SAN FRANCISCO: A LOVE AFFAIR AND OTHER ESSAYS

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Abstract

My honors project is a collection of personal essays that focus on themes of place, identity, and interpersonal relationships. "San Francisco: A Love Affair" looks at the way one special place and cultural era can shape a life. "Ballet is a Country" examines how an early path isn't always the one ultimately followed. In "Our Truest Selves," I explore family relationships using the technique of midrash, an ancient form of Hebrew scriptural commentary that augments the main text with added insight. "Wavelength" is a brief treatise on the profound differences, at least to my eyes, between the east and west coasts, using the ocean as metaphor.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. Carrie Shipers for her thoughtful guidance and encouragement throughout this project. Her insights gave me a clearer view of my own writing, and led to some well-advised trimming. She also challenged me (gently) to dig deeper, to write just one or two more sentences to finish the thought, to "stay there a little longer" when I was sure I'd said all there was to say. She made me a better writer.

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San Francisco: A Love Affair

What can I tell you about San Francisco without succumbing to clichés? I could rhapsodize about the storied Ghirardelli Square and the Cannery, and the haunted ruins of the Sutro Baths at the edge of the wild Pacific, and the cable cars groaning up and down steep hills, headed for Fisherman's Wharf, their bells clanging, people hanging off the sides, the San Francisco you see in the movies. Or the panoramic view from Coit Tower, the dense cityscape laid out below on undulating terrain, the blue bay beyond, faraway cars ambling along like shiny beetles, a scale-model come to life. I don't have to tell you, do I, about the translucent fog that slides through the Golden Gate Bridge and settles over the hills and water, a fog sometimes so thick that only the bridge's orange-red towers poke through and give the illusion that the whole thing is floating, the iconic image of a thousand postcards sent home to Iowa, *wish you were here*. You know all of that already.

So let me paint a different picture, one of an ordinary life in an extraordinary city, in the time before cell phones and internet and lives lived online. A city I used to call home, where – yes – I left my heart.

I lived there for fourteen years, from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, through my tumultuous twenties and half of my thirties. I lived there when it was still *San Francisco*, when the neighborhoods each had their own distinct flavor, when you could tell the Fillmore from the Marina from the Mission, walk the Haight-Ashbury and see ghostly remnants of the sixties in some little head shop, witness the migration to the nation's gay mecca in full swing, be as kooky or colorful or unorthodox as you wanted and no one would raise an eyebrow. San Francisco was fearless and nonconforming, with a rivulet of uneasiness running underneath and a defiant

certainty that it was somehow not "normal" and never would be, and didn't *want* to be. To live there comfortably, it helped to embrace those tenets.

Since leaving, and in the last couple of decades, I have watched with dismay – and from a distance – how the city has changed, all Amazon-this and tech hub-that, Google buses gliding through the city's streets, a Whole Foods on every corner and neighborhoods looking alike and exorbitant housing prices that only the new arrivals can afford. Homogeneity in a city as quirky and diverse as San Francisco used to be is hard for me to imagine, a heartbreaking byproduct of life in the twenty-first century. I am glad I lived there when I did.

I came of age there, you might say, racking up a few "firsts" – first real jobs, first truly independent living, first marriage, the beginning of my life as an adult. I'd grown up in Phoenix and spent my teenage years in Fresno, the flat, hot, agricultural middle of California. I'd visited San Francisco and felt a strong connection to the place, so decided to settle there after my post-high school attempt at a ballet career – including a stint with the Atlanta Ballet and auditioning for companies in New York – didn't quite pan out. I worked at various jobs around the city: ticket seller at an art-house cinema in Pacific Heights, assistant at a public relations firm, legal assistant at a small law practice, a field that paid well for someone without a college degree. I saved money, traveled to Mexico, Japan and Europe, and collected an odd assortment of friends from different walks of life. Except for one brief, disastrous marriage, I was deliciously single, living alone, autonomous and free, perhaps the freest I've ever been, or will ever be.

And what did that freedom look like? Sunday mornings. Just me and the day stretching before me, a blank slate to fill in, an apt metaphor for my life there. I'd set out early from my apartment, the Sunday paper and a blanket in my tote bag, stride uphill through Pacific Heights,

then descend into Cow Hollow and the flat Marina district that bordered the bay. Have breakfast at the café/bookstore on lively Chestnut Street, and head down to the Marina Green and lay out my blanket in the grassy park. Read the paper while children flew kites against a backdrop of cobalt-blue water, sailboats listing in the breeze. Later, maybe hike up to North Beach, rest for a while on the lawn of Saints Peter and Paul Church, the Italianate cathedral that dominates Washington Square, then start the trek back home.

On a sunny Saturday I might go to the "clothing optional" section of Baker Beach, a wide stretch of sand anchored on one end by tightly-packed homes clinging to a rocky bluff, and on the other by the Golden Gate Bridge, the hills of Marin County across the water, the eucalyptus trees of the Presidio behind us. I'd feel the sun and wind on my skin and gaze out at the waves swelling then crashing onto the shore, the water sparkling like a million diamonds.

I loved those times the best – carefree, wide open, unstructured, with this magnificent city and environs at my fingertips. Life felt as boundless as the sea.

I emerge from my apartment house on Sutter Street one Thursday afternoon. I'm in my late twenties. Keys jangle in my hand, a purse is slung over one shoulder, and I slip on a pair of sunglasses to cut the cloudy-day glare. It's warm in a city that is often cool, and I'm on my way to do some mundane errand – grocery shopping, maybe. But halfway to my car, I stop. Something about those keys jangling in my palm makes me feel, suddenly, so grown-up. I am an adult, I think. I have an apartment, a full-time job, a car; I live alone, pay bills, cook my own meals. I'm not just my parents' daughter, or someone's girlfriend, or one of the roommates. This is my life.

I lived in a relatively nondescript neighborhood called the Western Addition, in a city where not much could be called nondescript. It was sandwiched between a few distinctly different areas: to the south, the hippie-haven of the Haight-Ashbury, which bled into the Fillmore, a formerly vibrant, jazz-centric Black neighborhood decimated by redevelopment in the 1970s; to the north, the upscale Pacific Heights, with its rows of stately, turreted homes and breathtaking views of the city and bay. The Western Addition was far from the tourists and the picture-perfect vistas and those clanging cable cars trundling up the tracks. In many ways my life there was the same as it would be anywhere. I got on the bus every morning to go to my job in a downtown law firm; I hauled my laundry on weekends to the laundromat down the block from my apartment, where I paid those bills and cooked those meals and sat at my little kitchen table that overlooked an alleyway between my building and the next. I saw the city's grittier sides – homeless people sleeping in doorways, trash blowing down the street, neighborhoods I wouldn't walk alone in at night. It was, after all, just another big city.

But San Francisco was magical back then, at least in hindsight, and maybe with the aid of rose-colored glasses. So where was the magic?

It was in the way the scenic splendor of the place threaded through the most ordinary activities, like the snatches of that blue bay glimpsed between buildings on the bus ride to work, that omnipresent bridge looming in the distance. It was the seagulls' caw as they landed on the slanted rooftop outside my bedroom window, bringing a bit of ocean. It was sitting on a bench at the crest of the hill in Alta Plaza Park, a line of colorful Victorian houses sloping down the street in front of me. It was the white swans gliding soundlessly in the lagoon around the Palace of Fine Arts, and the noisy, bustling energy of old-world Chinatown, and the narrow streets full of sidewalk cafés in North Beach that could as easily be a town in Italy. It was that moment just

before descending the steep hill leading down to the Marina, nearly lightheaded from the altitude, the vaguely Mediterranean look of the city spread out below. It was the foghorns echoing across the bay as I fell asleep at night.

It was the building I lived in for many of my years there, a three-story Victorian apartment house with bay windows and a gabled roof and creaky carpeted stairs, where the tenants all knew each other, reminiscent of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*: two married couples, a few gay men, and several young women living alone, our lives intersecting. Sometimes on weekends we would gather in Mary Ellen's apartment for a potluck brunch of eggs and grits and "spoon bread" – a vestige of her West Virginia roots – and strong coffee. I would stand in her window, looking out at the tiny backyard of the building next door, and gauge the day's weather. "Looks like we're gonna be fogged in today," I'd say, or "Nice day for the beach," which might lead to a plan being made. There was a lot of knocking on each other's doors in that building, a place of built-in companions who were there for one another but respected the sanctity of our separate spaces. The Sutter Street apartment was the best of both worlds: I lived alone, but didn't *feel* alone.

And sometimes, the magic was simply sitting in my window seat on a weekend afternoon as wisps of fog scuttled across the late afternoon sky, light and shadow playing on the hills of Pacific Heights in the near distance, windows rattling with the ocean breeze. Aside from work, I was unencumbered, free to do and go as I pleased, answering to no one. I wrote short stories and poems, took ballet classes, began taking college courses at night, joined a writers' group, visited my parents a few hours away. I went out with friends to hear live music or dance the night away at a gay disco or meet for dinners or Sunday brunches. It was a level of autonomy – of *sovereignty* – I would never again attain in later years.

The flip side – and there's always a flip side – is that there were times I cried without knowing why, times I wondered if I'd always be alone, always live alone, never have a family. I didn't know what I was doing with my life, had no clear career path, was only just beginning to build the foundation of a college degree, something I'd foregone to pursue ballet. Freedom and autonomy and beautiful solitude come at a price, and there were times when I paid dearly, when I wondered whether the choices I'd made to that point in my life were the right ones, or how I would even know.

