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Interstitial

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They passed a law over a decade ago in our state permitting us to marry, but we never did. To my Liza, marriage, organized religion and hypocrisy are human institutions to be abhorred. I was buttoning my shirt this morning, contemplating the peculiar technology of the button and wondering at its history, how it evolved and such, when Liza came in to kiss me goodbye. She hesitated a moment, taking in my contemplative aura. I told her what I was thinking and she commented it was going to be that kind of day. She was letting me know that I felt out of reach. In a certain frame of mind, I have a tendency to turn inward, not so much away from her, but that is the effect. She could say things like that with such affection. In the years we've been together I've learned to relax and enjoy myself under another's gaze, not something I knew about before.

I drank my coffee on the couch with Shookah, the elder pit bull, at my feet. The other two lay beside me on top of one another. They took up more than half the couch and I was pushed over to the edge where I sipped my coffee and listened to them breathing and to Liza paging through the Times at the table where we eat our meals. She was driving down to the city to meet her sister and then on to visit their mother for lunch in what the old bird referred to as "the home". She had a place up in river

country, as well as an apartment in an upscale desert town outside of Los Angeles, and she still drove back and forth among all those places and others visiting friends, so it was a pointed humor, some kind of admonishment, that thing about “the home”, even if she moved in there herself for her own reasons with no counsel from her daughters. I was not invited to today’s get together. She didn’t like me much. She hadn’t had a drink in about thirty-five years but you always got the feeling that the next thing she might say could have that disemboweling vigor mean drunks seem to get away with. There was just something of the hovering and lying-in-wait about her. It made Liza’s kindness all the more astonishing coming as she did from this type of mother. We may be shaped by the parenting we receive, but some of us — and Liza is a shining example of this — take the damage as a cautionary tale and become people who will never perpetrate like that again. She’s a buck stops here kind of gal, my Liza, one of the many things I love about her.

The pit bulls and I kissed her goodbye and watched her trundle down the long driveway. Then we headed out for our morning walk. For most of the fall I had enjoyed taking the steep climb up to the ridge and then walking along the spine to the gap and that’s what we did. The rains had made a mess of the cut that got us up the first half of the slope and we had to pick our way through the eucalyptus grove and then cross a shallow gully that had become a good size stream. The dogs took the occasion to drink and I worried for a moment about giardia, but decided that we would face that if we had to and for now lapping up cool, running water was a pleasure too great to be denied. I pulled a bottle of Boost from my knapsack, gave it a good shake, and drank about half in two gulps without a breath. It tasted better that way, although the strawberry flavor variety wasn’t too bad. I screwed the cap back on and put it back in the sack for later.

We climbed the steeper side of the gully and from there picked our way across a field of blown-down Bishop pine to the fire road that took us to the top of the ridge. We followed the fire road then, a nice three mile ramble to the gap where we stopped to look at the valley to the east, fruit orchards and lakes and horse pastures, and I finished the rest of the Boost. Then we wound down the gentle slope to the foot bridge over Fennimen’s Creek and into the wooded neighborhoods north of town. Once we were within city limits I put the dogs on leads and they were happy to let me at that point having already walked the five miles through rugged terrain and now ready to slow down a bit.

We always stopped at the bakery on Main Street and that’s where we were headed. We ambled past the park and fell in behind a mother with an infant strapped to her chest and a toddler in tow. The toddler was bundled in miniature outdoor gear and crying in great heaving fashion, one long howl after another. This put the pit bulls on high alert. Babies leaking salt water demanded to be soothed and revived with vigorous licking and intense stares. Their dog brains would have it no other way. Shookah, the grand dame, led the way, and the boys were all in. I had seen this mother just about every day for the last two months and she was familiar with the dogs and their gentle manners. I had

never seen the father or other mother or whatever they had going on, but I was pretty sure there was a father in the picture. I imagined he was slim, obsessive about what he ate, and thoroughly distracted by his work, which would be something requiring a great deal of education and not much to do with his hands. For some reason I didn't like him. There was something about the mother, a kind of loneliness. I imagined she had been wooed, wed, impregnated, and then the couple's paths diverged. She was at home with children while he spent more and more time pursuing his career. She was quite beautiful, in her late thirties with an ample, athletic body and a focused, intelligent gaze. The dogs stood wriggling in front of the toddler. Look who's here, said the mother, but the child kept crying. Shookah licked her face once, wriggled some more, then licked again. There was a hitch in the crying, then some more licks, and the boys got in on it, and then the little girl threw her arms around Shookah's stout neck and lay her cheek on the dog's wide, blocky head. I watched as the mother's exhausted face relaxed. She was beautiful indeed. I had the thought that she had not been seen in quite a while. I'd seen it in so many marriages, a failure to preserve the awe of truly seeing one another. It's why we fall in love, I think, when we actually do, becoming awestruck by the power and beauty of the human standing before you.

