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## Hair on Fire: Essays from a Life

Lee Kahrs

*University of Southern Maine*, [kahrslee@gmail.com](mailto:kahrslee@gmail.com)

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Hair on Fire: Essays from a Life

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Lee J. Kahrs

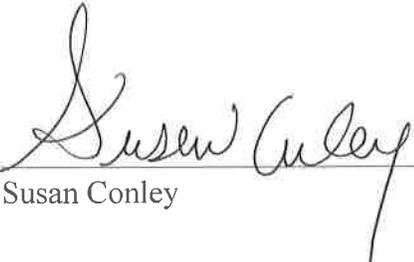
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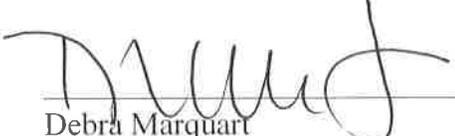
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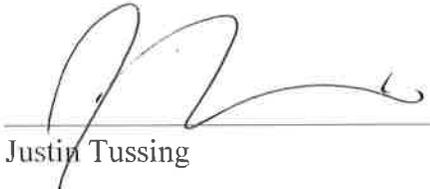
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Lee J. Kahrs entitled *Hair of Fire: Essays from a Life* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Susan Conley      Advisor

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Debra Marquart      Reader

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Justin Tussing      Director

Accepted

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Adam-Max Tuchinsky      Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

## **Abstract**

This collection of essays comprises a memoir of the last 17 years of the author's life, beginning with the decision to get sober and flashing back to her experience living through 9/11 in New York City. Her 9/11 experience was the catalyst for her decision to flee New York and seek a better life in Vermont. While she found love and the family she always wanted, her alcoholism grew until she decided to quit in order to save her family, and herself.

Life in Vermont proved to be rich with the opportunity for a new career in journalism and domestic life in the county, replete with chickens and the annual quest for firewood. But with that rural life came the personal evolution that comes with sobriety, the reckoning with demons — religion, family — as well as the unexpected challenges evoked by medicine and marriage. Throughout this journey, the one constant throughout, the narrator's Butch lesbian identity, comes more sharply into focus and informs all of her life experiences, proving that we are not all that different from one another.

## **Acknowledgements**

My mother has been telling me what a great writer I am since I could hold a pencil. She and my Dad have always supported my writing, clipping my news stories with pride, and I am so grateful to them for their unwavering belief in me.

My writing grandparent Fran Bull has been reading my work since just a few years ago when I was applying to Breadloaf for fun. When I broached the idea of getting my MFA, she was thrilled and helped me with my application essays, even writing a letter of recommendation. Thank you, Fran, for your warm light of constant support. I also have to thank my wife Sarah. Even though we are getting divorced, she has always, always encouraged my writing talents. I got sober for me, but for her and for our family as well, and if I hadn't, I would be writing this today. She has stood by me and encouraged me to pursue my writing since day one, and there is not enough chocolate in the world to thank her for that.

Finally, while the entire faculty of the Stonecoast MFA program consists of talented and giving human beings, Susan Conley made a mark. She shepherded me and my self-doubt from day one as a Firstie when I cried in workshop over a stupid cat essay, then as my first semester mentor with encouragement that made me soar in my writing and believe that I was, indeed, a writer. In this final semester as my mentor once again, Susan has been a keen editor and supportive friend whose enthusiasm for my work has only grown. She pushed me for more emotional depth and challenged me to dive deeper to a place I was terrified to go. She did that because she believed in me. I am indebted to

her thoughtful criticism, stalwart support of my talent, and consistent belief in me to grow beyond Stonecoast, because thanks to her, I believe it, too.

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## Preface

This manuscript was 30 years in the making. Thirty years of growth and evolution, of drunken nights and fuzzy mornings, of one night stands and failed relationships. This manuscript comes after three decades of dreaming, wishing and posturing, of discovering Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Kerouac and Burroughs, Hunter S. Thompson and Jim Carroll, and copying a lifestyle without doing the work.

It wasn't until I got sober at the age of 43 that the real work began, and the sentences formed in my head, my words. It's as if the alcohol plugged the brain veins carrying any literary prowess, and sobriety chipped away at the dam until it broke.

That said, I'd like to thank Hemingway and journalism for teaching me the art of simplicity and spare style, Thompson and Burroughs for irreverence and originality. I'd also like to thank Joan Didion and Patti Smith for their intellect on the page and the sheer beauty of their words and sentences. I am also forever grateful to Leslie Feinberg, who put the Butch lesbian experience into frank and arresting words in *Stone Butch Blues*, as well as Alison Bechdel and Lisa Kron for *Fun Home the Musical*, based on Bechdel's graphic novel, in which a lesbian was portrayed on Broadway for the first time.

There are so many more, but the authors I've listed here are the key players whose work helped shape my literary consciousness over the years. Armed with these influences and the guidance of my Stonecoast mentors, the goal of this manuscript was to offer a new, multi-faceted voice in creative nonfiction. Over the last two years at Stonecoast, I looked around and realized just how underrepresented Butch lesbians are, not only in publishing, but in film and television as well. The result was my third semester project,

*Butch Lives Matter: Examining the Dearth and Design of Butch Lesbian Characters in Modern Literature and Culture, from the “Well of Loneliness” to “Fun Home”.*

But I do not want to be another lesbian writer. I do not want readers to look at this manuscript as merely another lesbian book. The whole point of *Hair on Fire: Essays From a Life* is just that: To show that being a Butch lesbian is who I am, that it’s my life, one that includes many of the same aspects and forces of many other people, gay and straight alike. The essays I offer here deal with chickens and firewood and heartbreak and home repair and my relationship with my body, as well as gay-specific issues like coming out, and being rejected by the Catholic church.

Walking around in this world, I see that straight people don’t understand the Butch lesbian, and may have little or no experience in knowing a Butch. Consider this manuscript my introduction, and attempt to remove some of the misunderstanding and ignorance.

Still, if Stonecoast has taught me anything, it’s that the learning never stops. It’s not enough to read great works and put words down on paper. It’s not enough to hone the craft of writing by writing. I just learned this.

In April 2018, with five weeks left before the Stonecoast thesis deadline, I rented a cottage on Togus Pond just east of Augusta. My goal was to do a big push on my thesis, and get to the point where all the front matter was formatted, all the content was written and the preface was done. That would give me a few weeks of revision before I sent the thing off to the printers in mid-May.

I was completely emotionally unprepared for that experience. The aloneness, with no dogs, no cats, no other human being but myself, no television, it was overwhelming,

which was odd because I am someone who likes to be alone, needs to be alone. I crave that time, and I schedule it into my weekly life. I'm a writer. It is a uniquely solitary endeavor. The thought of spending 10 days alone in a lakeside cottage in Maine had been a dream of mine for at least two decades. Ahhhh... totally alone with my thoughts, no one making demands on me but the ones I make on myself. Eat when I want, sleep when I want, write when I want. Peace and quiet.

And in my mind, the break couldn't have come at a better time. I was in the last week of medical leave from work recovering from a hysterectomy, and my wife had left me two months earlier. I had a lot of shit going on. Ten days alone to write would be just what I needed.

Young's Point Cottage cabin was a two-bedroom Cape built in 1937 with dark oak hardwood floors and moldings throughout, milled across the pond. The owner's grandfather built the cottage himself. It sat just 30 feet from the water's edge, granite steps leading into the water, on a large lot with no close neighbors. Ancient hemlocks towered over the point, and dead oak leaves and pine needles covered the ground instead of grass.

Winter was loathe to go and spring was two weeks behind schedule. A thin layer of ice still covered the pond when I arrived on April 19, the edge of it 20 feet from shore. Each day for three days, the edge retreated as temperatures rose into the forties, and finally a stiff wind from the north started pushing the ice down the lake. By Sunday, temperatures were in the 60s and the ice was out on Togus Pond.

When young eagles and ospreys weren't flying overhead like pterodactyls, their enormous wings buffeting the air with fwoomf-fwoomf-fwoomf, they had been gathering

in small groups on the ice in the middle of the pond. It often looked like a small large bird convention as they waited for more and more open water to fish.

The loons arrived the next day, two pair. The Merganser couples swam by often and close to shore, chatting in their own language. Gulls started to form in huge groups on the lake, and when they took off en mass, it looking like white mist lifting.

The cottage had been winterized and the electrical was updated to a point, but there was only one three-prong outlet in the kitchen. I had to set up my workspace on a round café table in the small dining room near the front door and run the laptop cord from the adjacent kitchen wall. There were two chipped yellow padded café chairs next to a window that looked out onto the dirt road. I found I could only sit in one of them for 30 minutes at a time, as the padding was flat.

I arrived the day before my 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday, and my good friend Emily Baer drove down from Orono with a gluten-free blueberry pie to help me celebrate. She spent the night and left early the next morning, so my emotional unraveling was delayed by 12.5 hours of human contact.

But then the birthday was over and I was alone. It was good at first. Always a morning writer, I was waking up with the dawn around 5:15 a.m. each day. I would make a pot of Fair Trade Ethiopian coffee the owners left, grinding the beans fresh each morning. Black, with a touch of maple syrup. Delicious.

The first two days, I worked on the thesis front pages and formatting. Em left the morning of Day Three, and I was ready to start writing the final essay in the collection. I knocked out six pages by 10 a.m. and felt incredibly accomplished.

But that was also the day that the long quiet afternoons turned into the long quiet night, and I began to feel the sheer solitude of my circumstances. Faced with that kind of time and quiet, one can only eat so often, write so often. I started taking a nap every afternoon around 2 p.m. just to break up the day.

I was editing, though, which is something I've had to learn while at Stonecoast. In my journalism life, I write a draft, proof it, and it goes into the newspaper. This concept of draft after draft, of honing and cutting and shaping, a sort of writing in clay, was something I'd never done before. It is painful but necessary, and slowly I came to realize how much more I could get from myself with each draft. That was part of what my fourth semester mentor Susan Conley wanted from me during my time at the cottage, and since I had nothing else to do, that's what I tried to do.

Still, the hours were long, and I began emailing friends, then obsessively watching my inbox for any reply, then immediately responding. I messaged on Facebook, then listened to music. While there was no TV, there was a stereo, and I had three CDs with me: The Lumineers, Neil Young's *Harvest Moon*, and the *La La Land* soundtrack.

By the afternoon each day, I would sit and stare out at the water from the more comfortable chairs in the living room. Then I'd get up and walk in circles through the house sipping an O'Doul's non-alcoholic beer, my L.L. Bean slippers slapping the wooden floors. Then I'd go out onto the wide screened porch and stand looking out at the ducks and the loons, then I'd sit in a wooden chair on the porch. Then I'd get up and go back into the house.

I started getting anxious. I began to feel as though my plan to get away had turned on me, and was struck by unprepared I was to handle the solitude. I wasn't who I thought I was. I wasn't as much of a loner as I fancied myself to be. I was craving human contact.

Perhaps it was the fact that I was newly and unexpectedly single at 52, that a new phase of my life was starting and the unknowns were numerous. I had gone to see my old therapist Carolyn three times after my wife left. During the second visit, she asked me a question.

“What is your relationship to your emotional life?”

I looked at her.

“What is my relationship... to my emotional life...” I repeated the question slowly and deliberately in an effort to understand it.

She laughed a small laugh.

“Yes,” Carolyn said.

I thought and thought, but I was still processing the question.

“Let me think about that and I'll get back to you,” I said.

The following week, I went back for my appointment. I had already decided that I wasn't going to continue because it was too soon and I had too much going on and I wasn't prepared to be shrunk at that point.

I sat down in the leather client chair in her office.

“You asked me last time what my relationship is to my emotional life,” I said.

“The answer is, ‘I don't know.’”

Now, here I was alone with myself and my emotional life was begging to be noticed. Nights were even harder. I was going to bed at 8:30- 9 p.m. Thank God for the

nightlight lantern I'd brought and the fan setting on a small, portable fan in the bedroom, the white noise lulling me to sleep, masking the creaks and groans of the old house and the furnace beast in the basement. When it geared up to fire, it made a series of clicks and cracks and hums, and the cottage chimed in, the old walls expanding and contracting with hot air.

Peeing and pooping were events. I had to get up and climb the old wooden stairs to the only bathroom, and then come back down. Showers were even more of a treat, and I spaced them out. I did some yoga, I stretched mid-morning each day. I started walking in the evenings down the dirt road, just before dusk, ironically not wanting to run into any of the neighbors. Not sure what that means. Still, there were hours left to fill.

I made every other day trips to Hussey's General Store in Windsor. Three creaking wooden floors at the corner of Route 105 and Route 32, Hussey's claims to be the only independently owned department store in Maine. I believe it. A full grocery store on the first floor, along with a gift shop section for the people from away, complete with moose imagery and beer can cozies that say things like "Maine-Ya can't get there-a from here-a" and metal signs looking down the barrel of shotgun with the slogan "No Trespassing" and "We don't call 9-1-1".

Upstairs was the most complete camping department I had ever seen, right next to a fully stocked fishing section. But my mind was blown when I got the end of the soft plastic bait section and arrived at the used book corner. There, for the first time, my two passions in life were finally and conveniently located next to each other.

I wandered around to the hunting section, admiring the array of mid-1800 century Winchester rifles and revolvers in a display case next to the knives. Then I made a

beeline for the clothing section when I saw the wedding dresses. Yes, Hussey's sells bridal wear and wedding attire. It's beyond the gold pans, next to the Sorel winter boots and the shoe section.

The basement level is a hardware store, selling all manner of tools, gardening supplies, lumber, and housewares.

In the afternoons I would need to get away from the cottage and drive the 15 minutes to Hussey's, where I could buy O'Doul's, bananas... you know, staples. I also found a small video section and for less than \$10 bought seven movies, in two and three-packs, *Moonstruck*, *Unfaithful*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Three Weddings and A Funeral*, *A Fish Called Wanda*, and in its own case, *Diamonds are Forever*.

But what was getting me through was that I was finishing this thesis. I had drafts of all my essays, the front matter was done, the bibliography was done. I had a schedule in my head, I had deadlines to meet, I was doing the work. I just had the preface and the last batch of revisions to come from Susan. But before those revisions came an email from Susan that flattened me.

She wanted more emotional depth. She wanted me to dive deeper into each essay and find the subtext and make emotional connections and bring out the nuances of my deepest fears and hopes and anxieties. Susan wanted these things because she believed in the work. I knew that. Intellectually, I knew that. But here I was thinking I had already poured my heart out in these essays, essays that had been 18 months in the making. I was even thinking that I could see the finish line on this thesis. And then I got that email.

It was terrifying. The morning after I sat down with a cup of coffee, re-read the email, and started bawling. I was completely overwhelmed, not just by the directive and

the suggestion, but by the fact that my Stonecoast mentor officially knew me better than ANYONE in my life. Anyone. My wife, my parents, my closest friends. We hit it off immediately in my first Stonecoast workshop, after I cried over a stupid prompt result about my cat when I was a kid, and her comments on my workshop manuscript were the first time a writer told me I was a writer. Then she was my first semester mentor, and she gently pushed and pulled and cajoled and complimented my work. It was a given that I would request her for my final thesis semester. We were coming full circle, and she had helped give birth to these essays.

But it wasn't just one thing. There were layers to this paralyzing terror that overwhelmed me. For someone to really know me like that, and ask more of me because they believed in my ability. That was overwhelming. There was a part of me that was a six year-old being told to do something they did not want to do because it wasn't fun. Then there was the real issue. That if I really dug down and accessed my deepest fears and anxieties, they would swallow me whole and I would never resurface.

Who needs therapy when you're in an MFA program?

I sent Susan an email response after my cry that next morning and told her I was paralyzed and floundering. I remembered the question Carolyn asked me about my relationship to my emotional life, and how I didn't know the answer. THAT'S what this was about. THAT'S what was terrifying me. THAT'S what was paralyzing me.

I told her about that exchange with Carolyn in the email. She wrote me back.

“Ah, yes, I worried about that. I did,” she wrote. “But THIS is writing. At a DEEP level. And honestly, what you have written here below about your question about your

emotional life and your relationship to it is EXACTLY what we the reader want you to explore on the page.

“That’s IT.

“Your confusion. Your lack of clarity. How you handle shit.

“Can you put this in the book?”

Then she went on to gently remind me that she didn’t expect me to try and put all of her suggestions about more emotional depth and subtle connections in the thesis right now, perhaps a line here or there.

My friend and Stonecoast grad Jenny O’Connell took me up on my invitation to visit me on Togus Pond that same day. She came for the afternoon and I told her everything and read her the emails and started crying again.

She looked at me with those big green eyes and said two simple words that struck me and spoke to me deeply enough to go back to my essays.

“Just try,” she said.

Out laptops open across from each other on the café table workspace, Jenny and I spent 45 minutes working on writing. I chose the essay about my hysterectomy and started going through line by line, bird by bird, and suddenly I understood exactly what Susan wanted and how to do it. In 45 minutes, I had injected more depth of feeling here and there throughout the essay and called it done. My understanding of the writing process and the role my emotional life plays in my work as a creative nonfiction writer suddenly reached a new level that I did not previously know existed.

We called this “The Reckoning”. And then I took Jenny to Hussey’s.

I tell this story because despite all of this shit I've been through since my first semester at Stonecoast — a hysterectomy, divorce — this is how I've grown. I had no idea what a profound and transformational affect this program would have on me when I was a Firstie, armed only with raw talent and stories to tell. The time at Young's Point Cottage was a 10-day reckoning of my two-year evolution through this magical program. I never could have done it prior. My growth, not only as a writer, but as a person in this program, is incalculable unless you look at my first drafts and then you read this thesis. It's right there in the work.

The personal growth is harder to detect, but it's there in the anxious emails and soothing, brilliant, and bolstering responses from not just Susan, but all of my mentors: Suzanne Strempek-Shea, Deb Marquart and Aaron Hamburger.

From Suzanne I learned what worked in my writing, and her compliments propelled my confidence. From Deb, I learned that I have a tendency to bury my openings, and the art of reordering paragraphs to bring flow and bang to a piece. And from Aaron, I learned that I try to cover too much in my early drafts, that I often have three essays in one, and how to prune and hone and be less digressive.

But it's not just the faculty. It's everyone. The Reckoning would not have come without the love and support of the good friends I've made here at Stonecoast, friends who are writers and actually want to talk about writing and the angst and the glory of the process and all that other stuff your real world friends can't understand. It is an unshakable bond. For you heterosexuals out there, it's like coming out and finding gay friends.

When you graduate with a Stonecoast MFA degree, you are part of a tribe. Secret handshakes and code words apply.

That tribe followed me to Togus Pond in April. On my last night, I swept up the fingernails and made a fire in the fire pit. The spring air was cool and moist and as the flames lit my face, I pulled on an O'Doul's and for the first time, wondered if I should come back and do this every year.

Here's to reckonings. Here's to being uncomfortable for the sake of art. Here's to my tribe. Here's to Stonecoast.

## **I Believe**

I believe in babies and football. I believe in the power of trying really hard. I believe that if I get eight hours of sleep, there is no telling what I can accomplish in a day.

I believe in education and rejecting ignorance at every turn, the First Amendment in particular, and the Constitution in general. I believe in a women's right to choose, to say "No!", to say "Yes!" and to say, "Now!"

I believe in God or something like it, but not necessarily the Catholic Church, which has not believed in me.

I believe in love and all its rushes and warts. I believe in the power of women, the limitations of men and the magic of children. I believe in marriage.

I believe that there could be life on other planets, but I don't really like to think about it too much.

I do believe the pen is mightier than the sword, but that we are currently in a war of words.

I believe in the best of people and I'm regularly heartened, and disappointed.

And I believe I am lucky. But what I really mean is, I believe in life, in the life force inside of me, the thing that gets me out of bed every day, which is essentially... hope. Hope that today will be better, or at least good. This need to keep moving and improving, growing and evolving grew out of the stark realization that my life is at least half over, maybe more, and that I lost 20 years to alcoholism. And most importantly, that I could die before I get it down on paper.

But before all of that, before I grew into myself and realized I had a soul, I believed in beer.

Those 20 years were lost in the sense that I chose drinking over more positive endeavors like volunteering, family, grad school, ambition, fidelity, REM sleep and maturity. I could argue that it was my fate to become an alcoholic, that between my Irish and German heritage and coming of age in the 1980s, I was doomed. But after some therapy and a lot of introspection, I know I could have stopped years ago, when that first uncomfortable inkling hit me, or the first time I embarrassed myself... or at least the second or third or eighth time.

But I stubbornly pushed through those moments. Drinking was a habit I wore like a comfortable sweater, full of holes and pulls, but soft and familiar and in my favorite color.

I wore that sweater right through 9/11 in New York and well into the aftermath.

Lucky for me, my memory of my drinking years is relatively intact. No, of course I don't remember everything. I wouldn't even say I remember a lot. But I remember enough to know what I did and how it felt and who I hurt and what I was thinking at the time.

All told, I figure I lost about six years of nights to drinking and with them lost the clarity of meaningful conversations, of whispered feelings, of sober human connection. And in that time, I failed to really think outside of my own needs, my need for calm and confidence from within and not from a bottle.

Years ago, I heard a statistic in conversation about how emotional growth in addicts and alcoholics stops at the age at which their substance abuse becomes an

addiction. For me, I would say that my emotional growth stopped at age 28. That may explain why now, people who meet me think I'm younger than I actually am, and why I am drawn to people 20 years younger than me.

But it also explains why I saw my drinking as a hobby and not a habit well into my thirties and early forties.

I don't have triggers anymore. I go for days, weeks without even thinking about drinking, unless it's related to talking about my sobriety. I do talk about not drinking a lot.

Here's the thing. I lost two decades to drinking, and I was around other people all the time, people who called themselves my friends, my lovers, my co-workers, and in that time, no one took me aside and said, "I love you, and I think you have a drinking problem."

I remember having a lot of fun, a lot of laughing and dancing and sweating at the Clit Club in the West Village. I remember cheeseburgers at 3 a.m. at Cozy Burger on Broadway and Astor Place. I remember blurry sex.

\*\*\*\*

In February 2009, I had finally started seeing a therapist. Surprise, I had never seen a therapist before, but I had gotten to the point where I was so unhappy and my wife Sarah, and my 13 year-old daughter Anneliese were so unhappy with me, and my drinking was so unmanaged, I knew I had to do something.

Because I should have been very happy. I was editor of a small but respected weekly newspaper in a pretty little town in Vermont. I had fallen in love with Sarah after she answered my personal ad on an online gay dating website. She had a nine year-old

adopted daughter. Sarah was femme and smart, everything a butch lesbian looks for in a woman, and I proposed four months after we started dating. We were married seven months later, in October 2004.

Sarah went to nursing school and we bought our first home in Vermont in August 2006. I was 40 years old and I finally had the family and the white picket fence I had always wanted.

