

## THERE

by Cynthia Sohl Katz

It's November and the sky is everything Michelle remembers about New England in November. It's gray. Gray sky broken up by grayer branches which, praise God, still have a few—a very few—colorful leaves clinging to them. Not like January, February, March. She remembers how March in particular was grim, when there'd been no new colors for months—just dirty white ground and bare branches, save for the beeches and oaks which still clung to a few quivering, dry leaves. She would point the hangers-on out to the kids on tedious winter drives to basketball games, indoor tennis, shopping. “Kids, see how some trees haven't dropped all their leaves?”

“Oaks and beeches, we know,” one of them might have said, not in a particularly rude manner, but in a bored way, echoing her own feelings about the landscape.

Once Nick said, “Marcescence.” She can still hear his voice coming from the back seat behind her.

“Mar-what?”

“Marcescence. M-A-R-C-E-S-C-E-N-C-E. Marcescence: When trees hold onto their dead leaves.”

“Really?” she'd said. “That's interesting. I never heard that word before.”

“Nerd,” said Bim.

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Michelle walks into the bookstore/cafe where she's been told to go. How strange in all of Boston this should be where they've sent her. “May I have that table by the window?” she asks the hostess. It's 10:45, there are a number of empty tables. The full ones seat ladies in yoga clothes. She finds it interesting that everyone goes everywhere in yoga clothes nowadays.

She hangs her coat on her chair, sits up straight, and takes a deep breath. She relaxes her shoulders and forces a slight smile as she exhales. Her hands rest in her lap, one cupped in

the other. Then she turns her head and stares across at the trees lining the other side of the street. Their crowns are symmetrical ovals. Lindens, she guesses. Boston does so well with its trees, she muses, and shuts her eyes. "I'm grateful for trees," she says to herself. Gratitude, it's supposed to be healing.

When she opens her eyes, a yellow leaf gracefully flits down in front of the window. Back, forth, back, forth, then lands on the sidewalk against a parking meter. It's like he's encouraging her from beyond—*good job being mindful, Mom*. Michelle begins to sob. Ugh! Not again. She turns her chair toward the window so no one in the restaurant will see her face. She doesn't want to be crying when Elly arrives. She inhales and holds her breath then lets it out slowly. Again. And again. She takes a napkin and wipes under the lower lid of each eye. No mascara comes off. She hasn't worn it since she got the news about Nick. She puts the smile back on and turns her chair toward the table. She opens the menu and is studying it when her daughter walks in.

Elly pulls off her coat, sweeping the room with her eyes. She's dressed for work in an off-white dress. The material is thick, man-made, not clingy—the opposite of clingy, like it might stand up by itself when removed. Space-agey, Michelle thinks, but doesn't comment in case that isn't a compliment.

"This is a cool place. Have you been here long?" her daughter asks.

"Just sat down. It is nice! I wonder how they picked it."

"It was the only restaurant that would sell them a gift certificate over the phone and hold it at the counter."

"Well it's perfect," says Michelle. "We can definitely get something healthy here. I've got to start bingeing on vegetables—I can barely button my pants. I know it's not lunch yet, but I hope they'll make me this dish called "The Bowl." It's got every vegetable on the planet—even asparagus. I wonder where that's from this time of year."

"I'm sure they'll let you have anything you want when we tell them it's your birthday."

“Please don’t. Let’s just pretend it’s not.”

“Fine with me,” Elly says. She examines her menu. When she raises her head, Michelle thinks her child looks beautiful—her hair, her make-up. Motherhood obviously agrees with her; nursing has taken all the fat right off and her eyes are as blue as ever. Michelle has never stopped being amazed by their clarity. All her kids got their father’s clear blue eyes. “What’s wrong?” asks Elly suspiciously. “You’re staring.”

“Nothing! I was thinking how nice you look! That dress is very flattering. You look great! Honest!”

Elly squints at her skeptically.

“How was your meeting?” asks Michelle, thinking it sounds supportive.

