as a
casual employee in the American Studies Program. After a two-week assignment I was asked to
return for the summer and then to remain through the following semester. When Administrative
Assistant decided to resign, I was hired and within six months, my account of my responsibilities
resulted in a promotion. Sarah is quickly assigned a job that she likes. Times have changed.
Jason and Sarah’s relationship almost alerts me that my own marriage is being revisited the morning I am leaving for my teaching assignment at a new school. I still walk in the morning, only I take shorter walks before breakfast and I prepare my lunch the night before. Last night I went directly to bed after returning home from my class. The next morning, I enter the kitchen from the living room and immediately notice two of the four, small, hand-painted dessert plates I recently purchased from T.J. Maxx on the kitchen counter.

Remnants of red wine lie at the bottom of two gold-rimmed wine glasses and crumbs cover two of the four dessert plates that I purchased because I was inspired by their earthy colors. I imagined using the dishes for a romantic evening, but I have no idea when, because William and I have stopped seeing each other. The glasses were a wedding gift from the former boss who I worked for when I met Craig. My heart beats strong, not because of unwashed dishes on the counter. It is because of the symbolism of the scene.

Pausing to absorb the moment, I recall the magic of Craig’s and my first kiss. I leave for work and then school. I won’t be home until 10 P.M.

My first assignment is at a high school in Woodbridge. Most of the towns surrounding New Haven are smaller and greener. Rural does not fit their description, they are whiter, quieter, like first cousins who enjoy visiting each other. It is a new adventure for me like being a foreigner visiting another country and learning something new. In a state as small as Connecticut, there are eight counties and one-hundred-sixty-four fiefdoms. Most of the people who look like me live in the Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford, the major cities. Outside of those cities, we can feel like strangers in a strange land. I can sense that Jason, here with a clear purpose is like the major city while Sarah is quiet like the satellite towns. Unlike the cities and suburbs, they complement each other and there are no town and gown tensions between them.
Before I check in at the front office to receive my schedule, I review the manual for class management provided by my employer. It is straightforward: introduce myself, stick to the assignments, and report disruptive students to the main office. Easy.

My assignment for the next two days is music. Before any students arrive I write my name on the board and search the desk for the attendance sheets and lesson plans—there are no plans. I telephone the main office, and I am told that the students know what is expected since this is their fourth week of school. My management manual is wrong, the people in the office are wrong, and the first two classes I teach feel rudderless. The students have no captain; have not had one since the second week when their teacher quit. It is why I have no classroom instructions.

This is not much different from when I was in high school and substitute teachers were considered red meat for students, especially those who decided to have fun at their expense. Some students will tell us that their assignments were completed the previous week or yesterday and that they have a free day. The serious students yell, “He’s lying,” and usually it is a “he. My first two periods are frustrating exercises with sullen students ignoring me and talking among themselves, listening to music on their cellphones, or surfing the web. A few tell me they will work on completing assignments for other classes.

I had expected more from predominately white schools. These schools usually have their shit together. Skilled teachers teach model students inside well-lit classrooms. Students walk to classes in clean, sparkling hallways with working lockers, eat healthy lunches in well-organized cafeterias, and do classwork in quiet, well-stocked libraries. All of this is the opposite of what I understand about New Haven’s public schools. My agency does not assign us to New Haven schools public schools because the city has its own system.
Today is not a *Blackboard Jungle* scenario, but more like Welcome Back Kotter, an old television show about an idealistic teacher and his rowdy and cynical students. The office staff knew the score before I arrived to work and they told me nothing. By third period, after having heard how their teacher abruptly quit, I relax and decide to work with my class, give them more leeway, listen to how they feel about this situation, and decide what lessons I can guide them through for the day, and it works.

For the remainder of my classes, I spend part of the day listening to student grievances, and then we decide what they can do that is related to music. I am pleasantly surprised at how our cooperation develops. By the end of school, enough students have shared their feelings about the situation, and the school’s handling of it so that my rose-colored glasses are removed. I do not know if the office staff lied to my agency about the assignment or the agency chose not to give me all of the details, but I have learned some surprising lessons about substitute teaching.

After a brief stop home, I rush to my evening classes, where I am the willing student among adults. College is not compulsory like public school, but if I want to become something other than a bottom-rung clerical employee, a degree is necessary, especially now that the country is in a bank-induced economic recession. Evening graduate classes are structured differently from undergraduate day classes. A full load of twelve units is three, four-unit courses and each course meets one evening a week for three hours of usually, serious study, discussions, and assignment completion except that now, much of the discussion is centered on news about our country’s economic depression.

What we students are passing around is a poll asking whether the banks should be bailed out or the public. Overwhelmingly, my classmates, I and the public at large believe the banks should be held accountable. Times are uncertain, personal spending is curtailed, and the cost of higher
education continues to rise in the face of our economic slump. Urban Studies is a good field to study, but will it be enough, I ask myself while driving home. I arrive exhausted and hungry. At 10:30, the light from the television illuminates the window blinds.

Opening the front door, I hear soft rustling as if teenagers are straightening their clothes. Jason and Sarah are sitting on the sofa watching the credits roll on the screen, whose reflective light reveals their sheepish grins after their greetings.

I am glad to be home and glad that I do not live alone. I was glad to see the little plates and empty wine glasses on the counter this morning. They remind me of the weekend afternoons when Craig and I snuggled on the sofa, watching cooking shows all day while snacking on crackers and cheese.

For the next three to four months, many of my conversations are with Jason while most of my observations are of Sarah. I learn that life is changing for the better in Poland now that democracy seems to be embraced. Jason intends to take what he learns here, and teach it in his economic courses in Poland. Sarah is working in one of the offices at Yale, and both have found a safe route to bike to and from the campus. Sarah’s navigation of her days, and her own life goals while supporting her new husband, reassures me that love can conquer selfish demons. We are facing the uncertainty surrounding the world economies and politics. Sarah reminds me of my own subordinations to greater goals and once-promised rewards.

March, 1984. Craig wanted to paint the kitchen. Since last Christmas, his son, Paulo was living with his mother in Virginia. Craig did not like the golden-yellow color I painted the kitchen before I met him, but since he did most of the cooking, I agreed to his repainting the kitchen. He decided on white. He did not know that I had painted a white kitchen yellow to mend
my broken heart after I learned that my ex-fiancé, Tyrone had married. I wanted to feel better and a yellow kitchen was the best medicine.

Tyrone and I had been engaged three times throughout our five-year passionate and cliff-hanging relationship. We met inside of an elevator after leaving a Freda Payne concert in the unground mall at the Arco Plaza, in August 1977. I had recently started a new job as a receptionist on the thirty-second floor after returning from maternity leave. Freda Payne was ending her lunchtime concert and singing her smash hit “Band of Gold” when I first noticed a beautiful man standing on the opposite side of the informal stage. First, I noted his complexion—warm brown and smooth. Close cropped black wavy hair. He was slender and well-dressed in sharply creased black slacks, a cream-colored button sweater over a dark print shirt. His Florsheim shoes were highly polished. He was nodding his head to the rhythm and rhymes of the song.

I was sure that he would not be interested in skinny me with my weird, streaked, short natural hairstyle. Besides, I was a single mother and someone like him was probably breaking hearts. After the concert, we rode the same elevator up. I stood in front of him as he spoke in a sweet tenor to the back of my head. “So, what did you think of the concert?”

“I really enjoyed it, especially the last song,” I replied, still facing forward and my heart racing because there was no way, no reason this handsome man would want to talk to me.

“My name is Tyrone. What’s yours?” he asked.

“Nickie. Nice to meet you,” I said, facing the door and watching the floor numbers increase.

“I’m about to get off on the twenty-seventh floor, but would you mind meeting me downstairs around two?”
I turned around to look at him, surprised that asked me to meet later. “Okay,” I said and turned back around.

I sat at my receptionist desk dizzy with anticipation as the time passed. At 2 P.M., I was on the elevator going to the basement and wondering if he was laughing at his joke on me, but he was waiting for me next to the piano. During the fifteen minutes we talked, I learn that he was a law student, working at a highly-regarded law firm a few floors below me. I told him where I worked and what I did. I told him I was a new mother. He asked for my telephone number. When he telephoned, he invited me out for dinner.

Our first date, dinner at his favorite small restaurant where the owners knew him, was magical. I was on a date with a beautiful, smart, intelligent, ambitious man who was single and free from baby-mama dramas. Alas, he had been imprisoned for armed robbery in Detroit. He recently moved to Los Angeles and enrolled in the People’s College of Law because of his correspondence with an author who was interested in his case. He said he was completely rehabilitated and wanted to work for criminal justice.

Mesmerized by his courage and lofty goals I wondered what the heck he wanted with me. I was skinny with baggage. Our date ended well, and he wanted to see me again, but I was still in love with Drew, Charmaine’s father. For over a year after our date, I rebuffed Tyrone’s pursuit. I refused to see him and he wanted to know why. I would not tell him that I was in love with someone who no longer loved me but still had sex with me. Tyrone telephoned me at home and work, and stalked me during lunch, demanding a rational explanation why I refused to see him until one day, I said “Yes.”
It was the day I gave up on Drew. Tyrone was the prince I needed. His passionate pursuit was intoxicating, but it was not smooth sailing. He was impulsive and his emotions could be explosive, but he was not violent. He kept physically fit by jogging and boxing. He fed his intellectual curiosity at law school, and by debating and reading. His apartment, a single, was orderly for a single man, and his interests were displayed in the books neatly stacked inside his brick-and-plank shelves, his eclectic record selections, and the famous revolutionaries’ posters hanging on his walls. He was like no one I have ever met, and he desired me, loved me, pursued me until I surrendered, like Mother said that Dad had pursued her.

Our lovemaking was intense and sensitive. He was everything that my daughter’s father was not, and being in his orbit felt purposeful until I discovered that he was cheating. Over five years, we were on and off, breaking up because of his ‘other’ woman. I went back to him after he promised it was over. Three times I accepted his marriage proposal and three times I threw it back at him after discovering that ‘she’ was somehow still in the picture. “She needs me,” he had said. I did not understand how much he needed to feel needed. That men in general, needed to feel needed.

Tyrone’s love and energy had transformed me from a passive and dependent woman. His infidelities had ignited my fighting spirit but his desire to help others had inspired my social-justice-Utopian-seeking philosophy that had lain dormant during my Jehovah’s Witness, and Drew years.

His impulsiveness and cheating required me to demand his respect of my need for honesty and integrity in our relationship. Being with Tyrone meant I could never again be passive about love and sacrifice. His impulsive and fiery Mars had ignited my justice seeking Jupiter and thrice
I had believed him when he said he wanted only me. At last I said, “no more,” to his weakness for his ‘friend.’ A year later, he married someone new and I painted my kitchen yellow.

All Craig wanted to do was paint the kitchen white. My new fiancé did most of the cooking and had my blessing but I had not understood that my husband needed to feel needed.

Jason says that he likes to cook, but his wife likes to cook for him. She leaves signs around the kitchen to let me know that she is taking care of her man. When our kitchen was being renovated, I had created a baking center for Craig. It was spacious with three large drawers for storing his bake ware underneath a butcher-block top. Phoebe and I had purchased a large marble cutting board, expressions of appreciation for his food. Men need to feel needed. Maybe I should have asked him what he needed in dream. Maybe I should have told him how much I needed him. Instead, I was running the house, designing both the inside and outside and downplaying Craig’s ideas. He asked for a “honey-do list.” His reaction to his baking-center was not as enthusiastic as I had hoped. He never used the marble cutting board.

Being in the presence of this young, and newly married couple who, like Craig and I, had pulled up stakes to invest in their future reminds me of what I want to do differently in another loving relationship. I had thought that William would be a fresh start, but fairly early after we had decided to be exclusive, he committed a most egregious act, he broke his promise to cook dinner for me and Joy. William had insisted on taking care of everything most of that Sunday afternoon we had waited inside the spotless kitchen, but he never showed, answered his cellphone, or called me. Three days later, he telephoned and explained that he and his mother had had an argument. His excuse was wet-noodle limp compared to our waiting for him to arrive and finally cooking our own meal hours later.
In the past, I would have exploded in anger, but I forgave William. After more of his inconsistencies, I decided that William was not worth frustration. Ironically, I realized how I had caused Craig to feel the same frustrations about my broken promises. On numerous weekend afternoons while I was shopping for furnishings and household items, Craig was waiting for me to arrive home and share the lunch that he had prepared for us. How many times had I arrived home hours after promising him that I was on my way? It was too many to count. My excuses were that I needed to go to one just more store to see if it had what I was seeking. The disappointment on Craig’s face, the disrespect I had shown for his time and energy are what I finally grasped after I told William that I did not want to see him anymore.

Jason and Sarah walk together, ride bikes together, eat together, hold hands, and snuggle on the sofa, and someday I want that same intimacy. Craig and I had it before full-time parenting and work and disappointments outside of our marriage had wormed their way into it. I never hear the couple argue or disagree, although I am sure they must.

At the beginning of our relationship, Craig and I debated our positions until we arrived at an agreement. Our different viewpoints and how we expressed and laughed about them were what made our early relationship so lively. His being white and me, black was interesting to look at but listening to us talk made us interesting and formidable. Still, we had not expected to tackle the outside slings and arrows we faced. The sexist treatment I received when trying to negotiate buying a car, the racist things his boss said to him at work. We tried use our counseling sessions to help us erect steel barriers against the enemies outside. But our challenges made me question his sometime passive responses to slights directed at me. Eventually, and maybe too late, we realized that we needed to mutually protect each other’s integrity of purpose.
The couple will leave in mid-December to do more travelling before flying back to Poland. Binggi, who moved into the upstairs bedroom at the beginning of December, has already told them goodbye. I feel extremely lucky that my tenants have gotten along well. For a going-away gift, I give the couple a set of hand-painted dessert plates. One of my dessert plates is missing, but I find it inside their bedroom when I am cleaning it so that Binggi can move downstairs. After they leave, I realize that they have left me with a renewed sense of wonder, and demonstrating love and support with desert and wine.
November 2009

“Hi, one of my friends who at Quinnipiac University wants to rent a room. Your place is in Hamden. Is it convenient to go to Quinnipiac University? If so, I am interested in it and hope you can contact me through email or telephone.”

The grammar errors from a Yale professor, is amusing. I used to work there and I expect Yale correspondence to contain good grammar and correct spelling. However, having hosted Chinese nationals, I forgive it and respond to her inquiry.

“Yes, it is convenient to QU, right on the bus line. Who is your friend and what do they want? Looking forward to hearing from you.”

The following day I read “Great to hear about that, so I would tell her the information and then she can contact you directly. She is a Chinese Scholar here for six months, a very nice lady majoring in economics. Her name is Binggi. I will give her your email, so she would contact you. Thanks very much!”

“Hello Professor, I understand that I can call you Binggi. You need a room convenient to the university. I am on the J bus line that stops in front of the university. You can phone me before 7 P.M. tonight. (I have a class until 10 P.M.). We can make arrangements for you to come by on Wednesday morning by 7 A.M. or Friday after 5 P.M. Woodlawn is off of Whitney Avenue. You can rent the room with a shared bath or a private bath, which will be a little more. You will share the heating costs. One month deposit is required, but it will be returned at the end of the rental period. I think you will enjoy my home. Let me know what time is comfortable for you to meet me.”
A total of fifteen emails are exchanged between us before she agrees that 1) she is interested in the room, and 2) she intends to rent the upstairs bedroom beginning December 1 to April 30, although her move-in date is December 4.

When we finally meet, the day that she moves in, I recognize the tone of her emails matches her direct personality, and it is refreshing. Like me, she is an older woman, decisive and detail oriented, who will argue for her position and I suspect that she is used to getting what she wants. Although I suggest a three-to-five-minute shower to save water, for her, she successfully argues for eight minutes. Already, I am wondering what I have gotten myself into.

She has moved into her room when I arrive home from school. “Hello, I’m Nickie, and it’s nice to finally meet you. I hope that moving was not a problem.”

Rising quickly from the sofa, she shakes my hand. “It was fine and thank you for renting me your room. The place I was living was very expensive and very noisy. I like your house, and it should be easy for me to get to and from work.”

Binggi is slightly shorter than me, a little heavier but with a solid build and, yes, and she looks directly at me when she speaks. I like her immediately and want her stay to be all that she needs. “My husband Ken will be here in April and he will do the cooking for us. He is a wonderful cook,” she tells me. Like all of my previous tenants, they will travel for a week or two and shop for gifts to present to their employers when they return home.

During the Christmas break, when we have the house to ourselves and, we eat dinner together, I get to know her better, and she is not the least bit coy.
“I enjoy my work. I am a well-respected economics professor. I teach at a university in Hong Kong.” Her time in the United States will introduce her to different ways of understanding the new economic challenges that economists are grappling with.

“Hong Kong is different from most of the other provinces in China because its culture is more democratic and market-based, but China is working to lessen Great Britain’s influences,” she says softly, carefully, and respectfully.

She and her husband do not have any children, and have devoted themselves to their careers.

We have many dinner conversations that I think about while lying lie in bed. She inspires me to take more seriously, my finances. She is the first person I have ever met who can explain how economics affects economies. Her focus, of course, is on teaching her students economics in relation to China, but our slow slog toward some version of a recovery does not preclude informing regular folk who work for a living of the best way to protect ourselves from the ravages of corporate tax cuts, tax breaks and bank bailouts.

Attempting to show some financial savvy, I explain “When I first applied for a mortgage, the loan officer tried to talk us into getting one of those adjustable rate mortgages. Economists were warning people to avoid them because their interest rates could reset and it might be disastrous for borrowers. A few years ago, when I was working for a real estate attorney, I saw all kinds of loan models come across my desk. It was crazy. If I could have learned how to put some of those packages together for his closings, I could have earned a lot of money but I didn’t learn it. We reset our mortgage a few times, but the last time, I made it work better for us and not the bank,” I say, hoping to hear her approval but accepting her smile.
I do not know why it is important for me to have her respect. Later, I realize that our skills are different but also important because I have advised others how to navigate loans. Her presence acts like my stabilizer. Since both of us are very busy, our main meeting area is around the kitchen table where she sometimes shares bits of her telephone conversation with her husband, who she obviously loves and respects. Being with him helps me remember how much I had admired my Craig and how clumsily, we sometimes supported each other.

“You better give my husband a good salary,” I joke with Craig’s soon-to-be employer in 2007. I have met him a few times and we are comfortable talking about Craig. I had learned some salary-negotiating strategies after I was hired to work at Yale, and realized that despite the quality of work I was doing, the wage needed to be settled before accepting the job. I have explained to Craig that he can negotiate what he feels is talent is worth before he accepts the position since it looks we will remain in Connecticut.

Years ago I gave up any hope of us returning to New Mexico. Phoebe has grown up here. Even though they live on the West Coast, Charmaine and Paulo have made lifelong friends from their years in school. After many years working full-time and the last three years working part-time, much of our focus has been on Craig’s career. Craig has not written his dissertation. His two year contract in Poughkeepsie as a web designer was interrupted by a serious car accident. After returning to work, he negotiated a better job at Columbia University and now, he is preparing to work in one of the academic centers at Yale. Craig still has a penchant for letting me know his plans after they are solidified. At least he will be working in New Haven.

This year, Phoebe graduated from college. Craig and I began discussing what I wanted to do as a career. It was a conversation we had before our marriage twenty-three years ago. Now, I am excited to give full consideration to what work will give me a sense of purpose.
Unlike Craig, my idea of a perfect career remains unclear but what I do not want is clear as crystal.

Craig is a workaholic, but when you love what you do, work does not feel like work. Working part time over the last three years, I had a taste of that kind of dedication soon after I had resigned from my job at the law school. For two years, I was hired part-time to assist Yale’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and alumni office as they planned an international conference. I was hired to organize the entertainment and other specific events. The third year, I was hired part-time as the conferences’ principal event planner with no budget limit. I kept detailed records of services I contracted.

The project closest to my heart was choosing the centerpieces for tables at the keynote dinner. I wanted an attention grabber and decided on Bonsai trees, but they were not available to purchase anywhere. Undaunted, I recalled that New Haven had a Bonsai Society. Contacting the president, I asked about renting them. After describing the event, the society chose to donate their precious trees. At the dinner, the keynote speaker incorporated the centerpieces into his address.

The following year, one job inspired me to follow my instincts and demand the respect I deserved. It was a part-time temporary position I had accepted as a job placement assistant for New Haven high school students. At the beginning of the project, the manager ignored my suggestions for setting up the filing system which were eventually implemented, and she had ignored my suggestions about organizing the check distribution on payday. I discussed the problems with Craig, even my thoughts about resigning. When I discovered that my co-worker was secretly placing students in jobs, I finally threatened to quit. I was given greater responsibility and negotiated a few perks. That experience was my wakeup call to seek work that
fed my soul and respected my knowledge and utilized my skills. I admire Binggi’s sense of her purpose in life. Maybe these Urban Studies courses will result in good works from me.

Ken, Binggi’s husband is a retired businessman. When he arrives at the beginning of April he immediately begins ministering to his wife. Ken loves three things, cooking, making sure that Binggi has whatever she needs and golf. He reminds me of my late grandfather in build, energy, and sense of purpose, that taking good care of her is his destiny. Only occasionally do we have an opportunity to talk because I am usually gone until late at night. The aroma of some of the meals they cook lingers inside the kitchen long after he has cleaned it. I will miss them when they leave and begin travelling the final two weeks in April. Like Sunny and Jason, Binggi will buy presents for family, friends, and supervisors, but Binggi, has been the best present for me.

Talking to a mature woman who has no concerns about childcare and running a household has given me a lot to think about regarding my future security. I am divorced, and the alimony stops if I remarry or earn over a certain amount in any given year, including even lottery winnings. For the past three years, I have been drifting in and out of part-time jobs and waiting for the light bulb to turn on about what I want in my life. Divorce propelled me to enroll in graduate school, and the economic recession requires that I think about supporting myself.

After my last tenants move and I have no other prospects, I review my Diamond Report for 2010. My challenge is 4, the root is 5, action is 9, and the outcome is 14.

The 4 challenge has to do with trust and strength of character. Others will depend on you financially, emotionally, or spiritually. Be a rock of strength. It you avoid these actions you will be tested over and over. In the face of temptations, signals for the path you need to take will be
clear and undeniable. Avoid get-rich-quick schemes, which will leave you with regret. The difficult path will reward you financially, and with success, love, friendship, and loyalty.

Your 5 root has to do with your fear of freedom. Divorce or job loss can produce similar fears because now, your freedom could feel like a void or abyss instead of opportunities to fill it with plans, goals, and expectations. Consider returning to college, find your purpose, and set practical goals.

Your Action is 9. You will produce your best results by being less practical and more idealistic. Devote your time to activities closer to your heart. Consider perspective. Many people set narrow goals that may not lead to what we actually hoped. You do not want that. Step away from the path you have laid out and consider devoting your energies to the betterment of mankind. Be idealistic for a while.