The fence was figurative, but what it represented was something I had drunkenly and passionately talked about when I lived in New York. I would go on and on to friends about maybe I wasn't going to have a family and a white picket fence.

One of the few things I did manage to write while I lived in New York City was a short essay about my fence. It's been lost for years, but I remember the gist. I wrote that perhaps I did have a fence in my future, but that perhaps my fence was not white and not picket. Perhaps my fence was made of barbed wire and beer cans, old wooden skis and rocks with irises poking out between spaces. Perhaps my fence held a few garter snakes and a rabbit eating daisies and some old newspapers stacked and tied with twine.

That made me feel better, at least for a while, but whenever you finally get what you've always wanted, it's never exactly what you thought it would be. I finally got a family and home and proverbial fence, but... we bought a house we could just barely not afford. I quit my job at one newspaper and the job I had lined up at another fell through when we moved. Our daughter was difficult, puberty was kicking all of our asses, and she took oppositional defiance to a whole new level. We were broke, I was stressed, and I swam in beer.

I didn't hit bottom the way a lot of drunks and addicts do. I didn't get the DUI that embarrassed my family and ruined my reputation. I didn't kill someone driving drunk. I didn't make a fool of myself at the local bar. I didn't get caught cheating. I had all my "Lost Weekends" in New York. In Vermont, I just sat in my house and drank, then got up, incredibly hungover, and went to work. Everyday. For years.

I finally admitted to Sarah that I needed to find a therapist, and in her gentle, compassionate but no nonsense way, she said, "Yes, you do."

My doctor had a starring role in my sobriety. Along with my therapist, the three of us were a team once I got on board. Over the course of several weeks of therapy leading up to my sobriety, my therapist told me I had anxiety. Duh. I knew that.

"Alcohol is the perfect antidote for anxiety," she said. "The problem is, you need more and more as your tolerance builds. I think what's been happening is that you have been self-medicating your anxiety with alcohol all these years."

My brain cracked open when she said that. It made perfect sense. All those years of Life of the Party, then 9/11, then the adult, real-life trappings of a defiant stepdaughter and mortgage, now I was depressed and anxious and the only solace I sought was in an old friend who had never, ever let me down: Beer.

Beer was the best friend I ever had. It was always, always there, for the parties, for the break-ups, for the barbeques and camping trips, the heart-to-hearts... Beer was a constant. I had let people go, roommates and former friends who were toxic and who used me. Beer never used me. I used beer, and beer didn't mind at all.

But after 9/11, my anxiety skyrocketed and I didn't notice. I just drank more. So when my therapist pointed out that I was "using" alcohol to cope with the stresses of daily life, I knew she was right.

"Aren't you just tired of it all?" she asked, looking me dead in the eyes. I had pounded two beers in the car before I got to her office that day, then popped a breath mint, but I knew she knew. I met her eyes. She knew everything, and now I did too.

It was late April and I had just turned 43. I was sitting in the leather patient's chair in her office, bright yellow walls, a braided rug on the floor, the ceilings 12 feet-high. She asked me that question, and I could feel the exhaustion, shame and revelation mix at my feet and travel up my legs to my chest in a tight ball.

I looked down at my boots and nodded.

"Yes," I choked, tears pooling in my eyes and rolling down my cheeks.

"Good," she said. "Then let's do something about it."

She asked me for the name of my doctor and where she was based. The two of them talked, and the Doc had me come in for a physical. It was brutal. I was 40 pounds overweight, my blood pressure, naturally on the low side, was elevated. My cholesterol was high, because drunks eat whatever appeals to them at any given moment, and it usually contains fat, salt and cheese. I was a bloated mess.

The doctor wrote me a prescription for Celexa, a rather mild anti-anxiety drug. I was to take one 10 mg tablet a day. It was barely enough to warrant a prescription. I was dubious, but agreed.

“Oh,” the doc said as she sent off the script to be filled at my local Rite-Aid. “You really shouldn’t drink while you’re on this,” she said. “You can have one beer a day if you have to, but I wouldn’t recommend any more than that.”

If I have to. One beer a day. I had been drinking a six-pack of 16-ounce Miller Lite, every day after work. I always chuckle about my decision to switch to light beer. Like that was really going to keep my weight down despite the sheer quantities, the gallons of beer I was consuming daily.

If life had been particularly trying on a given day, I would throw in a couple of 24-ounce Steel Reserves for good measure. Steel Reserve is a beer with 8 percent alcohol instead of the usual 5 percent. Two of those can buzz even the worst drunk right quick.

But I needed to at least try drinking less, and those little white pills were going to help me. The first two days, I did drink a beer in the evening after work, my brain trying hard to imagine this new sober life I was aiming for. It was hard to picture. No beer? No cold alcoholic refreshment? No mind-numbing autopilot?

I should write Anheuser Busch and thank them for helping me get sober. They make O’Doul’s, a non-alcoholic beer, and I’m not sure I could have gotten sober without it. It’s a bottle to hold with a beer-like liquid inside. Aside from the distinct absence of the taste of alcohol, it’s not bad. If you drink it long enough, you can suspend your disbelief and fool yourself into thinking that it’s real beer. Then again, if you drink it long enough, you’ll have years of sobriety under your belt and won’t need to pretend because you hardly ever think about drinking anyway.

Sarah bought me a six-pack of O’Doul’s that first day, and I started drinking it out of necessity. At first, it was refreshing and fooled me a little but then left me craving the

taste of alcohol. And what's funny is, I never knew what alcohol really tasted like until I stopped drinking it.

The third day on Celexa, I drove home from work with a large can of Miller Lite. It was a warm May day and I was sitting on the screened porch at the house we could barely afford. There were dogs at my feet, and Sarah was in the kitchen. Our daughter was upstairs not talking to us. I opened the beer and took a few sips, and stopped. Something shifted. I always really looked forward to that first beer after work. Often I would drink one or two in the car on the way home. I let the bubbles settle on my tongue, the cool taste of alcohol in the back of my throat... and I didn't want it. I really did not want it. I started to see that beer for what it used to be — an obligation, a bad habit, a tremendous need that had to be fulfilled everyday — and in that moment, I was done.

I got up and poured the rest of the beer in the kitchen sink. Sarah watched me, but said nothing. I went to the refrigerator and grabbed a can of O'Doul's and returned to the screen porch. It was May 17, 2009, the day I quit drinking.

But then, there was another miracle. I learned that my doctor and my therapist had discussed the distinct possibility that I would need to go to rehab, and the probability that I would go through withdrawal. The DTs, or delirium tremens, the shaking and cramping and cold sweats that come when the human body suddenly goes without a substance it has become dependent upon, that's what addicts go through in detox. I drank everyday for 10 years and at least three times a week for 20 years, and I had no withdrawal. None. No shaking, no sweats, no headaches, no hallucinations. Nothing. It was as if my body had been waiting for my brain to join the effort, and was committed to making sobriety work by making it as painless as possible.

Not only was there no withdrawal, there was no organ damage. Five years after I quit drinking, I decided to buy some life insurance. As a journalist, I make a laughable salary. I have no retirement to speak of, and no savings. I thought the least I could do was pay for my own funeral and leave my wife with the money in death that I could not produce in life.

In order to get life insurance, you have to submit to a battery of blood tests and a general physical exam. It went well, other than the fact that the freelance medical examiner took an inch off my height, which made my body mass index rise to a more unhealthy percentage and I had to have my doctor's office fax my real height and weight to the insurance company. Among the lab tests they perform is liver function. There it was in black and white: Over 20 years of heavy drinking and my liver is in perfect working condition. It's a miracle.

## The Wood Pile

My wife Sarah and I bought our house 11 years ago, a 1927 clapboard farmhouse on two acres in the town of Salisbury, Vt., population 1,136.

It needed work. The kitchen came with a 20 year-old electric stove and flesh tone cabinets made from  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch pressboard that would have survived a nuclear holocaust.

There is one bathroom, downstairs, with the original claw foot cast iron tub, and it is clear that whomever built the house placed the tub exactly where they wanted it and built the bathroom around it, because there is no way that tub will ever move out of that bathroom.

The house has a newer oil furnace and a forced air heating system with intake and heat registers in each room, usually in the baseboard or in the wood floors. But only on the first floor, not upstairs.

The sitting room was the first room we walked into when the realtor showed us the house. I looked up at the original tin ceiling, down at the wood floors, and to the right, a bay window.

“That’s where the Christmas tree goes,” I said pointing at the window, knowing with one look at Sarah, her eyes are bright as mine, that this was the house we would buy. My parents were with us and my Dad made a grunting sound.

“Oh boy, look at this place,” he said, shaking his head and nodding toward a three-foot hole in the plaster wall across the room. We bought it anyway.

In the middle of the sitting room, then as now, sits a cast iron woodstove. It is vented with black aluminum stove pipe connected right into the furnace chimney. This is not code and not allowed, but apparently if you inherit the issue, you don't have to change it. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

A fireplace is nice, but not an efficient source of heat. Most of the warmth goes right up the chimney. A woodstove is a completely different animal, capable of producing great, long-lasting heat while cutting your oil bill in half. The trade-off is, you must develop an intimate relationship with firewood, and while the hunting and gathering of firewood has enjoyed a long, calloused history here in Vermont, there is a learning curve. Much like the gathering of maple syrup, the tradition of bringing in your own firewood is considered honorable and righteous. You find what works and you stick with it. You protect your secret logging spots but you share your splitter with your neighbor in exchange for some dog sitting or fresh eggs from your chickens.

I took to the idea of bringing in my own firewood like a dog with a ball. Our new old house was surrounded by lilac trees, old ones, some 15- 20 feet high, some beautiful but in need of trimming, others clearly dying and decrepit, others just plain dead.

That first winter, we just burned oil and didn't use the woodstove much. There wasn't time or money to secure wood that season what with everything else the house needed.

But the following spring my parents gave me a chainsaw for my birthday, and it was revelation.

What I knew about firewood and wood burning stoves at the time can be summed up in one sentence: I knew that you can't use fir trees, like pine, because there is too much resin in the wood and it burns too fast.

That's it. So I started cutting down dead lilac trees into log lengths. There were also some apple branches from an enormous but impotent apple tree in the front yard that must've been 200 years old.

Apple wood makes some of the best firewood, burning really hot but not too fast. Lilac, not so much.

By the third winter, I learned about BTUs, the thermal unit used to measure the amount of heat something generates. Beech, oak, maple, hickory and hop hornbeam, those are the prime burning woods. Birch and elm also burn well, but elm is a pain in the ass to split, very stringy. Then you get down to something like Box Elder, which dries quickly and is easy to split but doesn't put out as much heat. Vermonters call it "Shoulder Season Wood", good for those cooler nights in late September and October, or in early spring before the ice on the lake goes out.

Lilac isn't even on those lists.

There are acres of woods behind our house owned by the electric company. A small dam connected to a four-foot wide iron pipe, or penstock, funnels water from the pond at the dam to a small hydroelectric plan about a half-mile down hill in the village. I walk the dogs along the iron penstock twice a day.

I started coveting downed trees I saw in the woods, memorizing their location and estimating how hard it would be to access them with the wheelbarrow. I tried to pick times late in the day, when the light was lower but there were still leaves on the trees, so

the power company goons wouldn't see me cutting up their dead trees when they drove by.

But as it turned out, they weren't goons at all. The guy in charge of the crew that maintains the penstock lives in my town. His name is Dave, and after a windstorm brought down some trees around the penstock (which pleased me to know end) I met him and his crew cleaning up the trees. I introduced myself and waded in.

“SO, DO YOU THINK I COULD HAVE THIS WOOD?” I yelled over the whine of the chainsaw, trying to be casual but practically salivating at the 18-inch around maple logs the crew was cutting and throwing aside. “I LIVE RIGHT THERE!”, I said, pointing toward my house through the trees.

“SURE!” Dave yelled back. “YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF TO ANYTHING OUT HERE AS LONG AS IT'S ON THE GROUND!”

It was Christmas in July.

“THANKS!” I yelled, and walked back to the house with a huge grin on my face.

Later that year, my beloved Subaru Forester finally shit the bed with 275,000 miles on it and I realized every Butch lesbian's dream: I bought a pick-up truck, a 2001 Dodge Dakota five-speed manual Quad cab.

By doing so, I also entered the world of firewood hauling, upping my game exponentially. Over the years, I learned that although I live in what may be the wood burning capital of the world, there are plenty of Vermonters who don't burn wood in the winter, especially older folks, the “snow birds” who spend the colder months in Florida and other points south.

I posted a free ad on a cyber bulletin board online, saying I would cut up and haul away downed, dead hardwood trees free of charge. I added that the trees should be accessible via truck.

For the last few years, that is how I have gotten my firewood. A huge dead elm from a guy named Charlie, and even bigger maple from an older couple in town. I got some downed Beech trees from the woods, taking a snowmobile trail as far as I dare, armed with my chainsaw and a wheelbarrow. That was probably the beginning of the end for the undercarriage of the Dakota.

But once that pile of logs behind the house starts to grow, as that dead and dying wood seasons slowly in the summer sun, sucking the moisture out and cracking the ends, my anticipation for splitting grows.

My neighbor Ben lets me borrow his gas-powered log splitter. In return, I give him eggs from my chickens and dog-sit his frenetic aging yellow lab mix, Clover.

Now have been a few years when our Vermont winter was particularly frigid and long, and sometimes by February I need one more cord. One year, I found a Craigslist listing for dry firewood from a guy a few towns over on the other side of the Green Mountains. The price was O.K. (\$300 in the middle of winter, a premium rate) and he promised me when I called that the wood was dry, so I arranged to have it delivered that weekend.

I waited until almost dark that Saturday when I finally heard the rumble of an old dump truck coming up the driveway. A blond teenage boy was at the wheel and by himself, so he and I emptied the truck when it was almost too dark to see. I paid him the

\$300 in cash and went inside for the night, relieved to have a generous cord I knew would get us through the rest of the cold winter.

The next morning, I went outside to start stacking the wood, and I realized I had been taken. Some of the wood was O.K., and it was dry for sure, but a lot of it was punky. Some of the trees had already started rotting when they were cut and split, and that spongy, rotting interior wood does not burn well at all. It's too far gone. It smokes and adds creosote to the lining of the chimney. The creosote builds up and catches fire, and you have yourself a chimney fire.

I also realized why the kid had made the delivery at dusk. I wasn't able to really see all of the wood and gauge its quality. Lesson learned. Arrange wood deliveries during daytime hours and look it over.

Splitting is where my wife comes in. I set up a lawn chair next to the splitter, give her my hard plastic ear protectors and we go to work. I wear ear plugs and load the logs into the splitter, nod my head when I'm ready, and she pulls the lever that sends the metal wedge on a hydraulic piston into the log, splitting it in two. Then she pulls the level back and the wedge recedes while I either turn one of the newly split halves to be split again, or load a new log, and nod again.

A log splitter is incredibly loud. Nodding and pointing is the only way to communicate effectively over the mind-numbing clatter of the gas engine and the hydraulics. But it beats the hell out of splitting by hand with an axe. That said, I love splitting by hand. That wooden axe handle in my hand, the smooth hoist and the crack of the log as it splits. It's good exercise and so satisfying, but not for three cords. That

would take days, and without Sarah's help, it would take even longer. Plus, it's nice to have the company, even when we can't speak over the din.

When it is done, I've found few things more satisfying than gazing out my window at three stacked cords of split and dried firewood that I brought in myself. Firewood is not sexy, not at first, but it is a labor of love.

One of my favorite films is a little-known documentary made in 1968 called "Alone in the Wilderness". It's about a guy from Iowa named Dick Proenneke who leaves his life behind and at the age of 51 decides to move to the Alaskan wilderness and live off the land in a log cabin he built himself. He took along a small movie camera and documented the building of the cabin, which was turned into the documentary, narrated by Proenneke with entries from the copious journals he kept.

Proenneke was a master woodsman and builder. He lives in the cabin for some 31 years, until 1999 when the Alaska winters became too tough for him in his old age. He died four years later at the age of 86.

There's one scene in the film when Proenneke is out looking for firewood, and he says, "Standing dead timber makes the best firewood." That phrase follows me into the woods whenever I go looking for firewood, and reconciles my love of trees and need for heat.

But bringing in wood is incredibly time consuming. I usually start cutting up dead trees in July and August, split and stack in September. Three months of weekends. But last year, I had to buy three cords of split and dried firewood because I knew being in graduate school and holding a full-time job, I would not be able to bring in any wood.

So when those three cords I ordered were delivered to my backyard last fall, they were unceremoniously dumped into three piles. You have to stack firewood. You cannot leave it in piles on the ground because wood is inherently porous. It naturally absorbs moisture from the ground. You don't want moisture in your firewood, you want it dry or it won't burn efficiently. And it takes about a year for firewood to dry enough to burn properly. The whole process is long and nuanced and cannot be rushed. Then once it is stacked, you must put plywood over it, or tarps, or in a perfect world, you have a sturdy, handsome wood shed with a roof to keep it all nice and dry. I use the plywood method, but I want to build a wood shed someday.

Therefore, you must stack. I began the long process of stacking the delivered firewood, and I felt uneasy. Stacking firewood that someone else cut and split is like folding someone else's clean laundry. It's fine, it smells good, but those shirts and jeans are not yours.

These logs were strangers to me, so unfamiliar. They were cut more or less to length for my stove, but I did not know their grain, their bark, their heft. As I worked through one cord, then another, I realized I would never know this wood the same way, although I was still grateful for it.

## **Hair on Fire**

Most people would not say that 9/11 was a blessing, but I do. And I hate it. People died horrifically that day. 2,996 people. I still feel the heartache in my depths, an open wound.

And I hate that the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history made me leave New York, but I know now that if 9/11 hadn't happened, I would still be there, and I would still be an alcoholic. Or dead.

And I loved living in New York. The bagels, the bookstores, the museums, the Yankees. In 2001, I was an alcoholic living in an alcoholic paradise, a bar on every corner, last call at 4 a.m., and always someone to drink with. Coupled with the fact that I worked as a stage manager off and on Broadway, I lived at night. You did the show, and then you went out for drinks and dinner. Not drinking never occurred to me or anyone else I associated with.

The day those planes hit, I was secure in my own warm, wet cocoon of drinking and working hard in the theater. I smoked a pack of Camel Lights a day, drank black coffee, and smoked weed once in a while. I ate at diners and went to Yankee games and rode the subway and stayed out until 4 a.m. I met girls, dated girls, was in a long term relationship, then I wasn't, and dated again.

And the best part was, I never called myself an alcoholic, and no one else did either. We were just drinkers, and that was O.K. There was an expectation to drink, and I fulfilled it admirably. I was a fun, partying dyke in New York, paying my bills and working in an industry that I loved, climbing the strata in the business from off-off-off Broadway to The Williamstown Theatre Festival as an intern. Then to off-Broadway,

getting my Actor's Equity union card, then Broadway workshops and the occasional tour. There were Russian clowns in Toronto and Vancouver, the Five Lesbian Brothers in London, and summer stock in Connecticut and Sag Harbor.

I worked 60-70 hours a week when I was on a show, and my friends never saw me until the show was over. I watched magic form on small stages in dusty, windowless theaters down the street from where the Times Square peep shows used to be. I witnessed the Disneyfication of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in real time. One month I was walking to work past the pimps and the dime bag dealers, the next it was all boarded up and painted purple and green and pink.

I worked with famous actors and up and comers, legendary directors, salt-of-the-earth playwrights, and real jerks at all levels. I worked flops. I worked hits. I worked shows that should have gone all the way to Broadway but fell short. I worked instant classics with rabid followings. I worked heady period pieces and modern dance. I worked new plays and old plays, hip musicals and dry masterpieces.

I learned stage management by doing, and discovered that it is the perfect profession for a control freak like me. Stage managers are the invisible engines of the theater world. You're in charge of everything, from rehearsal schedules to lunch breaks, costume fittings to prop lists, coffee and highlighters and Altoids. You write down every move an actor makes and when they make it, every light and sound cue, and orchestrate every scene change. And then, when the house lights dim and the audience quiets, you orchestrate the show the way the director rehearsed it, calling lights and sound and entrances and scenes like a the conductor of a vast, visual orchestra.

And when the last cue is called and the audience leaves, you go out with your actors and your crew and you talk about the show and they are your people and you drink and laugh and stumble home and do it all again, eight shows a week.

I woke up late and hung over. The pain in my temples, the pressure behind my eyes, the dry mouth, that was normal, but I was rarely late and I flew out of bed. I ran down three flights of stairs in my walk- up and out onto my street. I turned right and racewalked the one avenue block to the R train at the Union St. Station in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Not of this activity was helping my head, which was pounding with my pulse. I almost closed the bar that morning, drinking pints of Bass, shots of Southern Comfort, and playing pool at Ginger's Bar, a dyke joint on 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. There had been no time for coffee, but despite the fuzziness I couldn't help but notice the weather. In fact, September 11 is the only date in my consciousness that I can remember the weather so clearly. The sky was bright blue, cloudless and clean, and the whole city looked like it just had a bath. It was a warm and bright Tuesday, perched on the shoulders of summer and fall, winter a far off threat.

I got lucky as the R rolled into the station as I hit the bottom steps at about 8:45 a.m.. I squeezed into one end of a car in the middle of the train.

The R train is underground in Brooklyn from Bay Ridge through Sunset Park and the Union Street stop until Flatbush Ave. It then emerges into the light and onto the Manhattan Bridge as it crosses the East River. Once on the Manhattan side of the river, the train descends back into the gullet of the city.

One of my favorite views in all of New York was the view of lower Manhattan from the R train as it crossed the Manhattan Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge runs parallel,

so close, leading the eye to The World Trade Center towers standing sentry, gleaming over the short, classy, Woolworth building with its green copper roof. Tugboats, water taxis, fireboats and the Staten Island Ferry crisscross New York Harbor where the East River meets the Hudson, the Statue of Liberty tiny but clearly visible in the distance against New Jersey.

The whole view seemed so big and so close from the train, like an Imax postcard, and no matter how many times I crossed that river, I took in that towering vista as long as I could, until the train sank back into the darkness in the tunnels of Lower Manhattan. It made me feel so proud and connected to something, affirmation that I really did live in the center of the universe.

It was standing only that rush hour morning, and I was sandwiched on one end of the car, my hand gripping the overhead bar. It was crowded, and the only place I had to stand was facing up river.

A few seconds after the train emerged from underground and rolled onto the Manhattan Bridge, I planned to try and turn around so I could see my view. But before I even made a move, some of the passengers started gasping and pointing. I turned, moving closer to the nearest window and looked up to see the Twin Towers, burning.

It was just before 9 a.m., and the first plane had hit at 8:46 a.m., but we didn't know that. The weight in the car shifted as everybody leaned to the south side to see the World Trade Center on fire, the smoke cutting a jagged gray etch across the bright blue sky.

