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CITY LIMITS

My mother died suddenly. By that, I suppose I mean unexpectedly. Or by that, I suppose I mean: at a moment when I was not ready for it. Though I thought I had been ready for years, since her slow mental decline had deepened into Alzheimer's. I have (somehow) reached my early fifties, an age my younger self imagined as so advanced I would somehow be immune to the pain of losing a parent—a parent who, I also naively imagined, would by then be so old as to be interchangeable with any other old person and therefore not capable of causing an acute sense of loss.

I received the call while striding down a Manhattan sidewalk feeling my heart might burst. Being back in the city I consider home, during a precious weekend visiting friends, gave me a sense of true aliveness I had not experienced since I had relocated to Phoenix almost two years prior. I never felt like myself in Arizona. But I could not stand to miss the end of my mother's life, nor could I take her from the only place familiar to her after two decades of sun-drenched retirement. There, she sometimes happily forgot that my dad had been gone for the past four years. Eventually she forgot everything and surrendered to full-time care at the memory facility she had picked out for herself in one of her last truly lucid acts.

The nurse who broke the news, as I strained to hear her on my cell above the din of traffic, was one that I knew. I noted true sympathy in her voice. Envisioned her sitting at the administrative desk in the hallway I had visited every day for months. Shook my head at the dissonance of the moment. This did not match what I had been imagining as the event of my mother's death. Without realizing my own expectations, I had assumed I would be sitting at her bedside, holding one of her frail, veined hands. Running my fingertips over her brittle nails. Faint beeping from various machines marking the beating of her kind heart. Her eyes already closed, her face peaceful, her treasonous brain finally calm. I would whisper to her that I loved her and thank her for my life. The beeping would slow. Then stop. I would weep over her chest, so grateful for who she was to me. Would something like a soul leave my mother's body at the moment of her death? Would part of it merge with me and stay once the physicality of her was gone? Would something in the experience make me doubt my life-long atheism?

The constant crowd jostled me as I attempted to press myself against an adjacent building while thanking the nurse for calling. I did weep then,

though less for my mother than for myself and the way this poorly timed trip east—an arbitrary undertaking at an arbitrary time, when there had been no sign her condition would change very soon—had cost me the answers to questions I had not even been aware of asking. And now my last remaining family member was gone, without any sort of goodbye. New Yorkers are supposed to be rude and callous, but at least three people stopped dead on the sidewalk at the sight of my tears to ask if I needed help. I must have looked at them blankly. Could they help me? Who, or what, could help me now?



Once I am irreversibly untethered from my origins, some inner magnet prevails in pulling me east for good. I sense it will be the last move I ever choose to make. At dawn on the first morning possible after settling my mother's affairs and packing all I own into a trailer hitched to my car, I turn myself back toward New York, vengefully refusing Phoenix any sort of goodbye via the rearview mirror.

Well after dark, I arrive on the western outskirts of Austin to spend a couple nights with a friend made in my young adulthood. As her teenage children bang around the house and occasionally swarm us, loud and itching with impatient life, Karen and I reminisce about past times and mutual acquaintances. So many strands of common history compose the fabric of the conversation we have been keeping for decades. As memories arise, I poke at various old wounds and find them scabbed or even scarred over, unaffected by (or maybe just minor in comparison with) the fresh, gaping gouge of my mother's death. The heightened state of feeling I have inhabited since that phone call on a Manhattan sidewalk now seems like a superpower, allowing me to recall obscure details of the past that leave Karen and me howling with amusement at our younger selves.

When I hug her goodbye, I set out again with a sense of being able to access my entire life, every facet of it, at will. Maybe that is why, when I drive past Zilker Park—the venue for Austin City Limits—on my way to I-35, a memory that is not even mine bubbles up from somewhere sacred.



I was thirty-nine when I had a five-month affair with a married man. When I think of him, as I often do, it is sometimes hard to believe that it was me. But then I have to admit: I did that. I undressed him, learned his body, and found a level of emotional intimacy with him beyond anything

I had known or have known since. I gripped the roped muscles of his forearms and gazed into his eyes without shame at every opportunity during the too-short time that he was mine. Never did I harbor any sense of guilt over what I was doing. For some reason, that still surprises me. But when I remember the feeling of laying my cheek against the wiry hair on his chest and watching his long, lean legs stretch away from us as his hand idly stroked my naked back, both our bodies young and lithe and strong and our happiness overwhelming any need to speak, I feel nothing except gratitude.

His marriage was unhappy, of course. Too young, too impulsive, too frightened of being alone to make a sound decision. Two children, too quickly. But he had no intention of leaving his wife. He was more accepting of his own misery than of the idea of his kids experiencing a divorce. On this point, he was completely clear. Unwavering. And when, over the course of those dream-like months, he sensed that I might be assuming or imagining something other than an inevitable ending for us, he would gently but firmly restate his intentions. I would hate him for that in those moments. I felt rejected. Put in my place. But afterward, in quiet solitude, when I tried desperately to re-center myself and remind myself of the life I would continue to lead and enjoy when my time with him was over, I was thankful to him for that clarity. It gave me a reason not to lose my grip on reality, as the intensity of our connection kept tempting me to do. I was slow to realize that I was in love with him. I had never been in love before.