I'm standing at the corner of Geary Boulevard and Steiner Street, a few blocks from my apartment, waiting for the light to change so I can cross. I've only been in San Francisco for a year or so. In my hand is a bass guitar, which I am holding by the handle of its black, faux-leather case. I've just begun taking lessons, hoping to get good enough to maybe play in a band. Suddenly a young man about my age – early twenties – appears at my side. His hair is shaggy and he wears those cotton drawstring pants that were popular then. "You play?" he asks, smiling and gesturing at the bass. I nod but my hackles are raised. He makes me uncomfortable – I am not sure whether he's merely flirting or he wants something. "You should come over and jam with us sometime," he says. "There's a bunch of us who get together, and, you know, just hang out, play music. Not far from here." I smile and say no thanks, that's okay, I'm not very good, just learning. He presses on. "It's really great; I think you'd like it. They're nice people, it's cool. Why don't you come by with your guitar tonight and have some dinner, see if you like it?" I shift my weight from one foot to the other, willing the light to turn. Our whole exchange takes less than a minute. I say again, I don't think so, but thanks anyway. Finally the light turns green and I step into the street and walk away quickly. He does not follow.

I later learned that we were standing half a block from the Peoples Temple, the headquarters of the infamous religious cult led by the Reverend Jim Jones, who moved his operation to Guyana in 1977. About a year after my encounter with the young man, the Jonestown massacre happened, where over nine hundred of Jones's followers died by mass suicide when he ordered them to drink cyanide-laced Flavor-Aid. I heard that Temple members would try to lure people in under the guise of communal fellowship, appealing to musicians to come play music, appealing to lonely souls to come meet new people, become part of a group advocating for racial justice and social equity. In hindsight, I was quite certain the young man was from the Temple, picking on an easy target. I shudder to think how close I came, and credit my solitary nature and my aversion to group activities for my visceral rejection of his offer.

There was an ease to the way different races and cultures mixed in San Francisco back then that I took for granted, that simply seemed to be another thread in the city's tapestry. Oh, there were areas with their own distinct identities and inhabitants. The Mission was largely Hispanic – it's where you went for authentic Mexican food and Central American culture; the Castro and Noe Valley, the center of the gay universe. The Fillmore was predominantly Black, the seat of an earlier vibrant jazz scene; the Haight, still the heart of the counterculture. Japantown was around the corner from my apartment; North Beach was Italy reincarnate.

But on an everyday level, the lines between race, culture and sexual identity seemed blurrier, at least to my eyes. My fellow tenants at the few apartment buildings I lived in were Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, straight, gay, bisexual – a microcosm of the melting pot that America holds itself out to be. Admittedly, that blurry vision was through the lens of a white, heterosexual woman, a vision not brought into sharper focus by encountering the indignities

endured every day by people of color and varying sexual identities. While I appreciated being surrounded by people who *didn't* all look like me – it's one of the things that drew me to San Francisco – in retrospect, I imagine the city's diversity was experienced differently by some of my neighbors. Still, the borders created by skin color, ethnicity and sexual orientation seemed more porous in San Francisco than in other places I'd lived before and have lived in since.

The beauty of San Francisco extended beyond its boundaries, and my friends and I took advantage of its proximity to the grandeur of the California coast. A Saturday drive north across the Golden Gate Bridge – during which one emerges from a cloak of gray fog to sudden blue sky and sun, like breaking through some invisible membrane – would bring us to Marin County. First stop, Sausalito, a charming (if touristy) town built on hills hugging the bay, boats bobbing in the harbor, an abundance of restaurants and shops.

Going further up Highway 1, the fabled two-lane coastal road that winds along cliffs overlooking the Pacific – sometimes from startling heights and with no guardrails in place – was an adventure in itself, a white-knuckle drive not for the faint of heart. The beaches at the foot of those cliffs required some work to get to, some careful stepping down craggy rocks, the reward at the end – a rugged, wild-waved, uncrowded beach – well worth it. We discovered one such place called Black Sand Beach, where the sand was indeed nearly black in color. We would load up my old car with sandwiches and fruit (and, okay, a few joints) and spend the day on that beach, just doing nothing. The waves churned and crashed with such abandon against the boulders they almost seemed angry, spraying the air with salty droplets we could taste on our tongues, the sound of them so loud we had to shout to be heard. It was there where I felt the

earth's power as I never had before, that thundering water, the ground shaking with nature's violence. It almost brought me to my knees.

In the other direction on Highway 1 was the rugged stretch of coastal California known as Big Sur, where mountains meet the sea and the waves roil at the base of the cliffs. There were campsites scattered around and a village or two perched high, high above the ocean, the vista breathtaking and infinite. Though I visited Big Sur only a few times, it remains my favorite place on the planet, a place where I felt on top of the world, where the orange sun melted into a faraway watery horizon, and I would swear I could see Japan in the distance.

Years before Sutter Street, I rented a room the size of a prison cell in a rooming house in lower Pacific Heights. Across the street, in a sliced-up, ornate Victorian, lived my friend Tari, a fluttery, melodramatic young woman who wore filmy dresses and flowy scarves, her wrists chiming with bracelets. One day she said, *there is someone I want you to meet, an artist from Japan named Kenji*.

Kenji was petite like me, with sinewy arms and a head of wavy black hair so thick I could get lost in it. He worked in acrylics and silk-screen; art was his *raison d'être*. We clicked immediately, became inseparable, spent hours together in his apartment, where he painted – sometimes using me as a model. He was soft-spoken and serious, with delicate hands and hard eyes and broken English. He smoked too many cigarettes, something I forgave, because I smoked a little too. We connected artistically: he saw the world and painted it; I saw the world and wrote stories. Sometimes he revealed a silly side to me. I thought I was falling in love.

After about six months, Kenji's visa expired, and he had to return to Japan, forcing us to either break it off or find a way to stay together. We chose the latter, and decided I would go to

Japan with him and look for work. My mother jokingly called me Tokyo Rose, and a part of me wondered what I was doing, leaving my beloved city, and the life I'd built there, behind. But, in the spirit of nothing ventured, nothing gained, I was all in, and off we went.

We lived with his parents in Tokyo for two months, the duration of my visa. Kenji and I roamed the immense metropolis, looking for work for his American girlfriend: as a bass-player in an all-girl rock band, or a live model for artists, or teaching English to Japanese businessmen. People stared at me unabashedly, fascinated by my different face – even in a city as immense as Tokyo there were few Westerners. Kenji's parents were lovely and welcoming, but it was difficult living with them after being on my own. It was the middle of summer and unbearably hot and humid; people hung their futons out to dry in the mornings. After the first month, Kenji largely retreated to his room to paint and sleep, leaving me to fend for myself in a city he knew well – in hindsight, a harbinger of things to come. Nothing materialized job-wise, and after two months I returned to San Francisco, with Kenji to follow later. The plan was to marry there, as that was the only way he could stay in the country.

We got married at the century-old Swedenborgian Church in Pacific Heights – where I worked in the office – with my family and close friends in attendance. I had found a cheap apartment in the Tenderloin, a seedy part of the city, in a huge building with hundreds of units. Kenji earned money chauffeuring visiting Japanese executives around town in a limousine. A few months later, we moved to the Marina district, a welcome change of scene. But, while our living situation improved, our marriage did not.

Kenji's demeanor had changed once we married. He seemed irritated with me, even cold at times, and had little interest in doing things as a couple, or nurturing our relationship. The difference in our backgrounds became more pronounced; he was raised in a culture where

emotions were muted, where it was considered self-indulgent to show your feelings. I, of course, was exactly the opposite, something I realized was a source of his irritation, as it had been in Japan. And, when Kenji wasn't working, the only thing he cared about was painting.

And so my enduring memory of our short marriage is of Kenji beginning a painting, then sitting in a chair to smoke and stare at the painting, getting up again to paint, sitting down again to smoke and stare, the cycle repeating for hours. Oh, I understood the process, the necessary contemplation of the artist – like that of a writer – but it wasn't easy to live with, and I tiptoed around him the way I tiptoed around my conductor father when he studied his scores. We cooked meals; we made love like any young married couple would. But I don't have happy memories of spending time together. I don't remember tenderness, or the silly humor we used to share. We argued a lot. His existence revolved around his art, a circumstance that seemed immutable.

In less than a year, I knew I could not go on, and we agreed to end it. So I picked up a do-it-yourself divorce form from a stationery store, filled it out and filed it – it really was that simple – and within a month or so we were no longer husband and wife. I was still quite young, only about twenty-six. I was very sad, but also relieved, though the whole experience took an emotional toll. After we parted, I moved to the Sutter Street building and got on with my life.

Not until later did I ponder the possibility that the entire thing was planned, that he and Tari had conspired to set him up for a green-card marriage – a chilling notion. But, because of the amount of time we'd spent together, and what had felt like genuine love, and the real effort we made to possibly establish a life in Japan, I dismissed the idea.

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Despite living in a city whose male population seemed overwhelmingly gay, I managed to date a fair amount in San Francisco, both before and after Kenji. I would describe my "romantic life" there as haphazard, exploratory, tentative. I wasn't looking to settle down, and wasn't sure what my "type" was, though a few came close.

There was Ibrahim, a young man from Jordan whom I met on Baker Beach. We became friends, hanging out at his apartment in the Sunset District, the flat lowlands that border the Pacific. We made dinners with his roommates, an Irish couple, took walks around the city, sat in cafés. He was handsome in that dark, Middle Eastern way, with a bothersome habit of eyeing other girls when we were together. But I liked him, though he seemed a bit immature. One night we decided we "should" take things a step further … and it was awful, forced and unnatural, an object lesson in avoiding "shoulds." Then he confessed he'd lied about his age – he was eleven years younger than me, a large gap at our ages. I called my friend Tanya. "He's *twenty!*" I screeched. We laughed and laughed, and I soon parted ways with young Ibrahim.