It was like watching a movie except we were the ones moving, the towers getting larger in our windows. And then the train and went back underground to stop at

Whitehall St./South Ferry, Manhattan. A deli delivery guy got on, his red hot food bag over his shoulder, a worn Yankees hat on his head.

“What’s going on?” someone asked him.

“A plane crashed into the towers,” he said, and everyone started saying what a terrible accident it was.

The doors closed and the train went on. I later realized he was talking about the second plane, which hit at 9:03 a.m.

It was a troubling ride to 59<sup>th</sup> Street, but we were troubled by what we still thought was an accident. I came up the station stairs near Columbus Circle and immediately tried calling my roommate, but there was no cell service, so I kept walking. I made it half an avenue block to 9<sup>th</sup> Ave. when I noticed a change in the streets. There were a lot of sirens, nearby and downtown, and strangers were gathering in small groups around parked cars, the doors open and the radios on, listening to the news. Still no cell service.

I got to the theater on 10<sup>th</sup> Ave. and the crew was in a panic. The actors were all on their cell phones trying to call people, the stage manager was crying, and by that time, we had all learned about the second plane and the horrifying reality set in. This was not just a terrible airline accident. This was on purpose.

We found a radio backstage and plugged it in stage left. As we listened, the newscaster’s voice was a mix of awe and terror, his voice cracking as he described the first tower falling at 9:59 a.m. We didn’t know what to do, until someone said that if the country was under attack, John Jay was a state building and that we should probably leave. Rehearsal was canceled.

We walked a block north on 10<sup>th</sup> Ave. to the Olympic Flame Diner. There were still pay phones in New York back then, and every diner, including the Olympic Flame, had one. The stage manager said his boyfriend was at work in midtown and had phone service in his office, so I gave him my parent's number in Vermont and had him call to tell them I was O.K. Then I ordered a cup of coffee, black.

Reliable information was scarce. We started hearing from other people in the diner that a plane had also flown into the U.S. State Department. We later learned it was the Pentagon.

Once I knew my parents had been told that I was O.K., our group dispersed to check on family and friends in the city, and I started walking south. It was now after 11 a.m. The New York City Subway System had been shut down, and the bridges and tunnels were closed.

I saw the ghost people for the first time on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. I was walking downtown near 48<sup>th</sup> Street when I began to notice them trudging slowly, methodically northward. They were businessmen and women in suits covered in light gray ash from head to toe. Some carried briefcases, most just carried themselves. Some of the women had their hair pulled back into a more corporate style, but strands had escaped and hung in their faces, all ash. It was almost impossible to tell what color their hair really was. Everyone who passed me had the same light gray ash-colored hair, everyone was the same color. It was unclear at a glance who was black or white or Latina or Asian. All the suits were light gray ash. All the shoes.

Their eyes seemed to see nothing but the path before them. I didn't know how far they had to go to get home, and they were already more than 50 blocks into their

journeys. I passed many, many ghost people on that stretch of 7<sup>th</sup> Ave., and they were the lucky ones.

I walked to 44<sup>th</sup> St. and 10<sup>th</sup> Ave. and stopped in to see Richard. He was a 22 year-old intern on the “Dirty Dancing” workshop. He was a big queen and his mother was visiting from Oklahoma. She answered the door in a dingy pale pink housedress. They looked a lot alike.

“Well, come on in,” she said with a drawl. “Great time to be visitin’ the city, huh?”

The three of us spent the next few hours in the tiny, rundown walk up watching TV in the kitchen. I drank a few beers and then it was afternoon. I thanked them for their hospitality and said I was going to keep trying to get to Brooklyn.

Down on the street from one of those car radios open to the sidewalk, 1010 WINS reported that the F train was running from Rockefeller Center to Brooklyn. It was 2 p.m. when I started walking across town on 48<sup>th</sup> Street to see if it was true. It couldn’t hurt, and I had nothing else to do.

As I crossed 8<sup>th</sup> Ave., I felt a low rumble in my chest and I turned to see three F-16 fighter jets screaming low in formation over me toward the East River. It was surreal and comforting at the same time.

I got to the F station and the platforms were packed. Hundreds of people were waiting for the Brooklyn-bound train. One train came, filled, and left. Then another. The mass of people moved like marbles into an empty jar. Finally, I was able to squeeze into a car. In all of my years living in the city and riding the subway, I have never, before or since, been on a train as crowded as the one that whisked me back to Brooklyn that day.

But it was dead quiet. Hundreds of people crammed into a subway car so tight they couldn't move — and not a sound. One stop, then the next, and the only thing we could hear was the conductor's voice saying the train would be running express, and the mechanical whisper of the train car doors.

The F train is an underground train all the way to Brooklyn, so we were all spared having to look at the smoldering skyline on the way home. The train doesn't emerge above ground until Smith and 9<sup>th</sup> Street Station in Brooklyn. I got off at the next stop, Fourth Ave. and starting walking the 12 blocks north under the elevated green track toward my apartment on President Street. It was now 4 p.m. The sun that had shone so brilliantly all day was lower in the west, traffic was steady, and a light rain of the same gray ash that covered the ghost people was falling from the sky. It was the ash from the towers falling on Brooklyn, seven hours after they had collapsed, and I wondered if I could be breathing people.

When I reached my apartment, my roommate was there waiting. She had been glued to the television all day. I grabbed a beer from fridge and sat down to watch what I had been inside of for the previous eight hours. There were many beers that night, and I slept in an almost unconscious state, drunk and exhausted.

I stayed drunk for the next two days. I called in and said I wouldn't be at rehearsal. God love her, the director went on with the show. There is a reason why the saying, "The show must go on!" exists. But I couldn't bear the thought of getting on the train and going over the bridge and seeing what was no longer there, a hole in the sky.

The ash was cleaned from my clothes within days, but I was forever changed.

The memory is always the same. Eyes open or shut, I can see a black man in a dark suit and a red tie hurtling headfirst through the air, his face and head covered with light gray ash. His arms are down at his sides and his tie is flying straight out behind him like a cape. He's on his way to die, and he never hits the ground.

I did not witness the falling bodies. I think that man in the suit was a photo that ran on the front page of the Daily News or the New York Post on September 12. They call him The Falling Man now. He's iconic now, but at the time, it was a real-life apocalypse. The jumpers likely thought it better to die instantly after falling through the air than stay in the burning towers and die slowly of smoke inhalation or burn to death. Or, as it happened, being buried in a gargantuan mass of twisted metal and concrete.

What would I have done? It's an involuntary thought that comes with being human, and I have never let myself think any farther past the question for many years, because the answer is: I don't know.

So, my emotional 9/11 souvenir is falling bodies.

The theater workshop ended two weeks later and never saw life as a full-fledged show. New York was not a place to visit in the months after 9/11, and the theater industry tanked for months. I started collecting unemployment and doing odd jobs for people, including a mentally unstable business professor in the East Village, who once gave me a pair of her underwear so her elderly German Shepherd would walk with me to the vet and back.

The city itself had changed for me, and I felt as if it would never change back. I called New York home for eight years. But after 9/11, I was shell shocked and tense and heartbroken. Whatever magic New York had held for me was gone.

I left a year later, in October 2002. I packed up a U-Haul with my inflatable Gumby, my red couch and my alcoholism and moved to Vermont, where I had spent my summers as a kid, and where my parents live full-time in retirement. I drank even more. 9-11 was a great excuse to drink. "Terrorists have flown airplanes into my favorite view and life as I know it is not the same." I still had rules, like never call in sick because you're hung over, or don't drink before 11 a.m. on the weekends, but other rules were eroding, like drinking and driving, and not drinking everyday.

The nightmares stopped around 2005, but it was hard to talk about for roughly a decade. Like clockwork, the anniversaries would come each fall and I avoided television outright. I didn't need to see that footage played for the thousandth time. I owned that footage. It was permanently stored in my brain. The silver towers with their hair on fire, the business suits covered with ash, the flowers and hundreds of "Have You Seen Me?" posters in Union Square place by people desperate to find their brothers, wives, husbands and sisters. And that God-forsaken bright blue sky.

The thing is, 9/11 ruined the life I had in the city, but it also gave me the chance to save myself. It took eight more years to get sober, but if I think about the what if, I know what would have happened to me.

What if I had just gone to work that day hungover as usual and planes didn't fly into the World Trade Center? What if September 11, 2001 was just another beautiful day in the city?

I would have stayed forever.

## Day Job

I often refer to myself as a 9/11 refugee. But I got lucky. I only had to travel five hours up the New York State Thruway to the Green Mountains to find my safe place. Don't get me wrong, when my wife and I first bought our house in our little town, I heard scuttlebutt that one of my neighbors was not happy about having lesbians next door. But that was pretty much the extent of any trouble we've had here, and we've grown on him. I think he appreciated my lawn care skills, and we leave a box of Christmas cookies and a card in his mailbox every December.

All of that marching in 1970s and 1980s, all of that visibility in the 1990s (Thanks, Ellen!), it slowly but surely brought us into the mainstream. That's not to say it's safe or easy to be gay in America, but some places are safer than others, like Vermont. Every once in a while driving around the state, you can see "Take Back Vermont" painted on the side of a barn here and there. And that's the thing. No place is 100 percent supportive and welcoming. You have to earn it, find another way in. That's what I did in Brandon, Vt.

It was a sticky August day in 2007, and things were not going well. I was unemployed, having been laid off from a house painting job six months earlier. A year earlier, we bought a house we could barely afford, and our financial life resembled a game of Jenga on our best day, constantly fretting and choosing which bill to pay, sometimes borrowing money from my parents and friends. I was writing freelance for publications around Vermont, and doing my own house painting here and there, but we were perpetually in the red.

I was also still drinking heavily, which only exacerbated, oh... everything. On that day in August, my car was in the shop, and I was stranded at the house. Sarah was working as a nurse in a nearby hospital. Our daughter, then 13, was in school. At least I hoped she was. She was starting to become more defiant, and sometimes she wasn't where she said she was.

It was hot and I was cranky and feeling down and wanted beer. The Kampersville Store on Lake Dunmore was two miles away. I had a mountain bike I hadn't been on in a few years, so I pumped some air into the tires, dusted off the seat, strapped on a backpack and headed up the hill to Kampersville.

I was also overweight and completely out of shape, so I got off the bike about 50 yards up the hill and walked at the steepest parts, then got back on when it leveled out, puffing and wheezing, feeling the heat in my face and knowing it was bright red with exertion. Most people would have waited until a vehicle was available to go buy beer, but I was an alcoholic. I would go to any lengths to buy beer when I really wanted it.

One time I was camping in Groton State Forest with my ex the first summer I moved to Vermont. I ran out of beer early the second night we were there. It was about 9 p.m. on a Saturday night when I turned to her and said, "I'm going to head down into Barre and get some more beer. I won't be long."

I drove out of the state park, and down the mountain two miles, then west to the Barre city limits, but the store I had in mind was shut tight. I turned and headed back in the direction I came, six miles, past the state park entrance and kept going. Mind you, I was drunk during this little odyssey. I kept driving east on Route 302 until I hit Interstate

91 and headed north to St. Johnsbury. I convinced myself that driving 45 miles on the highway to buy beer was not unreasonable.

I got off the St. J exit and hit the first convenience store I saw, bought a 12 pack and headed back. I had a few on the way, and pulled into the campsite, 90 minutes after I'd left. My girlfriend was livid and I was defensive.

"I can't believe you left me here alone for almost two hours to buy beer!!" she yelled.

So bicycling two miles with a backpack for beer was perfectly logical, but by the time I glided into my dirt driveway, I was winded and exhausted, sweaty, my face the color of a ripe tomato. I took off the pack and walked up onto my porch to the front door and saw a piece of white paper sticking out between the door and the jam. I set down the pack and opened the note.

"My father Andrew Lane needs your help at *The Reporter* newspaper in Brandon. Please give him a call," it read, with a cell phone number. It was signed "Pam Lane".

I went inside, sat down at the kitchen table, cracked open a beer and contemplated this development. Andrew Lane was the publisher of a large county bi-weekly paper to whom I sent my resume even before I left Brooklyn looking for a newspaper job. I sent another resume after I lost my house painting job. My first newspaper job in Vermont had been working for his brother Emory Lane at a daily paper in the northwest corner of the state, before I left to move south when we bought our house. I had met Andrew a few times since then, and we realized we lived about a mile apart. I described the house to him. So despite all of the resumes and the contact information and working for his

brother for four years, he only remembered where my house was and sent his daughter to see me, leaving a note on my front door.

I immediately called the number. Andrew answered.

“Hi there,” I said. “I just got a note on my door from your daughter Polly. It says you need help at a paper in Brandon?”

“Oh, hi Lee,” he said. “Yeah, are you working right now?”

I explained that I was in between jobs and freelancing.

“I bought the Ski News from Roy Newton and it came with this little weekly in Brandon called The Reporter. I’ve hired an editor, and an ad rep, and Polly is do graphics and lay out, but she is moving to Colorado. I need a reporter temporarily to help out while the editor learns how to do the layout.”

Temporarily. But better than nothing.

“Yeah, sure, I can help you out,” I said. “When do you want me there?”

Andrew told me to swing by the office the next day and where to go, adding that he thought it would “just be for a month or so.” What he didn’t know is that I had already decided to make it permanent.

The next day I climbed the narrow, carpeted stairs of a 150 year-old yellow brick building next to the Mobil station in Brandon. The stairs listed farther to the left as you climbed. The office was on the second floor, and there were low ceilings. The floors slanted one way, the door frames the other. It was like a fun house. I met with Thatcher, the young editor, and Polly, and Alyssa, the ad rep, the next day.

The office was actually two small offices at one end of the second floor, a bathroom and another office at the end of a hallway. All the floors were covered with low pile beige carpeting, but the floorboards still creaked underfoot.

They set me up with a laptop at a huge Clark Kent-era gray metal desk and I got to work. I decided to make myself indispensable. I covered every select board meeting, every school board meeting, every zoning meeting I could find in our coverage area. I wrote six or seven stories a week, took photos, covered high school sports, you name it, I covered it.

*The Reporter* had been a glorified newsletter full of typos, and we were trying to turn it into a more legitimate newspaper. It was working. Ad sales started to rise, Thatcher was doing layout, I was working full-time, and there was no more talk about my temporary status. My plan worked. We were covering Brandon and the seven other towns in our area exceedingly well.

But one day the following June, Thatcher came into my office and announced that he had taken a job as a reporter with a big daily in Barre.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I said, my eyes tearing up. I was so frustrated, but more over, I feared that was the end of the Reporter. I made him feel really bad, but there was an upshot. Two weeks later, Thatcher was gone and I was made the News Editor of The Reporter.

Ten years later, I’m still here, although my title has changed to “Managing Editor”.

Brandon has become part of me and I have become part of Brandon. The best part is, I’m not some butch newspaper editor on town. I’m “Lee from *The Reporter*”. The

novelty of my mannishness wore off long ago once I was able to prove myself as a capable, community-based journalist. The best thing anyone ever said to me about my job in Brandon came from an artist friend of mine, Fran Bull. She is my writing parent. After I got sober and start writing creative nonfiction for myself, she was my reader. She has always encouraged me to write about my newspaper life.

“You hold a mirror up to us in the community and show us who we are,” she said.

Whether I am writing about updating the sewer plant, who is running for select board, the local opiate crisis, or a guy who is recreating Brandon in miniature with a O gauge train set, there is an assumption of honesty and accuracy.

Of course, mistakes are made from time to time. Just recently, an extra zero was added to the zoning administrator’s annual retirement contribution from the town.

Whoops. I issued a correction, of course.

Then there is the Mother of all journalism blunders at this level, the good old pubic meeting. Yes, “pubic”, not “public”, in 32 point Times New Roman. In a headline. On the front page. That happened. Once.

The best part of my job is that I also deliver the paper. My graphic artist, Stephanie, delivers the subscription papers to the post office and then heads south to deliver in Pittsford, Proctor and West Rutland. I deliver the Leicester and Brandon papers. It’s a great way to stay in touch with my readers as well as the local business owners, some of whom have become friends.

At this point, I should mention that *The Reporter* does not have a website. There is no Twitter account, no Instagram, no Facebook presence. We do have a web PAGE that is updated with a pdf of the front page each week and has the contact info for ads and

the news department i.e. me. But the ONLY way you can read *The Reporter* each week is by physically going to the store and buying a copy of the paper. Or, if you are lucky enough to have a subscription, going to your mailbox.

The older folks, in particular, really rely on *The Reporter*. They know the paper is delivered on Wednesday mornings by 11 a.m. and they wait for me in the drug store or near the newsstand in the supermarket. There's Janice, a 65-year-old seamstress who lives alone and who doesn't drive and will often ask for a ride if you happen to be in the same store as she is. Then there are the Spezzanos, transplants from New Jersey who are in their eighties and just love Brandon.

"Hi Lee! Can we get one of those Reporters?" they ask as I fill the racks.

"Sure," I say, handing them a paper. "Here you go."

"Hot off the press!" they say, their eyes crinkling with delight as they shuffle off to the cashier to pay their 75 cents.

I hear "Hot of the press" a lot, and that is O.K. My circulation is about 1,500. Subtract the 200 or so papers I have left over each week and that translates to roughly 1,200 rabidly loyal readers.

They love the paper. There's one lady I see in the supermarket once in a while. She has a gray pageboy and is usually in the dairy section.

"We're so lucky to have you," she says, every time I see her, and then, completely serious. "You belong at the New York Times."

I smile.

"Oh, I don't know about that," I say, "but thank you so much for thinking so."

“But they can’t have you,” she will say, shaking a finger. “Please don’t ever leave us.”

“O.K.,” I say with a nod and a smile. “I won’t.”

I don’t think I belong at the Times. I don’t think they would hire me. I don’t have the right journalism pedigree. I went to a state college, and almost all of my clips are from Vermont. Besides, the Times would be quite a grind compared to my weekly life in Brandon. And, I’d have to move back to the city.

No, this is where I belong, at least right now. This job feeds me and keeps me honest. I have to look my readers in the eye every week. They are my neighbors, my acquaintances, my sources, and I run into them all over town.

I was covering Town Meeting in March when I ran into a woman I knew casually from around town. We were just making small talk when she said something to me that really showed me my purpose.

“If you’re not here, it’s almost like it didn’t happen,” she said.

## **A Piece of Steel**

A week before the 2015 anniversary of 9/11, I was on the phone in my newspaper office interviewing the Brandon Police Chief about a recent robbery. From my desk I looked out the window over the village green, the Congregational Church just across the way, its white steeple reaching high into the sky. A school bus rumbled up to the stop sign and released a few kids, yelling and laughing down a side street.

“Hey, by the way, did I tell you we got a piece of the World Trade Center?” the Chief asked.

I snapped to attention.

“What?”

My throat tightened and there was a buzzing in my head. He said that a three-foot chunk of steel beam from the Twin Towers he had requested almost a year before had finally arrived at the station. “We’re going to dedicate it at the 9/11 anniversary ceremony at the station. I thought it’d be something you’d want to cover it for the paper.”

My personal search and recovery operation had taken me 300 miles north of Ground Zero to heal, and here was this guy telling me that there was a piece of the Twin Towers a mile from my office in Vermont.

“Yeah, sure,” I deadpanned. “I’ll be there.”

I hung up the phone and sat absolutely still at my desk. The church clock tower chimed 4 o’clock, and the later afternoon sun streamed through my dirty windows. Press awards won over the 14 years I had been a journalist in Vermont glinted on the wall. I got here in October 2002, escaping post- 9/11 New York, but I knew I had unfinished

business. I knew there was a reason I never wanted to visit the 9/11 Memorial in New York. I couldn't fathom how overwhelming that would be. Even sober and healthy, 9/11 was with me all the time, like loose change in my pocket. But I hadn't addressed the trauma. I knew I was still grieving and September 11 wanted my attention.

The night before the dedication ceremony, I left a select board meeting and drove to the police station where the section of steel I-beam sat on its post near the entrance. The air was calm and warm and dark. A light breeze blew through the tall corn across the road. A single office light illuminated the parking lot.

Tears welled as I walked slowly toward the rusty beam, a distinctive curve in it caused by the force of the tower's collapse. I reached out and touched it, cold and rough, rust coming off on my fingers, and I was calm. I looked into the summer night sky with so many stars, then back to the beam.

"Hi," I whispered.

And then it all came pouring out of me, and I bowed my head and sobbed, my fingers still gripping the steel beam. I shook and let it all out, all the grief, the pain of memory, the images from that day, the falling people, the light gray ash, the irrevocable change in me and in my country, until my body stopped heaving. The air was still warm, and the tall corn was still swaying gently as I wiped my face, patted the beam, and headed back to my car.

I went to the dedication the next morning, Sept. 11, 2015. A crowd of about 40 people came. I just kept taking pictures, trying to keep my emotions in check and thinking, "It's here, it's right here."

The police chief said a few words, the chaplain from the local VFW led the group in prayer, and as the ceremony wrapped up “Taps” played soulfully through the cornfield across the road. I took it all in and I realized I was feeling a new emotion — comfort. I met that piece of steel beam and we knew each other now.

I could drive by it every day if I wanted to, and I wanted to. It was no longer a far off nightmare that I lived through hundreds of miles away. It was right here, and it was part of me. Weeks or months sometimes go by when I don’t drive past the police station, as our little town is blessed with a low crime rate. But sometimes, after hours when the station is quiet and the parking lot almost empty, or early in the morning before it gets busy, I’ll pull into the police station and walk over and touch the beam. I slide my fingers over the rough surface, the rust coming off on my skin, and I take those tiny pieces of steel with me as I get on with my day.

## **Eating for a Lifetime**

I did do some fishing before I got sober, and it fit brilliantly into my drinking. If you don't want anyone counting your beers and you want to drink alone, take your rod, your tackle box and a small cooler of beer, climb into a rowboat and go sit in the middle of a lake for a few hours. When you come back, you stash the empties under the seat of your truck so your wife doesn't know how many beers you had. Except if she knows you at all, she knows exactly how many beers you had.

But the threat of losing my family and my own misery forced me to finally get out of my own way, get help, and quit. About a week after I quit, I took my small aluminum boat out on the lake near our house, and I remember how strange it felt to fish without beer. That peanut butter and jelly relationship of fishing and drinking is so ingrained, so immovable, that to disrupt it is to chart a new course of reality. It's at first surreal, then slowly with time became the norm. I was drinking O'Doul's non-alcoholic beer. Ultimately, it's a cold bottle to hold when you feel the need, and that worked for me

Fishing became the great equalizer in my sobriety. No matter how stressful or anxious I was, I could let it all go and just fish. I subscribed to bass fishing magazines, devoured books on the subject, watched fishing shows on TV, and methodically pored over every page of the Bass Pro Shops catalogs that would arrive in the mail. I own every copy of *Bassmaster* magazine from 2008 to the present. They sit in neatly stacked chronological piles in the corner of my study. I struggle to hang up my clothes, but my tackle box is a study in organization, the lures arranged in order of running depth.