At the bakery the dogs drank water out of a bowl the owners kept out front while I sat at a cafe table in the sun and sipped my second coffee. Brewer's blackbirds were hopping around under the tables and I threw down crumbs off a biscuit before slathering it with butter and homemade jam. I ate and thought about a letter I'd been composing in my head to an old friend. He was becoming an even older enemy and the thing that blew us apart seemed still sharp on some days. He sent a letter last winter soon after the new year saying how he had been reading his journals from the last decade and it made him think that ten years ago he would never have thought that he and I would be estranged. His tone was one of bewilderment and it insulted me anew, because it was his doing, his rough treatment of me coming out of the blue that created the rift in the first place. I wrote back to him and reminded him that I was open to talking it through, with a mediator if need be, and had already said that to him more than once. He responded saying he would look at his calendar and get back to me with some possible dates. Then I never heard from him. He knew about my diagnosis and treatment and the aftermath. Not so much as a get well card.

I buttered the second biscuit and loaded it with jam and ate it, too. It was still hard to keep weight on. Dr. Kohn said she was certain that was because of all the exercise I was getting, and that all my numbers were good. Excellent, she would say. Exactly where they should be. My hair grew in quickly once treatment ended. I went from Yule Brenner bald to baby fuzzy within days. The soft bristles stage lasted a few weeks and I got in the habit of stroking them with the tips of my fingers. There was something very soothing about that. Then there was a weird bed-head phase where my hair stood up in tangential planes, like a cubist version of a crew cut, but that only lasted a week or so, before it settled into a super short wavy crown that looked great on me, nothing I would ever have thought to

do, but it looked good enough that I went into the hair salon in town and asked the owner if she could keep my hair looking just like that. She said no problem but I'd have to come in every three or four weeks and I thought that was a good deal. She had baked me three angel food cakes back in the spring when that was all I could eat for a while. That's how it went, the eating, one thing at a time for a few days, maybe a week, until I couldn't stand it anymore and I'd settle on the next thing. For a while it was blueberries. Then water crackers. There's an angel food cake in the freezer still but I don't think I'll ever eat one again.

After my second biscuit, I decided that once again I just didn't know what to do about my lost friend and whistled the dogs out of their sit-stay. We walked down the block to Holsten's Variety where I wanted to buy a few greeting cards and maybe a set of tea towels to replace the stained ones that hung from our oven handle. The proprietor was a woman in her seventies who had run this store for decades. She lived on a ten-acre spread north of our place and I occasionally ran into her when I was walking the dogs up on the ridge. We'd also sat next to one another over many a mostly taciturn lunch at the cafe over the years. She was a good neighbor. She'd brought our youngest pit bull home when he made a break for it his second day after we rescued him from a shelter in the valley. One year we doused a grass fire that had jumped past her defensible space. There was a long list of that kind of thing between us. I'd reached a point last summer when I was so weak I had to use an aluminum walker to stay upright. I made Liza drop me off in front of Holsten's and then had to lean on the walker to rest a few moments just from getting out of the car. Liza knew to leave me be, and then I shoved the walker in front of me into the store and caught the edge of a Monopoly box, pulling it off the shelf and dumping it on the ground. Betsy Holsten was behind the counter and asked if I needed help. Do I look like I need help, I asked, and she gave a wry smile which I had never seen before or since, keeping her eyes on a stack of mail she was flipping through.