Your outcome is 14. You will experience a new sense of freedom and potential as a result of your root and action keys. You will feel that the sky is the limit. Your life is more dynamic, audacious, and your self-imposed limits are lifted. The negative outcome is a sense of only limitations and frustrations and little positive happens. Extreme religious views can manifest these feelings. These views can develop the urge to apply even more restrictions on the physical, mental and spiritual planes.

In March, Craig and I begin preparing the house for the sale. “Your Tarot spread says it is going to be sold pretty fast.” Rhea warns. Felice, our former travel agent, is now our sales agent for three months. Before selling my house became a court order, we both completed a real estate course and passed the initial examinations, but I had decided to not continue when the instructor refused to confirm that all agents should adhere to strict professional ethics.
France

May 2010

Ever since I stepped into the fray at church the surrounded one of Phoebe’s classmates, her mother and I have become very good friends. The issue revolved around teenage sex and sexuality because the girl had said things about sexuality that in America, we are taught to keep wrapped inside brown paper bags. In France, where the classmate’s family vacations, sex and sex talk are understood as normal, but apparently, that the tender morality of the fourth graders was being corrupted. At least that was how the adults of their classmates had behaved.

I did not know either mother or daughter very well. Phoebe had brought the incident to our attention. At ten years old, she had pointed out the hypocrisy of one of our religious creeds, to respect individual rights, by defending her classmate. I had gone one better and called for a meeting of several of us mothers. We first met for lunch at my house to hear from Geena, the girl’s mother, about the how the French regard sex—not as a taboo subject but a normal function in human relationships. We all were attracted to Universal Unitarianism because of its open-minded approach to individual thinking. At that lunch, we had agreed to protect the rights of the girl, and we agreed to lunch together at least once a month at each other’s houses to eat home-cooked food and talk about our own lives.

Geena’s family owns an apartment in Paris and a cottage in a small village in Belazuc, in rural Southern France. They spend their summers there and often they traveled around the world.
The Water Ceremony, held the first Sunday after our church’s summer break, is where the congregants brag about their fabulous vacations. Geena’s water contribution is usually from France, and for years, she has invited me to visit her there. I never felt like we had the extra money, and I was still too afraid to fly over anything but terra firma.

Because I have been breaking new ground on a personal level in 2010, I say “yes,” to her invitation. It is a huge step for me. I have grown used to flying but not to my fear of falling airplanes, but I have said yes, to flying over the Atlantic Ocean, where currently there is a humongous, greasy oil-slick.

“You know what? I’m going to do it. I am going to come and visit you in France,” I say, half believing that I was going and looking at the passport that I had needed when I planned to travel Ghana with Craig, a trip he took without me. My passport headshot photo looks beautiful and chic with my hair cornrowed and pulled into a ponytail. I think I look like an older face model. “I got this passport in August 2006, and it’s good for 10 years. This will be a present to me.”

“I’m so glad you are coming; we’ll have so much fun, and you don’t have to do a thing!” she says.

I will visit her in May after school is out. I need one more course to complete my program, and I need to find it before I leave.

So far, Craig’s departure has invited new and interesting adventures into my life. Renting out my bedrooms has been a boon to my self-support and expanding my worldview. With the exception of Modani, all of my tenants were here with their mates and what an amazing opportunity to see love and marriage working.

Now, that I have something to work toward finding that course is crucial and after scouring not only my campus but the sister campuses, I cannot find one that is Urban Studies related.
“It has to have something to do with the urban landscape, policy, or design,” Dr. Graham, my program chairman and loudest cheerleader, has informed me. Occasionally, I sit with him and his colleagues for lunch. There are advantages to being an older student.

Dr. Graham reminds me of a lion, his hair is thick and wild, and he loves geography. He thinks I am funny; I think he’s brilliant and a huge asset to the university because of his institutional memory. Because of that memory, I was able to repeat the policy course I had taken as an undergraduate when the professor, because of a personal grudge, had given me a C. As a graduate student, I earned an A.

Not giving up but taking a break from my search, just for the heck of it, I want to see what kinds of entry requirements are necessary for graduate school writing programs. The program at my campus requires a GRE. GRE for Dummies is useless against my test-taking panic attacks.

The first entry to appear on screen is the MFA in Creative and Professional Writing at Western Connecticut State University. It is the word “Professional” that grabs my attention. I only have seen graduate degrees in creative writing. And no GRE is required! “Oh my God!” I say aloud. “No GRE required.” Telephoning the office, I set up an appointment with the coordinator for a visit to the campus I believe I will be attending. Then, I resume my search for a final course.

Checking the social studies summer course list, I notice Social Welfare Policies and Delivery Systems and my program chairman approves the course for my final credits.

Ordering my ticket, I take into consideration the time frame Geena sent. Including the travel to and from France, I will be away for ten days.
“I purchased tickets to the bullfights on the weekend that you arrive!” Geena says, gleeful about our itinerary. There is a stop in Frankfurt, Germany, and then I travel to an airport near a train that will deliver me to the station where Geena will be waiting.

When making my flight reservations, I did something I had never, ever considered—I chose window seats to and from France. On our first flight as husband and wife, Craig and I were flying to visit Rose, my new mother-in-law, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The farthest I had traveled by plane was to San Francisco for a criminal law conference my job had sponsored. I had sat in aisle seats. On the flight with Craig, I had squeezed his arm so hard, I left red marks. I always sat in a center or aisle seat, engrossing myself in a book or conversation with a seatmate.

On longer flights, I had watched movies. Now, flying to France, I look at Earth and ocean beneath me, and I use my camera to capture the sunset and the sunrise above and below clouds and the massive oil spill on the ocean, and I feel like an eagle, proud.

The first thing we do after Geena packs my suitcase and backpack into her car is drive to an ancient church chapel and then another one farther away and one more closer to our destination, Balazuc, the commune where they have a country house. I am snapping so many photos I am afraid of running out of either space or battery.

Everything that I have learned about urban design is ignited in France, including the painted graffiti I noticed while sitting on the train to meet Geena, validates that France is city, country and definitely urban. My vacation is complementing my education with the knowledge that Geena has regarding every place we visit. Geena commences to teach me about how the domes on the churches are hand-bricked, the windows are inlaid, the stone or dirt floors original, that some are still used as houses of worship for the local townspeople.
The village, built with mostly nearby quarry stone, is framed by a huge hill next to the quarry that and provides stone for many of the hand-built homes in the town. Most homes sit on rolling hills and gently winding streets and roads. What impresses me most, are the varied styles and colors of the wood doors on the homes; bright red, canary yellow, sky blue. Before the tourist season, the population is three hundred, but in tourist season it can swell to a thousand. My visit will end just before tourist season, so we are not impacted by rushing, pushy crowds.

Geena’s three-bedroom, stone home was constructed to accommodate the landscape. Her bedrooms, living room, and kitchen are organically located at different levels. A large poster of President Obama hangs on the inside, top portion of the front door. Like Geena, the house looks perpetually interesting with thought-provoking angles and furniture. French kitchens do not support the monstrous stoves and refrigerators often seen inside homes in the U.S. The comparisons are startling and fresh.

“Let’s go for a walk around the village so you can meet some of the people and see where I hang out,” she suggests. Many people that we pass know her, and introductions in French and in basic English are exchanged. We visit a small store along and way and then decide to stop inside a small, brightly lit, and friendly coffee shop for tea. “Bonjour! and “Au revoir!” Now roll easily off my tongue, and I love the sound of friendly people speaking French.

Good portions of our day are spent out of Balazuc, driving around the countryside. Apparently, Geena has taken courses on the church architecture, and so many of the sites we visit are ancient churches, large and spacious. Most are dark, light flowing into them from the sun, and all are quiet, meditative. I appreciate Geena being my tour guide, she knows me well enough to choose the sites and events I will enjoy. The next day we visit an open-air market that
resembles the flea market back home but is much smaller and more interesting. I purchase a sleeveless dress with a lovely print, and Geena picks flowers and some vegetables for dinner.

The highlight of my visit is the bullfights in Nîmes, a city in the Occitanie region of Southern France. It was once an important outpost of the Roman Empire, which built the Arena of Nîmes, a double-tiered amphitheater built around 70 A.D. where we watch the bullfights on Saturday and Sunday.

Walking into the ancient, stone coliseum reminds of the movie Gladiator. It is majestic even as it decays, and the weather is sublime. We are comfortable wearing loose slacks and long-sleeve, cotton shirts to repel the heat of the sun. What I learn about bull-fighting disturbs me. The bulls are handicapped at the start with prods that seem to pierce their flesh and weaken them. The dance of the slender matadors intrigues and infuriates me because I know the matadors have an unfair advantage. When they stab the bull, I close my eyes. There is a movement to repeal bullfights here. I concur.

Many of the French people vocally detest ancient the Roman influence in their architecture while others embrace or, at least, accept it. As a tourist, I admire the architectural symmetry and the artistry. Specifically, I admire the two-thousand-year-old Pont du Gard tri-level aqueduct and the engineering that existed as we walk across the bridge and stop to look down at the other tourists.

After leaving, I am eager to go swimming in the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps it is the scenery or the pace of Geena’s driving that allows me to relax and breathe the fragrant air and look at the sky. This part of the world, where once there was war that killed thousands and where there has been revolution, now provides universal health care and generous vacation for its citizens.
There have been social rumblings and violent protests from the African immigrants crowded into France’s suburbs. The sting of discrimination and its hopelessness are reported on American news.

In many places we visit, I am one of a few black people, but I am not bothered, and I do not feel like the exotic person. In fact, I realize that my usual social stresses have dissipated beginning with my train ride to meet Geena. Farms and villages, the few cars and fewer people, flatness, hills, azure skies, and wispy clouds above and the imperceptible vibration of the tracks below are the gifts of this visit. I wonder if we will go to Paris.

“A couple is renting our apartment in Paris,” Geena informs me when I ask about it so it is out of the question. Perhaps on another visit, I will see the Eiffel or Leaning Tower. In the meantime, we are driving toward the Mediterranean Sea to go swimming.

I am keeping a diary. By day three, my camera is full, and I have no way of downloading the photos onto my computer. I knew that I would forget something, but I’m in France and I release the idea that my trip must be captured in photographs.

We visit a nearby city for an early dinner on my final day of vacation. Some of the restaurants advertise beef of bulls from the fights, but I do not believe it. We stop in a local bookshop to browse; I will remember the bookshop and the food. Every meal that we eat away and at Geena’s home reminds me of a life before Big Macs and Jumbo Jacks. Here, food is a fresh and flavorful dance on my tongue. I lavish praise on our eating orgasms, while outside, the crickets lull me to sleep. Every day really feels new.

Flying home, watching the sun rising above the wings, I look down to see the Earth. If we crash, so be it. I feel the bravest I have ever been.
Now, I must focus on completing my final course after my meeting with the coordinator of the writing program goes better than expected. Later, when I begin completing the application and submitting fifty pages of different examples of my writing, I enclose a story about the 1965 Watts uprising, along with a few issues of the sports alumni newsletters I had co-edited. “Be an idealist. Devote your energies to the betterment of mankind,” my 9 Destiny encourages in my numerology profile.

That final course is rigorous, demanding, exhilarating and exhausting, fully engaging me in the class discussions, and the readings, and enamoring me of the professors’ righteous indignation at how antiquated are the U.S. government regulations regarding social services. Demonstrating how much I have learned is potentially undone by the completion of my final academic report, which I struggle to complete.

Like a toddler whose toys lie scattered across the floor, each toy is attractive but only one can be chosen, I am required to choose a single subject and write an academic research paper. The curve is steep, but I struggle to focus but my report does not meet the academic standards. Fortunately for me, the professor understood what I had struggled to convey academically. In deciding my final grade, he considered my participation and enthusiasm inside and out of the classroom and graded me well. A grace I learned to pass along.
Friday the 13th

Anyone can become angry—
that is easy. But to be angry
with the right person, to the right degree,
at the right time, for the right purpose,
and in the right way—this is not easy.

Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics

August 12, 2010

Exhausted from cleaning the house for the closing, I am ready to drop on the living room floor by late afternoon. Still feeling pissed because, a few hours ago, while enjoying lunch with my new classmates in Danbury, I had stupidly answered my cellphone without checking to see who was calling. The caller and her request replay inside my head, fomenting more frustration.

“Hello, Nickie! This is Felice,” she says in her high-pitched Indian dialect. Because the lunch room where I am sitting is so noisy, I step outside to talk to her.

“Oh, hi, Felice. I’m at lunch. Can I call you back later?” It must have surprised her that I answered the phone because I have been ignoring her calls—sending them to voicemail and ignoring them there.

“Well, I have great news! The buyers want to close on Friday,” she says, surely aware of my on-going irritation with her.

“I can’t do that! I’m in Danbury until Sunday! You have to schedule it for next week, like on Monday!”

“Well, I’m sorry, Nickie, but it has taken so long for them to get approval I’d think that you would want to have this behind you. The only time they can do it is on Friday. Your house must
be cleared out and you have to present the keys at the closing. They are leaving town on Monday, so you must be there on Friday!” I wonder if she would have preferred my voice mail.

“No, I am not leaving today. Look, set the closing for Monday,” I yell into my phone. Thinking the people nearby can hear me shouting, I lower my voice. I don’t believe that we have to close on Friday. Like a flimflam man, Felice had kindled my mistrust when she began acting like she was representing the buyers instead of me. She had pushed for a quick sale, but I had fought for the best sell, and I got it.

“Nickie, you must be there on Friday! It’s the only day everyone can do it!”

“Not me!” I shout. She sounds surprised that I am not dropping everything to do her bidding. My closing attorney has all the figures, and he told me how much Craig and I will receive.

“Look, I’ll get back to you in a few hours. I have to go,” I say, quashing the urge to smash my phone. I lied to Felice like she has lied to me. I decide not to go… until I consider that maybe I should leave and get this over with.

Attendance at the week-long MFA residency is a requirement, and I am enjoying meeting my classmates, our workshops, all of the meals, and some Danbury nightlife. My dream of learning how to write stories is coming true. Although I failed to find an apartment close to campus, which was fortunate, since I recently realized that my program is online. No harm no foul.

“Brian, I have to leave, I need to prepare my house for a Friday closing,” I tell our program coordinator. He understands. “OK, Nickie, but check your email for updates.” Beginning a new chapter in my life and possible career, I have chosen to be addressed as Nickie, a nickname I have used off and on for decades. Life seems to be composing new and exciting chapters for me.
Felice wins. I drive alongside the winding Connecticut River to calm myself. Even if she was right this time, she was wrong before, and it could be a mistake not to go home.

Still, because I have so little confidence in certain of my own judgments, I enlist fate to take charge as I fish around the empty ashtray for a coin. Parking off the road, I place the quarter in one palm; then, cupping my hands, I toss it. “Heads I go home; tails I turn around,” I say before the coin lands on my lap. Heads. Sometimes flipping the nearest penny, nickel, dime, or quarter is the only way I can get moving.

Our closing date kept changing because the buyer’s original mortgagers had backed out. Felice has no idea how close we came to firing her, and now I am heading home for something that I believe still might not happen.

Parking in our driveway, I am overwhelmed by the reason for my arrival. So, it’s finally happening. I actually grew to love a home that long ago I could never imagine buying. And this porch is where we ate dinner with friends, and where our children relaxed and I wrote stories for my Gotham Writers’ course. It is empty of everything except the screened windows that protected us from mosquitoes and shielded my crying jags. I had refinished the oak front door the new buyers admired. It took me three days to refinish it.

Jangling keys alert Audry and Elmo, who race to the door as I step inside the cool living room. Placing my purse on the floor next to the stack of mail that Emily, the teenager next door was hired to bring inside while I was away, I carry my suitcase upstairs to the bedroom and change into baggy jeans and a tee-shirt. Eventually, Emily will be paid, but now purring Audry rubs against my leg as Elmo skulks away. I am sorry my absence did not bring them closer.
After changing into more comfortable clothes, I dive into sweeping, wiping, mopping, and moping. My anger finally recedes enough to respect the elbow grease it takes to eradicate the vestiges of our seventeen-years of living here. The bulk of the furniture is neatly stacked inside two storage rentals. *At least I had enough sense to hire movers this time—the eighth move since my marriage and the seventeenth in my life.* Craig moved out last year, but it is still *our* house. Except for Audry and Elmo, I am doing this move alone. Still feeling perturbed, I telephone Felice. “I am at the house,” I say and hang up and mourn because it is no longer my home.

After everything is clean, I am spent, and outside it is growing dark. Tonight, I will wrap myself inside the bright-red sleeping bag I purchased two years ago from the Barn Sale Consignment shop, because I imagined camping and cuddling inside it with Craig. *Ha ha ha, silly, wasn’t I?* Valarie Simpson’s torch song plays inside my head. A clean sheet and towels, and some pots and pans I kept until we finally close, sit on the kitchen counter. Dinner is spaghetti with Ragu sauce served on a white paper plate and a bottle of decent pinot grigio, from a paper cup. As I cocoon myself for sleep, I turn on the radio to country music, lullaby-low. Audry nestles against my head and Elmo at my feet. For fresh air, I leave open the side window.

Mourning doves’ cooing drifts into the room. “It’s Friday the thirteenth and moving day,” I tell my pets.

Sitting on the kitchen counter and sipping ginger ale, I meditate on how far I have come since the divorce. “I completed my final class for my MS degree. I have to choose between writing a master’s thesis and taking a comprehensive exam. Jeez! I am in a graduate writing program!”

“Nickie, you are going to be a writer,” I hear big sister Flo telling nine-year-old me.
Yesterday, I telephoned Craig about our closing. “I’m in San Francisco. I’m getting married tomorrow,” he had said. *Even the ex-wife is still the last to know, and Phoebe is refusing to attend.*

I resent having to do all of the heavy lifting by myself. Audry and I will move into Clara’s house in New Haven. For years, I cut her hair inside this kitchen. People like telling their hairdressers about their problems, so we became friends. If she had answered “no” to my entreaty to bunk at her home until I found a new place to live, I don’t know what I would have done.

“You don’t need to pay me anything and stay as long as you need,” she has said. I anticipate staying for only a few weeks.

“I’m sure it will be for only a few weeks. I will begin looking right away, and I will be working in the MFA office, maintaining their web site. I have no idea what I am doing!” We both had laughed when I first approached her.

Back upstairs, I pack the clothes and books I’ll take to Clara’s house into ten of the twenty bright green shopping bags I purchased from Xpect Discounts and park them at the front door. Silently, I survey the remnants of my life here. It’s the small, bulky stuff that might be a problem. My Honda is small, and I don’t want to make a bunch of trips back and forth. *Oh my God, I forgot the basement!* I rush downstairs. *It’s clean.*

Deciding to improvise, I carry some remnants next door to Joy and Jim’s house. They are on vacation so I leave two wicker chairs and a side table inside of their front porch, and in their back-yard, I leave a large pet transport and some gardening tools. I will retrieve them later.
After I shower, dress, and lock the front door for the final time, I imagine the owners’ surprise when they come home and find a bottle of champagne on the middle shelf inside the refrigerator and, on the kitchen counter, my note. “I wish you much happiness and love here.” I drive Elmo to Cassie’s house where he will live. Before going to the closing, I leave Audry inside our bedroom at Clara’s and drive to North Haven to close out this chapter of my life.

Finally, I meet Anthony, my attorney with the sexy telephone voice, who has joked and guided me through this sad process. He is handsome, with dark, wavy hair. Tall and trim, he displays a reassuring smile. Getting to know him only over telephone calls, I discovered that we are Eagles fans and prefer old rock and roll to the latest music. Like a boyfriend from the past, he has made a mixed CD for me. For the first time, despite my legal Karma, I totally trust my attorney.

He guides me to a seat next to him at the round table inside his comfortable and cool office, where I will finally face my two enemy real estate agents. He reviews each step to our closing and settlement. “It will be fine,” he says. “I will be doing the bulk of the work. You are responsible for signing the documents. I spoke to Craig yesterday,” Anthony says sounding cautious. I say nothing. I imagine he knows that I am free-floating in sad, Craig memories.

As soon as the sales agents arrive, are seated, and introductions made, Anthony carefully reads each line on our contract. People have lost their homes by not reading the fine print. “These will be mailed today,” he says, holding up the checks for our outstanding debts.

Felice and her co-agent, like vultures, grasping their checks as if they might dissolve, congratulate me. If she only knew. After they leave with their filthy lucre, I linger a bit. “It is
such a pleasure getting to know you,” Anthony tells me. “I hope you enjoy the CD. Let me know if you want another one. Let’s stay in touch.”

“I promise,” I say, sadly doubting my word.

Driving to Clara’s house, my mind begins to drift. This is what divorce and property division feels like. It’s been more than a year since the divorce. Tomorrow, Craig is marrying someone I know about only through other people’s impressions. And who am I? I am reborn and filled with new potential! I thank you, Modani, Sunny, Jane and Ken, my first avatars. And, Jason and Sarah, Binggi and George, for sharing my home and keeping me sane! You all fed my intellect and most amazingly, inspired new insights about my past! Thank you! The radio invades with Pink singing and me joining in, “If someone had said three years from now, you’d be long gone, I’d stand up and shout them down, say you’re all wrong. I knew better, cause you said forever, my darling who knew?”
New Haven, 2010

“Isn’t it ironic that I am moving to New Haven?” I say and think back to when Craig had come home and said, “I think we should buy one of the new Yale condos along Temple Street,” the year before Phoebe had graduated from college.

“Taxes in New Haven are high. Housing in New Haven is expensive,” I had replied and suggested that we rent out our house and rent a place in New Haven for a year. “If we like it, then we can consider it. If we don’t, we have a place we can afford.”

Nothing about my life is usual. I am better at rolling with the punches and bending like willows. “Nickie, you must feel like you’re just the visiting the planet. The elements in your astrology chart show mostly emotional water with a fair amount of fire and a smattering of air, but you have no Earth, nothing to ground you. On the other hand, you do have psychic abilities. You are what we call an Empath,” said Juno. She was the first astrologer I met. That was in 1976.

“Well, Juno, you were right about my difficulty staying grounded, but I did not intuit any of this for my life, and here I am, technically homeless.” Parking my packed car in front of Clara’s house in the Westville section of New Haven, I glance up and down Oliver Road. “Early on this journey, Women’s Studies had offered the emotional support and other reality checks that I needed. And Seth was wrong when he said, ‘Judges hate snobbery.’” During the divorce, the judge was smitten with Craig’s snobbery when he called his apartment ‘my flat.’
“Things happen for a reason and he’s getting married tomorrow. Remember when that voice said, ‘You’ll figure things out in your fifties? Well, she was right. I want to be a writer,’” I say and grab two of the shiny-green shopping bags to begin living at Clara’s. Her two territorial cats are shooed away from outside of the bedroom where I have deposited Audry.

I did not consider that Audry would be a prisoner here after she inched out of her crate and sniffed around until she found a haven underneath the bed. I must make this temporary arrangement work. “Audry, you’ll have to stay inside our room, but you can sunbathe on the rooftop while I’m at work.” Her gaze seems to understand that we are in this together. I cannot remember life without Audry.