There was John, a down-to-earth construction manager who owned a nice house on Potrero Hill, a sunny, blue collar-funky part of the city. He was intrigued by my world of ballet and the arts, so we would go to a play or a dance performance, and he soaked it up, which endeared him to me. We were an odd couple, but enjoyed each other. He intimated after a couple of months that he'd like it if I moved in with him, but I resisted. It scared me off, his calm assumption that I would accept his offer of love and a comfortable life. A different me might have been happy with John, but instead I clung tightly to my independence, and was always glad to return to my apartment, where I could be my contemplative, autonomous, emotionally honest self. I wasn't ready to let that go.

And my dear friend Sir – also known as Lawrence – a tall, mocha-skinned Black man with a raspy voice, a "conceptual artist," dancer, and community activist, who lived with a French woman named Genevieve. Their apartment sat high up on Twin Peaks, above the Castro, with a spectacular view of the city. Sir and I were close friends and more, and spent hours talking about life, love and what it all means. Yes, he was in a relationship, and he clearly loved her, but it was fluid and open and it didn't seem to matter to Genevieve that we spent time together, and Sir and I rarely discussed it. When I look back on those days, I know that I simply would not do that now, would not be with a person who was with someone else. But back then, in that time and place, in a free-spirited San Francisco, it all made sense.

Incidents of violence against gays and lesbians happened all over the country but seemed to occur rarely in San Francisco in those days. The occasional mainstream news of a gay man being assaulted was a shock to the system, so at odds with the cultural and political muscle of the local LGBTQ community (an acronym that hadn't been coined yet). From my perspective as a straight woman, the positive side of the city's gay life was more evident than the dark underbelly of intolerance against marginalized groups because, in San Francisco, the gay population *wasn't* marginalized, at least culturally. They were my coworkers and friends, living and working in the city, loving whom they wanted, filling the streets hundreds of thousands strong at the annual Pride parade. All the same, they were denied things enjoyed by their straight counterparts, like legal marriage and basic civil rights, and for a time were largely relegated to the "gay ghettos" of the city, like the Castro and Polk Gulch, in which to comfortably live and own businesses. I knew that many gay men and lesbians were reluctant – or downright *afraid* – to come out to their

families and employers. It was easy for me to persuade a friend, "Just *tell* them. They'll still love you!" But I never had to face that myself, so how would I really know?

In 1978, the city reeled when the charismatic and first openly gay member of the Board of Supervisors, Harvey Milk, was gunned down by a conservative fellow Supervisor, Dan White. White was angry with Mayor George Moscone about the mayor's refusal to reinstate him as a Supervisor after he'd resigned, and felt betrayed by Milk, whom he considered a friend, for not helping him persuade Moscone to reappoint him. On that gray November day, White climbed through a basement window into the warren of offices in City Hall and shot both Milk and Moscone multiple times at close range. They both died instantly.

When the news broke, I was doing freelance work for an attorney who had a home office across the bay. She and I watched the terrible story unfolding on her television and then stood on her patio looking over at the San Francisco skyline, sick with disbelief. A stunned grief settled over the city. Now-Senator Dianne Feinstein, then the president of the Board of Supervisors – and the one who discovered Milk's body – stepped in as mayor. White's attorneys presented a diminished-capacity defense, in part blaming their client's consumption of a sugary junk-food diet. They also rode the wave of despair that still swirled around another tragic event that had occurred just nine days earlier – the Peoples Temple mass suicide in Jonestown.

Months later, grief morphed into anger and the so-called White Night Riots erupted at City Hall when White was convicted only of manslaughter. He served five years in prison and, in a macabre and sad twist, took his own life a couple of years after his release, at his home in San Francisco, a city that had shunned him completely. I read later that he told close friends his despair was rooted not in remorse over the killings, but rather in the fear for his own safety and his inability to rebuild a successful life. It was hard not to feel ambivalent about his suicide.

The murders were a turning point for me personally. In a strange way, the event cemented my relationship with the city, the collective grieving a bonding of sorts, much the way a couple grows closer when they go through some adversity together. I'd only been there a few years, but that tragic occurrence – following so close on the heels of Jonestown, whose victims included many San Franciscans – showed me a side of the city I hadn't seen before, an outpouring of raw anger and pain, a uniting against something unfathomable. I felt it too, and grew more emotionally invested in the place itself.

Just a few years later, around 1981, the black cloud of AIDS rolled in and began to ravage the gay community. By the early eighties, gay men started withering from HIV and dying from complications of AIDS, the mysterious virus that came out of nowhere and seemed to strike only homosexual men. Clubs were shuttered, tourists drained away, afraid of the "gay plague," and the normally lively streets of the Castro were filled with gaunt men who shuffled along like people twice their age. There was confusion at first about how one could "catch" AIDS – was it safe to hug a sick friend, breathe the same air, shake his hand? A lot of disinformation swirled around, much like today with Covid-19.

I lost friends in those early days, like Paul, artful hair stylist to me and Mary Ellen, whose mother, Loretta, was everybody's mom. And Chuck, who also got sick in the very beginning of the disease, when not much was known about its transmissibility. They died, sadly, years before the first treatments finally came out. I remember feeling helpless in the face of their illness – what could I possibly do to make their remaining time better? I was ashamed, too, of my uneasiness while visiting them, a little afraid to get too close, unsure of my own vulnerability. In

the end, Paul went home to Hawaii, his birthplace, where he wanted to die. And I kept a nervous eye on my good friend Roger, who miraculously escaped the whole thing.

Memorial services became the new social life, the gatherings you didn't really want to go to. I still remember Paul's service, the table at the front of the church adorned with a big spray of white roses and a blown-up photo of him, his dark hair falling across his eyes, his mother quietly weeping in the front row, the echoing clack of Mary Ellen's heels as she walked up the aisle to the podium. She shared what she said was her favorite passage of scripture to relate to the memory of Paul: it was about hope. She was tearful but clear-voiced, and delivered her message without wavering. When she returned to her seat next to me, there was not a dry eye in the house. There were too many such scenes at too many services over the ensuing years.

As the epidemic wore on, I began to feel a slow dimming of my enthusiasm for the city. I stayed on until 1989 and still loved my life there. But sadness and fear are hard things to punch through, and something was lost in those last couple of years – perhaps some of that magic – that I wasn't sure could ever be regained. I still got up every day and went to work, saw my friends, had my weekend adventures, dated, traveled through Mexico for a month with Tanya, Europe for a whole summer by myself. I started reading gay literature to try to understand the crisis from those who'd been there, rather than from news stories alone. But the air around me – around us all – had changed, become heavier. It was a little harder to breathe.

San Francisco was a love affair, one that ebbed and flowed, and one that I ended reluctantly. After fourteen years, I hit a brick wall. Metaphorical infinite horizons notwithstanding, it's a city that's built up, not out, bound by water on three sides with nowhere else to go. I started to feel the same way: hemmed in, like I'd seen and done all there was to do.

I had grown a little tired of the "non-look" gay men sometimes bestowed upon women, making me feel as though I didn't exist in their eyes. I had grown weary of living in a town where a normal Saturday afternoon might mean the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a bawdy group of transvestite "nuns" who used street performance to raise awareness of sexual intolerance, would show up at a festival or demonstration in full regalia and white-face makeup – on roller-skates. Their good works aside, I felt as though I were living in a Fellini film, when all I really wanted, as I got older, was a little house with a backyard and a dog and a husband. I started turning away from San Francisco's quirkiness more than embracing it.

So, I ended up following my parents north. Both were retired from their music careers (my mother was a pianist, my father a conductor) and they'd moved from Santa Cruz, a hip coastal town where real estate prices had climbed sky-high, to Washington State, to a town just north of Seattle – another city of hills flanked by water that intrigued me (and where I would live for the next twelve years, soon marrying and having a child). Before leaving, I threw myself a going-away party in a grassy field in Golden Gate Park, on a July Saturday blessed with fair weather. I invited nearly everyone I knew from my years in San Francisco, a diverse group with some whose paths may never have crossed but for that day: the Sutter Street gang, former boyfriends, law firm co-workers, friends with whom I'd experienced this amazing place. People brought food and drink and guitars, and my nervousness about some of them mixing like oil and water dissipated as the afternoon wore on. We laughed and ate, and music floated on the breeze, and we said bittersweet goodbyes.

I am in my now-empty apartment with the landlord, taking care of some final paperwork, and he says, with a certainty in his voice, "You'll be back. Trust me, you'll be back." The day is sunny and blustery, with those damn wisps of fog playing outside the windows, almost taunting me. He and I are standing in a patch of sunlight in the small empty bedroom when he says what he says, and I wonder if he's right, that I will be back. I reflect on my years in San Francisco, and it takes no more than a moment to know – with a certainty that matches the landlord's – that I cannot ask for more, that my time here, and the stage of life I had passed through in this wondrous city, has been perfect. It's enough for me.

I do go back, but only to visit, not to live, and only once in all these years. Yet, in my mind's eye, I will always be gazing down a hill at the city spread out below, the water beyond, the bridge connecting it all.

Ballet is a Country

Ballet is a country I call home. I speak the language, understand the customs, embrace the culture. I no longer live there but my stay was lengthy – almost twenty years. I grew up on its streets from the age of six, breathed in its dank air, wore its uniforms. I tried hard to be a model citizen, coming close at times, but did not always live up to the country's stringent standards of excellence. I was an adult by the time I left, which I did of my own volition, my head held high, feet still turned out. In the end, I knew I could not devote my whole self to the cause, that my allegiance was something less than one hundred percent, that I wanted to live in other places. I did not leave empty-handed, though, taking with me all that I had learned. My years in ballet will forever inform who I am, how I move, my awareness of physicality, and my unending love of dance. Ballet is a country I left, but it will never leave me.