I lined the dogs up on the sidewalk outside the store and made them sit while I went inside. Shookah kept her eyes on me as I walked away and the younger bulls kept their eyes on her. I said hello to Betsy behind the counter and she nodded. I had talked to Dr. Kohn about my irritability which landed hard after my first round of chemotherapy. It wasn't natural for me to be so short. I had mostly controlled it but it was getting hard and I really didn't want to take it out on anybody, especially not on Liza, who was taking care of me in ways you just wouldn't imagine an adult would need. She did it with such graciousness. Loving tenderness when I needed it. Efficient dispatches when my dignity was at risk. In all the years we had been together, I had never heard her raise her voice in anger. Never. And that's saying something. So I told Dr. Kohn I was worried about being irritable, and she said that getting angry was a natural response to the whole thing. I knew what she was getting at but I didn't feel angry about death. I mostly felt simultaneously calm and alert, and sometimes sad that I might have to leave my life earlier than I wanted. I was especially sad about leaving Liza, having found her late in life and

already sad that I had missed her youth and her mine, and in some romantic way sad that we wouldn't be able to celebrate a 65th anniversary, which I was certain we would have had had we met back when.

The walk home was shorter than hiking up the ridge. We walked to the edge of town and then followed a foot path through the woods into a pasture that abutted our property after a mile or so. When I got back to the house there was a text message on the cell phone. Liza was coming back that night, with her sister. They had been planning to stay in the city overnight and maybe see their mother tomorrow, too, but something must have gone wrong. I could imagine any number of ways the mother would have burned through the good will and longing of her two magnificent daughters.

I called Liza and she picked up.

"Can you talk?" I asked.

"Just a minute," she said, and I could hear their mother's voice, strident in the background, and then a door opening, and then the mother's voice dropped out and in its place the shushing of traffic. Liza had stepped out onto their mother's balcony.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She bemoaned Ann's not having a husband, she bemoaned me having you. She accused Ann of coming only to check on her inheritance which she'll surely squander on her drunken vets. Then we had lunch."

"Uh-huh."

"She invited her art dealer to join us at lunch and he blew in like the crown prince and they kissed each other on both cheeks. Both cheeks. She held Ann and me off with both arms when we arrived claiming she was coming down with something."

There was more, and I listened. I was glad to have Liza coming home. And her sister, Ann, was an added treat. Her sister was quite a bit older, fifteen years, and had blazed the trail that Liza perfected. Ann was a brash, hysterically funny woman who had joined the army as a nurse lieutenant, and retired to a life in the country running a treatment program for returning vets. She used horses and a four acre garden to treat their PTSD.

Liza and Ann wouldn't be home until late. I was on my own for dinner and decided to drive out to the organic farm where we bought our produce and eggs and chicken. I filled a thermos with coffee and put the dogs in the truck. Bouncing down the driveway, about half way down, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I cut the engine and rolled down the window. A Swainson's hawk was quartering the field between our place and Betsy Holsten's. I pulled my field glasses from under the

passenger seat and watched for a while. The dogs sat up and sniffed at the air when I first stopped, but had since settled back down and now I could hear their quiet breathing as they slept as well as the rustle of dry winter leaves from the trees above the spot where I was parked. The Swainson's hawk glided close to the ground, with occasional beats of those broad wings, which were maybe four feet across, a stunning width. The bird was approaching a rise about a hundred feet from the truck and I wanted to see this maneuver, which was to approach the hill stealthily and surprise any bird or mammal coming up from the other side. The hawk dropped low to the ground and skimmed the contour of the hill to the top where it hovered a moment, wings fully spread apart, its tail down and talons forward ready to strike, but to no avail. It rose up, turned, and quartered back toward the truck. From its underside I could see light feathers across the shoulders and the dark hood covering its throat and chest and then it floated down into the grasses where I could no longer see it. It must have caught something because it did not rise again.

I suddenly felt chilled from having the window open, which I shut, and drank some hot coffee. Liza does not share my love of birds. When we were first getting to know each other, I thought her attitude was one of indifference but it became clearer to me that she was almost hostile to birds, a fact that seemed out of character for her otherwise serene curiosity for most things. Then she told me casually that their mother went through a phase of birding, which was a popular activity among people of a certain age in their hometown. After meeting the woman, I could imagine their younger mother, drunk and chain smoking, and torturing her girls with her new interest, forcing them to feel competitive with the flighty feathered creatures that their mother found fascinating and interesting. Far more so than her own youngest daughter with whom she would be walking and then no longer talking while she scanned the trees with an outrageously expensive pair of field glasses that were far above her skill level and called out the names of birds as if putting a firewall between herself and any emotional connection between them. I only imagined this scene, and Liza was careful not to tread on my passion, but I was equally careful never to let Liza feel that she was excluded or less interesting to me than the birds I had studied my whole life and instinctively noticed and thought about whenever I was outdoors.