Our relationship existed in secret and within the confines of a research base in Antarctica, where we met when we were both contract workers. The days were the same as the nights: bone-chillingly cold and utterly dark. We were as far from any signs of civilization as we could be without leaving this planet. Maybe this feeling of being outside the limits of normal human existence led me to feel there were no limits on what we were capable of being to each other, regardless of him being a decade my junior, regardless of the restrictions that existed in that other world, the world of grass and smells and streets and houses and children.

One night, as usual, I climbed over him into my narrow twin bed to my side, against the wall. He always preferred I be closer to the wall when we relaxed together. When I asked him why, he said he thought it was a protector impulse; he liked knowing that if someone or something burst into the room to attack us, the creature in question would have to go through him to get to me. He was sheepish as he explained, knowing it was slightly silly but standing by the preference nonetheless. This night, he rolled toward me onto his side as I turned onto my back, tenting my

knees up over his thighs. He held me for a long time before asking if I thought I could fall asleep in this position, as he was incredibly comfortable. I kissed him and turned out the light.

Then he added, in the darkness, that he also prefers to be on the inside of a spooning position, with his back to my stomach. He asked if I thought that was strange. When I said no, he said he knew why he felt like that: it was the same protective stance he would take if he needed to barrel through a crowd with a woman clinging to his back. I asked if he had previously in his life needed to save many women from dangerous crowds by barreling through the masses while being held from behind. Not many, and not dangerous ones, he said—failing to notice, or choosing to ignore, the gentle teasing in my question. But he remembered one time in particular.

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Years ago, shortly before he met his wife and his life changed dramatically, he went alone to the headliner show at Austin City Limits. Waiting for the band to take the stage, he struck up a conversation with a girl who was also there solo. As the concert got going, she made a passing comment about wishing they were closer to the stage. So he told her to wrap her arms around him from behind, and then he dodged and wove his way through thousands of people, surfing the increasingly dense crowd until they were less than twenty feet away from the performers.

As he spoke, I could see and feel the scene so vividly that I almost believed he was telling me about an experience from my own past. I knew him well enough by then to know he would have been far too shy to have done such a thing were he not high on weed—his favored coping strategy at the time—as he entered the park grounds. I could feel the humidity, the closeness, and the lingering heat of the Austin day. I could see the girl: slight, and pretty in an understated way. Who initiated the conversation? Did she spot him first, his gentle eyes, attractive height, and quiet manner drawing her attention and interest away from the obnoxious, rowdy throng? Did she sidle closer to him, feigning nonchalance? Did she finally catch his eye and smile, her heart maybe skipping a beat at the kind, unguarded smile he returned to her?

Even now, I can sense the wheels turning in his mind and the determination that grips him in the moments after her off-hand, seemingly impossible wishing aloud to be closer to the stage. I can sense the swelling feeling of capability and possibility in his chest as he gets a vision of what he is about to do. I know the way that this mission he has been

given, this drive he has to do something nice and chivalrous for a stranger, causes his shyness to retreat. I hear him suggesting, deferentially, that if she is comfortable with it, she should stand behind him and hold onto him. Grinning, he refuses to tell her what he is about to do. Silently, just by looking into her eyes, he asks her to trust him. And she can see in the depths of blue there that he is trustworthy. She gives a subtle nod and smile of agreement.

I know, like I know my own skin, the feeling of stepping up to him, the moment of letting my chest press against his back, the intimacy stealing a breath from me as I thread my arms under his and interlace them around his lower ribs., first tentatively, and then squeezing him more firmly. His solidity, and the smell of him, so clean and inviting. The tensed wall of his abdominal muscles. Pressing my cheek against his soft shirt in the space between his shoulder blades.

“Hold on tight, no matter what,” he says, glancing back at me before crossing his own forearms over mine and clasping my hands with his to help hold me against him. He squeezes my fingers, silently asking if I am ready. I squeeze back: Yes.

And then he begins to move, walking with strong strides but leading with his shoulders, forcing me to lean on him even more, to trust more than I realized I would have to when I first agreed to whatever is happening. Committing totally, making myself complicit in however this goes and wherever it takes us. I try to keep my steps synched with his, touching down just outside of where he places his own feet, sometimes jostling the legs of the people we are pushing past. It feels magical: how easy it is to keep pace with him, how fluidly our bodies fit together. I notice, with tenderness and appreciation, the increasing pace of his breath and intensity of his concentration as the crowd thickens and he makes ever swifter, calculated decisions on the best path to take through the din. I am aware of the agitated reactions we leave in our wake, our motion causing ever-greater disturbance as he forces through spaces in the crowd that become too narrow to navigate without jarring collisions of shoulders and elbows. My brain frets over the consequences of what we are doing, but my body stays melded to his implicitly.