Clara, who will be home from work later, had promised to clear out all of the clutter on the bookshelves before we moved, telephoned her apology. I cannot really blame her. I told her I need the room for only a few weeks. So what if the six tall bookcases and two makeshift desks, made with counter tops over two-drawer file cabinets occupy prime real estate? I can make the shift. One desk is located across from the bed and the other is at the foot of the bed where I put my books and toiletries. I choose one bookshelf for my folded clothing and place its papers on nearby bookshelves. By the time Clara returns home, Audry and I are settled in and napping.

Westville is a walking neighborhood where everyone Clara introduces me to her neighbors and friends on our walk. Everyone seems to adore her as do I. “I hope you enjoy living here. Clara is such a great neighbor and friend, and this is a great neighborhood,” they say and give Clara details of neighborhood events.
Downtown New Haven, Yale, local restaurants, and trendy boutiques are a brisk but short walk from the house. Both Route 15 and I-95 are easily accessible for driving to work in Danbury. The next day, I rent a mailbox at the post office, four blocks from the house.

Clara’s Tudor-style house is spacious with a dated but functional white kitchen, and a warm and friendly orange living room, and yellow dining room. A screened, covered patio can be entered from the dining room or outside. Her small, grassy backyard hosts a deserted vegetable garden.

Our bedroom is cluttered with seven tall bookcases; six are filled with stacks of letters, newsclippings, reports, and other various and sundry papers. Clara is a clutter bug and a bit of a hoarder. Her house is like a repository for other people’s castoffs, and she just can’t say no or let go of these things. Her mother lives in a nearby retirement condo but her furniture fills Clara’s basement.

I met Clara when I worked at Yale. She had graduated by the time our paths converged, and I became her haircutter. Clara is friendly, open, and solicitous. She is the mother of all hens, happy when making you feel welcome and comfortable. She is offering me food and shelter and safety from the storm. Long divorced, she lives with Gregory, her teenaged son.

Now, I will be cutting her thick, dark, and wavy hair at her home. She keeps it short and combed away from her angular face and laughing eyes. Clara respects all living things, even the bugs who invade her kitchen, like the fly she once caught and released outside.

“You know he’ll be back and probably lay some eggs,” I had chided her. She didn’t care. It is her house and I’d rather share her holy air than caution her against fly shit on her food. I just need to get my bearings. I need a minute to figure out my next move, to sort out my new
responsibilities. I am excited and scared as hell, having committed to a new direction at my new school and a yet-to-be exit examination at my old school. Time is figurative, free-floating me towards a great unknown, murky and lacking definition and purpose. But here I am, with Audry in a big bedroom with windows that look over the tops of trees, and I am grateful.

Clara is a study in contrasts. She works freelance, as a transcriber and part time at the local library, although she has a PhD in history. She enjoyed teaching an after-school class in geography at Gregory’s old elementary school.

“The kids loved it, and I loved doing it, but I don’t know if I want to do it again,” she says at breakfast on Saturday morning. I imagine Clara as a delightful teacher, talking in her slow, deliberate voice, using her hands, smiling humbly and helping everyone feel important. We both are social justice oriented and we wax as poetic as the day is long about why we are that way.

Listening to lament about the clutter in her life and house, I gently suggest that she begin by removing and storing her papers inside our bedroom. But, since I am moving soon, her collection of Gregory’s childhood drawings and greeting cards, notices of political meetings, very old newspapers and clippings that she is sure someone can use remains in place. She is also a hardcore recycler and hates to waste anything or intentionally harm the environment. Her soft, brown eyes remind me of the noble American Indian in the commercial who sheds a tear because humans are ruining the land.

“I hope to find an apartment but I’m willing to share a rental,” I tell her over breakfast the morning I begin my search. Renting out my own bedrooms has been such a positive experience that I am willing to live in a shared space with Audry. My search yields strange offerings like the
filthy apartment three blocks from Clara’s. At least my mail is arriving on time. Clara and I grow closer by recognizing those things we have in common and what makes us different.

Her cluttered home seems to be the best place for me to begin again. When she asks for my help, we don’t accomplish much, and I begin to wonder why it is so difficult for her to complete her tasks.

Mothers

Clara and I have in common difficult relationships with our mothers. I discover this one morning when, eating breakfast at the kitchen table, we ponder how to approach decluttering her life and home. “I learned how to clean when I lived with my grandparents. They had a boarding house, and I helped my grandmother straighten up the upstairs bedrooms and sweep. She wasn’t a fanatic, but she seemed to know that keeping the house clean and orderly made life easier. On most weekends, my grandfather took old newspapers and worn out clothing to the recycling center.

“After I moved back to my mother’s house, life was different. The house was always not messy but chaotic with eight kids, five of them boys. Flo was our domestic sister and would straighten up the house. It wasn’t dirty or stuff broken so much as just kind of unfair that the girls straightened up the house and our mother didn’t expect that of the boys,” I say while sipping tea.

Clara says, “Both of my parents worked full time and my sister and I, grew up with housekeepers who did all of the cleaning. They did everything for us. I never learned how to organize and clean a house. We did other things with our time,” she says.
To me, mothers teach their children how to keep a house clean by their example. When they help, they bond, like my mother and Flo are bonded and like Mommy and I had bonded over brooms and linens and too-small clothes.

I think about a story I wrote for a final paper in my English 1 course. “My mother and I seem to be standing on separate mountains.” The professor wrote that she had felt the same way with her own mother. Girls are not born knowing how to run a house. For years, Clara has been starting and then stopping organizing her house because she feels overwhelmed. For years, I have been doing the same thing with trying to understand my relationship with my mother, how to sweep away my sense of feeling like her obligation instead the little child who returned to her nest. Is that sense of wondering if our mothers loved us, what makes social justice issues so important to Clara and me? At this moment, I believe it is. My epiphany does not mean that Clara should not de-clutter her home. To me it means that she should hire someone else to do the work.
Mercury in Retrograde

I begin my new job with Mercury Retrograde in Virgo, that stickler for order and detail and the spoiling of well laid plans. Mercury, the Roman trickster-god, is guaranteed to disrupt communications, transportation, electronics and lost things. The new computer system at my campus job is not working, and the Administrative Assistants are perplexed because one can do their job.

“Also, we are moving into a new space,” says Abby, the program administrative assistant. The new space and downed system do no help my mood, so I ask to work at home until things are in place. Not all of the glitches at work are removed when I return, but enough are so small that I can begin working on updating the website and whatever else the acting director and Abby need. My office skills are sharp and analyzing how I want to redesign our web site feels good, like I am coming out of hibernation and seeing sunlight.

Meanwhile, my search for an apartment is hampered by the new rules of credit reporting.

New, New Rules

Looking for a new place to live is like playing Chutes and Ladders, where you move forward almost to the end but find yourself back at the beginning. Driving to and from work is at least 45 minutes in decent traffic. Completing my class assignments, cooking my own food and searching for apartment are time consuming, along with checking my dating website where I meet Bill, a nice, politically-correct-minded man, for ice cream. We hit it off but I want to be friends.

So far, I have been offered an apartment where the owner swore that the living room, covered in at least ten coats of white paint, is actually a bedroom inside a noisy child-friendly building. Next, I salivate at a gorgeous apartment on Hamilton, several blocks from Clara’s house. It’s
two-bedroom with a chef’s kitchen and butler’s pantry, remodeled marble bathroom and ten-foot ceilings, oak floors, large closets on a lovely lot with parking. The rent is $1100 per month and doable with my settlement from selling my home, but better if I split the rent with a housemate.

The male and female agents assure me that the house will be mine after they advise the owner. I complete the application. “We need a good-faith deposit.” A few days later they tell me. “He chose someone else,” but do not mention returning my deposit. After a week I visit their office and complain to their manager that I have had to pay to place a stop-payment on the check. After two weeks, the check and fee are returned and a valuable lesson has been learned.

“If you want to park in the yard, its fifty dollars a month,” said the owner of the two-bedroom apartment. Perhaps she had forgotten that parking was included in her advertisement. It was a lovely first-floor apartment in a three-floor building. The staging was effective. The woman who had recently moved said that she had parked for free. Neither of us budged our positions, and frustrated, I continued my search.

Jolted awake at 5A.M. and three weeks into my stay, I search Craigslist for two-bedroom apartments in Hamden. The first entry is interesting. Whitney Avenue, Hamden. A second-floor apartment: 2 bedrooms; spacious living room, dining room, kitchen and sunroom; for eight hundred dollars per month. I know the area; I like the area. An hour later, Jeff telephones. We will meet at 8:30 A.M.

Hamden is an early morning-walking, jogging, and biking town, and Sunday mornings are no exception. I have walked and biked in Whitneyville many mornings. I passed it on my way to work. Early this balmy, late-August morning, a few couples and singles walking and jogging and biking leave me feeling less vulnerable while standing in front of the address Jeff gave me. It is a
bank, and I am confused. Across the street is Whitneyville Congregational Church, a classic New England-styled church built next to the reservoir. I pace to stay warm, deciding whether to wait or leave in ten minutes. My back is turned to the pale, balding, middle-aged man who asks, “Are you Nickie?”

“Are you Jeff?” I ask before answering. When he answers yes, I complain that I do not see an apartment.

“Step back and look up,” he says, grinning. I see a structure on top of the bank or actually the bank has extended the front and rear of a three-story house with white wood siding. The bank’s stucco siding is flesh-toned. “A lot of people don’t know it’s here because they don’t look up,” he says grinning, “Thank you for waiting for me. I think you’ll like the apartment. Follow me.”

We enter a black door located at the far end of the building, and easy to miss because there is no address. I comment on this lack as we walk up the steep stairway. A twelve-paned glass door with no lock opens into the dining area. New Berber carpet covers everything except the kitchen and bathrooms. Immediately, I notice the oak trim and the round columns separating the dining and living rooms just like in my old house. To the left is a sunroom, with three street-facing windows, perfect for an office. Next to it is a spacious rectangular living room with three tall windows facing the street and one facing the west side of the house. Across from to the L-shaped fully equipped kitchen with abundant storage is the smaller bedroom with two windows but lots of shade from the apartment house next door. It shares a wall with the bright master bedroom. Three windows opposite the door, bow out into a great place for my bed. The rose-colored full bathroom looks dated, with a built-in sink and full tub with shower.
Hoping I do not seem too eager, I nod my head, purse my lips and say “uh huh” and “hmm” responding to his descriptions. I realize that this is not an apartment; it is a house with double-hung windows. “There is an attic upstairs that you can use. You can even remodel it if you want,” he says. I notice clothes lines.

“Is there a laundry or washer and dryer in the building?” I ask.

“Oh, no, the bank is downstairs. An overflow would be disastrous. A laundromat is on the next block. There is gas heating and air conditioning. You will pay for your heat and air. Telephone jacks are in most of the rooms and AT&T is your cable provider. So, what do you think? Do you see yourself living here?” His enthusiasm for this house is genuine and I appreciate it and him.

“Yes, I can see myself living here,” I answer cautiously, still smarting from being burned. As we walk back downstairs, I ask why no deadbolt on the front door. “This is a really safe neighborhood,” he says. I would ask for a deadbolt, but it is not my apartment, yet.

The house stirs memoires of my grandparents’ and of my own home with the oak columns I at first hated, then grew to cherish. I appreciate the quirky kitchen and can use the attic for storage.

“I’ll see if I can make living here, happen. By the way, there is no subletting allowed,” he says, probably reading my mind. Reluctantly, I accept it. I can afford the rent of eight-hundred dollars per month.

“Oh, and I have cat,” I add, while he is completing my application.

“Is she an indoor cat? The last tenants had a dog, he was chef, and lived here a long time.”
The backstory is reassuring. “Yes, she is a healthy and mature indoor cat.” I say and sign the rental application. He does not ask for a deposit but will run a credit check since he works for a property management company.

“I can see myself being very happy here,” I tell Jeff, shaking his hand goodbye.

“Good for you! I hope you get the apartment,” Clara says when I return home.
Renting a house or apartment has changed considerably since renting my first two-bedroom apartment at age twenty-one for one hundred and ninety-nine dollars a month. Renting a house is easier than getting approved to rent the apartment on Whitney, so I remain at Clara’s. Not only is her kindness a buffer for my rental adventure, but living with her while my credit and credentials are examined like an autopsy and while waiting for the verdict, I peruse my current Diamond Report.

“Nickie your outcome is 14. You find yourself with a renewed sense of freedom and potential as a result of your root and action keys. You feel that the sky is the limit and you can do anything you set your mind to. Your life has become more dynamic and audacious. You no longer impose limitations.

“Yes, they do check your bank account before you can rent you a house or even a room. Didn’t you know that?” Abby says with sarcasm and a grin while I visit her work.

Of course, I did not know. It has been years since I’ve rented an apartment. Back in the olden days, they verified your employment after twenty-five dollars to check your credit score. “Heck, I rented my first a two-bedroom apartment for one hundred-ninety-nine dollars a month. Of course, it was ages ago, but geesh!” I reply. I blame the delay on the Mercury Retrograde shadow. Like a trickle of water, Jeff has been monitoring the gauntlet I am running to get into the apartment. I pass my final hurdle in late September, and Jeff tells me good and bad news.
“We’re reducing your rent by one hundred dollars per month for the first year. No pets, we just had new carpets installed,” Jeff says over the telephone.

“Oh, my God thank you for the reduction, but I told you at the viewing that it would be me and my indoor cat,” I remind him. A few days later we reach a compromise, I can keep Audry inside, but it requires a refundable pet security deposit.

The benefits to moving back to Hamden become evident after a stroll around my new neighborhood. One is Whitneyville Foods, a natural foods market and deli next door. On the other side of my building is a two-story apartment house. I can feel less isolated when all the businesses are closed. Books and Company is across the street from the church and feeds into a French café. The post office where I rented a new post office box is a two-minute walk, but there is no nearby laundromat. I will have to drive to Dixwell Avenue and Shepard Street, which are near my old shopping center. The bus stops on the corner. Everything that Audry and I need is here because of a pre-dawn Craigslist post.

The apartment feels safe, after I insist on the landlord installing a deadbolt and putting the address on the front door, and familiar like a warm memory. After a month, it makes sense when I remember the dream I had while still living on Woodlawn Street. I am standing alone inside a brightly lit room or space with a high ceiling. It feels like a store or some kind of business with a lot of glass. My anxiety is stirred from feeling like I am being watched to see if I steal something. When I visit the bank downstairs, I realize it is the space that was in my dream! “Hey, do you ever think about breaking in?” Every visitor here will ask me. I reply, “I wouldn’t know how to get out.”
After selling most of my old furniture at three tag sales, I need to shop and head to Ikea for a new sofa and dining table. Their Kivik sofa is perfect, and I repurposed a square, full-sized headboard into a table top that eight of my friends eat on during my first dinner party.

“I want that sink base removed,” I tell Jeff one afternoon after he challenges the idea, but he sends Jake over to handle it. Jake, who is tall and coffee brown, likes to laugh and talk himself out of doing repairs, lives down the street. He has been the apartment handyman for years. He liked the former tenant, and he seems to like me, especially when I challenge his lame reasons for not wanting to remove the sink base.

“There ain’t nothing’ wrong wit’ that base. The man who lived here befo’ you was tall as me an’ he nevah complained,” Jake says in his relaxed, Georgia drawl. 

“Okay, then you come and sit down here and tell me that a man as tall as you is comfortable. I dare you.” I sit and watch his gangly knees strain against the cabinet doors until he agrees with me, just like earlier with the deadbolt and the numbers on the front door.

“The post office knows somebody lives here,” he tells me on a different day, sounding annoyed with my insistence.

“I didn’t even know anyone lived here! If I have a visitor or need something delivered, I have to stand outside and wait. It’s embarrassing and frustrating,” I argue.

“They will leave yo’ packages at the bank or at yo’ front door,” he insists.

“Really? On a public street?” A week later, looking at the front door, I would have preferred brushed-silver like the doorknobs, but for some reason the numbers are gold.
I feel like I was destined to live here, but I do not know why. On warm days, Audry and I open up the windows and go sit on the roof. I stop leaving her out when I see her walking along the edge. Here, I have dinner parties and gabfests with my girlfriends. Charmaine and Phoebe come to my graduation and stay for few days. Paulo visits for hours on Mother’s Day. Phoebe and her new boyfriend visit for a weekend during her final year at Berkeley.

The guest room being used bodes well. Emotionally, I feel closer to people I care about, even those who live far away, like Sarai, Paulo’s mother. When she and I had agreed to work together raising Paulo, we became not only allies but friends and still engage in lengthy telephone conversations. I can be frank with Sarai, and, she can be frank me. One Sunday morning, lying in bed, I answer the telephone call that changes everything I knew about her and Craig’s custody agreement.

“Nickie, its Sarai. I’m calling because I can’t believe that you told Paulo that I refused to send him back to you and Craig because you were black, and now he’s pissed at me. Why would you tell him something like that? It’s such a lie,” she says with anger I have never heard from her.

Her accusation causes me to sit up. I do not like being called a liar. It’s the one thing Craig knew I detested. “You don’t like liars,” he had said while we were talking divorce. It was a weird answer to why he wanted to leave, and I still do not know what he meant. I am offended by her accusation.

“I just told him the truth. He had asked me what happened between you and his dad, and I told him what Craig had told me when you didn’t bring Paulo back after Christmas. Craig told me what you said, that Paulo might come back to you talking funny. I thought that was rich
because you don’t speak the King’s English yourself! So I don’t know why you’re upset. I told you that I will always tell Paulo the truth no matter what! Besides, I was shocked that you would say something like that. You didn’t even know me back then!

“Well, I think I did say some stupid stuff like that. It was because of where you lived, in a bad neighborhood, but I never told Craig I wouldn’t send Paulo back!

“First of all, I lived in a great neighborhood where Paulo had friends to play with. I had even found a good daycare provider. After Craig told me why Paulo wasn’t coming back, he was depressed over it,” I say, thinking about the fallout. It was the first time Craig told me that he had bouts of depression but not to worry. He said that your agreement was that you were supposed to have him for two weeks, but Craig said that you said that you weren’t sending him back to us because I was black. And you said other disparaging things about me. You didn’t even know me, and I won’t lie to Paulo. I think it’s one of the reasons he has been drifting for so long, but he asked me, and I told him what I knew,” I say without apology.

“Well, you were wrong! I mean, I did have some reservations about you, but our agreement was that I would have Paulo for three months!”

Early in our relationship and then marriage, Craig had painted Sarai as a con artist, someone not to be trusted. Seeing Paulo every other weekend after we moved to Santa Cruz, I had been curious about why a four-year-old thought he should be able to negotiate his rules with an adult. He had been telling me disparaging things about Sarai and one day I telephoned her to compare notes. It was the longest conversation we had, ever had and it forged our friendship. We agreed that it would take both of us working together to raise Paulo.
Of all of the conversations that we have had over the years, this is the most serious. She is accusing me of turning her son against her. I repeat to her what Craig had told me. His words were unforgettable.

“I’m telling you that I had a legal right to keep Paulo. It’s what we agreed to in our divorce,” she argues forcefully.

We agree to disagree and hang up. I always kept the records, report cards, doctors’ visits, trips, Craig’s horrible car accident in New York, the custody agreement for Kathy, and Craig and Sarai’s divorce agreement. Craig did not ask for any of his records as he was packing to leave. Locating the file that I never had a reason to open, I carry it to my bed along with a cup of hot tea.

After I had accepted Craig’s marriage proposal and saw he and Sarai go file for their divorce, I saw him as trustworthy. Sitting comfortably with my back against the pillow, I read the file. It is standard for a couple with few financial assets. I remember Sarai removing from the hallway the Rose painting, telling me a friend had painted it for her wedding present.

_It has been three weeks since Paulo left with his mother, and I have not said anything to Craig about his return because I don’t think it’s my business, but the daycare that is waiting for him has been asking. Besides, I am enjoying our childfree time together. Craig proposed on Christmas Day, and now, he has been moping. Pacing in the dining room, he finally he says something._

“Sarai said she’s not sending Paulo back,” Craig says, while pacing the dining room floor with a measured annoyance new to my ears.
“What do you mean? Why won’t she send him back? Isn’t that the agreement?” I ask alarmed and puzzled. I feel like I have no right to get between them in this matter. What little I know about her, he has volunteered. They’ve been separated longer than they have been married and the divorce is final in June, the month Craig and I will have our wedding.

“She doesn’t want to send him back because you’re black. She’s says he’ll grow up talking funny,” he says mockingly.

From the little I have seen and heard from him about her, she has a lot of nerve. “You’re kidding. That’s just stupid and wrong,” I say, thinking that he should go get his son. The law is on his side. Their divorce is not final but . . . Craig begins to withdraw, lies in bed for about a week, and I tend to him before and after work. Our hearts are broken and we miss Paulo.

Finally, he calls me into the bedroom, “I need you to know that sometimes, I get depressed. When I do, you don’t need to worry. Eventually, I get through it.” He sounds resigned to losing his son. I do not understand the calm, but I don’t question his lack of action.

For the time being, we do not talk about Paulo’s absence but I think about it. Craig told me that she likes to party, so I believe that she will cave after a few months with an active child, who requires a lot of attention and money for daycare.

“Sarai says I can pick up Paulo in Virginia. I can stay for the weekend, and she will give me a tour of the place. What do you think I should do?” he asks while I am sitting at the dining room table and he is standing inside the living room. I think of Tyrone, my former fiancé who cheated on me. I think Sarai plans to seduce Craig because they are still married until June.

Craig sounds hopeful, like her betrayal is no big deal. I understand his hope, but I do not like the idea of his spending a weekend with her. He had told me that she had betrayed him when she
was at a spiritual retreat. The way he said it sounded so painful, and I know that pain. I would never tell him to not go get his son, but I do not share my fears about if he chooses to go. Perhaps since they are still married, they might become intimate.

“What about getting a turnaround ticket? You pick him and take the next flight back?” I suggest. We all miss Paulo, even the kids next door.

“That sounds like too much of a hassle. She told me that she’s moving to San Jose in March. I’ll let her know that we’ll wait. We will see them when we go to my sister’s wedding,” he says of his new option. I wonder, what if I had said yes?

Their custody agreement reads that, effective immediately, Sarai will have Paulo for three months. She was telling me the truth. My head feels light as a twenty-five-year lie is exposed. Who was this man that I had married? At the time, the agreement made sense. Paulo was still young enough that not being in school was not a problem, daycare maybe, but not school. She did move back to San Jose. I had filed away this document without reading it. I telephone Sarai and apologize, explaining that Craig had lied to me, that he told me she had cheated on him. She revealed that, no, he had cheated on her while she was at a spiritual retreat. It was the reason she had taken their son and left Craig three months after Paulo’s birth, and now I believe her.

I think about the deadly scorpion sting of lies and manipulations that had poisoned my family bonds after my grandmother’s death and when her children had stolen the inheritance that she had intended for me, with the two joint bank accounts she had opened shortly after my grandfather had died. How for years, my aunts and uncles had conspired to deny me the truth.