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A bunch of kids walk into a barre … Phoenix School of Ballet, late 1960s. The air in the dance studio is heavy, humid, pungent with sweat. We chat as we adjust our leotards and secure the tight buns that will later make our heads ache. We take our places at the barre, holding lightly onto the wooden railing with one hand. Our teacher strolls in and claps once, a cigarette dangling from his lips. The pianist in the corner starts a Chopin waltz, and class begins. First position, feet pointing outwards, heels together, free arm aloft and placed. *Plié, demi, demi, grande*.

We check ourselves in the mirrors lining the opposite wall, to correct body placement, make sure the line is pleasing, the arm angled just so, the hips squared. The girls wear pink tights, black leotards, pink ballet slippers. The boys wear black tights, white t-shirts, black slippers. We are all around twelve years old, going to the studio after school the way other kids

go to sports practice. The language of ballet is French, but we don't think of it as French; it's just ballet. *Plié, tendu, rond de jambe, pas de bourrée*. It becomes our second language.

Our teacher, Kelly Brown, is a former soloist with American Ballet Theatre who left New York with his dancer wife, Isabel, to open a school in Phoenix. He walks down the line of us at the barre like a sergeant inspecting his troops. "Shoulders back!" he says. "Pull up those knees! Arms soft!" There is a lot of touching in ballet class: teacher's hand under your thigh, pushing the leg higher; poking your behind to get you to pull it under; pulling your shoulder back, lifting your elbow; a finger under your chin, gently tilting it up. *Rond de jambe en l'air, fondu, grand battement, développé*. "Pull up through your center! Legs high!" Dance teachers, cracking the whip: critics and cheerleaders all at once.

After the barre exercises we move out to the center of the room for the jumps and turns, the combinations that will move us across the floor. The music is louder now, with percussive chords and dramatic flourishes to match our bigger movements. *Glissade, pas de bourrée, assemblé, pirouettes*. We line up in the corner, two or three at a time executing the steps diagonally across the room, Mr. Brown shouting over the music. "Higher! Soft landing! Again! From the other side now!" *Again, again, again*; repetition is the backbone of ballet class. *Grand jeté en tournant*, the biggest step: propel to a jump, legs scissoring to arabesque in the air while turning, land soft as a cat. We're breathing harder now, some bent over, hands on thighs. Airborne, our limbs slice through time and space, our necks long and graceful.

I was reasonably talented, a petite girl with an ideal dancer's body: short torso and long limbs. I had nice *port de bras* (arm movement), "good feet" (high arches), hyperextended legs, a clean line. On the other hand, I did not possess a steely strength or a light quickness on my feet,

qualities that make for the best kind of dancer. I struggled with extension – how high the legs go – a crucial element for the female dancer, the way elevation in jumps is important for the men. As I got older, and higher extension became more expected, my *développé* (a slow unfolding of one leg in the air while supporting yourself on the other) stayed stubbornly stuck at a ninety-degree angle, while many of the other girls' legs lifted up and up, some almost touching their shoulders, seemingly with no effort. I remember being envious of their ability – why couldn't *I* find the muscles that did that? My ninety-degree legs would be the thorn in my side with ballet, my Achilles heel, a technical deficit that would always make me feel "less-than" as a dancer.

I loved ballet, loved the physical and spiritual expression I found through dance; I felt at home in dance studios – that was my world. I found the symmetry of class pleasing: nothing is done only on one side, always both sides, each time with every step. Dancers are musicians, their bodies the instruments, keeping the rhythm, sculpting the contours of the music – perhaps being raised by musician parents made me appreciate that aspect more. Ballet is a palette of opposites: strength and grace, athleticism and artistry, bloody toes hidden inside pink satin shoes. I loved that too.

As a young dancer in Phoenix, I wasn't yet feeling the pressure to decide whether ballet would become a career, nor did I know that my relationship with ballet would be fraught at times, as I wrestled with my imperfections in an activity that demanded near-perfection.

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My family – my mom, dad, older brother and I – left Phoenix, where my symphony-conductor father had led the Phoenix Symphony for ten years, and moved to California. Not the palm-trees-and-beaches California, but the less-glamorous agricultural middle: Fresno, where my dad continued his career, as conductor of the Fresno Philharmonic Orchestra. I joined the

local regional ballet company, Fresno Civic Ballet, comprised of a diverse group of high-schoolers who met several times a week for class and rehearsals. Our teacher, Clare Lauche Porter, had founded the school and company after dancing with the San Francisco Ballet.

Out in the center, we would watch each other take turns doing the big jumps across the floor. There was Kathy, short and muscular, with flawless technique – *she will go far*, we all assumed, though after a brief stint with the Atlanta Ballet she retreated from dance. Gary, tall and square-shouldered, one of the few boys in the class, a good ballet partner who became a close friend. Aleta, the only person of color in the company, a Black ballet dancer at a time when that was rare, *her dancing vibrant, joyful and strong*, I wrote in my journal. Kassie, the daughter of a Fresno police officer, brown-haired, pretty, with powerful legs. Therese, a Catholic-school girl from across town, with milky skin and red hair, her steps flighty and gazelle-like, a better dancer than most of us. Another Kathy, quick and light on her feet, tall and long-limbed. Roger, the pianist, guiding our movements with waltzes, marches, and adagios, watching us from his perch in the corner. Openly gay, musically talented, and hilarious, he became a good friend who later managed the Atlanta Ballet and encouraged me to join him there and audition for the company.

My ballet buddies became better friends to me than my school friends. We spoke the same language, commiserating about shin splints and bunions and how many pairs of pointe shoes we went through in a month. We performed around Fresno, doing the obligatory *Nutcracker* at Christmas and other shows throughout the year. We were giddy backstage in our heavy makeup and costumes, excited by the murmur of the audience as they took their seats. We were a family of sorts.

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In high school, the pressure was already on to figure out our life's path, or at least have an idea of a direction. I didn't have many pursuits other than ballet: wasn't proficient at a sport; hadn't stuck with piano, which I'd studied for years until quitting to focus on dance; had no clear answer to the age-old question, *what do you want to be when you grow up?* With ballet, similar to, say, gymnastics and figure-skating, you reach a crossroads at a certain age, when you've invested as many years in it as I had, that begs a decision: Are you serious or not? Are you going to take this all the way, or aren't you?

I was pretty sure of one thing: I had little desire to go to college. My high school experience was miserable: I was not a very good student – unmotivated, didn't apply myself, pulled down mediocre grades (and would wonder, years later, why my parents didn't demand better of me). It's hard for me to reconcile that girl with the kind of student I became as an adult taking college courses – committed, studious, excellent grades. But in high school? Ballet and boyfriend – that's all I cared about. Socially, I was adrift, didn't fit into any one group or clique but instead found one or two friends from each. The camaraderie I shared with my fellow dancers was missing from high-school friendships, and I never really flew my dancer flag proudly there. So, I wasn't particularly motivated to continue academic studies. In those days, too, the emphasis on needing a college degree for career purposes was not as strong as it is today.

My parents told me they would be supportive of whichever road I chose – ballet or college. They didn't push me either way (neither of them had gone the traditional college route – they'd both attended Juilliard School of Music). So my angsty life decision leaned heavily towards ballet: because it was my strongest card; because I wanted to follow my friend, Roger the pianist, to Atlanta, and try out for the company there; because I had spent so many years of

my life in the studio working towards *something*; because my parents had invested a lot of money in classes and ballet camps; because of a self-imposed expectation that I carry on a sort of performing-arts legacy that my parents were perpetuating. And, most importantly, because ballet is an occupation where youth rules: if you weren't already well-positioned by age seventeen or eighteen, either in a company or at least as a student in a school that fed into a good company, you risked aging out of the whole endeavor. It was a pretty short window.

So I decided to stick with it, though I was apprehensive. I wondered, *am I really good enough?* and, deep down, worried that I wasn't. I had my good qualities as a dancer, but my *developpé* still didn't reach the glorious heights, my pointe-work was sometimes wobbly, and my attention wavered – I wanted to hang out with my boyfriend, be a normal teenager. A ballet career meant total devotion to dance, to the exclusion of almost everything else. Today, many professional dancers find a way to weave college into their demanding schedules, get their degrees, master other skills so that when they stop dancing they can slide easily into another career (though some go on to teach, choreograph, or become directors of dance companies). That's smart, but was not the case in the 1970s. No serious dancer I ever knew went to college while pursuing a career, not back then. You wouldn't be seen as a "real" dancer if you did.

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I did indeed follow Roger, and danced for one season with the Atlanta Ballet, where I worked the hardest I ever had. I became stronger in the studio: sturdier pointework, higher extension, more stamina. The company performed in Atlanta and toured a little outside the state – I remember traveling to Miami once for performances. Sometime during the year, a worrisome trait in myself as a performer manifested: a nervousness would take over at times and I would forget steps – just completely blank out – in the middle of rehearsals. It was an unnerving

occurrence that I don't recall ever happening in performance, but it chipped away at my self-confidence.

I stayed in Atlanta for a while longer after the season ended, living with my boyfriend whom I'd met during my time there. But I decided to leave and reassess the whole "ballet-as-career" thing – that need to step away from something in order to see it better. I don't remember much about what I was *feeling*, just that I wasn't sure whether to continue, or whether dance was right for me. I went back West and settled in San Francisco, a city I'd fallen in love with while living there briefly before Atlanta. I took classes at the San Francisco Ballet School to stay in shape, and thought about my future in dance. I was all of twenty years old – by most standards, still young; in the ballet world, approaching middle age.

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Meanwhile, my mother was conspiring with her best friend, Isabel Brown, a former dancer with American Ballet Theatre, to get me to New York. Isabel was the wife of my old teacher, Kelly Brown. They had divorced, and Isabel had wasted no time moving from Phoenix back to New York with their four children, three of whom went on to dance with ABT themselves (her daughter Leslie would later appear in the movie *The Turning Point*, loosely based on the Brown family).