Years ago, my mother gave me a photo album full of images from my childhood. In one photo, I am about seven or eight years old, wearing a red and blue one-piece bathing suit and my mother's floppy wide-brimmed sun hat woven out of strips of blue and white plastic. My legs and arms are nut brown, freckles all over my nose and cheeks. In my right hand is a bamboo fishing pole, a small perch hanging from the hook. My left hand is presenting the fish game show-style, palm up, a huge smile on my face.

It was not my first fish, but I believe it was my first photographed fish, so there was finally proof. The photo was taken at one of the summer houses we rented on Lake Champlain in Vermont in the 1970s, before we bought our own "camp" in 1976. The camp was just a half-mile from the West Addison General Store, or WAGS. It sat between Route 17 and 125. A one-story wood frame building with a green-shingled roof, WAGS was a one-stop shop for locals and summer folk alike who didn't want to travel the 25 minutes to the larger towns like Middlebury and Vergennes for "big shopping." In a pinch, you could buy just about anything you needed at WAGS, for a slightly elevated price. There was of course beer and wine, canned goods, tarps, magazines, and a deli counter where you could order hero sandwiches made to order, or pick up a quart of homemade potato salad. There were pliers and duct tape and cans of Spam, paper towels and toilet paper, motor oil, chips, bread, milk, butter, and eggs. There was also candy, including three rows of glass containers with old fashioned stick candy in all kinds of flavors, root beet, cherry, watermelon, grape... I was partial to strawberry and black cherry. WAGS also had a small but well-stocked fishing section, including hooks and bobbers, lures and line, and a couple of rod and reel combos. In a small nearby refrigerator, there were white Styrofoam containers of night crawlers from Hog Island up

north, \$1 a piece. And outside, on a makeshift bench along the front of the store, were the bamboo fishing poles. They were real bamboo and eight feet long, and my preferred method of fishing for many years as a kid. I think they cost five bucks. You simply tied a piece of fishing line as long as the pole to the end, and a hook to the other. About two feet up the line from the hook, you attached a red and white plastic bobber. You bought some night crawlers and went out to the end of the dock and did some fishing, mostly for perch and sunfish. It was gloriously uncomplicated.

My summers were halcyon days filled with swimming and fishing, forts and baseball, Ghost in the Graveyard and bike riding. It was long before smart phones and social media. The only Kindle was a bunch of sticks, the only Nook a favorite reading spot in a tree fort. We never watched TV except on rainy days. Summer was outside season. Nice

In late August, after school shopping at Fishman's in Vergennes for new jeans and sneakers, we packed up the Dodge Dart and the trailer and headed back to the Hudson Valley for another school year. I would turn backward in the back seat, my chin on my arms looking out the back window as we trundled down the dirt road, tears in my eyes. We all hated to leave. September was like waking up from a dream.

Once I reached my teenage years, I fished less and less and drank more and more. I went to college and partied, moved to San Francisco and partied, moved to New York City and partied, and finally moved to Vermont and partied, except by that time I was drinking alone in a house with my wife and daughter, a fog of disapproval and self-loathing hanging over me.

In July 2009, I had been sober about six weeks when I thought I would try a solo fishing and camping trip to the Adirondacks. I had never been able to camp sober before and I wanted the challenge. Newly sober people, I later learned, often create challenges like this for themselves, as if staying sober isn't challenge enough.

I did some internet research on remote, boat-in only campgrounds and discovered a small state park about an hour west across Lake Champlain in the southern part of the Adirondacks in New York State. It is located on a medium-sized pond at the end of a three-mile long dirt road. There are about 30 campsites in the main park, but there are also eight remote waterfront campsites spaced out around the pond and only accessible by boat. One of them is on its own small island. It is my dream campsite, and when I decided to take my solo sober camping trip, I could think of no better place to go.

The lake is lined with pine and beech and maples that drop their fall leaves into the lake each year, staining the water the color of tea. Large granite boulders stick out here and there, making boating a tricky activity. There are loons who fish during the day and call to each other in the night. There are black bears here and there, but not on the island, although I did find out bears are quite good swimmers, and bought a lock box for my food. Hmm I think we need to get there first before we have this meditative moment

But the day I left, I was late and halfway to the park, and I realized I had forgotten a sleeping bag. But that was nothing compared to the creeping thought that began whispering in my ear before I even left my driveway.

I started out with good intentions, and with my wife's blessing. It would be a cleansing experience, a real test of myself, to go solo camping without any substances or crutches, not even O'Doul's. But as that July morning turned to afternoon and the

humidity rose, I started thinking about how good O'Doul's would taste. I was packed up, boat in tow, headed down the road a few miles from my house when the dangerous thought crept into my head.

"You could get some regular beer and mix it and drink the non-alcoholic, too," the voice said. "Or what the hell! Just get some beer and go for it. You'll be all alone. No one will know..."

But something took over, a positive, affirming, sober voice.

"No, no, no! This is about purification, not poison! Onward and upward."

I spent the next 20 minutes talking myself back into my sober brain, telling myself what a huge mistake it would be to buy beer, imagining that I would not be able to lie to my wife, and how that used to feel when I was drinking, always on alert and trying to hide something. By the time I crossed the Champlain Bridge and entered the evergreen woods, I thought, "Here we go, just you and me."

I got to the park without issue, picking up a \$20 sleeping bag at Walmart in Ticonderoga along the way. I unloaded my gear at the boat ramp, packed the boat, parked the truck, and motored out onto the pond toward my site. The water was calm and the forecast was for clear skies over the weekend. I was nervous, but excited, wanting the time alone and the chance to prove I could be alone with myself, sober.

The first morning, I headed to the southern end of the lake where there were submerged logs in deeper, cooler water, given that it was July. There were campers at a few of the other remote sites, but they were still asleep in their tents and I had the lake to myself.

I brought three spinning rods pre-rigged, each with a different weight of line and a different lure, my tackle box, a fish finder and a landing net. I pushed the bow of the boat out into the water and jumped in, sat down in the middle bench seat and rowed out. When I got into about five feet of water, I climbed to the stern, unlocked the outboard and lowered the drive shaft and propeller into the water, then locked it in place. I grabbed the fuel line to the metal gas tank and squeezed the primer bulb until it hardened, then flicked the choke, set the tiller to neutral and pulled the starter cord. The outboard sputtered to life and I quickly pushed in the choke and let it warm up for a minute, twisting the throttle handle on the tiller to give it gas. I put the motor in gear and I was off. I knew exactly where to go.

It was a cool morning and a layer of mist clung to the water as I motored down the pond, then cut the engine about 100 yards before my spot so as not to spook the fish. Not another soul around. I glided into position, then as quietly as I could, I moved to the bow and grabbed the anchor and rope and slowly let it sink to the bottom. A lot of fisherman won't even drop anchor. They'll cast three or four times and if they don't get a bite, they'll move to another spot. That's not me. I claim an area and invest at least 20-30 minutes and two three different lures before I move. I'm in no rush.

I grabbed my favorite rod strung with my go-to crankbait. It's made of balsa wood and shaped like a squat, fat baby bass. It wobbles through the water at 3-4 feet deep, depending on the speed of retrieve, and I find that bass can't resist it if they are hungry.

This particular Adirondack pond has a wide variety of bass habitat, and bass like cover. Downed trees, underwater stumps, lily pads... The bass hide and observe and wait

for food to swim by while they are suspended, so cattails and reeds, boulders strewn in five feet of water or less, overhanging bushes, stumps and logs all provide great cover.

Bass also like structure, which means anything underwater they can relate to or get close to, a pile of rocks, weeds, or even a drop off.

And depending on the time of year, bass will be shallow, like in the spring and early summer, where the water warms first so they can spawn. In the post-spawn months when the water heats up into the 70s, the bass go deeper. The magic temperature is 62 degrees. That's when they spawn.

What makes this little pond so great is the variety of conditions and environments, that depending on the time of year, you can fish shallow submerged log fields, deep drop offs, lily pads, boulder fields or gravel bottoms, which is what the Smallmouth bass like.

I think what I love most about bass fishing is the repetition of anticipation. It's such an optimistic endeavor. Every cast brings renewed possibility, the notion that this attempt will result in a bite, and as I retrieve that lure, my hands are like tuning forks on the rod handle, poised for that little tick on the line, that sometimes barely perceptible tug. The rod and I are one machine, flicking and twitching and teasing those fish into committing, and then BAM — I hook 'em.

Bass fishing is exciting because once you hook a fish, the bass fight mightily, throwing their bodies clear out of the water, jumping and shaking their mouths vigorously to free themselves from the hooks. They are often successful, but not this day. I was elated as I reached over the side of the boat and grabbed the bass by the lower lip and lifted it into the boat. A three-pounder, maybe three and a half. I used my pliers to dislodge the hooks from the cartilage of its jaws, then held the fish with two hands and

admire its dark green sides and plump white belly. Sometimes, if the bass is really big, I kiss it right on the nose. Then, I gently lay it in the water and with a slap of the tail and a splash of water, it disappears.

I took a moment after that first fish on that trip, and I sat down. I was so clear headed, so present. A pair of loons surfaced just a 20 yards or so from the boat, moving so smoothly, making soft whistles and soft calls to each other before diving below again. I was content, and knowing that I would remember it all clearly made it all the more satisfying.

I had a few good fish in the boat on that trip. When I wasn't fishing, I was relaxing at the camp, listening to the radio, eating, reading, writing and drinking Gatorade. I didn't sleep that great the next two nights, but I stayed with myself and I did it. I camped alone for three days, sober. I spent quality time with myself for the first time in 20 years and I liked myself. It had been years since I felt that way.

There is an old adage: "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime." And fishing feeds me, just like when I was a kid, but in so many more ways.

## **The Chicken Whisperer**

I never wanted chickens, because I didn't want the carnage. We have two dogs, and I felt that adding chickens to our lives would only increase the high percentage of critter death on our property. Add three cats and most mornings I am presented with at least one headless mouse and/or a mole of chipmunk for good measure. Then my springer spaniel, Ziggy, snatches the bodies in his mouth and chews on them for half the day, flinging their wet, lifeless, bloody little corpses into the air and catching them.

Chickens always represented a larger, messier, more feathered corpse that I would eventually have to dispose of, but in the 12 years since we bought our farmhouse on two acres, my wife Sarah has wanted two things — chickens, and a new mailbox. She hired someone to put in the new mailbox, but during one magical September in 2014, she talked me into getting chickens, too.

Across the road from us there was a simple, white ranch-style house owned by the town's Congregational Church. It was technically the parsonage, but it served as an income rental property for the church for years. In the spring of 2014, the church board discovered that the steeple on their 150 year-old church was rotting and needed a major renovation to the tune of \$300,000. That summer, the church decided to sell the parsonage in order to raise half of the steeple repair money. The last family to live in the parsonage had four dogs, and eight puppies because they never bothered to neuter the dogs. Plus a flock of chickens, complete with roosters. When the renting family moved out, they left a yard full of Chevy truck bodies, empty propane tanks, garden hoses, beer cans and scrap lumber. They also left their chickens.

We would come down our driveway in the morning and we could see the chickens across the road down near the sugarhouse the tenants had built. For a few days, we thought the tenants would come back and gather up the chickens and take them wherever they had moved. Then, after about a week, the flock started come across the road to our yard every afternoon, scratching and picking and foraging around the woods between us and our neighbor.

They were a colorful group, two huge roosters, and four hens of varying colors and sizes. A week went by and our neighbor's grandchildren started coming down and feeding the chickens ground up corn in the driveway. "They're starving," the mom said, adding that her in-laws, our neighbors, were going to take them. But after another week or so, we ran into our neighbor, who said they just couldn't do it.

"They're going to die," my wife said as we emptied the dishwasher one night. She was holding a slotted spoon and looking at me with those hazel-brown eyes the color of the forest that I've never been able to say "no" to. Her brow was knitted under her brown hair. "We have to do something," she said.

I sighed.

"But I don't want chickens!"

In the end, chickens are, in fact, animals and I could not in good conscience be responsible for the demise of a flock due to neglect, even if it was someone else's responsibility. So, we got chickens.

For the next several weeks I fed the chickens some scratch corn I got at the farm store, throwing it on the ground around their coop across the road. Despite the tenant's irresponsibility, the husband was handy and constructed a very well-built coop for the

flock of 2x4s and barn wood. In the meantime, my plan was to turn the old icehouse in the woods behind our house into a coop. But with a full-time job as the editor of a weekly newspaper, bringing in the three cords of firewood we needed for winter, and putting plastic up on the old windows in the house, I wasn't able to finish the icehouse before the snow flew. We decided to keep feeding the flock across the road for the winter in their own coop.

It was during this "getting to know you" period than I began to develop a real fondness for the birds. Although you could fill a book with what I didn't know about chickens, I could tell that these birds were special. There were two full-size roosters. And when the neighbor's grandsons were feeding them, they named the roosters "Thunder" and "Lightning, which stuck. Thunder was the classic Rhode Island Red, replete with green, orange and red feather on the side, a green plume of a tail, and red waddle and comb. He was big, and he was magnificent.

But he was not the alpha rooster, oh no. That was "Lightning", who was an Aracauna, I think. He was green, with a ruff of white feathers around his neck and shoulders. He was just as large, and clearly bore the responsibility of keeping the others in line.

There was a third rooster, the size of a hen but with the comb and waddle (the thing under their chin). Turned out he was a Bantam rooster. He was brown and red with a red comb and waddle, but he had black feathers at his ankles. My 19 year-old daughter Anneliese named him "Asshole" because he started roosting on top of a nearby sugarhouse at night when all the other chickens would be in the coop and wouldn't come

down. I had to start grabbing him with my bare hands and putting him in the coop. His family-friendly name is “Billy”.

Then there were three hens. There were four at first, but a little white Bantam disappeared the second week we took over the flock.

“Big Bertha” was the most reliable laying hen, and she didn’t take shit from anybody. She was big and dark, dark brown. She regularly laid huge, light green eggs. She was the workhorse of the hens.

Then there was a put-upon hen with gray and white-flecked feathers. My wife named her “Maizie” and I was never sure of her purpose. She didn’t seem to lay eggs, and her role was the scapegoat for the rest of the flock. Her goal was to eat enough to flourish, which she did, but to not draw too much attention to herself.

Finally, there was “Goldie”, the other laying hen. She was lovely, plump with light brown and gold feathers. Goldie was the first hen to greet me when I trekked across the road to the coop to feed them in the morning, probably because we had history. One night just weeks after we had taken charge of the flock, I made my second pilgrimage of the day over to the coop, spreading the ground corn scratch on the ground and refilling the waterer. I check the nesting boxes. A still-warm egg in my hand, I did a quick head count. Goldie was not present and accounted for.

I looked in the bushes. “Heeere, chick, chick chick! Heeere, chick, chick, chick!” I looked under the sugarhouse, around the sap buckets and piles of scrap wood. No Goldie.

I circled around the back of the coop past a large roll of unused chicken wire, fearing she had been eaten. I stopped and called again. Then I heard a sound.

“Goldie?” I said.

“*Cluck...*”

It was the softest “cluck: I had ever heard. I looked down at the roll of chicken wire.

“Goldie?”

“*Cluck... cluck*”

I got down on my knees and on a hunch, looked into one end of the chicken wire roll. There was Goldie, staring back at me

“*Cluck!*” she said.

She had gone into the center of the wire roll to lay and had gotten stuck — very stuck. Goldie was a robust hen of solid proportions, and the opening in the roll was just slightly narrower than Goldie’s width. Add chicken feet caught in the wire and I had one stuck hen.

There was only one way to get her out of there. I found the end of the roll of wire and started to pull it toward me, slowly turning the roll.

“Hold on, Goldie,” I said. “We’ll get you out of there.”

It was a large roll of chicken wire, and as I pulled more and more of it out, Goldie went round and round inside the middle, making her little clucks with each rotation. By the time I got to end of the roll where I could reach in and lift her out, roughly 40 feet of wire fencing lay in large ribbons around me, and Goldie had gone around probably 10 times.

It was the first time I had ever held a chicken. She was so soft. I held her close to my body and stroked her head. Then I gently placed her on the ground. She immediately

fell over, still dizzy from being repeatedly rolled. Alarmed, I picked her up again and steadied her on her feet, this time holding her upright while she got her bearings. After a minute or so, Goldie was walking around like the chicken she always was.

I started laughing, both at the ridiculousness of the situation and relieved that my favorite chicken was going to be O.K. I rolled up the wire, this time into a much larger roll with plenty of room inside in case the other chickens got the same idea.

In the days that followed her harrowing experience, Goldie seemed genuinely happy to see me every time I went over to feed the flock. I started spending more time with them, seated on a log, watching them peck their way around the driveway and drinking out of the waterer. They were a funny group to me, always purposeful but never angry, and very close knit, never more than a few feet from each other, the roosters always watching.

That winter of 2014-15 turned out to be one of the coldest and snowiest in recent memory, and that's when the flock really earned my respect. I started doing some research and was impressed when I learned that the average chicken generates roughly 10 kilowatts of heat each within their little bodies. By January, nighttime temperatures were well below zero, minus double digits for several nights in a row. Daytime temps barely broke zero. I forged a beeline path across the yard through the snow and down to the coop, where I locked the flock in, changed out the frozen solid waterer twice a day, and bedded them down with extra wood shavings. I had been reading up and it turned out chickens can get frostbite on their combs and waddles, but ours were fine. The roosters protected the hens and helped keep them warm being so much larger and they were all very easy keepers.

After months of trudging through the snow and icy wind to care for the flock, spring finally began to emerge, and I started letting them out. They liked to roost on the nearby sugarhouse, but often refused to go in the coop at night once it got warmer. I lost Lightning first. One morning in March, the temperature was up in the 50s. The sun was bright and the sky was clear, and the snow was melting fast for the start of Vermont's other season, Mud Season. I went over to feed the flock and it was eerily quiet. Usually, they came running as soon as they saw me, but that morning there wasn't a chicken or rooster to be found.

I found Lightning's body outside the run attached to the back of the coop. There were green and white feathers everywhere, and there he lay in heap, a gory necklace of bites around his neck, his throat eaten out.

The rest of the flock had scattered. One by one, I found them hiding all over in the brush and nearby woods, hunkered down and terrified. Lightning had given his life protecting them.

I started training the flock to get inside the coop when it got dark. I would lock them in with a 2x4 across the handles of the coop door. But inside they had a door that connected to a small run totally enclosed with chicken wire. The door was hooked to the ceiling of the coop, and I never thought to close it. I didn't think anything would get in through the wire mesh.

A fisher cat or a marten got Thunder. A week after Lightning died, I found Thunder in roughly the same spot, but his body was inside the wire run and his head was outside the fencing. Whatever got him had gotten hold of him and didn't let go, ate out his insides and left the rest.

I had to pull Thunder's body up through an opening in the top of the run where the wire mesh overlapped. That's where whatever it was got in. I was sick to my stomach and choking back tears. It was only after those huge, beautiful roosters died that I ever touched them. Both times, I picked up their bodies and was startled at how heavy they were. They each must have weighed at least 15 pounds.

I'd buried two cats and a beagle in the woods behind my house, but I made the decision not to bury the roosters without even realizing why. It was the first step I needed to take toward viewing the chickens less as pets and more as livestock. I needed to put some distance between my raw emotions, the helplessness and sorrow I felt for what these birds had been through. I needed to start thinking like a veterinarian, or a farmer, so I put Thunder and then Lightning into white kitchen trash bags and took them to the local dump.

That May, I came home from work one warm afternoon, and there was Bertha in the middle of the road, her big beautiful black body intact and warm from the sunny pavement. Perhaps she hadn't been there long, I didn't know. She was my best layer, producing these big, beautiful blue Easter eggs.

I'm grateful that I never had to see Goldie's corpse. She simply disappeared. I went to feed the remaining three hens one day the same week Bertha died and Goldie was nowhere to be found. I spent an hour searching, beating the bushes, checking her favorite spots under the sugarhouse and near the raspberry patch, but she was gone.

Same thing with Asshole — I mean Billy. He and Maizie were the only two left when I finally had the coop moved to my own backyard later that spring. I managed to catch Billy and Maizie and put them in a large dog crate, and my neighbor Jonathan came

down with his tractor and fork lift attachment. He had two long hollow aluminum extensions that slid over the forks to maneuver under the coop after some wrangling. He threw the hydraulics into gear and lifter the whole coop up in the air on the forks. Then he drove up the driveway and across the road to my property. I directed him to the backyard next to the barn and set the coop down in a space up against the woods near the icehouse.

One cold, rainy night a few days later, Billy went back across the road and wouldn't be caught. I came home to a note from my wife saying she was "across the road trying to get Asshole." I walked over to find her sitting next to the sugarhouse in the drizzle with a candle in front of her, crying.

"I can't catch him," she sobbed. "I don't want you to be upset."

I told her it was O.K., that he was named Asshole for a reason. I walked over to the sugarhouse and tried to grab his feet but he was too quick.

"Let's leave him, Babe," I said. "It's O.K. It's not worth it."

We felt bad, but had to leave him there and go to bed, and we never saw him again. It was a blessing in disguise. He had no redeeming qualities. He crowed constantly and as the lone remaining rooster, was mounting Maizie so often that all of the feathers on her back come off and she was rubbed bare.

So there she was, Maizie, the dumbest, least likable and most fearful, was the sole survivor from the original flock. There's a lesson there.

A few days later, Sarah saw an ad on Craigslist for four free hens in a neighboring town. They were Leghorns, all white, with red combs and yellow legs, and they were huge. I dubbed them "The Four Hens of the Apocalypse" because I couldn't tell them

apart. Except for one. Now, I had started to think that we should stop naming the chickens in an effort to become less attached, seeing that their grip on life was more tenuous than I ever knew. But one of the Leghorns was so magnificent, so large and white with such a commanding presence and clearly the hen in charge, that I named her Janis, after Janis Joplin.

A year later on a cool late May afternoon, I had been able to leave work early. I pulled my truck into the gravel driveway at my house around 3 p.m. and turned off the engine. The barn was sat straight ahead and the coop was to the right, tucked up against the woods. A quiet, calm breeze passed through the birches, and black walnuts loomed large over the barn. No traffic on the road that time of day. But something was off.

I climbed out of the truck, leaving my workbag inside, and walked straight for the chicken coop. It was sturdily built and had survived the move from across the street well, but it was missing a piece of metal roof and needed a coat of paint. The sun had dried the dew on the thick grass hours ago, and the smell of lilac was heavy in the spring air, the light purple blooms on the ancient trees around the house had peaked just days before.