“It went okay. I have a lot to learn. Mostly I’m just listening right now. And everyone is being so careful around me—not asking me to do anything. Did I tell you the CEO came up and hugged me and told me to take all the time I need? Said having his employees take care of themselves was more important than having them rush back to work. AND he apologized for not being at Nick’s funeral! Said he had to go to his son’s birthday party.”

“I’m so glad he didn’t come! What would we have done with him? But I’m glad they like you so much there. See what you get for being nice?”

“Ha! I hope I’m as nice as they are.”

“Of course you are. You’ve always been nice. And Quinny is nice too. I can already see it. She’s just like you. Did you tell daycare I’m picking her up?”

“Yup! Just remember to bring some identification.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll remember.”

When their meals come the women lose themselves for a while in eating. Michelle’s dish is an oversized white ceramic bowl with mixed grains at the bottom, a layer of roasted vegetables, a layer of raw, shredded ones, then three roasted asparagus laid across the top.

The sauce is Asian with something fruity in it. She wishes the menu was still on the table so she could re-read the description. "This is delicious," she says finally to her daughter.

"No kidding!" says Elly cutting into more of her eggs benedict. Michelle knows the reason her daughter can eat that and not get fat again is because she's still nursing. She decides it would be annoying to mention it, so she doesn't.

"You want to hear something weird?" she says instead.

"Good weird or sad weird? Let's try not to be sad, I have to go to another meeting and I can't redo my make-up."

"It's not sad. I don't think it's sad. It is a little woo woo."

"Okay then, let's hear it."

"I've been here before."

"Really? When?"

"Two summers ago. With Nick."

"What? No way. Why would you have been here, I didn't even live in Boston then."

"I know! But he wanted to take me to the MFA for a late Mother's Day present, and we got lost, and we ended up parking on this street to look at the map, and then we decided to come in here to look at books, and then all the food looked good so we decided to eat. And we sat at this table."

"You're making that up."

"I'm not! And I bought a book for him, "Peace is Every Step" by Thich Nhat Hanh.

"Who?"

"A Vietnamese monk. He's sort of like the Dalai Lama. He's still alive. It's a book about meditation and stuff. I read it once, a long time ago, and when I saw it in here I decided to get it for Nick. He liked it too. Anyway, when I walked in today I asked to sit at this table and then I remembered one of the breathing exercises in that book—you calm your body as you breathe in and smile as you breathe out. So I was doing that just before you came, and right at that

moment this pretty, yellow leaf came floating down. It just sallied back and forth and landed by that parking meter. It's still there."

Elly stands up a little in her chair so she can see the sidewalk. "There are a lot of leaves by the parking meter."

"I know, but I know exactly which one it is."

"You're right, that is a little woo woo, but it's sweet."

"That's what I thought. I've been hoping to feel him. That was the first time. It's taken him ten days."

"Okay, can we change the subject? Now you're making me sad."

The waiter comes to the table to ask if they want dessert. "Of course," Michelle tells him. "Today's my birthday. I'm sixty."

"Well happy birthday!" says the waiter. "You don't look sixty."

"That's nice to hear. I feel like I'm a hundred."

He leaves menus. Elly says, "I thought you wanted to pretend it wasn't your birthday."

"I did. But now I don't. Do you know my mother died when she was sixty?"

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry. That must feel weird."

"It does. And here's the weirdest part—I've done everything I can to stay healthy because I always thought if I didn't, I might die at sixty also. Like maybe I have a genetic predisposition for her type of cancer. So I was always careful to eat right and get plenty of exercise. And the closer I got to sixty the surer I was that I had it knocked, that I'd have a normal lifespan. But now I realize that, being a mother, it's not just my health that affects me. I wasn't taking into account your health, your brothers'. All of a sudden I feel like a feather could kill me."

Elly raises her eyebrows and tilts her head. "That's not supposed to be sad?"

"Right. Sorry. I didn't know where that thought was going until it just came out."

"There's chocolate mousse pie on the menu. Want to split a piece?"

"Perfect."