Isabel lived in a spacious apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her elderly mother, young son and one of her daughters (both of them ballet students). She acted as a kind of den mother, renting out a room with bunk beds to young dancers who needed a place to live. She and my mother thought that if I was serious about dance, New York was the only place to be. They were right, of course. New York had the best schools, the best companies and the most opportunities. Riding the momentum of my newfound strength in the studio, and with the

support of my parents and Isabel, I decided to take it up a notch and go to New York, the holy grail for any dancer hoping to "make it" in the big leagues. I packed my bags, said goodbye to my beloved San Francisco, and headed east. Isabel had a bed waiting for me.

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New York City, mid-1970s: Andy Warhol, the beginning of punk rock, Patti Smith, the Ramones, disco, the New York Dolls, the Talking Heads, the Apollo Theater, the pre-AIDS gay club scene, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, a crime-ridden Times Square. Amazingly, I wasn't paying much attention to any of it. My reason for being in New York was ballet, and that was my sole focus, at least in the beginning.

The dance scene was exhilarating. American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Martha Graham, the Harkness Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Broadway shows. I stayed for only half a year, but it was a heady time. I took classes at ABT, auditioned for scholarships at Joffrey and Harkness and for a spot with the Alvin Ailey company, where I made sure to stand in the front row so Judith Jamison, the tall, magnificent star of the company, would see me.

Many auditions yielded no offers, but I pressed on, because there was always another one. Looking back, I realized I was not confronting my shortfalls as a dancer, nor being honest with myself about what was realistically within my reach. I held tight to my good traits – nice legs and feet, good *port de bras*, a musical ear, a lyrical quality – and pushed the weaknesses aside. My experience at the Harkness studio should have awakened me, but it didn't.

My audition there, for a scholarship to the school, consisted of my taking a men's class one morning, the only time the director was available to check me out. I took my place at the barre, sandwiched between young men of varying ages, muscular, talented, some of them

company members. It was not a normal audition scenario, but I had no choice. The class was long and grueling, with many more jumps and turns than would be typical in a regular mixed class with women. I pushed my legs as high as they would go, showed off my good feet, my nice arms, my musicality. After the class ended, the director led me into her office.

She closed the door to the small room and sat behind a desk. She clasped her hands in front of her. "You look pretty good, Ellen, generally," she said. "Nice feet and *port de bras*, nice lines. But you should be stronger for the number of years you've been dancing, your legs should be higher, your turns shouldn't be so shaky." She was gentle, as I recall, and I nodded in agreement, not really knowing what I was agreeing with. A part of me knew she was right, but another voice was all *nah, no big deal, I can fix that, work on that, like I did in Atlanta*. I thanked her and left the building, walked along the congested Manhattan sidewalks, pushing back the tears and swallowing down the lump in my throat. I thought I'd done well in a tough class; I was sure she was going to offer me a scholarship at the end of it. *Oh well,* I thought. *An off day.* I was still not comprehending the disconnect between the quality of dancing I *thought* I was doing, and what others were actually seeing. Maybe I was in denial; maybe I was holding out hope that the next audition would be *the one*. Maybe that's the only way I could go on.

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From a young age, my dance education encompassed more than just ballet. Through the years, I studied, in no particular order, flamenco, Hindu, jazz, character, and modern. I was no different from most dancers in that regard – ballet choreography is comprised of many different styles and influences. With flamenco, I learned to play castanets and throw my shoulders so far back I felt contorted. Hindu introduced me to *mudras*, sacred hand gestures that symbolized different feelings, so I learned not just a way of dance but also got a glimpse into another culture.

I'd had great jazz dance training in Phoenix with Kelly Brown, whose career included a lot of Gene Kelly-type dancing on Broadway and in movies, giving me a solid foundation for what was to come in New York. I took some classes in modern dance, the antithesis of strict ballet training, with its flexed feet, contractions and rounded backs. I saw the value in learning other forms of dance, especially as the lines between different styles got blurrier on the ballet stage.

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After the Harkness experience, I started to turn my gaze away from straight ballet. I tried out for off-Broadway musicals and began taking jazz dance classes with Luigi (né Eugene Louis Faccuito), where I felt more in my element. I came in with Kelly's training, but Luigi was king of this realm, the master of jazz. He had invented his own style of movement to heal his body after a catastrophic injury, when doctors told him he would never walk again, let alone dance. His style was all slinky coolness, slow-walking steps across the floor, knees bent, arms reaching up, head back, his face nearly rapturous as he demonstrated the steps for us. The music was bass-heavy and rhythmic, soulful and sexy. It was all so different from ballet, and I gravitated to his school, taking most of my classes there. After a few months, a woman from his company offered me a spot on a tour with her and two other dancers. They were heading to Santo Domingo for a three-month gig at a resort hotel, where they would dance five nights a week between other shows.

It was thrilling to get an offer to dance and be paid for it, but something about it sounded a little off, a little tacky, and it veered far from my original mission: to come to New York, take classes, audition for companies. My parents encouraged me to go for it if I wanted to. After much thought, though, I decided to turn the gig down and stay put. Dancing between shows in a hotel was not exactly the vision I had for myself as a dancer, a sentiment that, in hindsight, was a

bit of ballet snobbishness on my part that ended up not serving me well. I didn't have the foresight, at age twenty, to see the possibility that the job might have led to other – better – opportunities.

Another offer came in the form of a call-back for an off-Broadway production of the musical *Carousel*, but I turned that down as well for other reasons: I was starting to hate New York and my living situation there, and I yearned to be back with my boyfriend in Atlanta.

I kicked myself later – who knows where those gigs might have led? Clearly I was better suited to jazz and musical theatre, judging by the offers I got, but I didn't stick around long enough to let it develop. Looking back, I wondered why I kept saying no instead of yes. Fear of success? Fear of failure? I used to say to people, "I have no regrets," heralding it as a personal philosophy, a thing of strength. But, the truth is, I do regret those no's, and will forever wonder how my life might have turned out differently if I'd been just a little more adventurous and more confident in myself as a dancer.

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My relationship with New York City was dicey. It was all city, all the time, which ultimately I would find exhausting. It was absurdly expensive (in 1970s dollars); on my budget, even going to a movie was a luxury. And the city wasn't yet the "cleaned-up" and safer (some would say less interesting) version of itself it would later become. *Big smelly gray cold pulsating written all over / The rumble of trains / The rumble of drums*, I wrote in my journal. It was gritty and noisy and fascinatingly seedy in places, the weather bitter cold and slushy, the dirty snow piling up on the sidewalks against the city's hard edges.

After months of bunking in cramped quarters in Isabel's apartment with high-school-age girls, I was itching to get out. I scoured the ads and found a violin student from Juilliard named

Rochelle who needed a roommate. We moved into a residence hotel in midtown, where we shared a cockroach-infested two-room suite, but at least I was on my own again.

New York was intoxicating: centuries of history etched in its old buildings, a quick-paced, vaguely menacing excitement in the streets, a feeling of never knowing what would appear around the next corner. I perfected the "don't mess with me" fast-walk that I was tutored on before arriving (being a young woman alone in big, dangerous New York). The blocks were short and walking thirty of them at a time was nothing, so I explored the city on my feet. I rode the subways, breathing in the creosote smell of the train wheels – such a big-city smell – and was fascinated by the dark subterranean tunnels, the endless entertainment of people-watching. I'd get half-price standing-room tickets to attend performances of the great companies I'd come to New York to be near. Sometimes I stayed after class at Ballet Theatre and sat in the glassed-in balcony overlooking the studios to watch company members rehearsing, occasionally catching dancers like Baryshnikov and Gelsey Kirkland in rehearsal. I soaked it all in, yes.

On the dance front, at almost every audition I found myself competing with stages and studios full of dancers trying out for the same one or two slots in a company or role in a musical. Many of them were very good, and many were better than I was (or so I felt), or had connections I didn't have, or a competitive streak that just wasn't in me. After a while it all started to feel sort of futile. I wondered whether I truly had what it took, as a dancer and as a *person*, to realize the "making it in New York" dream – a dream that required a thick skin, a dream that was beginning to lose its luster. At times, I felt like a prisoner in the studio, stealing glances out the windows during class at people walking down the sidewalk – they looked so *free*. I wondered whether anyone else felt that way, and considered that maybe the studio's four walls wouldn't feel so confining if I were happier doing what I was doing within them.

It wasn't only about ballet. I missed my boyfriend in Atlanta. I missed the clean ocean air and scenic vistas of San Francisco. I felt a little aimless, and the city's crowdedness and intensity were beginning to wear me down. *Maybe this isn't what I'm supposed to be doing with my life,* I thought.

I talked with my parents, and Isabel, and made the decision to leave New York. And wouldn't you know it? My last night there was magical, the kind of evening that makes you want to stay in a place. My bags packed and the plane ticket on my dresser, I went out with a friend. I don't remember who he was or how I knew him, but we spent a few hours talking and laughing in a cozy café, a glassed-in atrium adorned with hanging ferns (*so* seventies), soft music whispering from unseen speakers, the wintry world passing by outside the windows. The lit-up city looked beautiful, the New York of a Woody Allen movie. I thought, "I could *like* it here. Maybe I should have given it more of a chance." But it was too late; the plans were laid and my course was set.

I rejoined my boyfriend in Atlanta but ended up not staying very long after all. He was close to thirty years old by then and wanted to settle down, maybe get married; I had just turned twenty-one and was nowhere near ready for that. So I returned to San Francisco, where I would live for the next fourteen years.