I took less than 10 steps toward the coop and I saw him, an enormous hawk, crouched over something in the chicken yard. My heart sank, and I yelled something I don't remember, waving my arms wildly, my throat tight with the familiar grief. His wings were five feet across if they were an inch. A broad back the color of rich coffee, gold flecks, a wide smooth tail. He took off without a sound and flew low into the dark green forest bordering the backyard, expertly passing through the large maples and branches of oak in his path. And he was gone.

I ran into the coop yard and saw Maizie, poor, dumb, nervous Maizie, who had become one of my best layers, who had survived four separate attacks on her flock, dead on the ground. Her belly was ripped open, intestines spilling onto the dirt, her breast torn, pink flesh exposed. Feathers everywhere, gray, black and white striped, so many feathers. Her eyes were closed, and I hoped to God that she died of fright before the hawk's beak and talons ripped her apart.

My eyes welled with angry tears as I found the Leghorns cowering in the weeds in corner of the white fencing that surrounded the coop. They were O.K., but terrified.

I walked quickly into the house and opened the cupboard under the kitchen sink and grabbed a garbage bag. I was still trying to comprehend what I'd just witnessed. I felt the way people who are victims of burglaries must feel, violated. How dare that hawk come onto my property and into my chicken yard and commit such a barbaric act. But by the time I got back to Maizie and lifter her into the garbage bag, I understood. This was the trade-off. If I was going to keep chickens, I had to accept the fact that they are a quick, helpless meal. And it's not personal. It's nature, and there is a limit to how much I can control.

A few weeks before Maizie's murder, Janis started to act unwell. My vet lives in my town and also has chickens, and he agreed to have a look at her. I made an appointment and put her in a cat crate and drove her into town. Dr. Souter listened to her heart, asked me if she was eating (she was) and gave me a prescription for an oral antibiotic that I had to administer twice a day for two weeks. It took a few days but I developed a technique. Fill a plastic syringe with sticky pink antibiotic, clutch the hen under your left arm, bend over, and with your left hand pry open her beak and with your

right hand attempt to squirt 20ccs of medicine down her gullet. Chickens do resist this procedure.

Janis did perk up after about five days of this. I started making her special chicken salads. Chickens love spinach and tomatoes, so I would make her a special paper plate of spinach and chopped tomatoes topped with sunflower seeds and mealworms. Chickens LOVE mealworms the most. Janis often rested in the coop and even when she was too weak to move, I put the plate in front of her and she pecked at her salad.

She rallied, and in the next week I started to think she would make it. She was eating more, walking around more, and still bullying the other hens. Then Janis died in the coop one warm spring day almost a year after she came to us, so huge and fierce. To this day I don't know how old any of the Four Hens of the Apocalypse were. For all I know, Janis could have died of old age.

After Janis died, I was more resolute about not naming anymore chickens. But then Sarah and I would catch an old movie on TMC and there would be a Beverly or a Florence or some other throwback woman's name from the good old days that would be a great name for a chicken, and we'd steal it.

One Hen of the Apocalypse remains. She was second in command, but now, she is the Alpha Chicken and her name is Irene. Chickens are flock animals and are not meant to live singularly, especially an Alpha like Irene. Without a flock, she had no purpose and would wander the yard and then just sit on the roosting bar in the coop all hunched down. She looked depressed. Plus, winter was coming and she needed a few more hens to keep her warm. We added three Barred Rocks free from a farm in the next town. After about a year, another hawk and a fox got those. Then I got four Araucaunas

but they didn't last three weeks before a pair of young foxes started taking one or two every other day for a week until they were gone. Irene was the only one to survive, hiding quickly at the first sign of an interloper, her instincts honed after so many attacks.

I don't pay for my chickens. I don't have to. People are always trimming their flocks or deciding to go with a different breed. They advertise, I show up with a large dog crate, and take them home. Last October, I got four Rhode Island Reds from a couple on the other side of the nearest mountain gap. The Reds have become my favorite breed so far. They're like puppies. Not skittish at all, almost personable, they gather at my feet at mealtimes. I can even feed them by hand, and pick them up once in a while.

Yes, I am now a chicken person. Sarah calls me "The Chicken Whisperer", and I'm O.K. with that.

I have accepted the fact that chickens are expendable on some level. They are rather helpless in the face of predators unless they are locked up tight in their coop. And they know when there is trouble, a sixth sense that stops them where they stand, emitting a gurgling, back of the throat warning sound like a cat in heat.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I call to them. "I'm right here."

Then I hear it, that whistle-cry and I look up and there is a hawk, high above, circling my house.

## **Butch as I Wanna Be**

The first time I kissed a girl, I thought I would fly.

Summer of 1985, Upstate New York. I am home from my freshman year at Colorado State University answer an ad in the local newspaper for stable help and am hired almost immediately, mucking stalls at a prestigious Standardbred horse farm. At 19, it is the only real skill I have, leftover from years of pre-adolescent riding lessons.

I am tall and strong and very, very young. And asexual. A jock in high school, I was much more interested in sports and going to college. I knew I was gay, but led such a sheltered life I couldn't even name it until that summer at the farm. Within days of starting, I meet a seasoned employee named Stephanie. She is short and feisty with a Brooklyn accent. She is Italian-American, short dark hair and brown eyes. She has been at the farm for two years and knows everything. She is 25.

Stephanie shows me where the shovels and manure carts are kept, where to get fresh sawdust for the stalls, where the muck heap is behind the stud barn. It's a breeding farm, so she shows me how a foal will follow its mother wherever she goes, no need to lead the babies.

In the breeding shed, we watch a tired, teasing mare stand patiently as a magnificent chestnut stallion mounts her from behind, his huge erect cock swinging wildly as the breeding assistants grab hold of it to collect the sperm, the stallion grunting and screaming, coming into a large plastic cup. Artificial insemination is used widely in the Standardbred world. I later find out the stallion is worth \$2 million, the mare about \$500.

It's the first time I have ever seen a penis, any kind of penis.

About a week after I start, Stephanie invites me over to her house for a beer after work, an apartment on the bottom floor of a split-level a few miles from the farm. We drink several beers, and her attention excites me. She tells me how she grew up in Brooklyn but left as soon as she could because she knew she was a country girl and a horseperson at heart.

It takes a few more after-work get-togethers for me to realize that Stephanie is flirting with me, and even then I'm not sure.

One night after beers about two weeks later, I leave Stephanie's apartment to head for home. She walks me out to the 1983 Dodge Horizon I'm driving. I get in. The driver's side window is open and Stephanie is standing next to the car. It's a warm June evening. The air is heavy and still, and bugs fly low and slow in the air around us, the sun gold in its descent.

I'm buzzed from the beer and she is smiling at me and leans into the window and kisses me, long and soft. Then she pulls out and says good-bye and I have no idea what to say because I can't feel my head.

I do not merely drive home, oh no. It feels more like I have a magic carpet and I fly.

I was having sex for the first time, and it was utterly instinctual. Stephanie is happy, and despite the fact that she is butch, I am butcher. I became the seducer and wanted nothing more than to please the woman. Stephanie was impressed.

After the summer, I return to college in Colorado hopelessly in love, because sex equals love when you are 19 and have never been in a relationship. Within a few weeks,

Stephanie breaks up with me on the phone, telling me that she and her ex have gotten back together. I suddenly get smarter and ask how long they had been back together.

“Since Labor Day,” she said flatly.

And I have my first heartbreak. I never see her again.

Sometimes people are experiences that you have to go through on the way to being yourself. That’s the category I put Stephanie in. Everyone has to have a first in order to have a second, and a fourth, and then if you’re lucky, a forever.

Eight months after the Stephanie heart break, I leave Colorado State University and transfer to the State University of New York at Purchase near White Plains, N.Y, because I missed the East Coast and the only gay bar in Fort Collins, Colorado had suspiciously burned to the ground in 1983.

Purchase is a revelation. Unlike at CSU, where it was dangerous to be seen anywhere near the door to the Gay-Lesbian Alliance Club, 30 percent of the student body at Purchase is gay or bi. They are artists and dancers and actors and writers and I am home.

But the real world was another story. I move to San Francisco in 1990. I have taken up competitive powerlifting at a local gym. You compete in three lifts, bench, squat and deadlift. I do not have the guts to cut my hair short because I am gay and alone in my struggle and haven’t even come out to my parents. I’m afraid of looking like a lesbian and getting a the shit beat out of me on the street, so I decide to cut the sides and the top of my hair short but leave the back long, kind of a “best of both worlds” compromise. I think I am being very original and clever.

It's the early 1990s and I am living in San Francisco, the Gay Capital of the Universe, with my college best friend-turned-girlfriend, Sandy; and her best friend from Connecticut, John, a gay man of Portuguese descent who is resisting going into the family baking business. He favors drag shows. We need one more roommate to make our Mission District apartment affordable and I invite my junior year roommate, Scout, to live with us.

Scout dropped out of SUNY Purchase and never graduated. She loves to drop acid and is obsessed with the Butthole Surfers, Ed Gein and the video of Budd Dwyer, the Pennsylvania Treasurer who shot himself in the head during a televised press conference in January 1987 after being convicted of taking a bribe. She has long straight reddish brown hair, never wears a bra, and looks like the female equivalent of Alfred E. Neuman, the cartoon poster boy from Mad Magazine.

Here's a tip: Never date, let alone agree to spend the rest of your life with, your best friend from college because neither of you could find girlfriends at the time. My time in San Francisco is cut short by the fact that Sandy and I are not meant for each other, and my mullet and I move back to my parent's house in New York's Hudson Valley.

I meet my next girlfriend through another ex from college and my mullet and I move to New York City in the summer of 1994. Michele is from Queens and is an out and proud femme. A "Femme" is a feminine gay woman who is often attracted to butches.

While Michele likes my butchness, she is not a fan of the mullet, and within six months has convinced me to cut the thing off and finally get a short haircut.

"Butch as you wanna be, Lee," she would say. "Butch as you wanna be."

Easier said than done. Coming out as gay was one thing, but I am 28 years old and finally starting to embrace my butchness.

I thought I was fooling everyone. I actually thought that walking around with my hair long in the back and short in the front that people would think I was just an average straight woman, despite only wearing jeans and sleeveless t-shirts and powerlifting. Oh, yeah, I had 'em ALL fooled...

Compounded by the fact that me and about 768,000 other butch lesbians between, oh, 1986-1996, had the exact same idea. After the first year of the mullet, you could see us coming a mile away, swagger and all. But fear of being harassed or attacked was still the driving force behind my inability to own my Butch lesbian looks. But you're basically wearing a neck sign that reads, 'I'm a big dyke', and you have to be O.K. with that. It takes time

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It's 2018 and I am 52 years old. For the last decade, I have had my hair cut at the local barbershop where I live here in Vermont. Very short. Sometime around my mid-thirties, I stop caring what people think. I get brave with age. I get so brave, so sure of who I am and what I want, that I put a personal ad on a gay dating website and describe myself as a butch who prefers femme women. The woman who will become my wife, Sarah, answers that ad. Her username is "VtFemme." We've been together for 14 years and she is the love of my life.

I see young butches now and I am so proud. They have the freedom, the wherewithal, and the courage to not give a fuck and be themselves, now. For me, butch on the inside did not translate to instantaneous comfort with myself on the outside,

because I didn't know how people would react. It was a process of learning to not give a fuck, aided by the evolution of gay rights and an increased level of acceptance in the straight world. I had to learn how to be brave in order to be myself, everyday, which meant being as Butch as I wanted and, more importantly, needed to be.

## **A Butch Primer**

Here is where I separate the Butches from the boys. A Butch lesbian is a tomboy, squared. She is male-identified in many ways: she wears men's clothes, her hair short. She knows how to treat a lady, opening doors, sending flowers, buying dinner and doing all the driving whenever possible. In fact, she can drive anything, stick, tractor, motorcycle, four-wheeler, anything.

A Butch is strong, both physically and mentally. She is brave and she is protective. She does not shrink from a challenge. On the down side, she can be frustratingly stubborn. On the upside (SPOILER!), a Butch is often incredibly sensitive. Think of her like a turtle, a hard shell on the outside, and all mush on the inside. And sexually, most Butches are "tops," meaning they like to make the first move and then do a whole seduction, and they are literally on top. Often, a dildo is used for added effect, much to both women's delight.

And there are gradations of butch. There is "Soft Butch," which means you wear more women's clothes, but it's athletic wear, like tennis shirts. Some may even be pink. Your demeanor is slightly more feminine. Think soccer mom in New England, or perhaps the Midwest. You are practical, but not overbearing, fit and possibly maternal. You can either be a top or a bottom, no one knows for sure but you and your girlfriend.

The thing about soft butches is that they tend to date each other. They often even look alike. And sometimes, unfortunately, they also dress alike, making it even harder to tell them apart. They may favor matching jogging suits, a phenomenon most often observed on Commercial Street in Provincetown.

A “Stone Butch” is a Butch in every sense of the word, but she likes to give pleasure sexually. They get off on the seduction but may have a hard time letting their guard down enough to have the favor returned. In other words, to be touched, there. Some stone butches may have a history of sexual assault or molestation that has put them off allowing someone to make love to them. It’s very much a trust/strength issue. That said, there are a variety of ways for a Butch to get off, including wearing or using a dildo with her partner.

Butches, in turn, love femmes because the Butch-Femme dynamic allows them to be the Butch gentleman they are and the femmes appreciate it. In turn, the femmes are treated very well and often enjoy a level of authority in the relationship, despite the Butch’s tough persona (remember the turtle!). In the best Butch-Femme relationships, however, like any healthy marriage, there is mutual respect and appreciation for the other.

The Butch has become something of an enigma over the last 20 years. Millennial don’t like labels when it comes to their sexual orientation. They have coined phrases like “Pansexual” to describe their sexual tastes. In other words, they’ll sleep with anyone they want, which now included transgender and queer partners, so “Bisexual” is often not an adequate label. It’s refreshing, in a way, that this generation is so much more sexually fluid than ever before.

Feminists and, more recently, the younger LGBTQ community, have shunned the Butch, arguing that the Butch mentality at its roots is sexist, or at the very least mirroring the patriarchy.

I don't know... I can see why they would say that, not being in my body. But these are not choices I made. This is how I evolved. To take the "male" role in a relationship is like breathing.

We're still out here, us Butches. We're just living our lives as newspaper editors, factory workers, business people, farm hands, doctors, lawyers, bankers, students... We are an often overlooked and underappreciated subcategory of the LGBTQ demographic. That's O.K. Let the trans folk take all the current socio-cultural glory. The Butches will quietly continue opening doors and treating women right.

## Road Tripping

For eight whole days in September 2016, my wife Sarah and I slept on the convertible bed in the back of a campervan named “Huck” as we traveled the high desert of southwestern Utah. I wanted to downsize from the 25-foot RV we’d rented the year before when we went to Zion National Park, the Grand Canyon, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. I wanted be more nimble, to take narrow, cliff hugging highways and dirt roads in something more manageable and without the size restrictions for RVs in so many national parks. Essentially, I wanted more freedom.

Living in a campervan was a lifelong dream of mine, and I say that without a trace of irony. That seed was planted early. When I was about 10 years old living in New York’s Hudson Valley, I had a model toy conversion van. It was about 10 inches long and dark purple with a tinted circle window on each side toward the back. If you opened up the rear double doors, there was white molded plastic furniture — a couch, a table, a chair. And if I held the open doors up to my eye, in my mind I could suspend reality and place my whole body inside that van.

I started drawing overhead schematic interiors of the campervan and hatched a plan: someday I’d live in the van with my Golden Retriever, traveling happily around the United States. The fact that I had no job aspirations or plan to earn any income did not seem to be an issue. It would just happen. So, I spent hours in the den of my childhood home with a pad of drawing paper and colored pencils designing in the inside of my campervan. I drew the bed on one side, a small sink on the other, a two-burner stovetop next to that, and a couple of chairs behind the front seats. I drew a small box with an oval

in it to represent the toilet. I drew several variations, moving the sink, moving the chairs, subtracting a chair, folding up the bed, etc. In my prepubescent mind, I vividly pictured blue carpet on the walls (it was the 1970s), perhaps a beaded curtain for privacy, and a white Formica sink.

Never mind details like scale, and that the van would have had to be a 30-foot long RV in order to fit everything in my schematic. The plans fed my imagination and the wanderlust in my heart. As I got older, I found myself searching for the Next Great Road Trip.

But after high school and into college, the dream was stained by substances and cheapened by literary lies. Fueled by alcohol and the fairy tales spun by the Beat Generation writers and the scholars that touted them, by the time I was in college, I bought it all: That somehow I could drink to excess, do drugs regularly, get very little REM sleep, and still produce pages and pages of brilliant creative work. Gone were the visions of clear mountain streams and high peaks, open fields and red deserts, and small towns with friendly folks and great diners. Enter the new road trip ideal: swing into a town, find the local dive bar and make friends with colorful people, tie one on, wake up in a strange place, locate my car and head to the next state.

Most of the road trips I've taken prior to getting sober in 2009 have been grave disappointments. There were no drunken adventures, no exciting chance meetings, no one-night stands, and no drug-fueled "Fear and Loathing" storylines. In fact, and any substance abuse counselor or therapist would nod knowingly at this point, the most fulfilling excursions have been stone cold sober affairs with my wife of 14 years and my wits about me.

It started when Sarah and I were watching TV and we saw a show about the desert Southwest and I said I would like to go back to California or New Mexico, where I had lived and traveled decades ago. And Sarah said, “Yes, I’ve never been.” I think you make it a real moment and not conditional

Then suddenly here we were, with time, an empty nest, a reliable house and pet sitter, two weeks of paid vacation and a whole country to see. We would never have time to drive out there and back from Vermont, but we could fly into Las Vegas, rent an RV, drive where we wanted and get back and fly home within a 10-day window.

Our 10-year anniversary loomed, and I started researching RV rentals out of Las Vegas, and — boom — turned out that was something people did, fly to Las Vegas, pick up an RV and tool around the Southwest. We took to it like dogs to peanut butter. We rented Huck from Escape Campervans out their Las Vegas office. Escape’s “thing” is that every van sports an original painting/design by a different artist. Most of them have psychedelic designs, some have dinosaurs, others have stars and planets. One had Keith Haring dancing and fucking people on it, (I tried to reserve it but it was already taken) and another had a large three-masted schooner plunging through sand dunes.

Our van was named Huck because each side was decorated with large original paintings depicting scenes from *Huckleberry Finn*. On the passenger side, there was Huck, his back to us, looking out over the mighty Mississippi at dusk as a steamboat passes by, a patched cloth tent set up behind him with a campfire blazing.

And Huck seemed to be the only literary-themed van, which I thought was fated. Off we went.

Turned out the real-life version of my fantasy campervan was... harder to live in. Hick featured a backseat that could be converted flat to a double bed, cushions strategically placed at the head behind the front bucket seats. In order to accomplish this, we had to take the sheets and sleeping bags off each morning and re-make the bed each night.

There was no toilet or shower. The double doors on the back of the van opened to a series of wooden shelves made of plywood and 2x4s that held a Coleman propane stove that ran on canisters, plastic totes for dishware and food, and small metal sink connected to a five-gallon water jug underneath that operated with a push faucet. There was a paper towel holder on the door.

It was hard to keep our gear organized in such a small space, and we were constantly looking for things. Huck had a habit of eating things. We would look for something one day, and then the next day it would turn up. But some things were never regurgitated. I lost my flip phone, Sarah lost a pair of silver earrings.

And on a trip like that, where we were hiking every day and then coming back and making dinner and just wanting to collapse into bed, we couldn't. Every night, we had to summon all our strength to set up the bed and make the bed. It was annoying as fuck.

But the trip was magical. To be a Vermonter in the desert southwest is to be immersed in a foreign geology. In place of all that green mountain-ness is sandstone and red dirt and space — so much space. The sun is clearer, there is more white light in the desert, and driving down a highway with nothing but open space and spires and mesas as far as the eye can see, I felt small but free, so free.

A road trip is an opportunity, a fresh start everyday tinged with the subtle tension of the unknown. What will I see? Who will I meet? What will happen today? It's a chance to fly out of my comfort zone and embrace the new and unexpected.

I was as excited to show Sarah the desert as she was to see it. She took to road tripping in the van well, save for the lack of bathroom facilities. She loved the landscape, and the natural wonder of Arches and Bryce, Moab and the Colorado river. She drank it all in and was eager every day for the next adventure.

We were in the middle of the trip when we found a first-come first-served Bureau of Land Management site along the Colorado River about three miles from Moab. After circling one campground after another looking for an unoccupied site. We finally found one at the end of a BLM campground farther down the highway. There was plenty of room and a path leading to the Colorado River, green and cold and swirling in September. We set up our screen house and draped solar fairy lights over it, set up two chairs and the cooler inside and we were home.

We left the next morning for a say at Dead Horse State Park, but when we pulled Huck back into the campground access road and approached our site hours later, I thought, "Something is off." It took a minute to realize what was different: Our screen house was gone.

We started looking in the dry brush nearby, and down the footpath to the cold river. It wasn't anywhere.

"Someone must have taken it," Sarah said, convinced some ne'er do well had pulled up to our campsite while we were gone, ripped up our screen house from the stakes, stuffed it into their car and took off. But I was skeptical. All of our firewood, the

camping chairs, the cooler we were using as a table, they were all still set up just the way we'd left them, but the screen house they were in, replete with solar fairy lights, was gone.

But there was no other logical explanation, and I began to despair about humanity, crushed that someone would do such a thing. The screen house had looked so inviting and warm and settled the night before, the solar lights casting a cozy aura against dusk in the canyon, the campfire blazing just feet away, Huck parked like a sentry between us and the rest of the campground. That screen house had been to the Adirondacks and the Green Mountains countless times, and I had shipped it all the way from Vermont to Utah because we knew it would complete our myriad campsites. The screen house was our living room, and someone had taken it.

But then I noticed that the stakes were still in the ground? I walked over to the neighboring campsite where a large fifth-wheel with Utah plates had been parked since the day we arrived.

I knocked on the flimsy camper door and woman in her 50s with a bleached ponytail answered. She looked like she got too much sun on a regular basis.

“Hi!” I said. “We’re camping down at the end there and we just came back from Dead Horse and our screen house is missing.”

The woman’s shirtless husband appeared behind her. He, too, was in his 50s and had bleached blond hair. His skin was red, that flushed look of someone who drinks a lot. But both of their faces were open and friendly.

I dove in.

“I wonder if you guys were here and noticed anyone driving up to our site over the last three hours?”

“Oh, dear,” the woman said. “No, we haven’t seen anyone. That’s too bad. I was noticing that tent last night and thought it just looked so cute with the lights on it.”

“Yeah,” I said, still looking around for it.

Then she started talking about the wind and how strong it had been in the canyon that afternoon. The husband nodded behind her.

“Yeah, it was pretty fierce,” he said. “It probably blew away.”

He put on a t-shirt and he and the woman climbed down out of the fifth wheel and we all walked back toward our site.

“Honey, these folks said the wind was pretty fierce through here today. They think it blew away.”