“We need to include this in the probate. If you sign it over to me, I promise you will get this back,” April, my mother’s only sister says. It is early Sunday morning, a few months after my
grandmother’s death. I have never seen the green bank book with gold lettering with both of our names. I do not understand that I have no obligation to release the book with my name to anyone. Ignorance is my excuse when I sign the release card allowing her access to the account. I read three-hundred forty-five dollars as the total. I do not notice the dates or consider the interest that might have accrued. I am still grieving at the monumental loss a few weeks later she promises me that each of my grandmother’s children will give me one-thousand dollars after the probate. I believe her, grateful that she realizes what my grandparents meant to me.

Soon after her promise, my uncle Ralph hands me another bank book with my and my grandmother’s names. “She meant this for her grandkids,” he says. It sounds suspicious but I expecting money from him and his sibling, I feel good about sharing. At the bank, before I close the account and open a new one with my uncle Ralph’s and my names, the added interest increases the original amount to seven thousand dollars. Uncle Ralph says that his brothers will add three thousand dollars.

Patiently, I wait for the six thousand dollars my aunt promised me from her siblings, including Mother. I am too timid and respectful to ask her when I will receive it. A year passes when Aunt April knocks on my door with her declaration. “Momma wanted you to have this house,” she says pointing to the two-story, three-bedroom house next to my three-room cottage. My attractive cousin Betty lives here with her five children. For years she has paid her rent and and taken excellent care of the house. Mommy loved her great-niece and the feeling was mutual.

“You can tell Betty that you want to move in the house. It will be good for you and Charmaine.” My aunt sounds concerned about my welfare. Until her proposition, I did not believe what, for months, John and Liz have separately told me. “Big Mama meant for you to have that house, but Uncle Hurley was yelling, No, that’s my mama’s house! And Mother didn’t
say anything.” So, it was true, and Mother did not come to my defense. That night I think about my aunt’s proposition and what she actually wants.

Aunt April is jealous of Betty, and wants her gone. John and Liz have been my lookouts, listening for clues about the properties my grandparents owned and without a will, must be settled by probate. Too ignorant to ask for the deed with my name on it, I wrestle with dread. Her scheme is to evict our cousin and her children who are innocent of any wrong doing and my participation will scar my soul and taint the generosity of my grandparents, who adored their niece. That night, after much prayer, I hear the words, “God bless the child that’s got his own.” I choose to take no part of my aunt’s evil scheme. No one has given me the money she promised, nor has she returned my bankbook.

Aunt April’s mouth falls open when I say “I won’t make Betty leave.” The lyrics to Billie Holliday’s iconic song playing inside my head, I begin looking for a new place to live.

Truth and lies, and the truth about lies echo inside my head. These are just a few of the many deceptions that I discovered. I realize that Sarai has told me the truth. Like water dripping from a dying waterfall, my trust for Craig has evaporated. Years later, I learned that Mommy’s probate had been quickly settled. After I apologize to Sarai, I remember that my mother and her four surviving siblings have never apologized to me.

Only three of us mothers still gather once a month for lunch at each other’s house. But Geena and I are most consistent, and meet in addition to the meetings. We travel to New York just for heck of it, attend the theater, and for my last birthday, she treated me to high tea at The Plaza Hotel. Inspired by her gift, we have been visiting local tea houses. We spend time together and update each other on our daughter’s lives.
In late October, before a freakish snowstorm smothers much of Connecticut in white as high as some street signs, and the newspapers compare it to the hurricane of 2011, Geena asks me for a favor.

“Thank goodness, I don’t have to shovel sidewalks anymore,” I tell her while we visit that Friday at my house during our monthly lunch date. Snow is predicted later, so we meet midmorning for a light meal.

While we eat and catch up, Geena grows quiet. “I have a favor to ask you, and it would be a great help to me,” she says.

“Okay. What do you need?”

“Would you consider housesitting for us? John will be on sabbatical next year, and we’ll be at our place in France. I think it would be great having a mature and responsible person there.”

I am flattered but not interested. My home, although sometimes too quiet even for me, is peaceful and predictable. I live close to everything I need and she lives on a hill. A market, the post office, and bookstore are within walking distance from my front door. “I don’t know. I’m really settled in here,” I say wistfully.

“The thing is Judy’s son just started school at Quinnipiac, and although I’m sure he’s a nice kid, I would feel better with an adult. You already know how to take care of a house, and I’m leaving Happy here,” she says with a little more drama.

“Let me think about it. I can’t sublet my apartment; it’s in the lease,” I tell her.

“Well, you wouldn’t have to pay any rent,” she says.
“That’s true,” I think, considering the money I could save and I can cook, in her recently remodeled kitchen, but I am not sure that I want to pack up and move again. I need to complete my thesis. I have pleasant memories in this house of the kids’ visits, meeting Phoebe’s boyfriend, and the dinner parties.

Just think about it, okay? We’re leaving December fifteenth. I will transfer five hundred dollars a month into your account to pay all the bills. When our guy comes to clear snow and mow, I’ll transfer you the money to pay him. Besides, it will be quiet, and you’ll have free internet and cable. I would really prefer to have a mature person at the house,” she says before leaving.

Beautiful, powerful, virginal, and devastating snow begins falling earlier than the late afternoon forecast predicted. At 1 P.M., I am driving in heavy drifts to shop for provisions. I park in the back. At 3 P.M., I drive my car across the street and park in an end lane in the public parking lot.

By evening, I look out of the window after failing to focus on writing, and I am hypnotized by the feverish pace of snow landing and layering my roof. Across the street, the church lawn is completely white by 4:30 P.M. and the lake glimmers like frosting. The world is quiet as I witness fall’s early demise. Winter has struck.

Snow is piled to the middle of my window. I fear that the weight of the melting water might damage the roof and bank below. Even more stark is the beauty of the Sun.

Sidewalk snow contractors finally clear my front and side doors, and I decide to go to the Quinnipiac University library.
Backpack and purse packed to the gills with the day’s work, I walk to the half-filled parking lot where snow has been scraped from most of the cars. Placing my backpack and purse on the concrete, I remove the scraper from the trunk of my car and begin pushing it over the passenger’s side roof when I notice snowflakes falling inside the car. It looks like my driver’s side window is down but the window is not down; it is shattered into bits, covering the front section of the car.

I parked in an end lane so that I could easily exit. I walk around to the driver’s side and see that the top half of the door is damaged from a collision and the side-view mirror is hanging like an un-socketed eyeball. I was so focused on leaving, that I did not notice.

Did someone break into my car and steal my personal information or worse? Brushing off bits of glass on the passenger’s side I rifle through my glove compartment. Nothing is missing from it or the trunk.

My car is not drivable and I am perplexed while talking to my insurance representative. She telephones the police and orders a rental car for me while I wait for the tow truck. Although both the police officer and I agree the town’s contracted snow remover’s tractor most likely damaged my car but the clerk says that he has not received any damage reports.

My car finally towed, I return home and sit on the dim hallway stairs. I must pay the deductible for repairing my car. Even with a rental car, I feel upset because parking behind the bank would have avoided this catastrophe. It is a ridiculous thought but lessens my anger at myself, before Geena’s offer replays in my head.

It might be risky. It might impact our friendship. Geena has complained about every house-sitter she has hired, most being Yale grad students or couples. I have owned a house. I know how to care for a house. But still, I am not sure about committing to take care of her house.
A coin toss lands on heads. “I’ll do it,” I tell Geena, who sounds delighted. At the beginning of November, I submit my intent to move by December 15. My current lease is month to month so I expect December’s rent to be prorated by the new property manager. At first, they balk but realize I am right. Hearing Sean and Jeff say they are sad that I am moving is nice.

I begin packing before I head to Chicago to spend Thanksgiving with Chloe and her boyfriend’s family, where I have a wonderful time. When I return home, I pack on the weekend after work. I purchase twenty-five more shiny, green bags from Xpect Discounts and hire those Two Young Studs to return my place my furniture in storage.

A week before she is leaves for France, Geena asks for another favor. “Could you contribute something for the utilities and other nonessentials? It would be a big help, and of course, we’ll pay for everything else. I figured, maybe three-hundred dollars per month?”

Quickly, I calculate how much I will be saving in rent and utilities and in paying less for my car insurance.

“Yes, I could do that,” I answer. Geena lives in a spacious, old, Mediterranean-style, summer home. A small balcony sits off John’s upstairs study. French doors grace three sides of the house, opening into the entry, living room, and the kitchen. The corner-lot yard is expansive, and the numerical vibrations are excellent for creative people. Three hundred dollars seems a small price for some peace and space.

My friends help me as I prepare to move. Lena has purchased my Ikea shelf unit, a small pine bookcase, and a few other items. Ceres is helping me wrap all of my books in twine, and on moving day, before Rick arrives to help me decide which books to take, which to store and
which to donate. Two days before moving, Two Young Studs take my furniture to the storage units I have rented.
North Haven, December, 2012

“Hi, Geena, could you help me unload these bags?” Like the woman in those old Depression movies, she stands on her low-slung porch, glancing beyond me, while I struggle with numerous bright-green bags packed with dry goods for the pantry. The winter day is sunny, but I am sweating and fatigued. She is leaving in a few days, and I need to remove as much as possible from the apartment before the fifteenth.

“I have something to do first,” she says and disappears into her house, never to return and help carry my bags into her kitchen and upstairs. I am a bit miffed because I would have stopped what I was doing to help her. I wonder, is she embarrassed by this black woman and her big bags, but I never ask.

Two days before she departs, she emails two pages of carefully detailed instructions that I do not have time to read closely. I am annoyed because I had expected to go over everything at lunch a very nice Japanese restaurant. It is an old list and Steve is returning the last week of August. I expect to stay until September so I her ask about his return.

“Oh, yes,” she says. “You’ll have to move out when he returns.” I am shocked that she had not made that clear at the beginning when I would have reconsidered her request, but I say nothing. Except for Audry, I have already brought in most of what I will use during my stay.

“I am giving you a check for this and next month,” she says the day before she leaves. I remind her that she needs my checking account information. “I’ll get it when I land. I can take care of transferring the funds to your account after I get settled. This should be enough for December’s heating costs, and I’m expecting a call from the guy who is repairing my stove. By
the way, we had a mouse problem last year, but I had the exterminator out. But I’ve been setting traps anyway and going up into the attic every day. Sometimes, a mouse is inside and I just throw the whole trap away. Would you please remember to check the traps every day? You can replace them from your contribution, and also, you can pay for snow removal and cat food.”

Nodding my head, I think she should leave me the totals and dates for these expenses. The mouse problem is nowhere on her list, and she blames the infestation on the negligence of last year’s house-sitters. I agree to keep an eye on the traps and empty the dehumidifier in the basement especially when it rains because I am a good steward and friend.

Finally moved in, I discover that she had failed to create spaces for me inside the pantry or the bookcases in the front parlor. My books go upstairs where I place them along the walls. When I charge her for cleaning the pantry, I suspect that she knows that she was trying my last nerve. I am surprised that her kitchen looks dingy since she loves cooking, and often, I would sit and drink her expensive French wines and watch her chop and toss and mix our meals. Perplexed, I still give her the benefit of my budding doubts.

She left a package of new sheets on her unmade bed in the master bedroom. The bathroom cabinets are filled with her personals. What the hell was she thinking? Now I wonder, does she think I will be her maid? I decide to sleep in Steve’s office because it opens onto a balcony and has a television. Steve has a beautiful desk and a comfortable, already-made twin bed.

Geena’s linen closet is a jungle of fabrics, sheets and towels. I do not know where to begin, and I do not see any blankets. This feels like a repeat of Clara’s house but without the welcoming warmth. What have I agreed to? It is too late to back out now, but I liked the study’s vibration.
Her son is in the Peace Corps, and after filling his neatly made bed with her Geena’s wardrobe, I stand and admire the golden-oak floor-to-ceiling bookcases in his bedroom. A drum set is in the rear of the room next to a closet. I like the vibes in this room, too.

Later, when she asks me to mail her black slacks, I honestly tell her that I cannot find them.

Famished after unpacking all day, I decide to cook some fresh chicken, but there is no sharp knife anywhere in the kitchen. She has left knives as dull as flat-headed nails. I do not understand. I might injure myself using her knives. Curious, I look for other kitchen comforts, but there is no coffee maker, electric blender, or mixer. “What the fuck, Geena?” I will have to raid my kitchen utensil crate from storage to make up for this slight. This feels crazy deliberate. Lying in bed, I give Geena the benefit of the doubt. It is a beautiful house in a beautiful neighborhood. Stay positive.

“Nickie, I am so sorry, but I was just told that I had to change the checking account when I was in the States. I’ll have to mail you a check every month,” she says nonchalantly. I cannot believe she didn’t know. I do not believe that she forgot. I begin to believe that her sleights of hand are deliberate. Geena has hired house-sitters for as long as I have known her. She knows better than I, what steps are necessary to keep her house functioning. I begin to wondering if the former tenants rebelled.

My intelligence feels assaulted, but she does mail a few checks on time, so I will live with this skewed move. I have suggested but she has resisted wiring money into my account. “Everyone who knows me knows that I do not steal, cheat, or lie,” I tell Rhea in March after realizing that Geena has sent only two checks.
By mid-February, the money she has sent is depleted after paying the heating, electricity, and her annual payment for lawn care and buying cat food. Mailing her package to France costs forty-five dollars. Geena’s interference and intense nitpicking increases and interferes with my routine.

Every morning, I roll out of the twin bed inside John’s office. I feed the cats, clean their litter, check the mousetraps, prepare my lunch, and drive three minutes to the Quinnipiac University library where I study until 5 P.M.

Although Phoebe has visited Geena’s daughter here, I wonder what her bedroom looks like. It is a bright-yellow room and bathed in sunlight. It needs caretaking I think and close the door. The second-floor landing is equally cluttered. A piano is parked against the dark wall and clothing folded and unfolded sits stacked on the seat and hung over stair railings, making me wonder about her priorities. I remember sometimes negotiating that minefield, but as long my kid’s bedrooms were clean on the weekend, I was fine. But for this clutter, I would hire someone to clean it before the house sitter arrived.

Daily, I check their voicemail and, like my old boss had required, I email Geena any phone calls I deem important. She could have forwarded her phone calls or left a message since I rarely answer her telephone. A few people she expected to call her, I tell to telephone her directly.

Things seem to be going smoothly at the house. One afternoon while driving home from substitute teaching, my driver’s side wheel collapses in the medium of the highway off-ramp. Once again, AAA comes to my rescue and alerts the highway patrol, who alerts a North Haven towing partner who does not inform me he is not my AAA referral. Things go downhill after he
unhitches my car at his garage and charges me ninety-five dollars. The AAA representative informs me that this practice is a problem.

“You pay him, and we will reimburse you,” the representative says. I am upset with the whole matter, and I pay him, but it was too late to take it to my mechanic, so he backs the car into the front of Geena’s house.

Geena offers to let me drive her Subaru while I work out the logistics of getting my car properly repaired. In February, two months after Geena offers me her car, she wants to know when my car will be repaired. I think that she has been talking to her friends and neighbors. “It’s just that my husband is coming into town and he wants to drive the car.”

“Oh. He’s not driving your BMW?” The parked BMW is Geena’s, but her husband, Steve, drives it because she says it is too much to handle. I am weary of Geena’s explanations, but this is not my car.

“No, he’s not. He’ll be in town for a few days. He’s staying with a friend. He needs to pick up a few suits, and he’ll need the car.”

What could I say? My car has been broken since early January. I am not in any mood to go toe-to-toe with AAA again, but I must.

The friendly and handsome AAA tow truck driver is ill-equipped to hitch a car with a broken axle. By the time they send a proper tow truck, I have battled with them about additional charges. I learn that AAA contracts out to towing companies and bears no responsibility for damage. I am not having any of it, and over two more days of back and forth negotiating, they pay for the proper tow truck to remove the car with the least risk of damage. I admire competence and within ten minutes, my car is hitched to the truck, and on its way to where five hundred dollars
later, my car is repaired at Sam’s Auto. Unfortunately, the car begins wheezing before I drive away.

“That’s expected for it sitting idle so long. It might take some time to sound better.” It never sounds better, and I end up paying twice to repair a car I am now leery about driving.

On my fifty-eighth birthday, after a coin toss and a week before Geena’s husband’s arrival, I purchase a new Nissan Versa Hatchback in espresso brown with light-beige cloth interior. I know that I paid more than I should but going ballistic has never gotten me what I wanted, and usually leaves me feeling worse.

Geena’s husband never comes to get her BMW. “Oh, he had some clothes in New Haven and didn’t need the car after all,” Geena said when I asked her what happened. Some of the past year has felt like climbing a slippery mountain. My trust in people has been tested, and I keep sliding backwards. My new car makes me feel better in spite of what my Diamond Report says for this year.

*My numbers are the same as last year but in different places in the report. 4, 5, 9, and 14.*

*Helping Geena has not turned out well for me. Feeling chained by her demands is wearing me down and keeping me in a heightened state of anxiety. My thesis work is moving at a snail’s pace and now, I consider that maybe housesitting was a mistake. With no clear options, I am determined to complete the mission in spite of the worst possible outcome being to continue experiencing limitations and frustration.*

Like a nit, Geena keeps emailing me about the accounting. She insists that I should have more money to work with if I am including my contribution for the upkeep, but I do not know
what considered upkeep is anymore because she stopped depositing checks in February and March is looming.

“My contribution is for incidentals like mailing, minor repairs, pet maintenance, and only as a last resort, utilities like electricity, which is what I have been paying. Sending her mail to France is expensive, but I haven’t received the money to pay for heating oil and a telephone that I never use. Slowly, the mystery unwinds when the oil company tells they there are no payments due and on deliveries scheduled—since the weather is warming. In March, Geena emails me that until my accounting matches with her own, she will not send any money, and I begin to think that something is squirrely about this setup and our, communication.

“Please let me finish working on my thesis and send you the accounting as originally planned,” I respond to another demand. “I need time to tally all of your receipts, and doing it now, distracts me from my thesis work.”

She insists on my sending it right away, a strange demand, disruptive to my creative process while I try to churn out pages for my advisors. What happened to my idyllic vision of writing inside that gorgeous university library and turning my gaze from my computer screen to see the Sleeping Giant mountain, gentle streams, trees, and endless sky while sitting inside one of the small meeting rooms with my unloaded pack mule of writing paraphernalia and later heading home to eat, watch some TV, and fall asleep with Audry next to my head? What was rather shaky is now, unwieldy.

“I don’t see why I should have to wait until the end of next month to get a full accounting,” Geena argues when I fail to persuade her to be more patient. Why is she so agitated? At the end of March, I spend the weekend creating a chart of accounts for each month, including April’s
anticipated payments. It shows each of our bank deposits because I have dedicated one of my checking accounts for this project, and I carefully check and recheck my figures and include exact details for each transaction. I scan and then email the chart to her.

“I can’t open the file,” she complains, and I find that interesting because Geena had emailed me my responsibility list as an attachment. Nevertheless, I copy and paste each page onto an email and sent it to her.

“I can’t read or understand any of these figures,” she responds. It seems ridiculous since I can read the figures fine and offer to read off everything so that she can write it down, which she refuses to do. She has a full accounting of everything she and I have contributed and now she is insisting that I redo the accounting page.

“I am trying to finish my thesis, and I have done everything that you have asked. You have not sent me a check in two months, and there is enough in the account to cover the accounting, without my contribution, so I don’t know what else you want.”

That she cannot clearly see my contribution seems be the stick in her craw, but when I tell her about what I discover about the oil delivery, the intrusions cease for a while.

My time and creative thoughts are muddled because of the fears and rants of a woman upset about things over which I have no control.

Geena seems to decide that I cannot be trusted and suggests that either Rhea or Lena judge our impasse. Lena lives too close, and I do not want to drag her into something that seems silly. I ask Rhea because I trust her logic. I email her all of our correspondence and explain to her how I have understood what Geena has wanted from me. I try not influence or sway her decision.
After a few days, she sends an email with her thoughts, which I read as reasonable. She reminds Geena that I am trustworthy and that everything seems in order and that the money I am to contribute will be there, even if it is not used, when she returns. Everything will be resolved in the final accounting, she has determined, and I feel vindicated and ready to move forward, but Geena has other ideas.

All things being considered, I continue abiding by her list. I check the mouse traps, clean the litter boxes, and empty the dehumidifier. Geena still has not sent any more money, but I do not panic. I can walk and chew bubble gum at the same time. I go to the library.

“Geena, you can set up an automatic transfer to my bank account. That way you have a record of your payments, and I don’t have to stress about the money for bills,” I email her. She does not respond.

“Why don’t you pay the telephone bill this month?” Geena asks during a telephone call. I hear the tension in her voice, and we seem to be back at square one where I had agreed to contribute money to the kitty, but I have not held the kitty for a few months, so I do not know what bills are due or how much has been paid.

“Geena you can pay your bills automatically through your own bank. That way you know what has been paid.”

“I don’t want to do that. It’s too complicated,” is her swift email reply.

Her mercurial behaviors remind me of my manager at youth job placement center I left a few years ago.
“Today we are changing some of the rules for placing a student. Even if they have a D, you need to place that student,” said my boss on Monday. “Today, we are changing the rules. Even if they have an F, the student needs work for the summer,” she said on Tuesday.

As a last effort, I volunteer to set up the bill payment account for Geena. She will have none of it. I am frustrated because each conversation spent addressing her concerns means that I am not composing. I cannot help but wonder if their other house sitters had these problems!

Reluctantly, I begin recoding and sending copies of receipts as well as mail to France. I will not quit my friend.

Phoebe is in town for a few days, and we have a fruitful visit until I share my experience as Geena’s house sitter. Before that, I enjoy talking about William, who is back on my radar. He had cooked a marvelous meal for last night and has suggested that I move to Fresno to live with him. After I talk about the problems, Phoebe’s reply surprises me.

“Mom, you should just try to do what she wants. I used to housesit for my professors, and they made some strange demands.”

After the visit, I do try doing what Geena wants, but now, I am feeling more like an employee than her friend. This does not feel good. Over the summer, our relationship further deteriorates. When her cat becomes deathly ill and I tell her that I can take her to the veterinarian, she does not seem concerned. The woman she hires seems to be on a deathwatch, but when I return from a visit to Sacramento, Happy is still alive.

My friend Vera had invited me to visit her in Sacramento in July. Vera has that kind of dynamic and uplifting personality that I love to be around. The deadline for my submissions is approaching, and she is delighted to read my drafts for clarity during my visit. Being around
Vera reminds me that I have some awesome friends, even Geena at this difficult time. I discuss my problem with Geena because day four into my weeklong visit, she telephones extremely upset because of some keys I left inside her friend’s mailbox.