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Back in San Francisco, I continued taking classes and met a woman named Katrina, who'd started a small performing group that she asked me to join. We'd put on shows in artists' lofts and similar spaces, something that was popular in the city then. Our style was a mixture of jazz and ballet with a bit of "showgirl" thrown in – maybe what I would have been doing in Santo Domingo if I'd gone. After a year or so, we disbanded and my attendance at classes

tapered off, and I gradually eased out of the dance world in my mid-twenties. I had to make a living, and with no college degree or other credentials, I worked at a potpourri of jobs, finally ending up at a small law firm, where I learned the legal-assisting and paralegal ropes and later started my own business as a freelance legal assistant. I began taking college courses to start building credits towards a someday-degree. My beloved ballet companies always included the Bay Area on their tours, so I went to performances of ABT, Alvin Ailey, the Joffrey, and whoever else came to town, in addition to our own excellent San Francisco Ballet.

For years, it was painful to be in the audience watching instead of onstage dancing. "*Wait*!" I wanted to shout at the performers. "I'm one of *you*!" It dredged up old feelings: *didn't try hard enough, not competitive enough*. It was hard to let go of a version of me that had been my identity since childhood.

But as I got older, into my thirties and forties, past the time I'd be dancing even if it *had* been my career, those feelings subsided. I grew into my role as a spectator, watching the dancers onstage with a critical but admiring eye. I grew to appreciate my years of training, and my extensive knowledge of ballet, in a different way, and would write reviews of performances that I'd send to people who were interested (Isabel said I should become a dance critic, in response to one such letter I sent her). Sometimes I'd buy tickets for various friends to one performance or another, wanting to share with them one of my great pleasures in life. I realized that something I *didn't* regret was one minute spent in dance studios – those years shaped me. Ballet became something I could live with comfortably, from the outside, with only love.

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Over the years I occasionally took ballet classes as an older adult, but of course it wasn't the same. The *feeling* was still there, but my body had changed; I was thicker through the middle, gravity was harder to defy (*I've plié'd and I can't get up!* I would joke). Time is a cruel reminder that the window for highly physical endeavors, such as dance and sports, is short indeed.

Now, I dance only in my dreams, where I am magnificent: whipping out four or five pirouettes in a row, on pointe, strong and sure, my leaps high and effortless, my legs up around my ears, everything brilliantly executed. In real life, I can still place my arms in precise ballet position, my fingers angled just so, the way they always were. I pull myself up straight, feel my neck long, my muscles stretched and limber. My feet still have high arches that curve when I point them, and I catch myself standing in first position at the kitchen sink, my feet turned outwards, while doing the dishes. It's not something that ever leaves you, this gift of dance, this special physical vocabulary, even long after you've stopped doing it. I will always be a dancer.

Our Truest Selves

Hannah

She's five-foot-three, a wiry blonde, funny as hell, with a lightning-quick wit and a gift for humor: spot-on imitations, a roster of characters who don't hold back, spouting their opinions at the drop of a hat. She's a petite young woman who was often mistaken for someone much younger (a constant irritant in her teenage years: she didn't *care* then that she'd appreciate looking forty when she's fifty), until she opened her mouth and surprised you with a low-pitched voice, self-assurance and a touch of attitude. She is my daughter, every version of her burnished into my mind's eye, from pudgy toddler in overalls, to snug-jeaned teenager with blue-gray eyes not yet wearied by life, to grown woman cooking dinner while we FaceTime. She is my only child. She calls me Mina.

The Don (done in a perfect Marlon Brando rasp), rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he contemplates how he'll off his insubordinate flunky; Chipmunk, who observes the world from an inch off the ground but sees right through you; Penelope, a precocious eight-year-old who knows everything, and makes sure you're aware of that.

She makes people laugh, a tendency so natural it seems genetic. If there's humor or silliness to be found in something, Hannah's on it – she can't help herself. I think she was born with "improv brain," that ability to trust your instincts, think on your feet, take a risk. I remember when she was around eight, her dad, Tom, and I gave her a stuffed cow as a Christmas gift and she promptly named it "One Percent," her mind going directly to the type of milk we bought. She was recruited into a teen improv troupe in Providence at thirteen, and performed improv comedy through her freshman year in college. We've seen her countless times

Sometimes as a teenager she would question her own sense of humor. "Am I weird?" she would ask. "No," I reassured her. Then I'd correct myself. "Yes, you're wonderfully weird."

onstage, watching her make instantaneous decisions about character and dialogue, a decisiveness we didn't know she possessed.

She loves to sing; it's another talent, a gift, at times an emotional ballast. She inherited her musical ear, I suspect, from both sides of the family – many musicians among us. Her voice is soulful and strong, from clear high soprano to husky-voiced renditions of jazz standards. She spent years on risers in school choruses and choral ensembles, in a cappella groups and theatre productions, in voice lessons learning to shape the notes, find the perfect pitch, finesse the phrasing. She studied piano and violin, but her voice won out as the instrument of choice. Later, she gravitated to gospel, and joined her college's gospel choir; their raucous, joyful performances still ring in my ears.

Gospel music: centered on Jesus, on faith, on believing. Is it disingenuous to love the music yet not completely espouse the scripture from where it springs? Gospel touches me deeply, as I think it does Hannah. For me, and maybe for her, the music itself is religion.

In Southern California, where she now lives, she joined another gospel group, who put on their Spring 2021 concert virtually because of the pandemic. Tom and I watched as thirty faces in little squares on our computer screen made rousing music together, each of them having recorded their parts separately. There was our daughter's face, her voice, her joy in doing something she loves, shining through.

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The Brothers

Hannah is, practically speaking, an only child. She has two half-brothers, Pablo and Gabriel, with whom she shares a father, but her childhood connection with them was sporadic at best. The boys' mother

had absconded with them to Brazil, her native country, immediately after her divorce from Tom, right around the time I met him. He would not see his sons again for three years, despite his exhaustive efforts to locate them. By the time he finally learned where they were, and traveled to Brazil to reunite with them, we were married and I was five months pregnant with Hannah.

Aside from a year during Hannah's childhood when Pablo, then nineteen, lived with us in Seattle, the boys' visits were intermittent, their lives toggling between the U.S. and Brazil until adulthood. Sometimes their stays with us were tumultuous, father and sons struggling to rebuild their fractured bonds, to make up for the time they'd lost. The boys were unsure how to relate to their new little sister, and I think they didn't quite know what to make of me, or what we were to each other, a feeling that was mutual. To them, I was probably just their dad's new wife; to me, they were boys who did not need another mother, and I was not sure how to relate to them, or which role I should fill. I was glad they were safe and back in Tom's life. They had been through a lot, and so had we; I tried to be the adult, but it was hard to know where to begin.

Before I met them, I worried what they would think of me. Would they resent me? Resent the fact that their dad had moved ahead with his life? They were ten and thirteen when they were taken – how do kids assimilate emotional trauma at those ages? I did not know – and still do not know – the answer.

Hannah's brothers are grown men now with families of their own, Pablo in Seattle, Gabriel in New York City. Sadly, Pablo chose many years ago to estrange himself from his family of origin, but Gabriel is very present in our lives. He is attentive to his aging father, and has forged

relationships – slowly, slowly, over the years; these things take time – with Hannah and with me.

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So it was, for the most part, just the three of us – Hannah, her dad, and me, a tight little unit, a triangle, that sturdiest of geometric shapes. But three can be a challenging number. Sometimes Tom and I would present a parental front on matters of discipline, for example, leaving Hannah to advocate for herself without the camaraderie of a sibling, someone else to huddle with, compare notes with.

Sometimes Hannah and I were the twosome, doing things we enjoyed without Tom – shopping, going to a play, having a beach day. And sometimes, Tom and Hannah would pair up, go all father-daughter on me, planning a bike ride to which I was not invited. (Father-daughter was not always smooth sailing, though, as when two people are so much alike they drive each other crazy. *But that's a whole other essay*, as writer Jo Ann Beard might say.) I did not take offense at their separate plans; we all recognized our unique relationships with each other, and we always returned to the solid core of the three of us.

I gravitated to her, because she is a radiant planet with a strong orbital pull, my only child, my best companion.

As an only child, Hannah learned to argue pretty effectively with the adults in the house, to make points and counterpoints, and in fact went on to become a member of the debate team all through high school. "You should think about going to law school," her dad would say in the middle of an argument after Hannah had come back with some irrefutably good

point. Perhaps her only-child status was unrelated to this skill, but I believe she developed a certain set of muscles in her interactions with people because of the family dynamic that springs from one child living with two willful, articulate and sometimes prickly adults.

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The Parents – a Little Backstory

Tom is sixteen years older than I – not quite a generation, but enough of a gap that we grew up in different eras. When I was eight years old and in third grade, he was already in law school. When I was a young adult in the late 1970s and '80s, living a free-spirited life in San Francisco, he was in his forties, married with two young sons, practicing law. We were always in different worlds. Down the road, that mattered.

The age difference bothered me at first, but as we grew to know one another my discomfort with it dissipated – he was just Tom. By the time we married, it was pretty much a non-issue. The "different worlds" thing was more cultural than age-related.

On the last day of 1991 – about two years after we met – we got married by a judge on the walkway alongside Seattle's Fremont Ship Canal, with ducks and kayakers gliding by in the late-morning sun. Our only guests were my parents and two close friends, the married lawyers Tom and I worked with.

The first years of our marriage were good ones. We built a life together in our little house in a hilly neighborhood of Seattle that overlooked Ballard, the Scandinavian district. We had a big backyard where we planted a massive vegetable garden, and I learned how to stake tomatoes and grow zucchinis the size of baseball bats. I formed an uneasy alliance with his irritable black-and-white cat the boys had named Stormy.

Tom was a prolific and inventive chef, and did most of the cooking, which I loved and other women envied. We had a small wooden deck that looked out over the garden, and the spread of the city beyond, and the snow-dusted Olympic mountains in the distance.