Sarah and the woman started chatting and I followed the guy up to the highway through the sagebrush. A minute later, I heard him call out, “Found it!”

I clamored up the shoulder to the road and waited for a few cars and campers to go by, then ran across to the other side to see the screen house lying in a tangled heap in the dry grass. Two of the aluminum arms were broken, and the screen and tent material was twisted all around the other three arms.

The husband was holding one of the arms.

“You just need a couple of new screws here and here,” he said, pointing to the plastic hub where each arm connected. I nodded, and then I noticed the hub itself was cracked almost in half. Not good.

I gathered the legs and folds of mesh and nylon in my arms while the husband carried the broken poles and we headed back across the busy road to the campsite. Sarah and the wife were still standing there talking. I thanked the couple profusely as I laid the pile of screen house on the picnic table, and they headed back to their trailer.

“She didn’t know what Vermont was,” Sarah said in a hushed tone the minute they were out of earshot.

“What?” I said, half paying attention as I grieved the loss of the screen house, trying in vain to untangle the mess.

“She asked where we were from,” Sarah explained, “and when I said, ‘Vermont’, she had never heard of it and didn’t know where it was.”

The woman did know where Connecticut was, though, because her son had recently relocated there, so Sarah told her Vermont was about five hours north of there. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that there are people who don’t know the names of all 50 states in America or have a general idea of where each one is.

It was still pretty breezy and we decided not only could we not put the screen house up again, that we probably needed to throw it in the dumpster. I’m just glad the thing didn’t cause a wreck on busy Highway 128. I can only imagine what it looked like flying across the road like a 10-foot square green nylon kite.

The screenhouse was missed for the rest of the trip as we made our way down to Zion National Park for the last two nights. It felt like someone had bombed my living room.

We drove back into Las Vegas and said good-bye to Huck, dropping him off at Escape Campervans. The cleaning crew whisked him away and immediately began

cleaning the inside and preparing him for his next road trip. Turned out he was scheduled to head back out that day with another customer. I knew Huck was not a person, he was a van, but I had a pang of sadness that he would not be allowed to rest. And then I made myself feel better by thinking, "This is what he was made for. He is living his best life."

Then we headed for our hotel near McCarran Airport. I had shipped our dildo out with the camping equipment for this trip, but we were so busy every day and exhausted every night, we never used it. So, we decided not to ship it back the day before we left so we could have a romantic evening in the hotel the night before we left Las Vegas.

And we did, and it was great. But the next morning, one of us had to pack the thing in our carry on luggage (we never check bags). I just couldn't. I pictured it showing up on the TSA x-ray machine, a phallic contrast to the notebooks, glasses case and pens in my shoulder bag, or in my rolling carry on with my clothes.

Sarah took one for the team.

"Oh, fine, give it to me and I'll put it in with my clothes in the rolling carry on," she said, acting exasperated. I was on one side of the hotel bed and she was on the other. I handed it over, grateful. I felt certain it would be no big deal, as in all of our travels, we had never had our bags opened and searched.

We arrived at McCarran Airport over an hour ahead of time and started cleaning out our pockets and taking off our shoes in the TSA Security line. The wait wasn't bad and the line was moving well. We got up to the body scan within a few minutes.

After we each got scanned, I met Sarah on the other side of the machine.

“They’re holding my rolling carry on,” she said, her eyes accusing, her tone dripping with annoyance. My heart was in my throat. How could this be happening? The ONE time we decide to pack it with us...

I retrieved my bags from the metal rollers and we waited as an older TSA agent, a man in early sixties wearing blue latex gloves, chatted with us as he felt all around the edges of Sarah’s open suitcase.

IF the agent ever felt the dildo, he never let on. Sarah was laughing too much at everything he said, making self-deprecating jokes about how full the suitcase was. I stood stock still, afraid to move, keeping my eyes fixed on the x-ray image of the suitcase, relieved not to see phallicly-shaped on the black and white screen.

The TSA agent slapped a white inspections ticker on the suitcase and we thanked him and headed to our gate.

“Well, THAT was fun,” Sarah said rolling her eyes again. I took full responsibility for not “manning up” and told her I owed her big time and would buy her a really nice dinner when we got home.

## **The Right Place**

Now is a good time to discuss my relationship with public women's restrooms.

I hate them.

As a large-boned, Butch lesbian who wears men's clothes and my hair short, I am constantly mistaken for a man, which I guess is what I'm "going" for. But I'm not transgender. I don't necessarily feel like I was born in the wrong body. I'm somewhere between male and female, and I still have my breasts. I wear Under Armor sports bras to smash them down as much as possible, but I'm a solid 40C and there is no getting around that.

Nonetheless, walking into a public women's bathroom for me is an act of courage. It means subjecting myself to double takes and uncomfortable glances, or worse. More than once I've been addressed directly.

"Excuse me, this is the ladies room!" said one older lady, clearly alarmed, in an Applebee's restaurant a few years back.

I felt my cheeks flush, looked her dead in the eyes, and pulled myself up to my full height so she can plainly see my chest.

"I'm aware of that, thank you," I said and walked into a stall. Only then did I hang my head.

I once entered a restaurant restroom and passed a young woman washing her hands at the sink. I entered one of the stalls and locked the door. The crack between the

stall door and the wall was wide enough for me to see her dry her hands, walk to the restroom door, and open it to double check that she was, in fact, in the ladies' room.

Or it's just the open stares when I walk in. People stare at me. The trick is to stare right back. And if there is a line for the bathroom, I take a deep breath and I wait, very anxiously. I'm so uncomfortable, but every time I feel someone staring at me, I look 'em right in the eyes with my head up.

I love it when there is a "family" bathroom. No triangle skirted blue silhouette on the door, no little figure in pants. It's for families, and ironically, for me, too.

And this is what makes the whole transgender bathroom law debate so ridiculous. State officials passing laws saying that people had to use the bathroom of the gender they were born with. Fine. I'm doing that, and I have more problems than if I started using the men's room. Maybe I should start using the men's room...

My wife and I were camping at Bryce Canyon in Utah, and it happened again. There were no showers in the campground itself, just bathrooms and a sink. For a shower, you had to go to the main campground store building and get tokens from the clerk, five minutes of hot water per token.

There was a group of maybe six older women camping in the same campground as we were. I noticed that every time I went into the women's restroom and one of them was in there, they would leave as quickly as they could. I started to dread using that bathroom, and at night I would go in the bushes instead. But one night, I walked into the restroom and one of the older ladies was coming out of the handicapped stall. She looked up at me, gasped, skirted by me and fled out the door. It was humiliating, and I was pissed.

I think there should be more respect given to people who walk into a public restroom, regardless of what they look like. How often does someone mistakenly walk into the wrong bathroom, unless they are very old or their eyesight is failing? I mean really. You are using a toilet. It's a very personal experience you are forced to share with strangers.

One solution would be to wear women's clothes, but I haven't worn a dress since 1987 and I'm certain the police would be called.

And that's not me. This is me, and all I want to do is use the bathroom without feeling like I don't belong. When someone acts like I don't belong in the women's restroom, I'm in middle school all over again. In my mind, I'm running around the playground at Willow Avenue Middle School after my friend Ellen, yelling, "Why won't you talk to me?!"

Turned out she didn't have a good reason. One day she just decided she was going to stop being friends with me and, to make it sting even more, offer no explanation whatsoever.

I not only carry my "otherness" around with me, I wear it, every day. I can't take it off. And I won't. Trust that I am in the right place.

## **Ink In My Veins**

Two years ago, as my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday approached, I thought about a tattoo to mark the occasion. It would be my first. As a member of Generation X, I had done the requisite three years in San Francisco in the early 1990s and managed to escape without a mark on me. But as the big 5-0 loomed, the idea of indelible ink was much more tangible than it had ever been before. I had solved half of the tattoo puzzle a few years back when I decided that whatever I got, it would go on the upper part of my right arm. But as I drove around Vermont in my truck, I thought about where I was versus where I had been over the years, and an image sprang to mind, something to symbolize this new, best version of myself after my life's trials. A phoenix.

This ageless symbol of rebirth and renewal was just what I had been searching for. It would be with me for the second half of my life, reminding me where I have been and what I have overcome, but more importantly, urging me over future obstacles.

I have always been drawn to tribal-style tattoo art, the heavy black swirling ink patterns reminiscent of not only Native American art and symbols, but also the Maori in New Zealand, and Polynesian and Samoan cultures. I like the boldness of the design, the deep, dark ink, the ancient, primal look of it. I set to work looking online for a tribal Phoenix for my right arm.

There were hundreds. It took two or three days but when I saw it, I knew. It looked a little like an ancient Thunderbird in tribal style, his wings up, and a long tail reaching down, his body a slender swirl of tribal flames.

I copied the image and saved a version of it on my desktop, where I could see it all the time. Then, I sat on it for about a year. I started grad school. Life happened, and then I was turning 51.

That was spring 2016. Weeks went by when I never thought about it, the leaves fell, but as winter turned to mud season, I checked in with myself and knew I still wanted the tattoo. I got a quote from Frog Alley Tattoo and Piercing in Middlebury, Vermont, the next town over. Three hours, \$300. I couldn't get an appointment until May 6, Green Up Day. Turns out spring is their busiest time of year, what with tax refunds coming in and all...

The date drew closer, and I would look at my bare right arm in the mornings, or when I was getting ready for bed, running my hand over my right triceps muscle and trying to imagine a 9-inch long Phoenix there. It was difficult. For 51 years, my arms had been bare, just skin and some freckles. It was new territory, and a little scary. FOREVER.

The Saturday morning of my appointment came, and I did one more gut check before I even got out of bed. Yes, I still wanted this tattoo.

My wife Sarah came downstairs a little while later.

"Today's the big day!" she said with a smile. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," I said. "I had a meeting with myself this morning and we are good to go."

We had a late breakfast and headed out for my 11 a.m. appointment.

Frog Alley Tattoo is, in fact, in an alley, albeit a very tasteful Vermont college-town alley with clean brick and no trash. Inside, it was immaculate, almost sterile. Turns out Christin, owner operator, is a neat freak and germaphobe, good qualities in any tattoo

artist. She was a middle-aged woman with dyed dark red hair, pale skin, and an open, friendly and intelligent face. There were no visible tattoos, however.

Pierre was a large man, maybe 6'5", about 45, wearing all black, completely bald, and sporting a goatee. A former pro wrestler and an actor, Pierre was in charge of piercings. He was also Christin's significant other. In the corner was Tyler, the apprentice tattoo artist, probably in his late 30s, tall and skinny with a head full of dirty blonde dreadlocks.

And while the people were unique and friendly, it was the choice of music that made me feel immediately at ease. When we first walked in, Frank Sinatra was singing, "When I Was 17." I mentioned how much I loved that Frank was playing.

"I chose it," Tyler volunteered. "We couldn't agree on anything else."

I commended him on his choice.

Christin produced a release that I had to sign, swearing that I was not under the influence of alcohol or drugs. As I checked the "No" box, I thought, in fact, that at that moment, I was probably the healthiest I have been in 35 years.

Christin had prepared a stencil in the size I had requested. We cut the tail of the Phoenix and made it roughly an inch shorter and she affixed the stencil directly on the side of my upper arm, along the triceps muscle line. I shared the significance of the Phoenix and why I chose it. I told her it was my first tattoo ever, and talked about my alcoholism and living through 9/11. They all nodded, and Christin said, "That's cool," but I got that feeling you get when you are sharing something with people who have seen a lot, that they've heard it all, that the reasons anyone gets a tattoo are as myriad as the people themselves.

Then I sat down in the chair and propped my right forearm on the armrest at a right angle. Christin sat down on a rolling stool next to me and we began. I took a deep breath.

“Just relax,” she said.

“I’m ready,” I said.

And I was. The tiny needles of Christin’s tattoo gun started pricking my skin, but it didn’t hurt. It was just a new sensation.

But a few minutes later, the enormity of what I was doing, how long I had waited to do it, all I had overcome and everything I looked to in the future started to seep over me. The others were chatting away, and Sarah was sitting across from me when she noticed my eyes welling.

“You O.K., Honey?” she asked gently.

I nodded, and someone handed me a paper towel. I dabbed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“I just got a little overwhelmed,” I said my voice catching in my throat.

“Well, it’s a big deal,” Christin said as she continued working on my arm, and I nodded and pulled myself together.

Sinatra continued in the background with “Night and Day”, and the conversation took my mind off the intensity of the situation. It was a chatty group. I discovered that Pierre was a former professional wrestler who regularly performs in regional theater when he’s not doing body piercings or working as a bouncer at a popular local bar.

Tyler was sitting on a stool drawing a beautiful orange Koi fish with colored pencil. Turned out he is the vice-president of the local Farmer’s Market.

Christin grew up near San Francisco through middle and high school, and lived in the city itself for years afterward. The early 1990s, in fact. We reminisced about the Oakland Fire and the L.A. Riots, the homeless people and the burritos that you just can't find anywhere else.

“Luck be a lady tonight, luck be a lady tonight...”

Christin has a 17 year-old son who is a math whiz and was accepted to the University of Chicago, and she was incredibly proud, although concerned as to how she would pay for his education.

I mentioned that I didn't see any tattoos on her. We took a break and she pulled down the collar of her shirt to show me a large green octopus on her upper left chest and shoulder. In one tentacle, the octopus is holding a piece of toast.

“I love toast,” she said unequivocally. “I always have. I don't know why, but toast is by far my favorite food. I must eat toast every day. So when the guy asked me if I wanted the octopus to be holding anything, I said, ‘How about a piece of toast?’ It made perfect sense to me.”

I asked if that meant she collects vintage toasters, and she did have few of the classic ones from the 1950s and 60s.

We were about 45 minutes into the tattoo, and I got up to use the restroom and get some water. The Phoenix was about a third of the way done. I looked down at my arm and the black ink forming my Phoenix, and still couldn't quite believe it was happening.

“I've got my love to keep me warm...”

When we resumed, Christin said she left California and moved to Alaska for a few years.

“Did you know there are no lightening bugs in Alaska?” she asked, working the middle of my arm with the gun. “I had a woman come in once who was from Alaska, and she came here and someone told her the lightning bugs were fairies, and she believed that for a while...”

I quickly loved the suspension of disbelief for that woman, and pondered telling my toddler granddaughter the same, but then imagined the crushing disappointment that likely followed.

We were into the second hour and I had gotten used to the pain. I can't really call it pain, though. It's a different sensation, more like a constant, tiny, prickling rub.

And then I was so hungry. I had eaten a light breakfast as I was unsure about how I would feel, but by 12:30 my stomach was grumbling. Sarah graciously went out and got me a granola bar and a banana, which I gingerly peeled with my left hand while holding it in my static right hand, still on the armrest as Christin continued her work.

She told another story of a guy who came in for a touch-up on an old tattoo. He was in his 60s, and he had a tattoo of small snail on his shoulder. He explained that when he and his wife of now 20 years went on their first date, he had escargot and got the tattoo to remind him of that magical night.

“You don't wait 20 years to want more of that,” he told Christin.

Another gentleman came in and wanted a gold piercing.

“He looked like an accountant,” Pierre said. “But he brought his personal shaman with him, and the guy proceeded to start burning sage. I told him, ‘You can't do that here.’”

The shaman put out the sage but approved of the shop and the accountant said they'd be back the next day to do the piercing.

The next day comes, and the shaman starts reciting prayers while the client is in the chair. He tells Pierre that he has to wait for this specific line of a prayer, and at that moment, he can do the piercing.

“So, I'm sitting there with the piercing tool in my hand, poised in the air over this guy, waiting for this line. And it goes on and on, and after about 15 minutes, I just said, “Sorry,” and I went ahead and did the piercing. It was ridiculous.”

The CD had run through Sinatra's greatest hits and some smooth jazz and we had moved on to Dean Martin.

“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore' ...”

By then we were in the final stages. My arm was warm, and I had that feeling you get when something touches you in the same spot of skin over and over again for a long time. The only real sense of pain came in one specific spot farther down just above the crook, likely where the nerve endings were closer to the surface.

When Christin finished and I looked at my arm, I felt like I was in a dream. It was really there, shiny and black, but I couldn't quite grasp that it was real. It would take some time.

She put a large first-aid bandage over the phoenix and handed me a sheet of instructions for the care and feeding of my tattoo.

“You seem like intelligent people, and your wife's a nurse, so I know you'll take care of it,” she said. “But you wouldn't believe some of the people we get in here

sometimes, redneck farm boys with literal pig shit on their arms and they want a tattoo...”

We said our goodbyes and Sarah and I went out to lunch.

The first week it was impossible to forget I had a tattoo because it required quite a bit of maintenance. While Christin suggested using a clear moisturizing ointment like Aquaphor, I opted for a real Vermont product that worked brilliantly: Cow Cream.

Also known by its retail moniker Bag Balm, it’s a ointment invented in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom in 1901 to soothe rough skin and treat sore cow’s udders or keep them from freezing during harsh winters.

My instructions were to apply ointment to the tattoo at least three to four times a day for the first five days, and expect it to take 10 days to two weeks for the tattoo to heal. Then the peeling began. It seems as though your tattoo is peeling off, but it is not. The ink is too deep. It’s just the first few layers of skin. It only took a week for the phoenix to heal.

The second week was more surreal because once the peeling was done and moisturizing eased up, I would go for hours forgetting I had a tattoo. I would be mired in work, or reading a book, and then I’d catch a glimpse out of the corner of my right eye and remember, and I would be a little Butcher, a little tougher, more confident.

I was a bit concerned about what my elderly parents would think. Mother’s Day was the day after Green-Up Day this year, and I did not want to spring it on mom on her day. I waited until it was healed, and the next time I went out to visit them a few towns over, I showed them.

“Oh!,” my Mom said. “Well, it’s very pretty, very well done.”

“Oh, boy, kid,” my Dad said. “A tattoo, huh?”

I explained the significance of the phoenix and what it meant to me. My mom surprised me.

“Well, it’s very tasteful,” she said. My father just said what he usually says when I inform him of a decision I’ve made. “Well, alright, kid, if that’s what you want...”

And that was it.

And now I have a tattoo. It makes me happy and gives me comfort in that it’s a part of me. It’s a constant and a symbol of my past and my future. Much like my sobriety, I don’t think I earned the right to a tattoo any earlier in my life, nor would it have meant as much.

## **Losing My Religion**

Whenever religion comes up in conversation, I refer to myself as a “Recovering Catholic.” It usually gets a chuckle and a, “Ha, that’s funny, recovering Catholic...”

It’s my way of capsulizing the dysfunctional relationship I have with the religion into which I was baptized. Catholicism to me is like that much-older brother you adored as a small child, but who ended up disappointing you and ultimately left you rejected and dismayed. All you have left are those fond childhood memories, but every Christmas and Easter you are forced to spend time together, and it’s strained at best. You have nothing in common, and your politics are completely different. Perhaps he has become a Trump supporter. After all, he is Pro-Life, and even though you came out as a lesbian in college, he never accepted your lifestyle and does not believe in gay marriage.

“Recovering Catholic” meant more to me once I was actually in recovery following 20 years of hard drinking. In order to be in recovery, though, you must make amends. You must make peace with those you have hurt or betrayed when you were drinking, and you have to learn to forgive yourself for past indiscretions. The goal of recovery is striving to become the best sober version of yourself you can be. I can honestly say that I am nine years into my successful recovery from alcoholism, but I still have some work to do in my recovery from Catholicism.

The most burning question is, “Am I going to hell”? Actually, it’s, “Is there a hell?” Is there a heaven? And if there is a heaven, does my homosexuality stop me at the gate when I die?

From the time I was three years old, my mother brought my brothers and I to church every Sunday. She was like the postal service. Neither wind nor rain nor blizzard nor icy roads would keep her from her appointed communion, and that went double for us kids.

I received my First Communion in a white dress replete with veil. They really do turn you into a miniature bride off to marry Jesus. When I was 12, I was confirmed in the church, which I think means that essentially there is no turning back.

The Catholic Church is insipid in that I don't remember being specifically told that homosexuality was wrong. It was not an overt message. I wasn't even allowed to see R rated movies until I went to college, so homosexuality just didn't come up. It was more under the radar, like a secret passed between the popular kids at school to which I was not privy. In my house, my mother didn't even like us watching "Three's Company" because Jack and Janet and Chrissie were unmarried and all living together. It was unspoken, but I'm sure there was additional disapproval about the fact that Jack pretended to be gay in order to fool Don Knotts the landlord into letting him live there.

All my life up until I was 18, my mother pressured and cajoled me to be more feminine. I went along with it until I was about eight years old, and then started resisting. Still, I wore dresses to school concerts. I wore skirts to family holiday functions. I went along not just because it was what my mother wanted, but because it was what society expected, and I was too unformed in my principles to refuse. But the constant pressure to be more feminine, not only in my hairstyle (thank you, Dorothy Hamill!) and clothing, but in my demeanor, that was the silent but enduring rebuke to Butch lesbianism in my life.

Still, I had my sports. I had skiing and shot put and discus, and no one expected me to act more feminine when I did those things, which I loved.

I remember when I first understood that the Catholic Church did not want me, either. In October 1986, Pope John Paul II issued a “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons:”

*Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed to those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not.*

I was 20 and in college at SUNY Purchase where roughly 30 percent of the student body was gay. The Pope’s letter hit the papers and TV news and there it was. I was persona non grata in my own religion.

Granted, I had started refusing to go to church at 16 or 17, because I began to think for myself. I took issue with the idea of original sin and constantly begging some invisible almighty power for forgiveness when, aside from forging my Dad’s signature on a failing sixth grade report card and masturbating here and there, I hadn’t done anything wrong in my short life.

But to hear it as a decree from the Pope, that the church wanted nothing to do with a gay person like me, there was no misunderstanding. I embraced my life as a homosexual and turned my back on the Catholic Church.

December 22, 1989. My mother and I were Christmas shopping. I was 23 years old, a general assignment reporter for my local newspaper in Cornwall, N.Y. I promised my editor a year on the job, after which I planned a move to San Francisco to be with the girl I thought I was in love with and would spend the rest of my days. I was totally wrong about that, but I didn't know it yet. It would only last a few years, but in my young brain, I was already in the City by the Bay. I was counting the days.

My father wanted a new pair of ski boots and my mother, who had never skied in her life, asked me to go with her to the ski shop. I tried to explain that ski boots are not something you buy for someone else, that you really need to try on ski boots with a professional to get the right fit. I later realize that the last-minute Christmas shopping trip was a front for a conversation.

We left the ski shop and walked next door to the Howard Johnson's, the turquoise and orange sign in three-foot high letters above the front bank of picture windows, the booths visible inside. It was freezing and spitting sleet and occasional snowflakes as we walked across the parking lot. It was lunchtime, and the picture windows were crying on the inside, the heat of the restaurant melding with the cold pane, rivulets of moisture gathering drops as they slowly ran south.