The organic farm was run by a group of young people, all in their 20's and 30's, and as far as I could tell all college educated given the book groups and workshops they offered and advertised in town. Some were interns that the farm took on for a year-long program in organic farming and permaculture. The gossip in town was that they were polyamorous — a word I loved to hear coming out of the mouths of my wizened country neighbors — and that maybe they were a cult, although a cult of what no one quite knew. It made no difference to me, any of that. I liked going out there and perusing the farm stand. And they liked my dogs, so that sealed the deal for me. It was winter so the choices at the farm stand ran to kale, and squash, cauliflower and broccoli and Brussels sprouts and beets. There was a bin of onions, and one of potatoes. Some apples they pulled from cold storage and a few very ripe persimmons which were good and sweet. They ran the farm stand on an honor system. I chose a dozen

eggs, and a couple of the sweet, meaty squash that I preferred. There were loaves of fresh baked bread, and I chose a challah thinking I would make French toast with it in the morning for Liza and Ann. I had to go back into the barn for chicken, which was kept in a cooler there, and called Shookah out of the cab, but made the boys stay. She was a better guest on the farm, and more patient than the boys, and I was hoping to chat a bit with the young woman who was in charge of the barn and who was a birder of some renown, it turned out, in local circles. But I couldn't find her, and it surprised me to feel as disappointed as I did. I chose a plump chicken from the cooler and stuffed money into the wooden box nailed to the barn door. Birding was common among the grey haired, always, but there had been a surge of interest among a young crowd and I liked to hear what they were doing and seeing and thinking, poised as they were in an apocalyptic moment in human history. The young people I meet birding rattle off data describing the encroachments on birds from pollution and pesticides, road and housing construction, and, the banner of their time, climate change. At their age, we serious birders regaled one another with our knowledge of species habits and regional differences. The best among us could bird by ear as well as by sight and could identify what amounted to local dialects of birdsong as well as distinctions that were down to sex differences. The young people I meet now have all that as well as theories about evolution of a species, descriptions of species from places they'd never been because they can read the data on the internet, and tallies of endangerment and near extinctions as well as their putative causes. When I was young, I identified with the power and freedom of birds, feeling the lightness and release that came with the fantasy of flight. Young people today seem to identify with the fragility and helplessness of birds, which will be wiped out if we don't change the course of cultural development. I am old now, and I won't be here for the very hard times ahead, and I feel tenderness toward the young people and the birds that I once thought of as the future, the ongoingness of being. I had thought of my life as something like a long drive in the truck, a slow roll through a changing landscape I would study and know until one day I would be dropped off at the side of the road and I would know that this is where it would end for me. But the road went on, and I would watch others slip past into their futures full of wonder while the sound dropped out and the sun slowly set on my own journey. But now often in my imagination what had been a quiet, solitary parting from this world becomes a dotting of traffic jams, some small, some immense, while all our vehicles are stopped at the same time, and no one gets to go any further, and we all stand in awe, overtaken and confounded, car doors open, sharply focused like herd animals scenting the air, but with no instinct to run, no where to run to.

Back at the house, I baked squash and roasted the chicken and fed the dogs each a handful of the breast meat, which they gulped down in their sit stay. Then I released them to the couches where they curled and slept while I ate my dinner at the table. The house was quiet, the kind of quiet you can feel like a weight on your shoulders and pressing against your ears. Time lost velocity, just spread around me like thick jam, holding the shape of this moment, this perfect moment.

After I ate I made coffee and carried it out into the back yard because I wanted to look at the sky since it was a new moon. I sat on the stump by the barn and leaned back against the wall wrapped in a Pendleton my father had given me when I was in my teens and which I had slept under camping hundreds of times. As my eyes adjusted to the dark I began to see more and more stars, depths and degrees of starlight that shifted from a two-dimensional tableau to three dimensional space flowing out from me, and the dogs, and the enormous live oak that canopied the yard. Shookah slowly rose from where she had been lying, stretched a bit, and came to sit at my side. I reached my hand out from under the blanket and was absently stroking her ear when a sudden hot grief overtook me. It shook the air out of my lungs. Breath and tears and the endless night. I held on to Shookah's ear and the old gal wriggled and gazed and I leaned down to let her lick my face.

Patty Contaxis is a marriage and family therapist, musician and amateur naturalist living with her family in Northern California.