He maintained a solo law practice while I worked at various jobs; at times, we barely squeaked by financially. But we raised our little daughter in a neighborhood where everyone knew your name, where the people around us were friends, not just neighbors. We lived there until she was seven, when we moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where Tom had accepted a job in research integrity at the University of Louisville.

Stormy, picking his way delicately through the overgrown garden, his paw batting at basil leaves. Hannah, age three, sitting in a patch of late-afternoon sun on the deck's rough-hewn wood, clutching a sippy cup, laughing at the cat. The patch of light sliding slowly off of her as the sun sinks behind the distant mountains.

A couple of years later, Tom's job lost its state funding, and we moved to Rhode Island at the suggestion of a relative. It was after that move that I started to feel a discontent with my marriage, one that settled into my bones. Certain sides of Tom's personality grated. He was inherently argumentative and confrontational. He could be testy with strangers, like store clerks who didn't know how to answer his questions, or people who told him he must do something a certain way (but *why?* he'd ask). He pushed people for answers, challenged them on their motives, drilled down a couple of layers past most people's comfort zone – good qualities for a detective, or a lawyer, or an investigative journalist, but not easy qualities to live with day to day.

Louisville – so different from Seattle – where a sultry steaminess would settle in after a summer rain; where the gentle, near-South accent of the people grew on us after a while; where the lush, green, horse-country hills were as beautiful in their own way as the craggy mountain peaks of Washington. I loved my job at the University's school of music and was sorry to leave.

His contrariness bothered me. I believe in the old adage, "you catch more flies with honey," and tend to go with the flow, be overly

courteous with strangers, get what I need by appealing to people's natural instinct for kindness. Our ways of relating to the world at large were, and are, quite different. He was not a very good listener, something he admits. We bickered a lot.

Some of the discord rested squarely on my shoulders. I missed the old me, the young woman who used to sing along in her San Francisco apartment to Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder, David Bowie and Chick Corea and Joe Jackson and Curtis Mayfield, the music that made me feel alive. It was a side of me I didn't share with Tom, didn't feel he'd understand – it wasn't *his* music, *his* era – and if I tried, he didn't seem interested (*could you turn that down, or off?*). Yet, to me, that girl felt like my truest self. "We're mismatched," I would say, or "our chemistry isn't right," or – the one that he always refuted – "you don't know the real me." *I know you better than anyone*, he'd say.

I became easily irritated and impatient with him. I abhorred his facetiousness, a tactic he employed often and claimed to have learned from his alcoholic father. My predilection towards autonomy took over at times; I didn't feel the need for his input or help: *I am self-sufficient*. I didn't always comprehend the unspoken contract between committed couples – that each seeks the input of the other for important decisions – reflecting a self-centeredness that is one of my own inherent and not very "couple-y" traits. He reacted to these qualities in me, and I reacted to him and he would react to my reaction and we'd end up in an absurd argument

But before I go further, know that there is much good, much that we share: a love of language, of stories; we invented our own words, made our own silliness, channeled our pets. He reads to me at the kitchen table – lines from a novel, or an interesting magazine article he came across. He sometimes recites, from memory, a poem by T.S. Elliot or W.B. Yeats. He is smart and curious and ponders life's questions the way I do. Our core values are aligned – decency, respect, personal integrity. I can come to him with anything, literally cry on his shoulder – he is there. These are the things I hold close, things that will never alter, things I can count on.

about something that was, at base, insignificant. And so there was a note of discord that sounded throughout much of our marriage. It was sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. It was, and is, emotionally and spiritually exhausting. And, of course, Hannah noticed.

Sometimes I think that maybe I never should have married – I've always been a solitary soul. An interesting notion: not everyone is suited to marriage, to being paired up. More often than not I just want to be left alone. It's not a defect. It's just who I am.

I broached the subject of divorce a handful of times over the years, craving a "peaceful life," something I felt I could not have with Tom. I felt increasingly ill at ease about Hannah's witnessing the tension between her father and me. But, I did not want to tear our family apart, did not want to do that to my daughter, did not want her to be "a child of divorce." And there was enough good there, plenty of good, to justify staying the course.

Hannah has told me her childhood was happy – she felt loved, and secure, and cared for. But as she got older she sensed that something was off with her dad and me. She must have observed that we rarely displayed physical affection with one another, like certain of her friends' parents probably did. We didn't come across like a couple *in love*, and it pained me to imagine her seeing other moms and dads hugging and being affectionate when she didn't often see her own parents doing that. She intuited, I think, that we were not – or that *I* was not – happy. She told me recently that she kept those feelings inside for many years, not knowing how to express them, or whether they were even valid. It is something that has colored her adult life, colored her relationship with me, with her parents. It is something I cannot undo; I can only listen and hear her.

And really, how much should a parent share with a child, when it comes to matters of the heart? When does a child begin to understand the dynamic between her parents? It's so hard to know.

... and it is something that will always hang over us now; not a dark, heavy cloud, exactly; more like a sheer veil that hovers lightly. But still, it is there.

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Mother and Daughter

My daughter and I have similar traits, some of which – if they are things I don't like in myself – were daunting to deal with in her as a child: an impatience with inanimate objects ("Why doesn't this damn thing *work*!?" is one of my common refrains); a tendency to overthink things, especially when it comes to interpersonal relationships – a need to clear the air, the sting of hurtful things said, or things *not* said that should have been; both of us can ruminate for days about such matters. From a young age, Hannah bristled if she perceived she was being unjustly accused of something – one of *my* lifelong pet peeves. As a parent, you wonder how much of your child's temperament is completely her own and how much is inspired by proximity to her closest role models – her parents. You learn to be mindful of your own behavior around your child, as it might be reflected back at you, something I didn't always execute perfectly.

"Please, don't be like me!" you sometimes want to say to your child.

But I also found in my daughter a soul-mate of sorts. Our sense of humor is uncannily in sync; we usually laugh – or *don't* laugh – at the same things. She tends to share my preference for simplicity when it comes to personal appearance: unfrilly, minimal makeup, short nails, understated jewelry. We both find pleasure in observing human nature, trying to figure out people's motives, deciphering the language of friendship and the vagaries of love – why people do what they do.

Funny how the term "soul mate" has been relegated solely to romantic relationships. Over the years Hannah has felt more like my soul-mate than any romantic partner I've ever had.

"We are the same person," she used to say, only half-kidding.

As she got older, she began to peel away from me in certain ways and establish her own set of tastes, settle into her own way of interacting with the world, just as I did with *my* mother, seeing her through the lens of adulthood, realizing that her sensibilities were not always mine. And so it goes, mother-daughter bonds that change and bend with time.

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"What should we name her?" I asked Tom when we learned I was having a girl. I pored over lists in baby-name books; they were divided alphabetically, or by ethnicity, sometimes by era (old-fashioned versus modern, the Emma's versus the Britney's). I was overwhelmed by too much choice, immobilized by the notion that the very quality of my unborn daughter's life rested on the name we chose. Then one day, it just came to me: *Hannah*. Warm, rounded, a word that almost smelled good and rolled off your tongue – like "banana." I looked up the etymology and learned it is from the Hebrew name *Channah*, meaning "grace" or "favor," and appears in the Bible as well (Hannah, mother of Samuel). For me, it came down to the warmth (and the symmetrical palindrome, very pleasing). And Hannah lives up to her name: she is indeed a warm person.

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In my twenties, I came to realize that ballet was not going to be my career after all. I wasn't *quite* a strong enough dancer, not competitive enough to muscle my way to the front of the studio, and wanted to do other things with my life. Since my pursuit of ballet had precluded my going to

How sad it was to realize, as my mother and I both grew older, that I actually didn't care for some of her tendencies, that we weren't that much alike after all. It almost made me question everything I'd ever thought, and loved, about her – not diminishing that love, just seeing it in a different light. "Recalibrating," as the GPS units used to say. I imagine Hannah has felt the same with regard to her own mother: perhaps she has felt annoyance at a certain flightiness in me, or has trouble relating to my quasi-hippie-ish attitude towards some things, that sort-of "aw, come on, lighten up" streak I sometimes possess. We are, after all, children of different generations.

college after high school, I began taking college courses at night with the idea of slowly working towards a degree. I attended classes over the years when life circumstances allowed – at four colleges and universities in three states – and am finally finishing up a bachelor's degree at Rhode Island College, where I did the bulk of the work. But when I think about the forks in the road I didn't take at a younger age, the whole college experience looms large. The lack of a degree has always been a black hole on my resume, limiting me professionally, making me feel unequal personally to many of my peers and friends. So I lived a little vicariously through my daughter when she *did* have "the whole college experience."

When I started, I was only a bit older than the other students, but as the years stretched into decades, I gradually became so much older than my classmates that one day I finally realized I could be a mother to most of them. I had to get over it to go on.

Hannah lived on-campus at a small, liberal-arts school in New England, a beautiful campus with sloping hills and stately brick and graceful spires. She lived in the dorms and made new friends and did all the college things I never did. I can always summon the bittersweet feeling that washed over me when we'd visit her there.

I remember one night in particular, when Tom and I attended a performance of her gospel choir. It was a spring Saturday evening, maybe her junior year, and we made our way across the campus's lamplit walkways. Snatches of music and laughter floated out from dorm-room windows; groups of students walked here and there, many going to the chapel like we were, to see the concert. I imagined myself one of them, living in this insular little world, this tree-lined, self-sustaining universe of classrooms and dorms and parties laced with the heady thrill of living

... and would it be too much to say a silvery crescent moon was peeking through the trees?

away from home, where your biggest job was to learn and grow and test your limits, where college roommates might become lifelong friends, where the possibility of romance (or something like it) was always just around the corner.