As I was preparing to leave for the airport, I grabbed the wrong set of house keys to leave for Lena, who likes Geena and is happy to do me this favor of checking in on the cats and emptying mousetraps. Immediately, I telephone one of Geena’s close-by friends for the back-up key. She tells me to leave the key her mailbox. After I give Lena the set she needs, I leave the other keys inside the mailbox, which is at the sidewalk, the same as Geena’s.

I return the keys by placing them deep inside her mailbox. In North Haven, most mailboxes are on the side of the road.

“My friend said that you left her key in the mailbox! How could you do that?”

It takes me a few minutes to understand what she is talking about after I explain that, yes, I did as I was instructed. “She told me to put them inside her mailbox. That’s what you have told me to do with your keys,” I remind her.

“She meant for you to put the keys in the slot inside her door!” Geena yells. I tell her that she has instructed me leave her keys inside her mailbox when I was leery about it. So I am sorry and it was an honest mistake, but she got them back. I can reply rationally because my vacation has been regenerative.

“I want you gone by the twenty-fifth of this month,” she yells. I will have six days to vacate her home. Tomorrow, I am leaving on my flight, and both Vera and I are bewildered, but we manage to complete the chapters that I will submit.
Audry rushes toward me as I walk toward the house. “What the hell! Thank God you didn’t run away,” I say and I hug my cat. Lena told me that Geena’s daughter has been coming to the house since she left, and Audry must have run outside at that time. I begin searching on Craigslist for a room and packing up my belongings.

In a way, I feel relieved, but I am nervous that I will not be able to find a room I can rent at the end of the month but serendipity is on my side again, as a foreign scholar is leaving in a few days and needs someone to rent his room in New Haven to officially end his lease.

Late that afternoon, I park on the slightly hilly street in front of the gray, three-family house... Stepping outside of the car, I scope out the streetscape and see a mixture of single, duplex, three family homes, and a small apartment complex across from my destination. The street looks clean and free of loiterers. The house next door looks shabby, like maybe a fraternity house. I am going to the house with the wide and friendly front porch and double doors that open into a lobby. That’s the thing about East Coast homes; they have character that modern housing lacks.

The doorbell to the second-floor apartment rings, but there is no intercom. I follow the man who is renting up to the second floor, which has front and rear balconies.

“It is a really nice room,” he tells me as he opens the door. I have already forgotten his name but I don’t really need to remember it. I remember that center rooms have no roof-slants or knee-walls. The queen bed and bedding is included along with an architect desk and night stand. I am sold on the two large double-hung windows. The apartment next door is not too close, so plenty of natural light can enter. The closet is adequate. The bathroom is spotless and the kitchen also with large windows in the rear of the house, is spacious and uncluttered and filled with lots of
natural light. Sitting inside the dining nook to discuss the terms of the lease, the housemate enters.

“I’m Baron. I rent the front room,” he says and commences to rummage inside the refrigerator before sitting in a chair by the table. “The landlord may not let you break that lease,” Benny interjects.

The man looks annoyed. “I have discussed my options with him,” he says.

“She might want to look at that other bedroom,” Baron again, interjects. I am curious.

“Is there another bedroom that I can see before I commit?” I ask. The renter’s eyes narrow toward Baron as he writes down the owner’s phone number and passes it to me.

“I don’t think it’s ready to look at,” Baron says, which confuses me. I wonder what kind of game he is playing.

The owner says I am welcome to see the other room. It has a lot more sunlight but is smaller with slanted ceilings. It has a decent-sized closet and is freshly painted boring apartment-white. I express interest.

“Oh I think he has someone else in mind,” says Baron. I telephone the landlord who does not care which room I rent, and Audry will have to remain inside her room. I decide on the center bedroom, which makes the man very happy because he will complete his lease and his deposit will be returned.

Leaving Geena’s house for the last time, I am reminded of how she complained about all of her other house sitters. I feel like I have seen my friend at her best and worst, and I feel sad.
After I pack my belongings into the U-Haul van, I return to her house to sweep, dust and vacuum and wipe it clean. I lay the keys on the kitchen table and close the door.
New Haven, August, 2012

Before I move into my new bedroom tomorrow, I again review my numbers for the year because I have just left a heartbreaking situation. Am I on the right track?

*Your challenge is 4, and focuses on trust and strength of character. You need to be a rock for others, although you can choose to avoid this. You get to choose which moral values and strengths are tested. Your responses will define you. Signals indicating your path will be clear.*

“Did I ignore the signals?”

*Your root is 5, and there is that fear-of-freedom thing again. I think I am filling my life with plans and goals. “I am in college. But, I still have not defined my true purpose. Okay.”*

*Your action is 9 and represents guidance offered to help us toward mental, emotional, and spiritual growth. Devote your time and effort to what is important to your heart not your mind. This sounds good. Sounds like me. I have been striving to do that.”*

*Your outcome is 14. First the good stuff, I feel a renewed sense of freedom and potential. The sky is the limit, now for the bad stuff. Instead of a sense of freedom, there appears to be only limitations and frustrations. Nothing seems to work out and little positive happens. “Keep fingers crossed.”*

Moving in is easy because I can park in the back and the stairs are not has steep. And, despite Baron’s weird behavior, I choose to focus on the positive potential of this space. This time, I carry Audry into the house first. We pass the second-floor rear balcony where I can leave her
with fresh food and water while I am at work. I release her after I have brought in everything from the car and closed my door and begin owning the room.

I hang my Ansel Adams framed photo of *Moonrise over Hernandez* next to my bed. And the colorful poster of a native woman sitting next a huge pile of red chilies hangs on the wall next to the windows. My bright-red file cabinet will store writing utensils and files. My rag rug hugs the oak floor, and my toiletries are stored in a plastic side table already in the room. On top of it, I place my Art Deco lamp and my clock radio. Audry watches the decorating from the comfort of our bed. I pull out my wound up clothing from the shiny-green bags. Already on hangers, they are stored neatly inside the closet. A tall dresser at the far end of the room stores blouses and underwear.

The other Art Deco lamp sits on top of the wide architect desk that I am excited to use. Its surface is a black rubber, and the wide center drawer holds all of my pencils. The former tenant left the room clean and neat, but I replace the bedding with my own linens. After moving in, I decide to go outside and explore my new surroundings. Holding Audry, we begin at the basement and travel to the second and third floor balconies. This is a great place for us.

Back in the house, I imagine cooking in the spacious kitchen. It has the basics and some extras like a blender, a coffeemaker, and a microwave oven. The dishes, cookware and silverware are also provided. Everything here confirms that, as a landlord, I was pretty damned good.

A few days later I suggest to Baron, that each housemate have a dedicated shelf inside the refrigerator, the door, and the top freezer. Baron chooses the bottom shelf, and I take the center. Before the fall semester begins, Rebecca, the third tenant who moves in, accepts the top shelf.
Getting a little better acquainted with my housemate, I tell him, “I usually leave early mornings for my teaching assignments and return home around 4:30.”

Baron is less forthcoming. He has a part-time job and says that he is in school and is originally from Minnesota. I think I remember him saying that he has lived here for two years before telling me the rules of the house. “You have to clean up behind yourself, especially the bathroom and especially the shower. You have to clean the kitchen after you use it, too.” I notice that when he talks, he looks directly at my face while he seems to turn his slight body at an angle. His eyes are large and brown; his hair is cut short. He reminds me of Remy Malek, the actor.

I like these simple, straightforward rules. We do not have a living room or dining room to mess up. When the floors look dusty, someone should sweep. We take turns emptying our floor’s garbage into the dumpster at the end of the house. Audry is very cooperative and remains inside our bedroom even when our door is open.

Rebecca, a pretty, slim woman with a beguiling smile, is friendly and perky and loves to cook. She is a new graduate student at Yale, but I do not remember her discipline although In one of our kitchen conversations she says wistfully “I hope I can find love here. I know that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, and I love to cook,” she says and we share a conspiratorial giggle.

“You never know. I met my ex-husband in college, but he was the better cook.” Our interactions are easy, collegial. Although we aren’t buddies, we become reliable allies. Rebecca is level headed and her knowledge of all-things-kitchen reminds me of Martha Stewart. Occasionally, I am her food taster. With her thick brown hair, brown, big eyes, and full lips, she
should have no trouble attracting the man of her dreams. She will not dare leave the house unless she is carefully dressed. But mostly, I appreciate her exuberance for whatever she is doing at home and her commitment to our micro-community. The kitchen can be a mess from her cooking, but she just readily cleans it up. I feel like all positive hopes are possible with Rebecca. As the days grow shorter, we all spend more time inside the house than outside, and it makes for interesting encounters.

Baron has been practicing his guitar inside his bedroom and invites Rebecca and me into the kitchen to listen to him play and sing his songs. He tells us that he has been performing them in a few places and he wants our input. The kitchen, smelling like Rebecca’s pumpkin pie, has great acoustics. Baron’s voice sounds sweetly melodic, and his lyrics, original and compelling. Enthusiastic, we encourage him to continue. Before introducing his final song, his tone changes from friendly to caustic. He puts down the guitar, shuffles some music around, and then looks directly at us. “Some people think this last song sounds too religious, but I don’t see it.” We listen intently.

The melody is lovely, but has lyrics are haunting and somewhat confusing when he interjects words like “Armageddon” and “Jesus.” The two words loiter in my mind. I am not a religious person, but I believe that I understand the song’s intent. I attempt to explain how it makes me think. “I can see why people might think it’s religious. When you say Armageddon and Jesus, everything else you sing is forgotten, and depending on your Bible knowledge, they are frightening.

“I don’t think so. I think they just don’t like the song,” he says.
After Baron disputes my analysis, I am confused. Does he want a critique or praise? He repeats that his critics, some are friends, are wrong, and yet he implores us to help him figure things out. Again, I try another approach to my previous conclusion, and once again, I am rebuffed, but now he seems to be agitated.

Rebecca, who probably recognized his strange signal sooner, keeps her comments brief and positive. “It does sound kind of religious,” she begins before Baron’s face twists his disagreement. Then she attempts a conciliatory approach. “Try singing it without those words and see how it sounds?” Before excusing herself, she says, “Anyway, thank you for the concert, and good night.”

Baron’s repeat playing of the song reminds me of those times I listened to Craig and Phillip playing Grateful Dead songs in our living room or at Phillip and Charlotte’s house. For the third time, I try explaining what I mean. I agree with Rebecca’s comments but, because I can be candid to a fault I add, “Yes, the people who think your song sounds religious might have a point.”

Baron’s eyes narrow and we go back and forth as he defends the song that he wanted us to critique. After more attempts to convince him that the song is beautiful and has potential, I tell him that he can sing what he wants and retire to bed confused and frustrated,

“Baron, I’m sorry if I offended you last night.” I say the next morning inside the kitchen. When he attempts to restart last evening’s discussion, I leave the house. I decide that nothing is going to alter his stance. Mostly, I try to avoid interpersonal interactions with Baron.

As the presidential election draws near, I begin sensing a subtle hostility from Baron that I ignore until the night I come home late. I have been telephone banking for Barak Obama’s
second term as president and I arrive home exhausted and sleepy. Walking in the hallway toward my bedroom I see Baron standing in his doorway. “You’re a racist,” he snarls at me, unprovoked. Rebecca’s door is closed, and I assume that she is asleep.

Confused, I stare at him, but the look on his face and in his eyes tells me that I should be careful. “What do you mean I’m racist?” I say with practiced calm.

“You don’t like white people,” he says, barely audible, but his gaze does not change. His accusation is not true. Besides, Baron’s complexion is tan, his hair is black and curly and he looks Middle-Eastern.

“I am not racist. Why would you even think that?” I ask.

“Because I’ve heard you talk about white people,” he says and shifts his gaze beyond me, continuing to lean halfway out of his room.

“Baron, I have no idea what you are talking about. I am not racist. There are people who are white that I don’t like and I talk about them. They are politicians and racists. My ex-husband is white. Most of the men that I date are white,” I tell him and wonder what he is actually after.

But he has already resurrected my stubborn, argumentative nerve, and for ten precious minutes, I stand outside of my bedroom trying to convince him that I am not racist? “Good night,” I finally say. In a few days our encounter is forgotten and he has disappeared.

As the weather cools, Rebecca and I spend time together cooking in the kitchen. When we notice most of the cereal bowls and some dinner plates missing, we both assume that Baron has them in his room because his girlfriend and her small son have been spending time at the apartment.
“His girlfriend is pretty, isn’t she? I didn’t think he was seeing anyone,” Rebecca says. She is dating a classmate who has come for dinner a few times.

After the singing debacle, it was difficult for me to imagine Baron in a serious relationship. I am dating an attorney for a gun manufacturer, a long, lean, and mean Libertarian who insists on wearing a cowboy hat, so our dinner date conversations are pretty heated.

“I’ll buy a few plates and bowls from the dollar store,” I volunteer. When the missing dishes are returned, we notice that our butcher knife is missing. “Maybe Baron is going to sharpen it like he did last summer,” I say. Before the knife reappears, Rebecca decides to purchase her own set.

My expensive knives are still in storage and would be a hassle to locate, so I also purchase a butcher knife from Goodwill that disappears for a few days. When Baron offers to install WIFI, if we share the monthly fee with him, I agree because I want to watch Hulu on my computer. A month after the installation, he tells me a quotes my share of the cost that is more than I believe. When I ask to see the bill, he refuses to show me.

“I never pay anything without seeing the bill,” I tell him, but he insists that I must pay him according to our agreement. Again, I insist on seeing the bill. One morning, I click on my computer and my name is gone, but I return to using my Broadband account. We avoid each other and few weeks later, he posts the bill on the refrigerator. It is lower than he had stated, but it is too late. I will not to do any business with him.

We all slow down at home during the Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks. Our but our spirits seem to rise along with everyone else. I have Christmas dinner with Ceres and Ed and their extended families. Baron is still away, but so are all of the sharp knives.
“It’s just weird. Two butcher’s knives and the paring knife, all gone,” I lament to Rebecca who has not yet returned from Seattle where she spent Christmas. I am staring into the utensil drawer. The knives, now dulled, reappear when Baron returns.

In late February, before heading home from a teaching assignment, I purchase a set of Paula Dean knives from Wal-Mart as a birthday present to myself. Rebecca lets me use her knives only when she is home. It makes more sense to purchase another cheap butcher’s knife for the house, but I keep the good knives inside my bedroom. No one mentions knives missing. Baron, more quiet than usual, is raising my anxiety.

The landlord telephones me a week after my birthday. Baron has all but disappeared, and Rebecca, still dating her handsome young man is spending less time at home. I enjoy having the house to myself and invite Audry to roam and keep me company in the kitchen.

“How do you remember when I suggested that you to sign a lease, but you never did? Well, I’m officially giving you notice that at the end of March, you have to move. I’ve rented the room to the returning student I mentioned to you. It’s just business,” says Scott.

Hanging up the phone, I am not upset with him. I have been here much longer than I had intended, and although I love the room, I had taken a calculated risk.

A few days later, I arrive home famished after a long workday, to cook chili for dinner. I search for a knife to chop onions and see only dull-edged dinner knives inside the drawer. When I turn around, I see sunlight gleaming on neatly sliced silver knife-blades, dismembered from their handles and lying in stark contrast on the dark kitchen counter. Frightened, I race toward the safety of my bedroom when I notice the scraggly printed words on white paper, thumbtacked to Baron’s bedroom door:
“No swords shall be raised against me.”

“He’s crazy!” I say, and I bolt my own door. Now, I am convinced that Baron’s weird behavior resembles that of my schizophrenic older brother Donald. A Marine veteran, he is being treated for paranoid schizophrenia that began manifesting itself with him banging on the piano at two in the morning and putting all kinds of rotting food on the roof outside of his second-floor bedroom window. Donald’s behavior really frightened us when he began telling us what God wanted him to do, and talking about government conspiracies. For years, mother had attributed his behavior to a curse from his former fiancé. She ignored the suggestions his symptoms, while we all lived with his unpredictable outbursts. Surely, our landlord is aware that Baron has exhibited strange behaviors, at least toward me.

“Yes, I phoned the landlord before I calling you,” I tell Rebecca who is visiting friends in Denver. “Yes, I believe that Scott is aware of Baron’s mental problems. Yes, I have alerted the police.”

Baron with his slight build, dark hair, and stormy eyes does not come home before or after the police arrive the next day. They look around the apartment, ask questions, write down my concerns, and leave. “Yes, you can call us tomorrow for a copy of your police report,” the taller officer offers and adds, “I have to say this is one of the nicest apartments that I have seen.”

Late that night, hugging Audry, I scan Craigslist searching for a new bedroom.

*Hamden, Nice Apartment to Share, Available Immediately—a partially furnished room to rent in a shared, very nice, quiet, clean, large, 3-bedroom apartment for $375 per month.*

*Second-floor walkup. Large bedroom good closet space. Large kitchen, completely furnished; full bathroom; sun-porch and terrace. Utilities, Internet access and some basic household*
supplies included. Conveniently located. Half block walk to Albertus Magnus College, 10 minute walk from Yale, 20 minute walk from downtown New Haven and 5 minute drive to supermarket and shopping area. Convenient street parking. Read Street at Winchester Avenue, Hamden.

The street name sounds familiar. The next morning is bright and warm helping the snow melt. The rental, half a mile away is at in the border of New Haven, not Hamden. I had considered renting a room on this street while I was living with Clara. Parking in front, I study the house of the rental. Its light gray vinyl siding is dirty. The small, fenced yard and shady front porch are freshly swept. The street is a hodgepodge typical of single, two and three-story dwellings. I am looking to rent for three months, enough time to complete write my thesis and possibly move to New Mexico.

Dirty snow covers the sidewalk and the edges of the street where burly-looking black men wearing long, black leather coats seem to be milling around the house directly across the street from the rental. A few are standing on the street corner. Instinctively, I look up to check for tennis shoes wrapped around the telephone wires. There are none, and although I am concerned about these men, I ring the second-floor doorbell.

“Hello,” says a tinny, female voice.

“I’m here to look at the room. My name is Nickie.” She buzzes me in, and I walk up a clean stairway, trimmed in walnut and turn at the first landing where a large potted plant sits and onto the second landing four steps below the second floor apartment. The plant looked healthy because of the filtered light coming through a window on the first landing where Mara greets and guides me to sit in an upholstered chair across from her. Mara resembles my mother, dark-
skinned, short and a bit chunky around the middle, an intelligent face with serious eyes. Mother keeps her gray hair closely-cropped but Mara wears a bad wig.

I admire the intricately designed patterns in the glass-stained segments of her living room window. The furniture, two upholstered side chairs and an upholstered sofa, sit beneath the window. The computer in the corner tells me that this is her work space. “I work from home. I have my own business designing greeting cards. So, tell me something about yourself, and then I will show you the room,” she says.

I notice that the house feels too cold to remove my coat, probably from opening the front door downstairs.

“Well, I am a graduate student, and I currently live less than a mile away. I substitute teach and I’m looking for a short-term rental, about three months,” I say while sipping the bottled water she has offered. Although it feels like a job interview, I believe she is also looking for compatibility and reliability. At least I am meeting the owner at the beginning.

My tour begins with her showing me the enclosed sun-porch, a narrow room in the front of her apartment. Inside, her cat is sunbathing. I mention cat toys and Audry. “You can bring your cat. My cat stays here most of the day,” she says. Walking back through the living room, she shows me the closed door of her bedroom. We walk into a room that could be a formal dining room except for a larger desk and a computer. It is neat but one less room in which to relax with friends. The room leads into her kitchen. It is clean and filled with bright sunlight, and larger than I imagined windows and a food pantry. A large side-by-side refrigerator occupies one wall.

“You will have your pantry shelves and shelves inside the refrigerator and freezer,” she says and opens the doors to reveal and sparkling clean interiors. The gas stove is spotless, and the
overhead cabinets are filled with her spices. A black, oversized bar-height, kitchen table and chairs is located next to a large, curtained window that faces the building next door. A few feet away on the same wall is a spotless, stainless-steel sink underneath a small curtained window. The house smells just-sprayed fresh. Her rented bedrooms and the bathroom are separated from the kitchen by a narrow hallway. A bedroom is located at each end of the hallway, and the bathroom is in the center of the hallway.

“The other renter, Trey, rents the room across from the rental,” she says before opening the bathroom door. Inside is a wall of peach-colored ceramic tiles. The floors are small black and white patterned tiles. The tub and ceramic pedestal sink are white, as is the toilet. Rolls of white toilet paper lie neatly stacked on a small stand. “I provide the paper-goods,” she says and I nod my head in approval. “Let me show you the bedroom.”

I do not know why, but the baby-blue walls, white trim, royal-blue carpet, rear window facing the back-yard, and the side window facing the next door apartment all feels familiar. The closet is an adequate walk-in. The ceiling fan twirls. However, when I lift the twin-sized mattress curiously placed in the center of the floor between the entry and closet, I discover what she is attempting to hide.

“These carpet burns will be noted as already there, right?” Moving out and having my deposit returned is a big deal.

“Yes, of course. That mattress is new, and I a new bedframe will be provided,” she says. Exiting the room, I notice the lack of any lock on the door. “We’re honest people. You don’t need to put a lock on the door.” Downstairs, the dimly lit basement offers free a washer and dryer. I do not imagine that I will be using it. I like the laundromat in Hamden.
Once we are back inside her living room, we discuss expectations. “Rent is due on the first of the month. Cash is preferred but a check is fine.” Walking downstairs after signing the lease, I realize that my new bedroom, except for the closet, is an exact replica of my bedroom in my first rental when I was twenty-one. It was a two-bedroom apartment for only one-hundred and ninety-five dollars a month. This rent is less than double, a good sign I think, until I remember, Flo never moved into that other bedroom.
Read Street

New Haven, March 15, 2013

On March 15, I move into what I hope is my final rental in Connecticut. Clara helps me move out my the bedroom on Sheldon Terrance. Baron has not returned since I reported his sign to Scott and the police. With only one item left to put into the U-Haul van, we sit and drink our cups of herbal tea at the kitchen table. “I really liked this street and the people I’ve met, but Baron? Well, who knows?” I say.

“You’ve been through so much. I hope this new place works out for you,” Clara, says, issuing a generous helping of goodwill that I need.

“I’m sure it will be fine. I am only renting it for three months. Three seems to be my lucky number. I was only supposed to stay here for three months but, oh well. It was mostly good while it lasted.”

We get lucky parking the van in front of the house on Read Street. It might be the weather and the sun or because folks are at church. Parking might be a problem later, but we are feeling easy like the Sunday morning as Mara watches us carry my shiny, green shopping bags into my powder-blue bedroom. With the exception of the black Ikea shelving and bins I use for my dresser and drawers, I have no other heavy furniture. At this point the bags hold everything. “This looks like a nice place,” and again Clara says. “I hope this works out for you.”

Mara, working at her desk does not offer to help bring anything into the chilly house. I introduce her to Audry lying inside her carrier. I take her into our bedroom where she will wait until I close my door and open hers. Clara, who I will see later, leaves after depositing my final bag and a hug.
Perhaps an older, mature, and live-in landlord is good for household security and sanity. Her description of Trey, the other housemate was confusing, so I will have to wait until I meet him to decide for myself. I just hope he is not another Baron.