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At 2:00 Michelle has had enough of the weird mix of on-line birthday greetings and condolence messages. She can't make herself write a single thank you note for all the flower arrangements and casseroles. She feels guilty, but she decides to pick up her granddaughter instead.

As she pushes the stroller home across the Christian Science Plaza, the wind is a terror, but Quinny is protected by the canopy and she faces her grandma. "How was your day, darling? Did all the children play nice? Would you like to hold a leaf? Here's a pretty one." A dark red sycamore leaf is skittering across the cement. Michelle picks it up and twirls it by rolling the stem between her fingers. She gives it to the toddler. "Don't eat it please," she instructs. Quinny waves the leaf up and down in front of her face.

"Your Uncle Nick would like that leaf. He loved falling leaves. He always tried to catch them as they fell. Sometimes he did! He was very fast. And graceful. And coordinated. And he was very smart. Just like you." Michelle knows it's good for children to be talked to. To hear the sounds of many words, the patterns of sentences. Quinny studies the leaf. "That's a leaf. It grew on a tree. A sycamore tree! Sycamore trees are beautiful. The bark on them looks like puzzle pieces. Some day you and I will do puzzles. Uncle Nick liked to do them. He could sit in one place for a very long time. Even when he was a little, little boy. He had very good concentration." She talks like this all the way back to the apartment. She feels the happiest she's felt all day and takes Quinny out of the stroller and lets her push it by its storage compartment (she's too small to reach the handlebar) down the hall of the sixth floor. Progress is slow—the little girl has only been walking for a few months. Michelle is happy to go slow. There is nothing that needs to be done. Nothing. Well, except thank you notes. Almost nothing.

Inside the apartment she turns on the R&B station. She picks Quinny up and dances, her socks sliding easily on the parquet floor. Quinny laughs and puts her head back and

watches the ceiling as her grandma twirls and rocks her. Then Michelle cuts an apple into small pieces, and they read some books.

At 3:30 Michelle can't believe she already needs to turn the lights on in the apartment. And still it feels dark. A feeling, long forgotten, comes over her. It's like she might suffocate from lack of light. It's a panicky sensation and brings her back to a time when her own children were toddlers and babies. It'll be another two-and-a-half or three hours before her daughter and son-in-law will be home. "Quinny!" she says quickly. "We're heading out!"

The little girl is not at all interested in getting bundled back up, much less in getting in her stroller. She screams and arches her back as Michelle tries to make her sit. "Please sweetie, you'll like it, I promise, just sit for a minute. I'll let you out in one minute." But it's at least five minutes before the elevator comes and lowers them to the lobby. The doorman raises his eyebrows at the ruckus. Quinny is red in the face and wailing. Michelle just smiles. "We're going out to get some air," she says calmly.

Back on the plaza, the windy, concrete plaza, Michelle lifts Quinny from the stroller. It's like she flicks a switch. The girl is instantly calm. "See? I told you you'd be happy. Let's just stay out here for as long as we can." Michelle has on her son-in-law's down jacket, gloves and a scarf. She pulls Quinny's hat down so it covers her ears. "Run around! Go nuts!" A vaguely handsome man wearing a black wool overcoat and earmuffs looks at them and waves his fingers at Quinny. She waves back and smiles. She toddles in one direction after a pigeon, stops when it flies off, turns and goes to the left, stops, toddles to the right. It's random, but she's happy and Michelle relaxes watching her. She thinks it's a good sign when the child waves again at the man and he waves back. A good sign that she's social, like her mother.

Nick was not a sociable baby. Not a cryer but not a smiler either. A great self-soother and sleeper. Found his thumb fast and stuck with it. He was also the only one of the three children to stop nursing on his own at six months. In the grocery store, he was a bit of an embarrassment when people would coo and speak to him in babytalk. Whereas Elly and Bim

would've babbled back, smiled and laughed, Nick just stared people down like they were jerks for trying. "I'm sorry," Michelle would say, "he's just not into strangers." She found herself talking to him more seriously than the other children. He ate pesto with her when he was ten months old while the other two had peanut butter and jelly. When the older two were off at school and she did housework, Nick liked to play Candyland alone or practice being blind outside in the yard. He was content, always, on his own.