We got a booth by the weeping windows, glad to be in from the weather. My mother seemed happy to be there. She always had a soft spot for Howard Johnson's, ever since she was a "soda jerk" at her local HoJo's as a teenager in 1954. I grew up eating hotdogs on buns toasted in butter on each side, the signature Howard Johnson's way.

"There is really no other way to eat a hot dog," my mother would declare proudly, and I would have to agree.

The waitress brought us two glasses of ice water. My mom ordered a signature HoJo's hotdog on a toasted bun. I opted for a bacon cheeseburger. We talked about what else my father would like for Christmas, since my mother agreed he should buy his own ski boots. She took a sip of her water, set down the glass, and looked me in the eyes. Her jaw was set.

“So, were you going to move to San Francisco without telling me?” she asked, her voice metal on metal.

My throat tightened and my heart fell, but I felt myself smirk. I looked down at my water glass and stirred the ice with my straw.

“What do you mean?” I asked, not looking at her.

“You know what I mean,” Mom spit back. “And wipe that smirk of your face or I'll slap it off.”

My mother had always been my champion. She was always there for us kids, quick with a hug or a soothing word. We always knew we were loved without question. Mom taught first grade for 20 years, then opened her own day care center. She simply loved children. She only once in my life threatened me with physical violence before that day. When I was eight and wasn't doing what I was told, she threatened me with the wooden spoon, but it never touched me.

But this threat from my mother as an adult, this was something else entirely. She took my homosexuality, and the fact that I had not admitted it to her, personally. As a lifelong devout Catholic, this is one of the three legs of the Sin Stool, the other two being Divorce and Abortion.

Her threat got my attention and I looked her square in the eyes.

“I didn’t think you wanted to know,” I said.

“Well,” she said, picking up her hot dog. “I don’t think this is something your father needs to know about.”

I felt the rejection in my chest. My father and I were close. I would have been more comfortable having that conversation with him, so for her to take that away from me felt like double jeopardy. At the same time, I was relieved. I had been instructed not to have this incredibly uncomfortable conversation, which is not going well at all, with another parent.

“Fine,” I say. I was angry, and hurt, and even more defiant than before. My own mother didn’t want to know me. Fine. I will go on with my life. The words “gay” or “lesbian” or “homosexual” are never uttered in this conversation

We finished our meal in relative silence and headed home. We had a family Christmas. My mom gave my Dad an expensive wool plaid robe and some high-end ski gloves. I got a woman’s sweater that I returned for men’s ski socks and a knit cap.

Over the next thirty years, I dipped a toe in a few other religions. I tried the Unitarians, but there I felt the opposite problem. The Unitarians were so welcoming and happy, yet I was hard pressed to understand if they stood for anything. It was a little too “Anything goes” for me.

I have always been attracted to Jewish women and dated one woman for five years. We got engaged and almost got married. I really liked Judaism. Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, was a revelation. To go from a religion where confession was encouraged as often as possible to the belief that you just needed one day to atone for

your sins — it was so... practical. Feast for a day, atone, then eat cookies and drink juice with your congregation, and go home and gorge yourself.

And Jews don't believe in Heaven and Hell. When you die, you just cease to exist and the worms eat you. That's it. I love that. I also learned quite a few prayers, and I would have converted, but we broke off the engagement. However, my vocabulary to this day is still peppered with Jewish and Yiddish words I picked up back then.

I started taking yoga last spring and have discovered the soothing merits of meditation, Kripalu Yoga, and Buddhist principles. I'm learning about chakras and yogic breathing and sending out love and positive energy. "Peace behind me, peace before me, peace within me..." "May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings awaken to the light of their true nature. May all beings be free. May I and all beings know peace."

I recently had to have an MRI and am terribly claustrophobic, but a sleep mask and some yogic breathing — "I am breathing in, I am breathing out" — got me through 45 minutes in a seven by three foot tube like a champ.

Better yet, there is no rejection in yoga. It's wonderfully inclusive. "All beings" means everyone. No one will ever make me feel less than or other in a yoga class. Except for this one girl in my class, Kelly, who can twist her body and achieve serpentine poses I simply never will. I hate Kelly.

Anyway, Kripalu yogic mantras speak to the belief that all beings on earth are connected and they promote peace and happiness in all things. Yoga does not care that I am gay. There is no yogic principle that dictates who lives a better life. It acknowledges

the daily struggles of every human being, and welcomes them to a time of peace and mind/body fusion.

And the best part is, yoga is whatever you want it be. If you don't like chanting or connecting with your third eye using yogic breathing, that's O.K. You get out of yoga what you put into it, the it recognizes that we are all individuals who brings our own set of needs to the session.

That's my kind of religion.

I've lived in Vermont for 15 years now, and have also adopted some key Green Mountain credos for living a good life, like getting up early and the merits of physical labor and hard work and everything in moderation. Also, a little common sense goes a long way, and that you can't get there from here.

I have cherry picked my beliefs and principles from different religions according to what works for me. I live my life with a strong sense of right and wrong based on Christian ideals like "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "Love thy neighbor as thyself," "Honor thy mother and thy father..." It's a combination of Catholicism, Buddhism, Judaism, Vermontism, humanism, and gut instinct.

Then I went to Paris. My wife and I visited the City of Lights for the first time in July. It's a place we have always wanted to visit, and the city and her people did not disappoint. For four days, we walked all over her, visited the Musee' d'Orsay, the Eiffel Tower, the Picasso Museum. We sat in a café near our hotel and drank Café Americain and watched the street life at the corner of rue de Turenne and rue des Francs Bourgeois — A woman leaned out of second floor window across the street, picking her teeth over the iron railing. Cigarette smoke mixed in the rain, and we ate fresh bread and cheese,

wonderful cheese. A man in a purple pleather jumpsuit walked by, then a woman in a jaunty straw hat with a blue bow carrying fresh flowers, and two small girls in print dresses holding hands crossed the street. It was magical, and I was so pleased and relieved to be somewhere that was just as I knew it to be, and hoped it would be.

Our last full day for sightseeing, we walked to Notre Dame Cathedral. We bought tickets to go up into the tower, climbing the 12<sup>th</sup> century spiral stone staircase, the width of the steps getting narrower as we ascended to the very top until we emerged and were rewarded with a panoramic view of the city and square below, the gargoyles stoically watching over it all.

We walked back down and it began to rain as we waited in line to go inside the cathedral itself with an English-speaking guide from Germany. The Gothic church was cavernous and dim and smelled like my childhood, incense and candles. Every once in a while, a gentle recorded male voice would come over the loudspeaker and, in French, remind the hundreds of tourists in the echoing cathedral to lower their voices. The voice was followed by an actual shushing, “Shhhhhhhhhhhh... Shhhhhhhhhhhh.” And everyone would quiet down, at least for a while.

After the tour, we checked out the small gift shop and then headed for the bank of votive candles, rows of red flickering with the memories of others. My wife lit a candle for her late grandmother, and I lit one for my mother, who would have loved Notre Dame.

It was just before noon when we decided to rest our aching feet and legs and sit in the wooden chairs in the center choir section, or the knave. There was a velvet rope

separating the choir area and the seats reserved for those who wanted to participate in the daily masses in the sanctuary.

We were sitting in the nave people-watching when the cathedral bells rang signaling the noon hour, and a priest, an assistant and two young altar boys appeared in the front of the sanctuary to perform the noon mass.

The priest began speaking in French. His words echoed off the gothic windows and pillars and mass began. I smelled stone and candle smoke, and I couldn't understand the priest, yet I understood every word. In that moment, Catholicism was beautiful and packaged within the ancient walls of one of the oldest and most revered cathedrals in the world. I felt my throat tighten and tears formed in the corners of my eyes, my breath coming short and shallow.

I was overcome, wonder and grief flowing over me, and in that moment I realized that my religion had been taken away from me. All these years, I had been telling myself that I turned my back on the Catholic Church, but really, the church rejected me. Sitting on that wooden chair in Notre Dame listening to mass in French, I felt such a deep sense of loss, that my religion had been withheld from me because of my homosexuality, because of who I was and what I represented. And then I thought that just sitting there with my wife was an act of resistance.

My mother and I put down our swords long ago. We were estranged for over a decade until I wrote her a scathing letter giving her an ultimatum: I am either in your life as I am, or I am not in your life at all. She chose the former, and added that, unbeknownst to her, my father had known for years that I was gay. Since then, I have become their go-

to person. They are in their eighties now. I live close by and talk to them on the phone almost every day. I can't imagine my life without them.

Once a year on Christmas Eve, I sometimes go with my mother to Mass. I inhale the incense and listening to the children's choir sing "Oh Holy Night" so sweetly and I forget that the church does not want me.

On cold winter nights when I drive through my little Vermont village during the holidays, the old Congregational Church sign advertises services at 10 a.m. on Sunday. I feel a pull in my chest as I drive slowly by, thinking how it might be nice to go to the Christmas service sometime, or just a regular Sunday service, that perhaps I could find a church community there and feel part of a higher something. But I always keep driving.

## Pot Pilgrimage

I used to smoke a lot of weed. In college, my friend Steve's dorm room was a destination for anyone who wanted to get stoned and watch 1980s Japanese anime, porn, or really violent, bloody cult action films. I was there a lot.

Steve was also the owner of Nuke, a legendary four-foot tall Plexiglass bong that reached mythical status until it was destroyed at a house party in New York in 1990 under mysterious circumstances.

But I digress.

As I aged into my 30s and 40s, I only smoked pot occasionally when it was offered, which was less and less. I quit smoking cigarettes, then alcohol, and I'll be sober nine years in May.

I can never ever drink again, and cigarettes are out of the question, but I never officially "quit" smoking weed. I just stopped when I grew up and got married (my wife did not approve) and the opportunity ceased presenting itself. So, when I was offered a road trip from Spokane to Vermont last December, I thought, "HmMMM..."

Pot is legal in Washington State. I had never been in a retail pot shop before and wanted to check it out, you know, for the experience. I flew to Spokane on Dec. 12 and my friend Catharine picked me up at the airport in her white Sprinter van-turned-camper van, Benedictus. She bought it used from a roofing contractor and built a bed platform and shelves inside, threw in a foam mattress and set off for a travel nursing assignment.

She peeled all of the roofing contractor's info off the sides of the van, except the guy's last name: Benedictus.

We spent the night at a Days Inn, but I was too excited to sleep. I had traveled all over the U.S. but never across the northern tier of states, and had never driven across the country. I had been working a lot and with the holidays coming, the adventure of a road trip was just what I needed. Catharine's travel nursing assignment in Spokane ended, and we had five days to drive her to Dartmouth in New Hampshire, just enough time for me to complete the trip between editions of the newspaper without missing an issue.

The next morning dawned 20 degrees with light snow. We decided to drive across town to a dispensary we found online. We chose it because we liked the name — Sativa Sisters. It opened at 8 a.m.

We passed six or seven retail pot shops along Spokane's Trent Avenue before we saw it. Sativa Sisters was a windowless, one-story stucco building painted electric mint green with dark green trim. We pulled into the parking lot at the stroke of 8 a.m. and went inside.

A burly, bearded barista in his 30s greeted us from behind the sleek counter of a coffee bar, a black chalkboard above his head offered Café Americain, latte, and espresso.

We walked through the café to the back of the shop, and the first thing I noticed was how clean it was. There was nothing out of place. The carpet was spotless, and the air smelled... fresh. An L-shaped counter ran from one end of the room to the other, and behind it was the largest, mostly neatly displayed treasure trove of marijuana products I had ever seen.

On the left were the edibles. It was a veritable candy store. There were chocolates, there were gummies, there were mints, all in glass jars with metal lids lined up in rows.

To the right was the weed, so many different varieties and hues and flavors, in small sealed bags with retail labels. There were cigarette-style boxes with pre-rolled joints. Under the glass counter, there were more marijuana varieties in small plastic jars. Then there were glass and metal pipes, screens and rolling papers. A basket of 99-cent Sativa Sisters lighters rested on the counter.

At the far end was an array of Sativa Sisters swag — hats, t-shirts, even boxer shorts.

Wide-eyed, I approached the small, brunette clerk who was at least half my age, her nose ring glinting under the track lighting.

“Good morning!” I said, trying to act cool. “I understand that the weed today is not the same weed I smoked in the 80s, that it is much more powerful. I don’t think I can handle that, nor should I try. Do you any... retro weed?”

She smiled and nodded. Turning behind her, she lifted a small blue and gray pouch from the display and placed it on the counter.

“We have Acapulco Gold,” she said.

“I’ve heard of that!” I said, “I’ll take it!”

Not surprisingly, these dispensaries are cash-only establishments. I handed over two twenties and bought 3.2 grams of weed, which should last me about a year. Catharine bought a box of THC-infused mints for a friend. On our way out, I stopped at the coffee counter and bought a Café Americano for the road. Four other people had arrived at the

shop in the half-hour we'd been there, proving that it's never too early on a Thursday to buy weed.

As I climbed back into Benedictus, I couldn't believe I had just walked out of a pot store with legally purchased drugs. As someone who came of age when pot was ALWAYS illegal and ALWAYS on the down low, it was a revelation. All those fumbling nights with pipes in cars, all the air freshener, all the eye drops, things of the past. At least in Washington, Colorado, California, Oregon and Maine. And in July, Vermont...

We set off west on Interstate 80 through Idaho and Montana, pausing in Billings for great Mexican food. At about 1 a.m. on Friday, we stopped at a rest area off the interstate in Wyoming, climbed in the back and tried to get some sleep. But about two hours later, we woke to the van rocking back and forth on its axles. The whole van was shuttering as incredibly high winds rolled across the open prairie in the dead of night to our perch on a hill overlooking the rest area, slamming and buffeting the van. As we swayed back and forth on the foam mattress, the winds intensified and it felt like at any moment the tires would leave the earth and we would be caught up into the draft and carried away like a 2,000-pound tumbleweed.

We decided to head for lower ground and Catharine climbed into the driver's seat and maneuvered us down to the parking lot in front of the rest area building. It was definitely more protected and we managed to sleep until 6 a.m.

Back on the road, we headed out of Wyoming and into South Dakota. We still hadn't smoked any weed. The one site Catharine wanted to see in South Dakota was the Badlands, but our timing was a little off. We entered Badlands National Park at sunset,

and were only able to see a few of the views from scenic overlooks before we lost the light. Still, we drove the entire 20 –mile scenic byway through the park, the headlights of Benedictus illuminating the red and white rock walls, spires and domes, and a herd of Bighorn sheep resting for the night on the side of the road.

We were completely alone out there, not another human or car in site as we followed the road through the blackness. I had to pee and pulled over. It was silent and dark, and I could not think of a better time to get stoned. In addition to the weed from Sativa Sisters, I also purchased a small, green metal pipe and a Sativa Sisters lighter. I packed the pipe and Catharine and I stood next to Benedictus in the Badlands and smoked a bowl.

I climbed back into the driver’s seat and we exited the Badlands back onto Interstate 80 headed east. By the time we hit the on ramp, I was completely stoned, and I stayed that way. For three hours. Three hits. Three hours. Not my 1987 Acapulco Gold.

Catharine and I made out way back to the East Coast in the allotted five days, smoking once in order to cross Iowa and Illinois, because there is nothing to look at.

I didn’t tell Sarah I had gone to a dispensary until we got home because I didn’t want her to worry. She was not happy. She tried to be cool about it, but about a week later, we got into it.

“It scares me,” she said. “You always talked about your friends who got sober and turned into potheads and how you never understood that. I’m scared that pot will eventually lead you back to alcohol, and I can’t go through that again. That’s why I’m scared.”

It made sense, and I told her so. It was true. I had former friends who quit drinking only to become huge potheads, to the point where I couldn't have a conversation with them anymore and lost touch.

“Listen, you just have to trust that I am never going to drink again,” I said. “You have to trust that I am a grown up making conscious choices and that I have my own best interests in mind. You have to trust me.”

It was good to talk it out, and to understand where she was coming from, but I never smoked in front of her after that. In fact, I never smoked unless I was completely alone and would be for hours, which was the whole goal all along and the reason why I knew that Acapulco Gold would last me a year.

But Sarah had a right to worry, and, oddly enough, the concept of relapse was also presented to me in December 2017, the same month as my pot pilgrimage. I heard an interview on NPR with journalist Elizabeth Vargas. She wrote a book called “Between Breaths” about her battle with alcoholism and getting sober. She was interviewed along with psychologist Kathryn McHugh, a Harvard professor who specializes in drug and alcohol abuse. McHugh said something during that interview that buried itself inside me and reminded me about a key aspect of sobriety that I had forgotten in the nine years I've been sober: How tenuous it can be.

One statistic stuck out: 62 percent of women who are alcoholics have anxiety. Check that box. Here's another. Those women are twice as likely to relapse, and on average, they relapse three to seven times before they get truly sober. (National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism)

“Among alcoholics, the unicorn in the room is the one who got sober the first time they tried,” McHugh said.

I’ve never relapsed, not once in nine years. I heard McHugh’s words and I thought, “Am I a unicorn, or a ticking bomb?”

There is no way to know, and it took a few weeks of pondering and soul searching for me to let go of the cloud of risk that interview evoked over me.

Ultimately, I have too much riding on my sobriety to ever drink again, or to ever need any substance again. I have books to write, a family I love, road trips to take, and adventures to be had. I know that in my core I will not drink again, but to make someone else believe it, someone who’s seen your dark alcoholic side, that involves a lot of trust. I offered to throw the weed away.

“If it’s going to make you this uncomfortable, it’s not worth it,” I said. “I don’t need it.”

I meant it.

“No, no, don’t do that,” Sarah said. “It’s O.K.”

So I am very mindful of my relationship with weed. It’s nice once in a while. Not every day, not even every week. It’s like those General Foods International flavored coffees. When the moment is right and you want something a little different.

We’ll see how it goes. I’m prepared to give the Acapulco Gold away at any time if Sarah asks me to. It’s certainly not worth jeopardizing my marriage.

## Left

The sap was running the day my wife left me. It was February 24, and winter was tricking Vermont. Most of the snow had melted in a series of thaws that left the ground bare and the maples bursting with sap.

I had just returned from two days at newspaper conference in Boston. I had been home 10 minutes, and we were sitting at the kitchen table, catching up, when her face changed.

“I wrote you a letter while you were gone,” she said reaching beside her for the letter that was sitting on the table. I hadn’t noticed it before.

“O.K...,” I said. I looked at her, and she looked sad but resolved, and something told me to ask, “Is this it?”

She nodded without saying anything, and my heart dropped to my stomach. She asked if I wanted her to read the letter.

“No, I can read it,” I said, and she handed it to me without looking at me.

“My Dearest Lee...” “We have said many things to each other over the last 14 years...” “This is the hardest letter I have ever written...” “I can’t believe I’m saying this...” “I thought we would spend the rest of our lives together...” “I love you, but my feelings for you have changed and I no longer love you the way I feel I should as your wife and partner...” “I’m not sure when it happened...” “It’s time to stop pretending...” “I would ask for a legal separation...”

She watched me read this letter, and as my eyes welled so did hers in a devastating mirror image. The letter went on to say that I am still her best friend and that she hopes we can someday come back around to being friends and stay in each other's lives.

I finished the letter, and I didn't speak. She got up and started gathering her bags, which I hadn't noticed were packed and sitting on the other side of the kitchen table.

"Do you think I could have a hug?" she asked tearfully.

I was standing in the middle of the kitchen with one hand in my pocket, unsure of how I'd gotten there. I shook my head slowly.

"I don't think so," I said, my voice sounding odd to me, my throat tight.

She nodded, picked up her bags and walked out the front door to her car. I looked out the window and watched her load the bags in the trunk, get in, back out of the driveway and head up the road out of sight.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen, and realized I was still holding the letter. Tears streamed down my face, my eyes wide with disbelief. My wife just left me and I never saw it coming.

I spent the next 24 hours sitting in our house with our two dogs and two cats, alternating crying and sitting, numb with shock. The dogs, Ziggy and Gunner, always empathetic, were never more than three feet from me, and when the sobs would come I tried to do it in the bathroom so they wouldn't start whining and worrying over me.

Fourteen years together. In the letter, my wife also said that this change in her feelings for me and our marriage had begun a year earlier and she had been working with her therapist to try and overcome it and get back to where she was, but it was no use.

There wasn't someone else. It was me. There was no abuse of any kind, in fact we enjoyed being together. The spark we once had had settled into that martial ebb and flow of a life together of bills and vacation plans and Sunday dinners, and she wasn't comfortable with that anymore. I just didn't know it until it was too late.

To be left is to be discarded, to be told through action that what you represent is not enough, that no matter how hard you tried and worked to be a good spouse, it wasn't enough. You are not enough.

The things you think when your wife leaves you:

It's because I didn't finish painting the kitchen cabinets, isn't it?

I was wearing my favorite sweater when she left.

Last week, I was happily married. Now, I'm not.

I lived the first week in an otherworldly fog of shock and awe. As a weekly newspaper editor, having to put the paper out was a blessing and a chore, but it was important to have a place to go to, a familiar routine that hadn't been disrupted like so many others.

It took all the energy I had to gather news and publish the paper, and then I would come home after deadline and collapse on the couch. It was hard to find motivation to do more than the bare necessities — eating, bathing, dressing, and feeding and caring for the animals. Things started happening that never happened when we lived here together: Dishes piled up in the sink, and I wouldn't do laundry until I was out of underwear. When I ate, which wasn't often, it was on the couch in front of the TV.

All of the clichés, the tired old sayings, the euphemisms, the hyperbole, it all applies when you've been left. Life turns on a dime. One minute, you are living in the

house you think you will die in, with all of your hopes and dreams and plans in your head, and they all include your wife in some way. Then, she makes a decision and it all just evaporates. All of those hopes and dreams and plans vanish in an instant, and there you are, alone in the house with the animals, and you have no idea what your future looks like. I suddenly knew exactly what feeling adrift is like.

I called our daughter Anneliese after my wife said she'd broken the news to her. Our daughter is 23, but she is an only child, adopted before my Sarah and I even met. She was nine years old when we got married, and she is my only child.

That was a tough conversation. She started choking up after she asked me how I was.

“A lot of things will stay the same,” I said, trying to hold back my own tears. “We’ll still have family dinners. I’ll still tell you things you don’t want to hear. I’ll still give you money for no reason.”

She laughed, and that was just what we both needed.

After about a week, I took off my wedding ring and put it in my travel bag in the bathroom with the sample size shampoo and the plastic soap dish and a tiny sewing kit. The skin on my ring finger was wrinkled and indented, and it would take months for the ghost of my wedding ring to fade away. For days, I unconsciously touched my left thumb to my left ring finger to re-adjust my wedding ring, only to find it empty, a habit I didn't know I had.