“He’s studying computers at Gateway Community College. He and his wife came all the way from Brooklyn to look at the room. I haven’t seen her since. He seems to have a girlfriend. He has lived here six months but is already behind on his rent. He spends all day in his room so I guess he takes online classes. If he doesn’t pay soon I’ll have to ask him to leave,” Mara tells me a few days after I move in. I did not fee; that it was my business.

As promised, the bed was assembled and I moved it to an outside wall and put my faux dresser in its place. Mara brought in a side table where I place only my lamp, radio, and clock. Since Albertus Magnus is across the street, I plan to spend my free days there.

Still a bit concerned about the lack of a lock on my door, I calm down when I remember that I never put one on Phoebe’s room when I rented it out. Mara says that she respects the privacy of her renters. Sitting at the kitchen table while my canned tamales are cooking, I watch Trey staring into refrigerator. He ignores me, but I notice that like Modani, his refrigerator shelf is bare except for cheese and crackers. Ramen is also his staple.

“Hi, I’m Nickie, the newbie. You must be Trey. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Closing the refrigerator door, he answers in kind. Very dark-skinned like Modani, he is also soft spoken, thin, and tall with an intelligent face. In the morning, I catch a glimpse of his girlfriend quietly leaving out of the back door. They must be very quiet because I never would have known she was inside his room. This is none of my business until the following week when Mara makes it my business.
Mara invites me to dinner in her kitchen a week after I move in. She has prepared roast chicken, mashed potatoes with smooth brown gravy, buttery biscuits, green beans, and a coconut cake for dessert, just like dinners at my grandparents’ home. The table is set with a tablecloth, cloth napkins, and fine silverware. She has put sheer curtains on the large kitchen window.

“This is a nice way to get to know each other,” she says, we put food on our plates. It even tastes like my childhood. After talking about my day at work, she asks me “So what do you think of the neighborhood?”

“Well, what do you think?” I reply.

“Well, I think this is the kind of neighborhood you might warn people away from,” she answers cynically and glances out of the kitchen window at the apartment building next door.

“But to be fair, a lot of families live here, and their children play outside. But that house across the street, I’m sure they’re selling drugs or something. My car was broken into, so lock your car.

Originally from Brooklyn, Mara was married for twenty years to a university technical administrator in Minnesota, where her ex-husband, who is white, still lives. “We met there when I was working as an administrator. He was intelligent and handsome,” she says. Like my Craig memories, her story sounds wistful and painful. Our similarities are visceral. Well educated and supportive of a good education for her son and daughter, after the divorce, the three of them moved to New Haven after her daughter had been accepted to Albertus Magnus College, the college down the street. “My son graduated from a Catholic high school and lives in San Francisco.”

Then, averting her gaze, she says, “My daughter and grandchild live a commune in Denver. She works there, too. I visited her there once. I didn’t like it, or her husband. He’s a good-
looking man, white, but controlling. I wish she would leave him. We haven’t talked in a long time,” she talks momentarily with a longing I know well.

Because she tells me about her daughter, I tell her what I’ve never told anyone else. “When Charmaine was twelve, she asked me, as if she had given it consideration, what I would do if she got pregnant. We lived in Albuquerque then, and I was so shocked at the question that I answered out of anger and fear, ‘I would kick you out.’ Of course, I didn’t mean it, but in the heat of the moment, she goaded me into presenting it as an ultimatum. A few days later, Oprah was doing a show about unwed twelve and thirteen-year-old girls who were proud to be pregnant. Silently, we watched it together. She heard those girls talking about how they wanted to dress up their babies. Those babies would be somebody who would love them but the fathers were nowhere in the picture.

We didn’t talk about that show, but I know it had an impact on her. Months later, she asked if I meant what I had said. I told her I would never throw her out, but I was hurt that she would even think about something like that. I was a single mother. Why would I want that for her? Understanding how my words had hurt her had hurt me too. It took years for her to fully trust me. Now, we talk every day. Then again, she is a child psychiatrist so you have to wonder.” We both laugh. Sharing our past bonds us, and our unspoken similarities seem profound.

This is the most intimate conversation I have had with a stranger. My girlfriends and I share our deepest hopes, fears, and mistakes, but we know each other well. I don’t know Mara as well, but our core and family similarities are remarkable.

“Some of these people are too ghetto. I just keep to myself,” she says, returning to her first question. She says that she stays here because of her business; she designs cards or something. I
had rented my rooms out for the money and the intellectual stimulation, and I gained much more, but, if I had hated my neighborhood, I would have moved away.

I think about my sisters and how our old neighborhood has changed.

“Everyone we grew up with has moved away,” both Flo and Liz often argue. “Why should we move when we have a place to live? If any family member needs a place to live, they are welcome here. This is our family property where Mother wants to die—at home. End of discussion.” Actually, our grandparents had carefully purchased the properties over many years when our neighbors still looked like them and us. It has changed and become home for people from South and Central American countries. My grandfather had a good head for business. Mother does not. When I visit her and my sisters, I fear that one big earthquake will forever alter their lives. I think of the saying, “Most people die within five miles of where they were born.” Years ago, I walked away from all of it, but I remain emotionally tethered; after all, they are family. Mara feels like family.

Into the Weeds

By the second week, I recognize Mara’s fragrance inside my bedroom, and I install a lock on my door. “It just feels more businesslike,” I tell her which it mostly true. She had not left a note on my door explaining why she had been inside. She is not pleased about my lock but is even less pleased about Trey.

“He’s still has not paid his rent,” Mara says while I eat my breakfast. For a few days, she has been saying that she can rent his room to someone else and then tells me what Trey pays, which is less than I. I say nothing. I don’t know what to think. When I knocked on his door to see
if he had some matches to light the burners on the stove he gave me his lighter and said, “Ah, electric stoves, they don’t light our candles.” We laughed. I like his philosophy.

The morning of my third week, Mara knocks on my door to tell me that she is interviewing Frank, a potential renter. Trey has told her that he is not moving. I do understand why I have to meet the tall, ebony, heavy-set man and his seventy-pound Labrador retriever or listen to his credentials: Gateway College student, undefined major, looking to rent until the end of May. “I am moving to New York City for an internship at PL&C,” he tells her. I do not believe half of what he says and I want to leave.

“How do you smoke?” I ask, and he replies yes, but says that he will smoke outside. I have smelled that flouted rule. Mara and Trey sometimes blow their cigarette smoke out of their bedroom windows. I have heard enough. “Frank, I don’t have any say in who she rents to. I’m new here myself, but I think this place is too small for you and your dog. What about walking him?”

“I walk him three times a day,” he says. I don’t believe him. I cannot see him running back and forth from school to a walk a dog, who has been locked up in a small bedroom inside of a cold house, across the street from a possibly illegal drug haven.

“I told Trey that he has to be out by Saturday,” Mara tells me after I return. “What’s your opinion of Frank?”

I do not hide my annoyance at her insistence of my participation. “It’s your house,” I say. A day later, she tells me what I already know, “Trey refuses to leave.”

“What’s with the water? My shower was lukewarm this morning. It was cold when I tried to wash my dishes,” I ask the day after Frank’s interview, and just before I leave for work.
“A breeze from outside keeps blowing out the pilot on the hot water heater downstairs.” is her answer. We walk to the basement where she pushes a red button in the center of the tank controls. “There should be hot water in fifteen minutes. Sometimes it works without me pushing it,” she says.

“You know, the tank is the owner’s responsibility, and this has been happening quite a bit. I can’t see paying full rent if I am not getting full use of the apartment,” I tell her that evening.

“Remember, I told you the house was in foreclosure?”

“Yes, I do, but after I moved in. This is not about that. But, I guess you don’t want to bring attention to yourself.” When she answers no, I realize that whatever falls apart will not be addressed but that she expects full rent although it’s illegal.

Early Sunday morning, the commotion in the hallway breaks my sleep as Mara harangues Trey. “You need to move,” she repeats and opens the lockless door that he keeps slamming shut.

After Mara leaves, I hear Trey’s angry telephone conversation, revealing the fight’s genesis. “Dat lady, she put a lock on her door, tinking I’m a steel from er. I don wan’ er shit. I was gon’ be out by next Saturday. Now she wan’ me out dis afternoon? I know me rights. I could stay here.” Trey is correct; she has to give him a month’s notice. It’s interesting to me that I recall all of this legal stuff.

Softly, I knock on his door. “Come see me when you get off the telephone. I want to clear this up.” A few minutes later, entering my room looking upset and confused, is tells me his side of our household debacle.
“I was talkin’ to my mudda,” he says, leaning against my closed door, grasping his phone in one hand.

“What exactly did she tell you?” I ask, sitting on my bed dressed in blue jeans and sweatshirt.

“She say, you worry ‘bout me stealin’ from you and dat’s why you put de lock on your door!”

“I put the lock on my door for privacy,” I say calmly, a partial truth. Mara does not trust him.

“I get dat. But, dere’s all kinds of stuff ya don’ know about her. I don’ like to talk about people but every buddy who lef say it was becuz she steal from dem. She say I have a girlfriend. So? I’m young. I date. She tryin’ ta be mah mudder. She need ta be da landlady.” He sounds rational and never mentions a wife.

Hearing movement outside of my door, I suspect Mara is eavesdropping. I have heard enough. She is not there when he opens the door and I leave to go meet my friends for breakfast.

That night as I unlock my door, Mara comes into my room to talk.

“I need to tell you that I will be turning off the electricity tomorrow. Trey won’t leave, and since you got into this, you . . .”

“Wait a minute!” I interrupt her. “First, don’t blame me for this mess. I have nothing to do with it! Second, by law, you have to give him a thirty-day-notice,” I say, suddenly recalling my tenant rights.

“Yes, you did. When you said this stuff to him, you gave him the idea,” she says. Trey already knew. Like my sister Liz, Mara has reframed her argument with Trey, blaming me for his refusal to leave. Is she saying that I pushed her into this current hole that she has dug and cannot escape? She blames her daughter’s decision to be with her husband for their estrangement.
but praises a son she rarely sees. She hates the neighborhood but stays. She blames Trey’s intransigence on me, regardless of my recent arrival.

Finally, I recognize the circular quality of our conversations, sharing our hurts but silently blaming others, and I feel my present life meeting up with my past life at tornado speed. Epiphanies arrive fast and furious. I have no idea what tomorrow will bring.

Early the next morning, Mara knocks. Asking to step into my room, she closes the door. “I just want you to know that I did not bring your name into this,” she says with the voice that convinced me to rent this room. “I would never bring up your name. He just inferred it based on the conversation we had.”

“What exactly did you tell him about my putting in a lock?” I ask and sit back on my bed.

I notice that Mara has not moved from her spot. “I told him that I had some concerns. I said that people who live together need to feel comfortable and safe. I said that you put a lock on your door,” she says vaguely contrite.

“And, you can’t see that you gave him the impression that I put on the lock because of him?” I reply low and calm. I hate being lied to and, worse, being lied about.

“I’m not going to let you goad me into saying something I can’t remember I said. There is no way I can remember exactly what I said,” she says, moving backwards towards the door, and sounding both offensive and defensive.

I had been moving my toiletries into little drawers or bags for easy retrieval while listening to her try and blame me for yesterday’s disruption. Her excuse sounds like her illogical jibber-jab about gay marriage, with which I had disagreed with. She is like an old boss I had once imagined
pushing out of her second-floor office window. “You have already answered my question. You put me in this position for your own reasons, and I am not happy about it,” I say and indicate this conversation, at least for me, is over.

“I guess we both need to get to work,” she says, without apologizing and turning around to leave.

“True, but I want to talk to you about my rent. I want a reduction,” I say, remember that I had intended to approach her on this subject.

Her voice and body rigid, she turns to face me. I’m a businesswoman, and this is about business.”

“I know. And when I moved in, I reasonably expected to have full use of the house, including the common areas. Outside of this room, the house is like an igloo. I wear my coat when I cook. And my cat is not allowed in the sunroom,” I say, hearing the frustration in my own voice.

“When you first came, the temperature was the same as now,” She says and crosses her arms.

Her logic escapes me. “It was still winter. I wasn’t paying attention to the temperature in the house. We can’t see everything until we move in. You know that. You’ve said it in our conversations. In fact, you decided not to heat this house because of a high electric bill that I had nothing to do with. The house is freezing; the bathroom is freezing. Unless I stay inside my room, I am freezing. I should not have to wear a coat to cook,” I shoot back, crossing my arms.

During our dinner, she had bragged, “I never lose a debate.” This morning I cannot understand how she wins one. Driving to work and replaying our conversation reminds me when Craig and I had disagreed on how to pay off our credit cards. They weren’t ridiculous, but I
wanted to pay off the lowest amount first and then the higher balance. Craig had suggested the opposite. I had felt vindicated when we heard an economist suggest my strategy on a news program. Full rent means full use of the house. It seems ridiculous, but do I sound like Mara? I had left the house this morning hoping that would consider my argument. I return home to discover that she has completely missed the point when she asks me to sit with her at the kitchen table.

“Well, I thought about you said about the cold. You know I’m from Minnesota, and if I kept my room as warm as you guys, and I turned on the heater, I’d be sweltering. I guess I have a different threshold than Connecticut people.”

I have no idea what she is talking about, and I am tired of her Minnesota spiel. “You have lived in Connecticut for three years. Last week, you showed me an apartment complex that you and your daughter had considered moving into but changed your mind because you said she would have to drive on the highway to get to school. The utilities were included, and it had a swimming pool. How much was that rent?” I wanted know what she had turned down for this icebox we live in.

“It was one thousand, one-hundred and fifty-two dollars a month, which wasn’t bad, but the apartment was on Route 8 and I didn’t want my daughter on the freeway. Why are you asking?”

“I had told you that I drove to and from my friend’s house in Bethel, and when I wanted to take the scenic route, it was on Route 8. No freeway needed to get to New Haven.”

“I know that now, but I did not back then.” She sounds annoyed with my “gotcha”.

“Mara, are you planning to move?” I suspect that she has received a notice to vacate. “I am asking because you had said that all utilities were included at that complex.”
“Actually, they paid for heat and hot water. We would pay electricity. Heating costs more than electricity.”

She has been lamenting about her electricity bills since I’ve moved in. She turned off the heat and handed us space heaters. I had thought it penny wise and pound foolish but I did not challenge her logic because I am gone most of the day. I can still cook dinner and watch TV on my computer but things have changed. Apparently, tonight’s new moon is a monster moon, triggering issues over money.

“Use of the common areas is curtailed and Audry is never allowed in the sun-room because of your cat. Your office is the living room so there really is no common area except the front porch. It’s too cold to eat inside in the kitchen. I have not complained until recently about the lukewarm showers and the shower head falling off. Now, I am complaining.”

“I turned the hot water heater back on. It should be hot enough for a little while” was her terse reply this morning after she returned from the basement.

Before I leave for my bedroom I say “Mara, I want to deduct thirty-five dollars from March and April’s rents. When the weather stabilizes, I will pay the full amount,” I say. Originally, I wanted to deduct seventy-five dollars.

Appearing to consider my proposition, she replies flatly, “That’s not gonna happen.”

“Okay. I am giving you my thirty-day notice. I’ll begin looking for another place,” I say. I feel that she is wrong, and I cannot trust her.

At the beginning of April, Mara emails me an eviction notice. Reading it, I’m guessing that she intends to tell a judge that her computer proves it was delivered—it doesn’t prove that I
opened and read it. Officially, we should be served, but since she had failed to mention that the house was being condemned, she would lose. I have learned much about tenant law from cheater landlords.

Mara has not cashed my recent check. As promised I deducted thirty-five dollars. Privately, I think that Trey should pay something, even a token amount to keep Mara from clearly losing her mind.

A few days ago she removed his mattresses, which were better than mine, and Trey began sleeping on the floor inside his dark blue room with his room-darkening clothing covering the windows. The atmosphere inside the house is tense. I begin searching for a room, just in case.

In the morning, while preparing to go teach at Phoebe’s former elementary school, the lights and my radio go off. Except for the refrigerator, Mara has turned off the electricity. I rush out of my room, ready for her battle to force tray to leave.

I think that both of them are filled with emotional adrenaline, and neither will win. Unless there is an emergency, she needs his permission to enter his room.

Livid, I yell, “I will contact the police if you do not turn the electricity back on. It is your responsibility to supply utilities, and I swear I will call the Department of Health if you keep this up. This is ridiculous!” The electricity is restored before I leave for a long day’s work.

Mara backs down long enough to retrench, what she calls her strategy to save money, but I think in the long run, it will cost her.

Aware that what she has done, renting out rooms, might be illegal, her trying to stay below the radar makes her a dishonest broker and, now, possibly delusional.
Like a bad strip-tease, she has slowly revealed what life with her children and husband may have been like. She turned off the gas heating and replaced it with electric space heaters because of a four-hundred-dollar electric bill, which she says is now eight-hundred dollars. “Turn the heaters off after twenty minutes and your room will stay warm,” she promised in early spring and bright days hastened melting snow. The house remains uncomfortably cold, and the norm for water is lukewarm instead of hot.

“Trey is running two heaters,” she tells me one day. I did not see that when he let me into his room. To me, they both act stupidly stubborn and tied to each other like a fisherman and the hooked fish. Both seem to be desperate for money. Trey has no job or income to move. I have no idea if he as even tried to borrow money. Mara needs money to pay her bills in this foreclosed house, presumably until her business is profitable.

Hearing them argue while I am getting dressed for work, I yell, “You are disturbing my peace! I want some peace! I expect peace!”

Mara turns on the electricity. Trey yells “I do not have two heaters.” I prepare my lunch for work and leave, unsure if electricity or a dead body will be in the house when I return. I have a good lock on my door.

“You need to lock your door from inside,” I tell Trey. “He can’t do that without my permission,” Mara argues. Yes, he can. He must. No judge will hold it against him if he installs features to protect his privacy from nosy Mara.

Driving home a full day of substitute teaching, I am exhausted, but I think about this morning’s crazy-time. I place a stop payment on my rent check because Mara’s control is destructive when a memory slips in.
I am reading Craig’s words written inside his composition book that I find in the closet. It has been a week and I don’t know where he is so searching for clues when I see the notebook. The first-page entry is on my birthday, eight months before we meet. “Serendipity,” I say, and sit on the closet floor to read his insightful and creative prose. In the middle of the notebook is his “To Do” list for getting his divorce from Sarai. He mentions Mexico. While reading the following page, I drop to my knees. “She’s controlling you . . . you don’t like it . . . Small town people might think you’re going down the drink a two-time loser . . .”. Two-time loser has to be about us, his second marriage. I had no idea that he thought I was controlling him. I look for the date he wrote it. It isn’t there. It could be years ago or last week. I don’t know, but I sit on the floor and cry. “You know, we don’t have to get married right away,” I had told him three days after his divorce and four days before our wedding. “I can’t wait to marry you,” he had replied.

Slowly, I realize how I had taken control of organizing our lives, where we lived, where Phoebe attended middle school, Craig’s horrible car accident, our honeymoon, those final Christmas vacation plans to visit his, and then my family. Craig was not with me because he had said “I want a divorce.” I had believed I was investing in our future but he had experienced it as me controlling him.

Suddenly, I feel worn out and wish someone would take care of me. Maybe that’s what I thought moving to Mara’s would be like. Why didn’t I ask, “Why is it so cold in here?” Like my sister, Mara is determined to live in a house waiting to be condemned.

I sit in my car for a while before walking up the front porch stairs. That the first and third floor tenants have probably moved out because I have not seen the third-floor tenants’ Mercedes Benz in several days or heard loud the music they usually play. Peeking in the first-floor windows, I see that the house is empty.
That evening, I eat dinner my fast-food dinner and while lying in bed, and I rehash this morning’s conversation. Mara and Trey seem to represent so many things that I have handled badly. I am determined to complete something significant in my life, and yet, I am moving around like a vagabond. I can sink or swim. Being divorced has not been easy, but I’m okay. I have amazing friends, school, work, and fun things that I enjoy doing.

I think about Mara. Maybe she means well by renting out her rooms but Trey said the others left because she steals. Nothing was missing from my room but I put a lock on my door.

It is not quite 8 A.M. the next morning when Mara again begins haranguing Trey. She keeps opening his bedroom door, and he keeps slamming it shut. I hear them arguing through my doorway. It’s the same argument; she wants the rent, and he insists on a formal four-day notice.

As I prepare to leave to teach third graders, the radio and heater go quiet. No radio, no light, no heat. At least it is daylight. Work is in an hour. The lights are out, but the refrigerator is working, and I hear Mara walking up from the basement that stinks of her cigarette smoke. By the time I return home, the lights are back on.

Easter Sunday morning, I make plans to meet Ceres at Romeo and Joe’s for breakfast. Later we plan drive to Middletown to have dinner at her friend’s home. A last minute trip to the bathroom reveals that Mara has thrown down her gauntlet. I have lived here for fifteen days. There is no toilet paper in the bathroom. The ten roles usually stored in the cabinet have vanished, so I use the emergency roll I keep in my bedroom. After a lukewarm shower, I search for cleanser and discover the missing toilet paper inside a kitchen cabinet. As I leave, I take note of the house’s atmosphere. Mara is hassling Trey, there is no hot water or bathroom tissue. When
I return home, the lights are still out. I light my candles and go to bed. This is insane, I am moving in a few days.

The following morning, Mara confiscates our space heaters. I replace the one in my room with one I had brought with me. Planning to cook a quick breakfast, I notice her pots and pans covering the kitchen table, and the burners on the stove are gone.

Three nights ago, Mara had stood outside of my bedroom door demanding my rent. The kitchen was dark, and the dim light from the living room made her look shadowy and sinister.

“Do you remember our conversation yesterday? You said that you wouldn’t accept any money from me,” annoyed and confused, I reminded her.

“But your check bounced,” she said low, and cautious.

“No, I told you I had stopped payment because you turned off the power and hot water again. I expect to be able to shower and cook.”

“Then, you said that you would pay me each week!” she pleads.

Opening my door, I say, “I did. But that was before all this new stuff started. You told me to move, and I’m leaving in two days. Now, I’m frazzled and hungry. I’m going to get some cooked food. Our electricity is iffy, you unplugged the refrigerator a few days ago, and my food thawed.” My final night in the house, after eating deli-sliced ham on Ritz crackers, I turn on my room heater and connect my computer to my portable internet. Sleeping in my clothes and leaving the lamp on, Audry and I watch Hulu on my laptop before falling asleep.

Gone
April 15 at 7 A.M., the U-Haul van that I rented last evening, sits half filled with a few shiny, green shopping bags. Across the street, police cars silently park along our end of the street, and uniformed officers use hand signals to direct each other as they surround the house across the street. I am not surprised. There was always suspicious activity at that house. Clara and I decide to rethink packing the van and park the bags and my faux dresser on the porch. Up and down, we walk through the kitchen and past Mara, sitting inside her office watching us. Just as Clara had helped me move in a month ago, she helps me move out.