I'm romanticizing, of course; I know those years presented some challenges and difficult times for Hannah. But seeing that world up close was, for me, a taste of the sort-of-magical interlude that I hope the college years were for her, and a reminder of what I rejected after high school, only to spend decades making up for it. Hannah pointed out, when I told her I was including this sentiment in my essay, to imagine if I'd chosen college over ballet: wouldn't I then lament *that* choice, and forever regret not giving ballet a chance?

And the reality is never like the fantasy. My own version of the living-away-from-home experience was fraught with loneliness and self-doubt. It was probably no different for Hannah at various points along the way.

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Hannah has said she wants to have a big family, a lively household. I understand. It's something I wanted, too, having grown up in a quiet home with just my brother and mom and dad. But I waited a long time to have a child, and then had only one, mainly because of the ages of myself and my husband. Her life has seemed more clearly charted than my own ever did, largely through circumstances not of her making. She grew up in a community – our small Rhode Island town – where it was assumed that you would go on to college, and probably graduate school. Unlike my parents, who didn't push me one way or another, leaving the choice up to me, Tom and I steered Hannah pretty firmly down the higher-education

But then, does anyone's life really turn out like they imagined it would? Where was my big old drafty house (with fireplace), noisy with three children running in and out with their friends, the living room alive with music-making every night after dinner, my husband and me slow-dancing to Van Morrison's "Tupelo Honey" long after the kids were in bed? Did some other woman live my life?

path, and she did go on to get her master's degree. I will admit to a sliver of disappointment, back when we were visiting prospective college campuses, that she didn't choose to stay in the arts and exploit her comedic skills, her singing talent. But I think she's got a more practical head on her shoulders – it's hard to make a living in the arts. And, more importantly, a child's got to follow her own path, and live for herself, not for her parents.

I used to fantasize that, rather than college, she would go off to Second City in Chicago, the ultimate comedy training ground, the feeder into shows like Saturday Night Live. We talked about it, and I think she considered it, but not in a serious way. It was a fun fantasy, though.

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When Hannah was around age sixteen and did not yet have her full-fledged driver's license, I still got called upon for driving duty when she and her friends needed a ride to a rehearsal or a social event. But it was different from the earlier years, when I would silently observe how Hannah was more "herself" with some girls than with others, or how some got her jokes and others didn't. They were older now, closer to adulthood than girlhood. The braces were gone, the nervous giggles replaced with substantive conversation. I was more visible to them, a real person. And we talked. I asked them about their futures, what they hoped for themselves, where they were applying to college. We talked about relationships. We talked about periods and what to take for migraines. We talked like women talking. Looking back, I realize I watched my daughter and her friends grow up in my rearview mirror.

... but these girls weren't my women friends – their mothers were. They were my daughter's friends, my daughter's age. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that.

Hannah and I had a similar evolution in our own relationship, especially as she neared the end of her college years. As she became more adult, I had to "recalibrate" again, and see *her* in a different light, as I did

with my mother. Her growing maturity made me feel more open to sharing, more open to being just "women talking." I tentatively waded into certain subjects, like dipping a toe in the water before diving in: my feelings about my marriage, my past and things I'd always been afraid she might "disapprove" of or, worse, emulate (*yes, I smoked pot, a lot of it; yes, I've had many relationships*). The more receptive she seemed, the more I opened up, wanting her to know her mother as a person, not just as a parent. It seemed important to her, so it became important to me.

It's fascinating to watch your daughter become a woman. A part of me still saw the girl she had been – and how could I not? It's not like that little girl just disappears. Ever.

Of course we'd had meaningful conversations before, about friendship troubles, self-image, goals and ambitions – typical issues in middle- and high-school, especially for girls. But even while she was in college, I still felt that mom-ish persona, still got in the car with Tom and drove to campus to watch her in various performances or to attend a family event. It still had that "going to see my kid in a recital" kind of feel to it. Once she hit graduate school, it melded into something more adult. Hannah is a good listener, as she tells me I am, and we have helped each other navigate through some difficult emotional terrain. I have cried in front of her, confided in her, shown her my raw emotions. She has called me out on my irritability towards her father, and rightly so. She's a grown woman now, and I have no shame in admitting that I sometimes look to *her* for advice and wisdom.

Hannah had her own age difference to contend with – the one between her father and other fathers. Tom was in his mid-fifties when Hannah was born. People sometimes mistook him for her grandfather. "No," she would say, "that's my dad." It started to bother her a little in high-school, I think, when the difference in age between her dad and her friends' dads became more apparent.

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Hannah and her partner, an East Coast native, left Rhode Island for California a couple of years ago so he could begin his residency in emergency medicine at a large Los Angeles hospital. They were both happy to move to a warmer climate, and have no desire to return to staid New England. She texts me photos of the Cal-Tech campus near their apartment where she takes walks, palm trees towering skinny and tall over splashing fountains and arched entryways, the whole scene sun-washed and blue-skied and you can feel the arid warmth even through the screen. I wouldn't want to come back either.

"... so old and cold and settled in its ways here," to borrow a phrase from Joni.

These days, she rarely strokes her chin with the Godfather voice anymore, or chirps like Chipmunk or pontificates in Penelope's strident tone. Those personas came out mainly for me - the lucky sole audience member – and she has moved on, leaving them behind, relics of another era. She's a couple of years from thirty now. I don't get called Mina much anymore, though often I still get a "Momma." She has become a talented cook, and posts photos of healthy, visually gorgeous meals on her Instagram devoted to food and recipes. She tells me she's happy living with her partner, a lovely, gentle man, and looks forward to having her own family in the next handful of years.

I suspect Hannah was relieved to truly get away, not just to college or grad school in a neighboring state, but away from us, away from home, away from the strained quality of her parents' marriage. That cannot have

... and away from her younger self – isn't that what we're escaping when we leave home? The younger version of ourselves? Like a snake shedding its skin?

been easy to live with all these years, and she recently made it known to me that, in fact, it was not. That triangle, the sturdiest of forms? Feels a little looser lately, the sides melting away like in a Salvador Dali painting.

But there are moments, I swear, when I can see through my grown-up daughter to the little tow-headed girl inside, and all the troubles of life fall away, and she's two years old again and reaching out her pudgy arms for me to scoop her up and settle her on my hip. *Momma, pick me up!*

Wavelength

I stand at the brink of the crashing waves on the town beach of the Rhode Island community where I lived for eighteen years before moving to Providence. Or, not crashing, no. *Lapping* waves, the gently lapping waves, the expanse of water unbroken by land, horizonless … or no, in truth, the waterscape is encumbered by spits of land, and peninsulas and points, and the towns across the bay. The expanse of water encumbered, encroached upon, thwarted (the way I feel while taking it in). New England is that water: surrounded – *contained* – by tradition, local customs, generations of close-knit family, people who are "from around here." Closed-in, safe, unchanging, that landscape. Outsiders are vetted, must pass some unspoken approval, and even then, if you're not from around here, you'll never *be* "from around here."

Every Rhode Island shore I have stood on has an abundance of land within sight, water hugged by the earth, always something grounding it, stopping it, confining it. My mind and heart do not soar when I look at that landlocked scenery, the circumscribed screenshot from, say, Newport, or Westerly, or Barrington. Is there beauty in it? Yes. Grassy parks abutting the water; craggy boulders jutting out into the deep blue Atlantic; sailboats' white masts tilting in the breeze. But, there's an ethos of restraint, of local control, the opposite of wildness – *not freedom*. How can I explain it better?

Not so, the Pacific Coast. At Ocean Beach, where San Francisco meets its western end, I stand before the crashing – yes, crashing – waves, mesmerized by a horizonless, unbroken seascape, maybe a freighter gliding by in the far, far distance on its way to Japan, the sun sinking into the ends of the earth. Open, wide open, like the people there who come from all over, who did not grow up together, who let in the light of other places, other cultures, other ways of doing things ("that's not the way we do it here" is something I've often heard in New England – but

then, small towns in rural California or Washington state or Oregon can be just as provincial, just as resistant to change, I know). When I stare out at the unending Pacific Ocean – and is that the curvature of the earth I see? – the word "infinity" comes to mind. Freedom to go on forever, to be anything, to do anything, to take off and fly if I want to.

And the wildness. The Pacific swells pound the shoreline, fling themselves with abandon against the cliffs and the salt-smoothed boulders, where seals sun and seagulls caw and hover high above the whitecaps, scouting their next meal. *There's a feeling I get when I look to the west / And my spirit is crying for leaving*, Robert Plant sings plaintively in "Stairway to Heaven," and the very water is wild, unafraid, willing. How many afternoons have I sat on the sand at Baker Beach, nearly in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge, my eyes shielded from the sparkle of midday sun on water, watching the waves form and roll and crest – high now – and tumble towards me, then flatten and pull back as though suddenly shy, only to start all over again? And over and over and over, and I could watch forever.

But no, I am here, in New England. I am older now, so maybe this more sedate shoreline suits me better. How high can one fly, after all, at a certain age? How wild can I get, how far into infinity can I go, when the horizon of my life is certainly, by now, coming into clearer focus? Maybe I should take comfort in the loving arms of those peninsulas, the reassuring spits of solid land – the *groundedness* – encircling whatever unfathomable mystery underlies the cold Atlantic waters. Learn to accept, without scoffing, waves that are smaller and less impressive than their west coast counterparts ("You call those *waves*?" I used to joke when I first moved here, not believing that surfers got excited about two-footers that barely raised them above the sunbathers on the beach). Maybe there is a different kind of wildness in the protected shorelines and coves and bays of the New England coast, a safer adventure, one from which I am more

likely to return intact. Maybe that's my new normal, my downsized fate, my older side of young.

Or, maybe not.