As oddly satisfying as it was to sit in the house and think and watch TV and not interact with other people, after the first week I found I felt better when I was driving. The act of driving my truck, moving forward, was comforting. It made me feel proactive,

I was going somewhere, I was doing something, I had a goal, however small, be it the office or the grocery store, or visiting my parents. I was starving for goals.

In the first two weeks after my wife left me, the songs I was hearing on the radio seemed, shall we say, fatefully chosen by a higher-powered DJ, designed as a soundtrack to my situation. I started writing down the songs on my hand as I was driving and kept a list:

*She's Gone*- Hall & Oates

*It's Too Late*- Carly Simon

*I Need a Lover That Won't Drive Me Crazy*- John Cougar

*A Change Will Do You Good*- Sheryl Crow

*Get Out of Your Own Way*- U2

*Can We Still be Friends?* – Todd Rundgren

*Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me*- Elton John

*Wishing You Were Here*- Chicago

*Our House*- Crosby, Stills and Nash

*Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone*- Bill Withers

*I Ain't Got Nobody (That I Can Depend On)* – Santana

Grammatical inaccuracies aside, these songs came on and if I had managed to forget, just for a minute or two, my life circumstances, I was immediately thrust back into a wrenching emotional spotlight. And then I would laugh. I would laugh because it was so ridiculous and the universe was taunting me and acknowledging me all at the same time.

But the kicker, the one that really said it all, was “Wasted Time” by the Eagles, and one line in particular, Don Henley earnestly belting, “You never thought you’d be alone, this far down the line...”

Not all of these songs were heard on the radio. Some of them were playing in the grocery store. After the first two days, I dragged myself to the Hannaford and Train’s *Marry Me* was playing over the speaker system. A thin layer of tears formed on my eyes and I almost lost it in the produce section. I was thinking about all the food I used to buy for the house that I wouldn’t be buying. I was buying food for one for the first time in 14 years. I pulled myself together by the broccoli and pushed my cart onward. I left the store with six Lean Cuisine dinners, a bag of tater tots, and eight cans of cat food. I’m 52 years old and single. Welcome to my new life.

I went through the five stages of grief in the first week, and thought I was done. Then I went through them again. And again. Just when I thought I had reached acceptance, I would get angry thinking about how blindsided I was by the separation, how disruptive it was, and how I had absolutely no control over it.

But during one of those periods of reflection, when I wasn’t angry and I wasn’t depressed, I began to think about my role in all of this. Sure, I got sober in this marriage, and I spent a lot of energy trying to improve myself in this marriage. I had always wanted a family and a house and dogs and cats and a home life. But I was also on a pretty short leash with a lot of responsibilities. And was there as much of a spark as there was back in the first five years? No. And if I am really honest with myself, I had to admit that, deep down, there was some ambiguity on my part when it came to my marriage. Yes, I was

settled and I was comfortable with that and the thought of leaving never, ever occurred to me. This was just my life and I loved my wife.

But maybe by leaving, she had the courage to do the thing that I was never, ever going to do, the courage to say, “This isn’t working for me. I want more. I’m leaving.”

HOW she did, with no inkling that the marriage was in any way in jeopardy, could have been improved upon, but after time passes and I’m not feeling as broken and left and adrift, maybe this will be a blessing, an opportunity for growth and change that I didn’t know I wanted, or needed.

And then the utter heartbreak of what I lost would overwhelm me yet again.

Years ago, before I left New York City and moved to Vermont, a friend of mine went to one of those crafting places where there are buckets of random buttons and feathers and miniatures and cloth and pieces of stone and metal, and you make your own collage in a frame. She made me a fence, my version of a picket fence, the one I had been railing about wanting and needing so desperately all those years ago. I had come to the conclusion that perhaps my picket fence was not picket at all, that perhaps it was made of barb wire and driftwood and tin cans and stones and old sweaters.

The fence she made was in a gold frame on manila parchment. It was made of wire and pieces of cut up Budweiser cans, purple feathers, sea glass and old Dominos.

Now I have to wonder if the picket fence is an illusion all together, like the institution of marriage. Under the heading of “Be Careful What You Wish For” comes the realization that I don’t believe in marriage anymore, not for me, and I wonder if it’s actually a realistic endeavor. For all of you reading this and feeling self-satisfied because you are secure in your marriage, I am happy for you. I used to feel that way when I’d

watch a movie or read a book about couples that complained they weren't having enough sex when we were having a lot of sex. Or when I'd hear about couples who stayed in really dysfunctional marriages, or who never should have gotten married in the first place and everyone knew it.

This will be my last marriage. I gave it my best shot, or at least I believed I did when I was in it. I don't know what's next. I have the urge to quit my job and disappear into a long road trip, but how many miles will it take not to feel broken anymore?

## Getting to Know You

Once a month for 3-5 days over the last 40 years, I have been reminded that I have a uterus. The other 25 days of the month, I forget that I am a woman and stroll through my life straddling that line between male and female. I think of myself as a spork, an uber-practical amalgam of spoon and fork.

I'm not transgender, but as a Butch Lesbian, I am very male-identified — in my walk, my demeanor and my wardrobe, but also my sensibility, so much so that the only other time I think of myself as a woman is when my legal name is used for medical billing purposes or debt collection. No, I am not telling you my real name.

O.K., it's "Lisa". Ugh. It's hard to type. That is not my name, but the one given me by my parents in April 1966 when it was incredibly popular. I went through school with at least four other Lisas.

When I was 18, however, I viewed college in another state as an opportunity to start fresh with a new name and started calling myself "Lee". It was nice and short and androgynous, and everyone I met from the age of 18 on knows me as Lee. I was coming out and terrified, but at least I had an androgynous name that I chose, that fit me and who I was becoming.

But every 25 days since the fifth grade, my menstrual cycle and I am reminded that I am a woman and I have female body parts. I'm turned 52 and menopause was almost within reaching distance when I faced a stark reality that placed my uterus front and center in my day-to-day consciousness.

It was the start of summer when I had incredible cramping pain during the first 36 hours of my period. It felt like being knifed in the gut. An ultrasound confirmed that I had four fibroid tumors in my uterus.

That's when I really began, for the first time in my life, to have a relationship with my womb. I was actually kind of impressed with the exploitation of an otherwise unused organ. I had been an empty vessel for 50 years, so why wouldn't some benign fibroid tumors take up residence there? And here I thought I was having either constipation, appendicitis... perhaps gall bladder trouble. It NEVER occurred to me that the intense pain I felt in my gut would be because of a problem with my woman parts. In my mind, my uterus is very much like an appendix, a rather useless body part that only exists to fill space.

Before the first ultrasound, I was in the gynecologist's office in South Burlington, Vt., filling out forms and answering questions about the cancer history in my family and some very personal questions about my sex life.

"Are you sexually active?" asked the young, bespectacled physician's assistant.

"Uh, yes."

"Great!" she said, and I smirked.

"Yay!" I said raising my fist. "Yay for sex!"

"Is there any chance you could be pregnant?" she asked.

I choked on my own spit.

"Uh, no, absolutely 100 percent zero chance of that," I said flatly.

Then the doctor arrived, a strawberry blonde-haired woman with glasses named Jane Connolly. She was perhaps 35 and five foot nothing. I liked her immediately. She

told me her theory, that a burst ovarian cyst caused the pain that led to the discovery of fibroid tumors in my uterus.

Then I took off my pants and we started the ultrasound. She squeezed some lime green gel on the end of what looked like a dildo, and asked me if I was ready.

“Sure,” I said. “Now, if you find a baby in there, it’ll be a medical miracle. We’ll be famous!”

“I’ll be sure to call the papers,” she said with a smile.

And then she went in. I leaned back and tried to relax. Over my head tacked to the ceiling tiles was a mobile made out of small sticks of driftwood with seashells dangling from them. It was cheesy, but at least it was something to look at as someone I just met entered a place not often entered.

I could only see the side of the black and white monitor with the image of my uterus, but it reminded me of the ultrasound photos of my granddaughter in utero that we have tacked on the fridge at home.

“Hey, can I get a print out of the ultrasound of the fibroids?” I asked. “I can put them on my fridge with the ones of my granddaughter.”

Dr. Connolly looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Fibroids aren’t nearly as cute as a baby,” she said drily.

“I know, I said, “but you have to admit this technology is pretty amazing.”

She kept rooting around and I past the point where I was comfortable with the situation, but had to stay put. I just kept staring at that godforsaken mobile.

“I can’t seem to find your ovaries,” Dr. Connolly announced.

“Well, it’s dark in there,” I said.

She laughed and pulled out.

“Well, if I can’t find them, it’s actually good because that means they are small and not inflamed, so I’m not concerned.”

I was of no help, since I had no idea where my ovaries were either. It should come as no surprise that my knowledge of female anatomy is weak at best, even as a lesbian. I know where the clitoris is, and I guess that’s all I really thought I needed to know. My wife, who is a nurse, drew me a diagram of where the uterus is in my body when I was first diagnosed.

Let me be clear here when I say that my relationship with my female body is dysmorphic and unconventional, and that I recognize that millions of women, straight and gay alike, love and celebrate their female bodies. They are as comfortable with their periods as I am splitting wood, which is to say it is a part of them. And if they have children, their uterus is a precious and revered part of who they are. When those women have to have a hysterectomy, it is very traumatic. They say they feel like “less of a woman”. And when those same women go through menopause, it ushers in a period of grieving for their womanhood.

I have never wrestled in that tournament. I don’t know what it feels like to want to bear children and I don’t know what it feels like to give birth. There was no ticking biological clock once I hit my twenties and thirties, no deep-seeded desire to create life and bear it. By the time I hit 35, my deepest desire was for a 12-pack and a fishing boat.

An MRI a few weeks later dispelled the initial diagnosis. I didn’t have four fibroid tumors. I had 14. Turned out I had a variety-pack of fibroids, a little something for everyone. I had a large 6 cm fibroid living adhered to my uterine wall, I had another one

attached by a stalk to my uterus like a leaf on a tree. I had small fibroids and large fibroids, the mother of them all being a 6.3 cm fibroid sitting directly on my cervix like a beefy doorman at an exclusive dance club.

I had an interventional radiology procedure in November, where the radiologists go into the femoral artery in my leg and shoot some tiny plastic pieces into the veins and arteries feeding the uterus, blocking the blood supply. In theory, this shrinks the fibroids.

Everything was fine for three months.

I came home from work on Valentine's Day, put the mail on the kitchen table, let the dogs out, and made a beeline for the bathroom. As I was peeing, I felt something coming out of me that should not have been coming out of me. I wiped, stood up and turned to see a toilet bowl full of blood. I put in a super tampon, but minutes later I felt that leaking feeling and headed back to the bathroom. I pulled out the tampon, which was soaked through, and a torrent of blood and blood clots came out into the toilet. The tampon had been in for about 3.5 minutes.

I called my gynecologist from my seated position on the toilet and while I was on hold, more blood and clots came out. It felt like globs of Jell-O coming out of my vagina.

I didn't know they were blood clots until the nurse told me on the phone.

"We're going to call in a prescription for progesterone for you," she said. "Can you get to the pharmacy?"

"Yes," I said as larger Jell-O pieces came splashing into the toilet.

"Take it as prescribed for the first few days," the nurse continued. "You will need to rest this afternoon and do as little as possible. You'll feel weak."

No kidding. I was in the middle of my own Valentine's Day Massacre. It was like the final scene in "Carrie". I'm not squeamish, but I had never seen so much of my own blood in one place.

When I got home from the pharmacy, I changed my underwear again, popped a progesterone, put in a Super Plus tampon and waited for the massacre to ease up. It took about three hours for the hormones to kick in.

So, the IR was unsuccessful and those 14 fibroids weren't going quietly.

"We have to do a biopsy," Dr. Connolly said when I saw her again.

We tried. We tried to do it right there in her office, but the doorman fibroid was having none of it. The doctor could not get into my uterus to get the tissue for the biopsy.

Then she said we'd have to schedule an appointment at the hospital in the operating room. They'd have to put me under in order to get the biopsy done. That's when I called it.

"I think we're working too hard to keep something I have no connection to," I said. "Let's just take the fucker out."

And then a sob got caught in my throat and I started bawling, right there in the office. Sarah had left me just six days earlier, and the enormity of it all just exploded out of me. I shook with sobs as Dr. Connolly and the surgeon, Dr. Kym Boyman, stood one on each side of me with a hand on each of my shoulders as I let it all out. They both looked genuinely concerned.

"That's a lot," Dr. Boyman said.

I nodded and took the tissue offered me, blowing my nose. Indeed it was. And I wasn't just upset about my marriage ending. In the moment after I made that decision to

have a hysterectomy and the doctors agreed, maybe the one tiny fledging girl part still left deep inside of me mourned. But more likely, it was surgery on top of divorce on top of life that overwhelmed me.

For a hot minute. And then it was over. It was like letting a burst of air out of a too-full balloon, just enough to ease the pressure so it won't break.

The hysterectomy was scheduled for just over a month later, April 6. I continued to live at the house with the animals, and Sarah had gotten a sublet in the next town, close to the hospital where she worked as a birthing center administrator.

In planning for my month-long leave of absence, my doctors needed assurance that there was someone to drive me home after the surgery and stay at the house with me, at least for the first few days. Sarah was the only option, and given her nursing background, a good one, despite our recent development.

And she took good care of me. Friends would ask about my recovery and who was caring for me, and when I told them, they would say, "Huh, how was THAT?" It wasn't as awkward as you might think. After so many years together, Sarah and I are still eminently compatible. We know how to sit together in the living room watching ghost hunting shows and Roseanne re-runs, her with her knitting, dogs lying about.

I'd had five weeks to process Sarah's leaving by then and slowly I'd begun to make peace with her decision. My recovery was a frankly a welcome distraction from the split.

One night about four days after the surgery, we were watching TV and something I saw in a commercial prompted me to inform Sarah that I was never getting married

again. I expounded on my theory that the institution was a sham, and that humans were sold a bill of goods on the promise of marriage and happily ever after.

She disagreed.

“I think you take the good from every relationship you have,” she said. “And you always have that, even if you end up going in different directions.”

“Well, that’s nice,” I said. “I’m not there yet.”

“Of course not,” she replied. “But hopefully someday you will be.”

She ended up staying for six days until I could move better and take back the dog walking chores. The night before she went back to her sublet, I bought her dinner at her favorite restaurant, Applebee’s, to thank her for taking care of me.

Sarah and I will always be in each other’s lives, parenting and grandparenting together and separately. My emotions continue to swing from ugly cry to staunch resolve to melancholy to hopefulness on a weekly basis, but there is acceptance.

And I am poised to start the next phase of my life, single and uterus-free.

Still, it’s a lot.

## Never Forget

“Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the 9/11 Memorial?”

I’m sure I looked pale and on the verge of tears as the hotel doorman across from Trinity Church pointed beyond a construction zone to the left.

“Just go around to the other side,” he said.

Just go. Just go around to the other side of those barriers and visit the hallowed ground you haven’t been able to stand on since before 9-11 happened. Just go. Seventeen years. Just go.

And I did. I walked around the construction zone and there it was, Ground Zero. Two one-acre squares of cascading water that disappeared into the earth at center of the fountain, the watery footprints of the Twin Towers.

As I got close to the first one, the sound of the water began to drown out the street noise and construction. The fountain was surrounded by a low wall and a metal sheet of bronze with the names of all the dead cut out in negative space. I saw a white rose stuck into the name Anthony Rodriguez, and as I walked around toward the museum, I saw a plaque next to one of the small oaks planted all around the memorial. It read, “Every morning, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum recognizes the birthdays of the men, women and children whose names are inscribed on the 9/11 Memorial by placing a single white rose at each person’s name on their birthday.”

I lost it and succumbed to the sobs that I had been fighting to keep down since I got on the subway that morning. It was the first of several moments when I would have to

let my emotional dam burst during the visit. And as I gathered myself and looked out over the memorial and noticed another white rose, and another, and another, I did the math. With roughly 2,977 victims and 365 days in a year, the law of averages dictates that every day would bring at least one birthday here.

“Happy Birthday, Anthony,” I whispered as I ran my fingers over his name.

I pulled myself together, blew my nose, and headed for the will call ticket window at the 9-11 Museum just across the memorial plaza. It was going to be a long morning. I had paid \$65 for an early private group tour of the museum at 8 a.m. before it opened to the general public at 9 a.m. I figured it would be a more controlled setting with fewer people to deal with. It was a good call.

There were four other people in my group, a couple from Tennessee and a couple from Spain, but I was the only one consistently on the verge of tears for the first half-hour of the tour. And despite the fact that the group was so small, we were each issued a listening device that went around our necks, and small headphones. It enabled us to hear our guide, Derek, better at a lower volume, as he spoke in the low tones of a funeral director during the hour-long tour.

And the museum evoked that. Literally built in the pit created at Ground Zero during the aftermath, as heavy machinery and rescue personnel sifted through the wreckage for human remains, and dump trucks carted twisted metal and debris up a dirt ramp and out to a hangar at Kennedy Airport. The sunken bases of the memorial pools are visible as visitors to the museum walk down the same ramp, and at its deepest, the ground floor sits four stories below the surface. The lighting is dim and soft, the ceilings high, the mood somber.

On a large wall at the gathering place for the start of the tour is a quote by World Trade Center architect Minoru Yamasaki in six-inch high letters:

*Beyond the compelling need to make this a monument to World Peace, the World Trade Center should, because of its importance, become a living representation of man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity, his beliefs in the cooperation of men, and through this cooperation his ability to find greatness.*

Yamasaki said those words at the dedication of the towers in 1964. The irony washed over me as we started walking down through the museum. World Peace. Humanity. Cooperation. Greatness.

There were crumpled fire engines, and large sections of the iconic steel façade of the towers on display. There was the last piece of concrete taken from Ground Zero, standing 25-feet high, messages scribbled in black and red and green marker by rescue personnel remembering the fallen.

We came to a huge wall, perhaps 40 feet long and 30 feet high, decorated with rows of paper in various hues of blue, each 8 ½ by 11 piece of paper slightly different than its neighbor. Below the paper, a quote by Virgil: “No day shall erase you from the memory of time.”

Derek explained that the artist designed the installation inspired by how blue the sky was on Sept. 11, 2001. But he chose to use paper because it does age over time, and the blues will fade. He did that in homage to the dead who are no longer aging but frozen in time by death.

Behind the wall of blue, he added, was an office and lab of the New York City Medical Examiner's Office, where work continues in the search for human remains in the rubble. Derek said the lab is a completely separate and closed facility, that museum personnel are not allowed in the lab, but families of 9-11 victims do come and go. The work continues because some 40 percent of the victims of 9-11 have not had their remains identified. The 9-11 recovery effort continues all these years later.

Next to one of the crumpled fire engines was a cylindrical piece of machinery the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. Maybe a little bigger. Maybe the size of a commercial jet engine.

Derek asked us to guess what we thought it was, and the couple from Tennessee guessed a plane engine.

"A lot of people guess that," Derek said quietly. "It's actually a piece of the antenna from the North Tower."

It wasn't even a big piece. About 12 feet long, it was about one-sixth of the antenna. The scale was remarkable.

There was a particularly heartbreaking story about the search and rescue dogs at Ground Zero. There were dozens of dogs at work trying to find survivors in the wreckage the first 24 hours after the attacks. They actually did find one survivor in that time. But that was it. As the days and weeks followed finding only dead bodies, the dogs were becoming depressed, and it was harder for them to keep going out there every day. So their handlers coordinated with emergency personnel who agreed to hide in the rubble and play the role of survivor so the dogs could find life again. It worked. The dogs felt successful again and their moods improved.

I spent the first half of the tour with my heart in my throat, fighting the waves of grief and tears that would overwhelm me every few minutes as I fathomed where I was and what I was seeing. But the longer I was there, the more familiar the museum became, and the authenticity of place became equal to my resolve to see it. I began to relax. My eyes dried, my breath came in normal cadence and I immersed myself in the moment.

As our tour wound down, tourists trickled in and the museum opened for the day. Derek invited us to visit the museum's artifact and exhibition section on our own and thanked us for coming.

I went into the exhibits and there the sights and sounds of the actual attack came alive. A loop of 911 calls and cell phone messages from victims played as I took in the exhibits. Badges, holsters, keys, shoes, briefcases, bicycles still locked to a bike rack, covered with that light gray dust. Many of the items had been donated by survivors, and there were small theater rooms throughout where visitors could sit and listen to accounts of those who made it out alive before the towers fell. It was refreshing, comforting, to experience stories of life amid the stories of death.

There were so many photos and videos from so many angles that I did something I haven't been able to do more than a few times. I watched the planes hit the towers, over and over again. I saturated myself with the replay.

There was a piece of jetliner, a window frame, unpainted steel with no glass. All I could wonder was who was looking out that window when this all went down.

I turned a corner and didn't see the sign before it was too late: "This exhibit contains disturbing images that may be upsetting." It was about the falling people. I made myself walk into the space, tucked away in a corner with walls on three sides. There on

the wall a slide show of photographs of the falling bodies. I stood there and forced myself to look at the photos, and sobbed.

That was it. I collected myself and headed for the exit. I had seen it all and I had seen enough. But I passed the museum gift shop and was compelled to take something with me. Amid the key chains and t-shirts, I found a gray cap and a black coffee mug. They both say “9/11 Memorial” and “Honor & Remember”. I was ready to own a piece of this place. I would wear the cap fishing and I would drink my morning coffee out of the mug and I would be at peace with the role 9/11 has played in my life. Finally.

Looking at the posters and postcards, I was reminded of the early slogan of Sept. 11: *Never Forget*. I stood in line at the 9/11 Museum gift shop with my mug and my cap and shook my head. Never Forget. I had spent the last 17 years doing everything I could to forget 9/11, despite the fact that I carried it around with me like a body. I left New York intent on forgetting and moving on, finding my picket fence and my happily ever after. And I found it, and then I lost it and here I was.

I was never supposed to make that pilgrimage back to Ground Zero by myself. Like so many plans I had made months earlier, my wife was supposed to be there with me. But it was just me and my sobriety. Everything else was changing. My picket fence had fallen, and my future in no way resembled what I had imagined just months before.

The 9/11 Memorial made everything else in my life small. It made my marriage small, it made my sobriety small, it made all of the fear and angst I held onto all these years so, so small.

I walked out between the two footprints of the towers and looked up. It was a beautiful March day, blue skies. The Freedom Tower just across the plaza gleamed in the

early spring sun. Just then, a commercial airliner flew low across the sky headed west, but no one noticed. Except me.

I sat down on the wall of the nearest memorial pool, exhausted and drained, not just with the experience of visiting that hallowed ground, but with all my life's developments. I thought about a refrigerator magnet my wife gave me years ago right after I got sober. It has a well-known quote by a woman name Mary Anne Rademacher: "Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says, 'I'll try again tomorrow.'"

I never really understood that quote for the longest time. I reached up patted the Phoenix tattoo on my arm under my coat. I understand it now.

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