Even now, the house stinks of Mara’s cigarette smoke, and the potted plants on the second floor landing reek of stale urine. I wonder if Trey has pissed in her plants.

“T’m glad to be leaving this igloo,” I tell Clara. She nods her head. We place my bookcase in the van and pause to watch more police surround the house across the street. On any weekday morning, we see burly young men wearing full-length black leather coats and slim-brimmed hats, like sentries, stand outside of that house and on the street corner.

Forty-five minutes later, the van is packed and the bedroom is clean. “She’s watching us,” I say. Walking down the steps for the final time, I notice a sign face down on the ground and lift it up. “For Sale” is covered by “Condemned”. I remember that Flo never moved into the second bedroom.

Clara and I hug as she closes the van doors. In two weeks. I will be moving into a bedroom on Woodland Street. Until then, Audry and I are staying at her house.

One by one, the police cars leave from in front of the house across the street. A policeman closes the front door. We have missed the perps walk. Not many neighbors are up and out. As I drive away from this sad place, I think about Mara’s response when she finds the two down
comforters I have left for the next tenant. She will have to remove the contractor-sized trash bag from my room. She will have to clear away my rotted food from the refrigerator. On the kitchen table, she will find her house keys.

Moving back to Clara’s house is a safe harbor while I wait for May, to move to Woodland Street. After a day of uncanny revelations, Audry and I snuggle on the bed as I review this year’s Diamond Report. My root number, the catalyst that sets the chain of events in motion, is 9. The number 9, completes the cycle. 9, is both my Life Path and Personality numbers.

Nickie, you will find yourself again and again in situations that stab deeply into your sense of justice and compassion. You will be a witness to some disturbingly unjust proceedings. You know you are in a position to do something about it, but it requires sacrifice and effort, and you are holding back. You probably think of it as restraint, however, when you look deeper you realize that you are postponing the inevitable. Your sense of justice is being challenged.

Taking action is necessary and your self-sacrificing acts earn you the gratitude of others. But that is not your true reward. You will open new windows into your deeper self. You will learn much about yourself, and your self-esteem gets a powerful boost. This is one of those opportunities when your efforts to help others are returned a thousand-fold.
Woodland Street

Full Circling Rough Diamonds

New Haven, May 1, 2013

On April second, I visit one awesome rental property arriving at Woodland Street. The room inside the house on Huntington is the most attractive. Ironically, it is around the corner from Read Street. It is a sweet, compact second-floor bedroom with direct access to a semi-finished attic that has windows and electricity. I can write in there and Audry can play. The visiting professor who is looking to rent the room, is going to put in a good word for me with the four graduate student housemates. The rent is five-hundred, fifty-dollars per month, plus shared utilities. It is an amount that I can comfortably pay.

The final place I am looking to possibly rent advertised a third-floor furnished bedroom with utilities included, for the same amount as Huntington, and pets are welcome instead of just, OK. I am excited about living on Mansfield, a tree-lined historic street where a number mansions have been converted into multi-family homes. The homes styles are mostly Queen Anne, Shingle, Colonial Revival, and Tudor Revival architecture. The problem is, or was I cannot find the address. When I check my information again I realize that the room is off of Mansfield Street. I had imagined walking past the mature maple, oak, elm and the occasional peeling-bark birch trees on the way to a room on Mansfield Street, located in what is affectionately called, the Yale ghetto. Some of the university’s offices, professional schools, and gardens occupy huge swaths of Mansfield and Prospect Streets, but I am looking for Woodland Street.

Parking on the one-way street in front of the house, a three-story, two-front-door, pale yellow, dusty vinyl-sided building adds to my disappointment. Cracking concrete steps lead into
a yard in the early stages of blooming whatever pushed through the soil in April. On the shaded front porch the length of the house, are two webbed chairs.

I note only a few people dog-walking as I explore the side and rear of the property. Both can use some maintenance, but a dirt and gravel parking lot in the back means off-street parking. When I return to the front, Noel is sitting on the porch waiting for me. His light-gray eyes and heavy, dark eyelashes on his lightly tanned face are hypnotic.

“Are you Nickie?” he asks as I climb several concrete stairs to shake hands and sit down. His slight midsection bulge makes him appear shorter but he stands about six-feet with broad shoulders and thinning, wavy graying hair. His eyes remind me of Rudy Valentino.

“The bedroom will be available on May first. The current renter is away, but I have her permission to show you the room,” he tells me in a somewhat gravelly but rushed voice. He seems annoyed but he also seems like he is trying to hide it. I notice that he is wearing a clean white tee shirt and Bermuda shorts, Proletariat garb. I am dressed in dress slacks, a silk blouse and waist-length jacket so people will take me seriously.

“I rushed here from a track meet. I coach high school track in Stamford,” he tells me. Now I appreciate his unpretentious manner, and my initial reservations dissolve. I like him, I think I will rent the Huntington bedroom.

I am tired of moving but I cannot seem to find a stable environment for just a few months. I feel like I have been moving all of my life, moving and being moved. Three months after we moved to Connecticut, we left a comfortable home in a prime Hamden neighborhood and moved into a house in a transitional part of Hamden and into the second floor of a house with two front doors. “The two-front-door house,” Paulo had called it.
Both front doors on the Woodlawn property remind me of that house. Walking behind Noel to the third floor, I lightly massage the solid oak railings and admire the original molding along the stairs. “The sunroom on the second floor is for the second-floor residents, a couple, very nice,” Noel says, evaporating my vision of working inside.

“No one is home this weekend. I’ll show you the apartment, then your room,” Noel says after opening the front door. There is no adequate landing in front of the white door that opens into a spacious living room filled with eclectic furnishings.

On the opposite wall is a dank, severely neglected fifty-gallon aquarium sitting on a black, metal stand. Over it hangs a large painting of ancient weapons of war. An abandoned diver and floating plastic plants float in dank green water. The furniture along the window wall consists of an overstuffed blue-corduroy loveseat and matching rocking chair, and a deep-brown, faux suede sofa. The large coffee table is covered mostly with blue-textured ceramic tiles, some which are chipped. It sits on a large, faux Persian area rug. The apartment has a garage sale, fraternity house aura. My gaze lingers on two professionally framed paintings on the wall leading to the hallway where the bathroom and two other bedrooms are located.

“Those are my mother’s, she’s an artist,” Noel tells me with pride. I wonder if she is still living. I wonder if he is serious about renting a room inside this apartment.

Across from the living room is the kitchen with two large windows facing the gray siding on house next door. Wet glass-stains tattoo the ebony-stained dining table. Four mismatched chairs are sit around the table in the center of a fairly large kitchen. Orphan cabinetry sits over the micro-wave and against the walls opposite the sink. Dirty dishes sit inside the stainless-steel kitchen sink. I say nothing, but I imagine trying to cook in this space.
“The couple who lives here recycles,” Noel says proudly and points to the plastic bins underneath the windows filled with empty Whole Foods and Elm City Market bags along with upscale wine and water bottles.” These are people with expensive tastes.

The floor and counters are grimy. The white stove top displays splashes of burnt grease. Instinctively, I see how I can help here, but I remind myself how are important boundaries.

“Each tenant has their own cabinet space,” Noel says as I open the refrigerator and see the jumble of foodstuffs. I imagine having to remove half of the contents just to locate my food.

“How is the shelf space allocated?” I ask, recalling the usefulness of the dedicated shelves in my old house. At Clara’s, it was catch space where you can, but, as good natured as she was, she kept the fridge stocked and I could eat whatever I wanted. You can share but there are enough cabinets so that you can claim your own. We walk towards the hallway.

“A young couple has this bedroom,” Neil says, pointing to the door opposite the bathroom. They used to have that front bedroom. Cheng lives at the end of the hallway. He will be back at the end of the month. By that time, a rear egress will be built.” I do not know what an egress is.

Entering the bathroom, I see first, the grimy sink in the center of a white Formica countertop. An electric toothbrush, large bottle of mint Listerine, a shaving kit and soapy bar are on one side and other sundry personals on the other. Don’t they have their own spaces so the counter can be used by everyone? Dried toothpaste is splattered on the mirror and water faucet. I do not bother to look underneath the cabinet. I won’t live here. The toilet needs cleaning the floor mopping. The cubbyhole in front of the only window is another jumbled mess of personal belongings. The tub is grimy, with dried soap scum mounted on each corner. Bewildered, I wonder what kind of people live here. Didn’t they know someone was coming to see the apartment?
Like a reader of my grimace, Noel offers, “They need to do a better job in here. Let me show you the bedroom.”

The furnished bedroom is neat, and a large German Shepard barks happily inside her cage. “She’s a sweetheart. Pets are welcome here” Noel says after opening the door and stepping outside the room to grant me some privacy.

*I’m not afraid of dogs. I once had a puppy, Spunky.* The large room is bright from sunlight streaming through the mini-blinds of three large double-hung windows overlooking the street. The plaster walls are painted an icky Crayola flesh tone. The ceiling is white. The closet looks small but when open, I see that the high ceiling allows room for three hanging rails--what a girl wants, want a girl needs.

Nothing about the room inspires me to want to live here. Not the queen, black-metal headboard on the bed against the western knee-wall or, the antique dresser with a large attached mirror and deep drawers against the opposite knee-wall. I am not impressed by the classic solid oak office desk or tall bookcase. I exit the bedroom disinterested in this apartment.

Sitting on the recliner, Noel says, “Whatever else you need, I can get you. I have everything from linens to bookcases in the basement. You also get free washing and drying.”

Free washing and drying is a great perk I had forgotten about, but I do not like the apartment. Besides, I would have to go outside to enter the basement because there is no rear exit from the third floor. “The egress will allow the third-floor tenants direct access the back porch,” Noel says and clears up my confusion. “Thank you for showing me the room,” I say.
“You need to let me know as soon as possible if you want the place,” he says as we walk down the stairs and out of the yard. “Can I think about it? I mean, I am interested.” Too many negatives, I think. I am trying to stay away from negatives.

A few days later, Noel telephones. “Hi. I wanted to check with you first. Are you still interested in the bedroom on Woodland? I need to know by today because someone else is interested.”

“Oh, I think so. Can I call you back in ten? I can let you know then,” I say. The Huntington rental is still unsettled.

“The current tenants haven’t even met to vote on who will get my room, and I don’t know when they will,” the guy who showed me the room on Huntington, says. I imagine myself writing in the attic, and Audry resting at my feet but I need to give Noel an answer.

Hanging up, I flip a nickel. Heads means wait for Huntington, and tails mean it’s Woodland. The car is heating up as I telephone Neil. “I’ll take the room,” I say, hoping to hide my reticence. If the Diamond Report, which so far has been spot on, is accurate, I will be hanging onto my seat.

May 2013

When I tell Lena, Ceres, and Rhea, at different places and different times, the name of the street where I am living, they each laugh and say the exact same thing, “Wow, it sounds like you are coming full circle.” I had already come to that conclusion before my omniscient voice told me. I laugh, remembering Noel’s frown when I told him, “I only want the room for three
months,” and he said okay but to let him know if I change my mind. Two weeks later, I change it to one year.

“You can stay as long as you want and I won’t even raise your rent,” he tells me. What manner of man is this? How does he make money? I intend to be out before my lease ends but I know myself well enough to realize that it might be a pipe dream. Two visits were what it took for me to say yes.

After viewing the room again before signing the lease I sensed its full potential. Now the windows and dresser remind me of my childhood bedroom at my grandmother’s house. After sleeping on twin beds at Geena and Mara’s homes, this queen bed looks like royalty, but it is the classic, golden-oak office desk that captures my heart and mind. I think about my grandfather and his dark-stained secretary desk with its letter slots and drawers that locked. I see myself composing inside this room, on this desk, my back to these windows. Looking outside the window at the spot on the roof where Audry can sunbathe.

On May 1, I had loaded up my Nissan Sentra hatchback with Audry in her carrier and everything else tucked securely inside shiny, green bags. Hugging Clara goodbye, I said, “Wish me luck.” No heavy furniture was coming with me. My belongings were still in storage. Maybe one day I would have a stable place to put it all.

Driving to Woodland, I think about how living in Connecticut has changed me since arriving here twenty-four years ago. The first year, I felt skittish, after suddenly moving from a great home and into transitional neighborhood within our first three months. But, in time we met new friends and navigated our children through high school and college even here and when Charmaine and Paulo returned to complete school in California. There were the secrets, revealed
with Craig’s terrible car accident in Poughkeepsie—he was drinking a lot. Good times and good fortune and then rough times and disappointments. I remember mostly the good times but the bad times are heavy to bear, especially the empty-nest divorce.

“Our was not the first or the last divorce. I have new directions, more healthy relationships. Five moves in four years feels like a Lifetime Channel movie. The safe space with Clara, the dream place above the bank, the unwieldy place for would-be kings, the crazy place for sharp knives, and the out-of-control space I finally left. New epiphanies gained because of all the people I have met along the way,” I say sitting inside the car, thankful for the pleasure and pain of the loves I had found and lost.

Sitting inside the car in front of the house on Woodland, I contemplate the month ahead. In five days, I leave for Florida, in fourteen days, Berkeley for my niece and then Phoebe’s college graduations. I will visit Charmaine in September after the baby is born. Audry will stay with Rick. I need to complete two classes this semester and work on my thesis. “God, I hope there are no crazy people here.”

After hauling up fifteen shiny, green bags with everything I need for now inside, Audry and I curl up for naps, and only I wake up when I hear voices and the front door closing. My bedroom is next to the hallway. Being at the front of the apartment makes it feel like a private island but the creaky steps are the highway. I hear two voices, male and female, and paper bags rustling inside the living room. By the time I open my door, a white woman and black man are snuggling on the love seat.

My first week here provides a few clues of what I have gotten myself into. “The couple, you’ll meet them at some point, has been here the longest. They moved away and then asked to
come back,” Noel had said on my second visit. “They’re great people, into recycling and saving
the environment. They have a composter in the backyard,” Noel said after I signed the lease.

“Hi, I’m Shelli,” says the attractive young woman with shoulder length, brown hair, big
brown eyes, and a wide and welcoming smile, when I open my door and enter the living room.

“She looks like Anne Hathaway,” I think. They remain on the sofa, and whatever was in their
bags is put away or somewhere else. “Noel told us you were moving in. We live in the middle
bedroom. We used to have your room but this one is better for us. This is Antony,” she says
introducing the dark-chocolate-skinned man who looks like Sidney Poitier. He smiles, extends
his hand and says, “Welcome. It’s nice to meet you,” with a hint of British accent while Shelli
deploys a guarded smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Antony,” I say. “I detect an accent. Where are you from
originally?”

A huge grin precedes his answer, “You have a good ear, and I am from Kenya.”

Shelli seems to be studying me with her gaze. I am not flirting, just naturally interested in his
origins.

How comfortable they seem, these two people who, not too many decades ago, would have
been shunned, and accused of engaging in forbidden love only because of their skin color. When
Craig wanted us to hug in public, I usually felt nervous. Early in our marriage, black men and
white women probably would have frowned on inter-racial PDAs. Not long after my wedding, I
was told that some of our relatives actually disapproved of our marriage. With William, I finally
felt confident enough to hug and kiss that very white man in public. But I was much older and social mores about interracial relationships have changed.

“By the way, once a month, we host a Friday night drinking party here. It’s kind of a thing that our friends do at each other’s houses. If that might bother you, we can make other arrangements, but Liz always enjoyed them, and you are certainly welcome,” says Shelli. I appreciate her courage to invite an obviously older woman to a drinking party with twenty-something students.

“I don’t have a problem with it,” I say shaking my head. “I’ll let you know if I do. By the way, I was wondering about the refrigerator. How does refrigerator space work here?

“Oh, we just move stuff around to get to our stuff,” grinning, Antony replies. I remember Phoebe complaining about her college housemates eating other people’s yogurt and cottage cheese. She had rented the house with five other women, during her final year as an undergrad. At Berkeley, she moved in with a best friend, college classmate. Their apartment was orderly but welcoming, a perfect fit, she had told me.

Feeling overtly concerned with the existing practice, I offer my idea. “I have an idea. It’s something I’ve seen work at other places. What would you think about each of us having our dedicated spaces inside the refrigerator?” I had already experienced tucking my own perishables in between the food this one couple already purchased. There are bottles of different sauces, packages of grated cheeses, and bottles of wine from their most recent gathering. I can’t even put anything inside the vegetable bin.”

“Oh, that was Liza’s food that she left in case anybody wants to use it,” Shelli says.
“That’s thoughtful but I don’t need it,” I reply while thinking it was Liza’s responsibility to clean.

“So, how would that work? As long as we’ve been here, everyone just moves stuff around,” Antony says while staring inside the refrigerator.

Walking over to stand beside him I say, “Well, if we each have our own shelf, we know what food belongs to us. We don’t have to move other stuff and remember to put it back. The same could be said for the freezer and even the vegetable bins. I have seen it work very well at other places I have lived.”

“I’m at least willing to try it. But how do we evenly divide the space? What if somebody has more space than us?” I am happy Antony is asking questions but I am wondering if Shelli will come on board.

“That might happen, especially on the top. Another option would be to have each person have a dedicated space on each shelf. That way, we get to use all of the shelves. It might be a little tricky, but this is pretty big refrigerator,” I say, watching Antony’s expression as he concurs.

When I tell Noel how we worked out the refrigerator space, he is truly surprised. But he is more pleased when I tell him I would like to rent the room for a year. “You can rent here as long as you want, and I won’t raise your rent,” he says. It is a shock to me, that he is so generous.

Until I leave for Florida to attend my niece Melanie’s college graduation, I decide that I like my room and housemates. When Noel offers us renters a reward of half off of our next month’s
rent if we find him a renter for any of his three properties, I decline. I am too busy, and I do not know anyone who would know anybody.

Audry is staying with my friend Rick while I am in Florida for my niece Melanie’s college graduation. May already feels hectic with Phoebe’s looming graduation and my multiple starts and stops of chapters inside chapters inside folders stored on my computer. I am realizing that I do not know how to write the story that I want to tell even with work shopped chapters. Flying thirty-thousand feet above the Earth, I feel like I am sitting on the sharp edge of a cliff.

Florida, May 2014

Flo, my middle sister and Melanie’s mother, and I are sharing a hotel room. The ceremony for Bethune-Cookman University graduates is long and grandiose. Melanie is as headstrong and precocious as I remember her being when she was a child and lived with us for a school year. The after-graduation gathering at Melanie’s apartment that she shares with her boyfriend was relaxing, but on our drive back to the hotel, Flo begins griping about him. I offer none of my own observations. The next morning, she is still upset about her daughter’s beau. Silently, I agree with everything she says but I say nothing because I am reading my current Diamond Report and wondering if I printed out the wrong one.

Your challenge is 6. It is about love, loyalty, and sacrifice. Almost every one of your relationships will be tested. Some will survive; others will fall by the wayside. It is not the love and loyalty of the people you are close to that is being tested, but vice versa. How real is your love? Are you a fair-weather friend or are you more than that? During this challenge many of the people close to you will have the opportunity to find out, but in the end, you will find out for yourself.
Your outcome is 3. Three is my Heart’s Desire number so, I smile and read on. You feel less inhibited and more optimistic. Creativity awakens. This is the most desirable outcome and directly affects our ability to experience simple joy and happiness as if the child in you has been re-awakened. You may change your style and taste; dress more colorfully. Your sense of humor is less reserved, and your health improves as a result on your positive outlook.

I feel better. Only time will tell. I plan to go swimming after our trip to Eatonville, the birthplace of Zora Neal Hurston, a favorite author. I plan on wearing the bathing suit I purchased at the local Goodwill where I desperately searched for lightweight clothing. I had packed a cool-weather Connecticut wardrobe and I found the swimsuit, with a comic-book female super-hero motif above the chest, irresistible.

Putting away my report, I listen to Flo still complaining about Melanie’s beau. “I think she can do better,” I say in support of Flo’s critique.

“Wait, what did you say?” Flo asks, turning to look at me and sounding upset.

“I think that she could do better, too,” I answer.

“What are you talking about? What makes you think you should have an opinion about my daughter’s boyfriend?” she replies in a tone I have never heard and a look I have never seen.

“I’m just agreeing with you. I think she could do better,” I repeat unprepared for Flo’s immediate tirade that leaves me roofless and bewildered.

“So, you think you know more about my daughter than me? You sound like you don’t think she can find another man. Well, who are you to judge who my daughter chooses to love? It’s her business. You think you know so much, well get out of this room!” Flo shouts at me.
Many of her judgments of me are baseless. I do not think I know better than anyone else, I do not think her daughter cannot find a man. Her final response is unexpected, but her directive is clear.

“I want you out of this room! Now!”

I sit on my bed, speechless. I can stay and defend myself but I pack my suitcase, go to the hotel lobby, and telephone Derek, our eldest brother, to come and get me in his rented car. But things are in flux.

Sitting inside the car at the hotel parking lot, Derek tells me that he has spoken to Flo about what happened in our room. She does not want to go on the trip, but I do. Derek does not repeat what Flo said.

“I think we should go anyway. Tomorrow we leave, and I want to take home some Eatonville memories.” Derek is a curious study male dominance. The eldest brother, he wants to claim the mantel of Patriarch since our grandfather died. Our own house was a matriarchy despite the fact that Dad was ever-present until he died. I do not think Derek processes the wisdom and charisma that true leaders possess. His response to the matter at hand, a judgment of my character is my proof.

“You know, you were always spoiled,” Derek says, like he is finally getting something off of his chest.

“What?” I ask, sure that I must have mistaken his words.

“You heard me. I said that you were always the spoiled one. Our grandparents spoiled you,” he says with added emphasis and then glances out of his car window.
Of my seven siblings, of mother’s eight children, I was the one that was removed from the house when I was too young to have a say and even now, some fifty years later, sitting inside a car in Florida, I am that little girl with her stomach growling, standing at the kitchen opening asking, “Mother how much longer before we eat?” I am the eight-year-old bathing in cold, recycled bath water inside a dark bathroom. I am the girl with thin arms and legs wearing second-hand-store dresses that nearly swallow my small frame, and I do not know why I do not have new clothing like my sisters. Every hurt that Mother’s “you are spoiled” words had meant to deliver is now absorbed by me inside Derek’s rented car. But I am no longer that little girl. I am a mother with grown children. I am a grandmother. I have tasted the sword of divorce and disillusionment and other people’s words designed to make me feel defenseless.

“How dare you! How dare you say that I was spoiled! I was never spoiled. Big Mama and Daddy did not believe in spoiling children. I have heard this from you guys since I was a kid and it has never been true. You have never said what you think I did or I do that made me spoiled. I was the only one that left the nest, and I was raised different! Different, not spoiled! My earliest values I learned from our grandparents! I was raised different, and I will not apologize for it!” I say, hurt and angry, and justified.

I do not believe Derek expected me to defend myself. I have watched him try to manipulate us sisters, but I have been successful at resisting him. His accusation, unfounded, feels like an attempt at manipulation, but I refuse to be humbled.