Eventually I just close my eyes, knowing that wherever he steers, I want to go, that wild horses couldn't drag me away, that it does not matter how little I know him or how reckless this may be. All that matters is this feeling of life and purpose flowing between us and a rightness I will not even try to define. We keep pushing through until there is nowhere else to go and I only know it is the end when he slows and then stops, breath

thick. People press in around us from every direction. I hook my hands on top of his shoulders from the front and use that leverage to rise to tip-toe and peek past his neck for a view of where we are: so close to the stage I can see beads of sweat running down the band members' faces. So close to him, I could take his earlobe between my teeth and hold it there, firmly enough to keep, but not so sharply that he wants to pull away.



They watched the rest of the concert from that vantage point. And when it was over, they walked together out of the park, said goodbye, and never saw each other again. They did not exchange phone numbers, did not make any promises or false attempts at anything beyond what had happened at that specific time and in that specific place. I asked him what her name was, but he could not remember — was not even sure if he had ever asked her name. In the darkness, I told him: I bet she remembers you, I bet she remembers that moment in her life and it means something to her. He did not respond immediately, and the lack of light in my tiny room was so absolute that I could not even see enough of his face to read a shadow of his expression. So I waited. Eventually he said, in a shrugging voice: Maybe, I don't know. I know, I told him, She remembers. He did not reply. Soon we both dozed off, the sides of our heads tilted against each other's in comforting contact.

After that night, we had a couple more months of stolen daytime glances and clandestine nights together before the relentless wheels of life took us each back to our existences as they had been before we met. In retrospect, I can say that the death of that affair felt similar to losing my mother: though I knew quite well the end was coming, the pain of it actually happening still tore my heart from its moorings and left me hollow. Within a year, that emptiness began to feel like a haunted space, something not quite real. Almost as if we had never been anything to each other. Or worse: that maybe he had not even existed. Even the memory of him telling me, as we struggled to say goodbye, that he would look back on our time together and be grateful that for at least a few months of his life he was truly happy — even that soon felt like part of a dream I once had.

Except that, on our last night together, I already knew I was pregnant. Too newly for him to have noticed the lack of a timely period. But enough that an unprecedented two-week lateness, the persistent soreness of my breasts, and a strange feeling of constant fullness left no doubt in my mind what was happening. I am still not completely sure why I did not tell him. I think it just seemed grotesque to burden our bond with something as trite as an unplanned pregnancy. I think that, as he kissed

me goodbye, part of him was relieved he would not be called to atone for the supposed sin of our liaison. I believe he felt sadness as I did. I believe he loved me. But I know he was also excited to return to his familiar life, to being a father and a husband, without consequence. And I loved him too and did not want to ruin that for him.

Shortly after I got home consistent nausea set in, prompting me to buy a pregnancy test. The positive result made it easier for me to push aside my longing and nostalgia and objectively consider each combination of options available to me: have the baby or not; tell him or not. I had never felt the desire for a child and—knocking on the door of forty as I was at the time—assumed I never would. When I thought of my future, I imagined the second half of my life rich with friends, travel, hard-earned self-knowledge, and freedom from the emotional constraints of a husband or the financial responsibilities of a dependent. On the other hand, I had never been pregnant before. Neglecting to find the time or urge to pursue having a baby seemed a very different thing than forcibly rejecting one that was already on its way to me.

I still had some time to make a decision and tried, through the panic and pressure and urgency, to remind myself of that. I was determined to choose wisely. Until one night, two weeks after returning home, I woke with strong cramping, blood leaking onto the bed sheets, and no decisions to make, after all.



Heading east out of Austin, I indulge in a familiar mental calculation and then glance at the empty passenger seat beside me, imagining there is a twelve-year-old boy belted in there. He has gotten so big; he is growing up so fast. Is he reading? Playing a video game? Is he chatting comfortably with me? Or staring sullenly out the window? Does he have his father's reserve, his deep undercurrent of intelligence, his softly cleft chin? Like him, does my son have a selfless streak that I both envy and have trouble understanding?

Or does he resemble my mother? Does he have the thin, impossibly soft hair that I loved to run my fingers over as a child? Her cheekbones, sculpted as works of art? Her knack for always saying the perfect, most disarming thing in an awkward situation? Does he make even the most mundane routines of life fun through the cheerfulness she embodied?

If he had come to be, I would still have both of them with me.

For a couple of years after the miscarriage, I would occasionally wonder if I should try to find a man who was free to really be with me and try to get pregnant again. Maybe I was making a grave mistake by not creating another person to guide me through my old age and death as I had done for my mother. But a fear of ending up alone has never struck me as adequate justification for marrying or reproducing. And my mother was alone, in the end, despite everything. Probably we all are, regardless of our most frantic efforts.

But at the same time, never alone. I steer my car among many on this freeway, east toward a city crowded with humanity. No one close enough to witness my sobbing at the acute gorgeousness of all that I have had and all that I have lost, but the world teeming nonetheless with people just like me, owners of lives that radiate longing, joy and suffering. Our common humanity a comfort. The lines of the road blur through my tears, and I drive on.