“When I first moved back to Mother’s home, my life had been very different from my brothers and sisters; food, clothing, even my bed, different. I went from being an only child to being the seventh of eight, the bottom of the totem pole, and I was not spoiled. I had grown up
with different experiences and expectations, but I was not spoiled. I love my brothers and sisters, but there are times that I do not like them. This is one of those times. We drive to Eatonville and I have a wonderful time collecting priceless memories.

Flo and I both have short memories of the insults that we sisters hurled at each other. I have a lot to think about sitting on the plane home.

FANGS BARED

“You know, she likes being here, but Audry waits for you at my front door,” Rick says, when I come to retrieve her. I like Rick, but my feelings about him are confusing. After meeting him for ice-cream on our first date, he had wanted us to be more than just friends. I was not interested and did not appreciate fully the kind of man he is. We meet twice a month for biking and breakfast. He has a girlfriend of sorts. I am confused about their relationship, but I respect it. He is good for Audry, agreeing to keep her go to Berkeley.

Before I leave for California and Phoebe’s university graduation, I cannot decide if the couple I share the apartment with is obnoxious or devious. Cheng’s return was brief, long enough to pack up and move out. Until Noel finds another renter, we are the only three tenants living in the apartment, and they, well, Shelli is a slob. And, I know this sounds harsh and I hate to think that way, but as beautiful, intelligent, creative, and generous as they are, I sometimes want to pummel them. Well, mostly Shelli.

Shelli is outgoing, outspoken, and courageous. She seems to be the cheerleader in their relationship. I appreciate that she and Antony are enthusiastic environmentalists, but they do not clean up after themselves in the kitchen or the bathroom. In the backyard, they have installed a portable composter for their food scraps but it is unused. Below the kitchen windows, they put
the recyclable bottles, cans, newspapers, whatever, in the plastic bins distributed by New Haven. And she cooks like nobody’s business, the house often smells of rosemary and lemons, but she is messy, leaving red splotches, smashed noodles and spilled drinks where they land.

The closest I’ve come to living in a household like this is, never. The dishes eventually get washed, but the bathtub is left for some imaginary maid to clean. I have kept my frustrations inside and concentrated on going to Berkeley, but the day of reckoning is fast approaching.

In the meantime, I shared an idea with my friend, Michelle, a physician’s assistant. She lives in Santa Cruz, and after my cesarean section with Phoebe, Michelle was the person who advised me on how to heal properly. Running some of my ideas by her first has saved me some embarrassments, and although we don’t see each other often, we are close.

“I’m going to just go up and introduce myself to her,” I tell Michelle, after retreating to my bedroom and changing the subject from my abhorrent housemates. “For the past three years, we’ve been seeing each other at different events around town, and not once has Craig introduced me to his wife! I’ve certainly heard about her from Phoebe and Paulo and even Donovan and Sharon, but not even an introduction from him? It’s just weird! So, that’s what I am going to do.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Michelle says calmly when I run my idea by her. “I think it is the right thing. Let me know how it goes when you get back home.”

That Sunday, before Phoebe’s graduation ceremony, I give Craig’s sisters, mother, and the nieces and nephews hearty, long-time-no-see-you hugs. Craig nods at me in acknowledgement before he and his wife sit separate from everyone else during the graduation. Phoebe, slated to receive her PhD in political science, moved to Washington, D.C. to live with her boyfriend, and
has removed herself from the impact of her parents’ odd behaviors, never mind that we continue to have specific tastes and some friendships in common.

Charmaine, very pregnant arrived to the even on a turn-around flight, and say for lunch and a few other celebrations before she has to leave. I am delighted to see her, in fact to see all three children together in one place lights up my life.

Afterward the ceremony, everyone waits for the graduates in the greeting area outside of the coliseum. All around us I see and hear snapping cameras and introductions of fellow-graduates to parents and friends, laughter and excitement. I separate myself and approach Craig who is actually standing alone.

“Hi Craig, you know, I think it's time that you formally introduce me to your wife,” I say more like a business suggestion than a demand.

He looks startled like the thought had never crossed his mind, but now occurs to him. “Ok. I will. But I need go to do something first, and then I will introduce you,” he says and walks rapidly in the direction opposite from his wife.

Shaking my head, I wonder what is more important than a brief introduction to someone standing less than one-hundred feet away. I believe he is stalling and I walk over to curb where his wife, mother and his sister are standing.

Stopping and facing Tina, I extend a smile and my hand, and in my rambling introduction I say, “Hi, Tina, I don’t know why Craig has not formally introduced us, but it’s nice to finally meet you.”
Clasping my hand like a long, lost friend, she gushes, “I am so glad you came over and did this!”

Surprised after expecting a more reserved response, I answer, “Well, I just thought it was time for us to meet.” I am relieved that she is so welcoming. Has Craig bad-mouthed me like he did Sarai? I wonder. Before I complete my thought, her reply repudiates my understanding that this is our “first” introduction.

“But I have met you before!” she says compellingly. I smile, nod, and gently release my hand.

She sounds convincing, but I am confused. Suddenly, my head feels light, but again, I smile at her and say “Oh, I have to go. I’ll see you later.”

As I walk away from Tina and toward Charmaine, time slows down but my thoughts speed up. What did she mean “but I met you before?” When, where? Wouldn’t I remember? Sometimes people say things to you that you cannot possibly comprehend, and the most you can do is back away and ponder their words.

Craig does not seem upset that I moved to introduce myself to his wife. In fact, he asked for a copy of the cellphone photo I take of him and Tina. While she goes shopping for a replacement sweater, I ride shotgun in Craig’s rental car as we drive to meet family at an ice cream shop near Paulo’s apartment, and, later for a late lunch before Charmaine leaves for Los Angeles.

On my plane ride home and now, inside my bedroom, I replay the Tina conversation until, as if the universe has decided to grant me wisdom at a safe distance, I comprehend Tina’s, telling me that we have met and I slap my forehead. “Oh my God! We met six summers ago!”
My head grows light from the flood of memory. Craig was teaching a weeklong history workshop in Worchester, Massachusetts, and invited me to visit him that weekend.

The drive to Worchester was pleasant, the scenery breathtaking and relaxing. Craig began showing me off to his students and colleagues. His bedroom was in a converted mansion, in a section separate from the classrooms.

In our marriage, I had often been passive initiating love-making but on that weekend, I wanted us to make love inside that historical bedroom.

The next afternoon Craig and I were walking to a meeting room and deciding which talks we each wanted to attend when he waved to a shapely, brunette with a dazzling smile, and gestured for her to join us.

“Tina, this is my wife, Nickie,” he had said proudly. “Honey, I want to introduce you to Tina. She’s here teaching a workshop, too. I’m going to hear your talk this afternoon,” he tells her.

As our smiles widened and our hands shook, I had felt a familiar, faint shiver and eerie anxiety. Walking away I heard an inner-voice say, “She is going to impact your marriage,” hijacking my pleasant thoughts, and I shooed it away.

I share my memory with Michelle and Rhea, who are as shocked as I am. Later, while downloading the graduation photographs from my cellphone, I see the photo that I promised to send to Craig and Tina. He looks happy; she looks pensive. Pushing the send button for his email, the photograph disappears, poof, and no matter how much I try to recall it, it is gone.

Later that day, I remember other things, other words and hints of her existence from Craig. She had been his shadowy hint of “a trophy wife” that I had dismissed the evening we chatted.
inside his office at home. On another night, Craig had played the Gordon Lightfoot balad, “If You Could Read My Mind.” I had felt something faint and shooed it away. “What a tale my thoughts could tell... I don’t know where we went wrong, but the feelings gone, and I just can’t get it back.” A ghostly echo fades.

The signs had been there for two years, and like the “Condemned” sign in Mara’s yard, I had ignored them. I apologized to Craig about the lost photograph. I really was sorry. A week later, Tina and then Craig, each send me their Facebook friend request. I discuss it with Michelle and then Rhea, who understands my reticence. I email Tina, “Thanks for asking, it’s nothing personal, but I’d like to maintain my privacy.” I ignore Craig. I am not being mean, just tired after I realize that Tina might be the innocent bystander in our divorce.

My emotions are murky. “I know Craig. He is quite the Pied Piper. Maybe she wasn’t the home-wrecker that Phoebe had described. I feel that her smile was sincere and that she wants to get to know me better, but I cannot, not yet. I need to sleep and to let sleeping dogs lie.

Grant Me the Serenity

Watching both Antony and Shelli separately and together, on the day I come home famished after a difficult day of teaching in three different classrooms at a Hamden elementary school, I recognize in both of them a stubborn and argumentative characteristic that I often tackle within myself. They are eating dinner at the kitchen table while the aroma of an Italian sauce seeps into my room while I change into loose jeans and a cotton blouse.

Since I chastised Antony about the grime he left inside the bathtub, it has been spotless. Both of them are cleaning up the bathroom after they use it, and the other shared spaces are more comfortable for relaxing. Noel removed that horrific aquarium. I have painted my own room
after Kenton, Noel’s Mr. Fix-it, never showed up. Last week, I attended Antony and Shelli’s monthly drinking party. It was fun talking to people mostly in their mid-to-late twenties. I did not sing with them, but I certainly swayed in unison, laughed at the jokes and failed to win a few of the games. I turned in at 11 P.M., and woke up at 1 A.M. to hear the guests finally leaving. I did not complain when one of them had spent the night on the sofa.

Vickie, a quiet, studious, middle-aged woman has moved into the rear bedroom a few months after Noel had asked me for ideas on staging it for renting. Like a fish to water, I dove into the project and rearranged the furniture and brought a few items from the basement to liven up the room. The best window view is the treetops because, below, the parking lot looks shabby with overgrown vegetation. Mostly, Vickie keeps to herself and she is gone a lot — working graveyard and overtime as a 911 operator. Noel replaced the old refrigerator with a newer, larger, used refrigerator where new packets of my salad mix rots after a few days and ice cream and cubes go to die.

Arriving home after a long day of teaching and as usual, famished, I stare into the kitchen sink filled with dirty water and dishes. The sink counter is crowded with pots and pans, implements of Shelli’s latest, fabulously fragranced meal. I am livid, and I yell, “What the fuck! How can anyone else cook when this kitchen is such a mess? I am tired of it. I need to cook my dinner. Please, clean up this mess, now!” I yell at them.

“What the fuck back to you. You don’t own this kitchen!” Shelli shouts back after putting down her fork. I think that secretly, she has been waiting for a showdown. Antony looks at me, silent and then Shelli, and lays down his own fork.
“I pay for the use of this kitchen, the bathroom, and all of the common areas here,” I shout back, “and now that I want to use this space to cook, it’s too fucking filthy, and I would appreciate you at least clearing out the sink so someone else can use it!” I say, and I return to my room to fume.

Antony knocks on the door half an hour later. “I want to apologize. We do need to clean up our messes and we will be better at it,” he says.

“Thank you,” I say and invite him into my room. Closing the door, I say, “Look, I don’t like coming home and fighting about the kitchen any more than you want to hear it. I’m just tired.” “deeply, I say “We are all adults here. But thank you.”

They clean it up but I am too tired to cook so I eat ramen. The next morning, Shelli is standing inside the kitchen as I enter to make some tea. She hands me a handwritten note. I wanted to give this to you. “I don’t know what happened, but I am sorry. Sometimes I just blow up when I feel threatened. My mother says that I need to watch my temper.” I can understand her passion. I possess that passion when someone challenges my personhood without a just reason, but I know that mine was reasonable and that her reaction, like mine can be, was instinctual. I read the note and though I cannot remember the words, they struck a chord of recognition and revealed her own search for reconciliation with her mother. Her mother is divorced and concerned about her daughter’s relationship with her boyfriend. I do understand her concern and if I could talk to her, I would tell her to let them be, watch what they do.

Unable to hold back my tears, I look at her and we hug. Both of us apologize for yesterday. A few months later, Antony’s history is even more revealing.
“Would you like to sign Antony’s birthday card?” Shelli asks. It’s May, and Gemini is the zodiac sign in play, and confirming what I think I know about him. He is Gemini, amiable and mercurial but often in a solitary way.

“So, are you planning anything special for his birthday?” I ask as I sign the card.

“Well, actually, his birth history is complicated. His father has two wives, and their tribe does not keep good records of birth, so Antony is not sure what day he was born.” Shelli says.

“Wow,” I say in recognition that this quiet and amiable young man does not know the date of his birth and has chosen one himself, and yet it seems to fit him—astrologically speaking, except I do not remember thinking he has ever lied to me. Gemini can get away with stretching any truth. I can only imagine how he must feel about the mystery of the day of his birth, and it takes me back to the dining room table in my mother’s house but I let it go.

On the other hand, I know something that Shelli does not. Antony is just as nervous about taking her, a white woman, to Kenya to visit his family at the end of the year. Shelli wants marriage and his children; and Antony is not too keen on either in their near future. He has not ruled it out but he feels that he is too young. I know these things because people talk to me. Strangers tell me their life stories. They tell me I am an old soul. I believe that both Antony and Shelli are old souls, old souls that finally understand that I am not their enemy.

Why This, Why Now?

Gardena, California September 21, 2013

In September, as I pack to leave the condo where Charmaine lives with my newborn granddaughter, her father summons me into his kitchen. It is an intrusion on my concentration, and I
am already skittish about flying when Mercury is in retrograde, although I have taken great pains to triple check flight time, luggage, my identification, and carry-on limits. Entering his kitchen, I see Drew leaning against his refrigerator. I have not told anyone yet, but I want to move back to California or maybe Albuquerque. The ten days that I have been here have been relaxing and pleasurable. He and I have gone to dinner and, on another day, the movies. We talked over the phone quite a bit before I arrived, and for the most part, it has been a pleasure spending time with him

“I wanted to clear up something that has been bothering me,” he begins in his deep baritone. Now in his seventies, Drew has become more spiritual and politically minded. On his last birthday, I sent him his Numerology Personal Profile. He wants to talk about two days ago, when I picked him up in his car at LAX and he noticed that the parking brake was set.

“I can’t believe that you set the parking brake,” he had said and then released it. I reset it and said, “As long as I drive, I will set the parking brake. I realized that cars can roll when it isn’t set,” I had said, believing the issue was resolved. I guess I was wrong.

“I didn’t like how you spoke to me a few days ago,” he says looking down at me like some benevolent overlord.

“Excuse me? I have no idea what you are talking about,” I say, confused.

“When I asked you about the parking break, the tone of your response bothered me,” he says as if his life depends on my apology.

I feel that I will be lying if I apologize for doing something I feel was correct, and no matter how many ways to Sunday I attempt to explain to him why I will set that brake, he does not
accept my answer, so out of frustration I say a few curse words that I immediately forget, and I walk out of the kitchen.

Hopefully, I have clearly ejected Drew’s sexist way of thinking of me as that fresh, feminine damsel whom he first met long, long ago. That fascinating girl, who had cooked and served his dinner, washed his undies, cleaned the house and had acted, oh, so helpless—had died two years after he abandoned her with his infant daughter. I am a woman who walked away from three marriage proposals to Tyrone because he could not stop seeing his other “friend.”

Standing in a sloth paced line at LAX, I think about these two important men in my life. Drew has chosen celibacy and Tyrone is a widower. Thinking about Craig, I recall being surprised at Tina’s annoyed tone when talking to him at Phoebe’s wedding reception. Finally, standing at the check-in counter, the past is packed away when the clerk tells me that I am too late to board my flight home.

Craig’s latest email about getting a divorce is shocking but I am preparing a major move. He is divorcing the woman he left me for. The Runes have advised me to wait. I do, and I see him around town and occasionally, we see each other at mutually-liked events. Walking behind him and his date at a guitar recital, I say “Hi, Craig,” and he turned around to nervously introduce me to his date. I have seen him with other women and I have felt the pang of rejection of me as his soul mate. I conclude that either I will finally be done with him or we will rediscover each other. Still, the Runes and tarot cards had said to wait.
DECEMBER 23, 2014

Road Skills

I had not considered the weather when I first imagined driving from Connecticut to California beginning on December 23. It was an all-encompassing bad idea, so my plans to move are on hold. Instead, I decide to take the Amtrak to Chicago and spend Christmas with Phoebe’s family. Heavy snow is falling along the train route, causing both train and flight delays. Whatever plans I had imagined for me and Audry driving across a green continent, are moot. She is living comfortably with her new family.

My current itinerary is as follows, December 24 to January 5, 2015 I will be travelling. First stop is Phoebe and Darren’s home until December 28th. Then, I will take the train to see Jillian, Craig’s mother and my good friend. There, we will welcome the New Year and I will begin my return home on January 3, 2015.

I do not know what, if anything is waiting in the wings for Craig or me, but I have learned to embrace living more fully in the moment, to enjoy the present while hoping for a good future. I will call my mother on Christmas and New Year’s Day to say, “I love you.”
Epilogue

So wake me up when it’s all over
when I’m wiser and I’m older
all this time I’ve been finding myself
and I didn’t know I was lost.

Avicii

July 31, 2016

Jerome, My Hero

We may be out of Connecticut, but we are not yet out of the woods. While driving in the fast lane on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and listening to one of Jerome’s carefully selected mixed CD’s, the front-driver’s-side tire blows out. Jerome, my first cousin who had heard about my plan to drive across the country alone, insisted on coming from California to escort me and see if he could beat his previous record of two days driving from New York to Los Angeles. Until the blowout, luck has been our lady. Traffic is light, and we are able to safely drive to an off ramp, where Jerome unpacks my stuffed hatchback to get to the donut tire. My belongings neatly lining the grassy area next to our car, draws the attention of a highway patrolman.

After frantically explaining our predicament to AAA, the customer service person tells me that nearest tire repair service is a Wal-Mart a quarter mile away from the off ramp. The patient highway patrolman listens to our plight and offers to drive me and my blown tire to and from the Wal-Mart. While my tire is being checked for possible repair because driving to California on a donut tire is out of the question, I learn that the patrolman, Harold, is an Iraq War veteran, married, and a father. I tell him that three of my brothers are Vietnam era veterans although only the eldest one served in Vietnam. We both reveal a love of classic rock, antique furniture, and a penchant for helping others.
“I will not leave until you two are safely on the road,” he tells me as we drive back to my car.

“We patrol specific areas, driving on and off the highway during our shift. The things we discover are no longer surprising. One guy had an AK47 inside his trunk.” After his shift ends, Harold remains with us.

“You’re lucky you were close by because we’ve never seen this kind of fray inside of a tire,” the Wal-Mart tire repairman had said, showing me the cause of the blowout. I purchased the new tire that my patient, and now exhausted cousin mounts, and then he repacks the car while the Harold guides exiting cars away from us. He will leave no man and woman behind and drives half a mile with us to assure we are safely on the road.

Two years after my original plans, I finally drove my car from Connecticut to California. I had left a disheveled living room for Vickie to organize and an equally disarrayed bedroom for the new tenant to deal with since she had insisted on moving in a day early. Finally, while driving, I had telephoned Noel to apologize for the predicament that made me look as irresponsible as some of his previous tenants.

But the two-year delay of my move to California is both informative and transformative. My 2014 Diamond Report had presented me with specific challenges to listen more closely to my heart’s yearnings instead of only my head, and to trust my “gut feelings” but not only my “emotions” when working with others in quasi partnerships. I began to recognize my failures as guides to greater insight. “Sometimes you learn more from the tone than from the content,” the report had concluded.
My emotional and physical life began be more stabilize when I moved to Woodland Street. I strengthened my bonds with my old friends while being less inhibited in embracing new friendships.

A month before my departure, Craig and I finally completed one remaining unfinished piece of business. He signed over his half of our joint stock, the ones he had denied ever promising to give me the day we had revised our 2009 divorce decree. I hear that he is in a serious relationship, and this time I am not the last to know.

June, 2016 – I race to get to the Young Men’s Institute Library just a five-minute drive from my apartment. For more than a year, I have been attending their monthly short story readings by local actors and tonight, after struggling to locate a parking spot, I sit in a seat at the rear of the room next to the refreshment table. I am late, and the reading of the first story has already begun. Scanning the room for a familiar face, I am surprised to see Craig. Seated next to him is a thin, very dark-skinned woman. Her hair is styled in a straight-textured chin-length bob. Because she keeps her head turned down at an odd angle, I cannot see her face. I am curious because I have never seen Craig at these events but watching her constantly fidget with her overcoat, she seems to be paying scant attention to the story telling. Craig occasionally reaches over to help her adjust her coat and returns his attention to the reading. This is all rather curious and none of my business because I am leaving in August, but once again, we end up at the same place because of a shared interest.

During the question-and-answer session, the facilitator instructs everyone to form a circle, something I do not ever remember us doing, and I realize that the only remaining space is on the
next to the woman seated next to Craig. She says nothing, does not turn her head to say anything to me.

The facilitator, who is also a friend of mine, begins asking the audience for their interpretations of the motives of the couple in the final story. He repeatedly refers to the couple as “the Thurstons.” Each time he says the Thurston’s, I am stunned, but I do not mention his gaffe while in the circle. Craig and I, sitting a few seats apart, are the main responders to the questions. At the end of the program, he and I acknowledge each other with a nod, and he and the woman leave.

After the gathering ends and everyone has gone except those of us remaining behind to help clean up, I mention the gaffe to my friend, the facilitator.

“I’m just curious. Why did you refer to the couple as the Thurstons? I am smiling and stacking unused paper cups.

“What are you talking about? I did not say the Thurstons,” he answers definitively and gathers together the flyers on the table.

“Uh, yes, you did,” says the other young man helping with cleanup.

“You’re kidding, right? Oh, my goodness. I am so sorry. I had no idea,” he says, appalled and then sits down for a minute.

Laughing, I say, “I’m sure it was Freudian. Actually, it was pretty funny,” I say. I met this man post-divorce but he knows that Craig and I were married through other mutual friends.
Later that night, after I am in bed, Craig sends me a text message. “It was really nice to see you at the reading. My friend, Sapphire, had wanted to meet you, and I thought it would be good for her to attend a reading.”

Why is he telling me this? Is she some high school student that he is helping to expand her horizons? Why does she want to meet me? What has he told her are my unasked questions. “I didn’t know. What does she do?” I ask instead.

“She’s a poet,” he responds. He cannot tell me if she is published or what kind of poetry she writes. It sounds romantic and yet, he does not explain why he did not introduce us. “It was nice to see you. Goodnight.” I turn off my cellphone.

For four years, Craig had made no overtures to introduce me to his Teri, and when I had finally understood why (because he had introduced us four years earlier); I was upset with him, not her. Tonight, sitting a few seats away he had made no overtures to introduce Sapphire. It was the wife debacle all over. The man that I had once loved truly, madly, and deeply for so long and long after he had left, no longer holds that space in my heart, and finally, I wish him well.

The drive to California had its hilarious moments, and Jerome and I talked about everything under the sun the whole trip. We even cleared the air about the inheritance from my grandmother. At the end of the trip, Jerome, who had hoped to beat his previous record driving from New York to California in two days, did not. We arrived in California in two and a half days. My question to Mother will wait.
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