Once he could read, he decided to read the bible. They weren't a particularly religious family and they didn't know where he got the idea. But each night she would get in bed next to him and listen as he read the words he didn't understand. "These are the sons of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter, and these she bare unto Jacob, even sixteen souls. These are the sons of Rachel, which were born to Jacob: all the souls were fourteen. These are the sons of Bilhah..." If she fell asleep, he didn't care. He only depended on her to protect him to do his own thing. He wasn't demanding. He didn't whine or throw tantrums, he just silently trusted her to care for him while he entertained himself.

And did she mistake this for independence as he got older? Interpret his lack of interaction as a lack of need for her presence? A dismissal even? Is that how she could move away and leave him on his own? In New England? Darkening afternoons day after day with no one to shove him outside or make him some healthy food. Light, vegetables, meditation—he knew those things helped. But Nick couldn't always help himself.

Following a few yards behind her granddaughter as Quinny pushed the stroller backwards across the plaza, Michelle smiled and nodded as people stepped out of the way. She thought back thirty years to before Nick's birth, to another fall, right around Halloween. Elly was two-and-a-half. Bim, nine months. Babies really. Very adorable babies dressed for Halloween in costumes she'd made. Elly was a gypsy and Bim a clown. She'd cut up her sheets from college—ones with big blue, five-petaled daisies like the ones people stuck on their VW vans—to make the clown suit. She felt like a genius when she installed snaps up the legs so she



could change Bim's diaper. Elly's costume was easier—long colorful skirt, white blouse, mardi-gras beads and a piece of lavender cotton tied around her head for a scarf. The shade of lavender showed off Elly's blue eyes in a way that took Michelle's breath away.

That Halloween was warm for New Hampshire, so the playgroup moms had marched the kids around the village in their costumes. Adorable. But by 11:00 a.m. she was already back home, the show over. She set the kids up on the couch and snapped a few photos. She still had them—Elly with her arm around Bim so he didn't tip over, both of them smiling with their tiny white teeth showing. The rest of the day stretched ahead. She hated the short days. It made her anxious knowing that in just five hours it would be dark again. She was in her new house, with a glimpse of mountains out the west-facing windows. She thought she should feel elated.

That house was what she'd wanted, but she felt so, so...what? Claustrophobic somehow. Not while the sun was out, but by afternoon—by 3:30—the sense of suffocation would start. She wanted to tear down the walls, blow the roof off. Was it the house? She had fought so hard to convince her husband that they should buy it, no way could she be wrong now. And it was cute, a cottage among large estates on the prettiest road in town. She was convinced it was a good investment—the view, the neighborhood, the school—how could it not be? It was only her mother who was negative. "You're going to be lonely," she'd said. "Why not live in town, in a neighborhood where you can walk to the store, to the playground." But Michelle was envisioning herself with a big dog and maybe even chickens. She was certain she wanted to raise her kids in the country.

In those days, her husband cooked dinner for the two of them every night. It relaxed him when he came home from work. She wished he'd get home earlier though. By the time he'd arrive, she'd been in a dark house alone with the kids for hours. And she'd already fed them. Bim was asleep, Elly in her pajamas. But that day Michelle left the costume on Elly so she could show her Daddy. When they heard his car, Michelle re-tied the lavender kerchief around the little girl's head. As her father hung his coat by the door, Elly twirled in circles in the center of the

white linoleum kitchen. "Very cute," he said. He loosened his tie and pulled ice from the freezer.

"Did you have fun at your Halloween party?"

"I got an apple!" she said.

"Wow! An apple," he replied. "That's an innovative Halloween treat."

"I know!" she said.

He smiled at her feigned intelligence as he poured gin into two glasses and took tonic from the refrigerator. Michelle can see it all in her mind's eye even as she keeps her real eye on Quinny who is parting more oncoming walkers bundled against the wind.

"Give Daddy a kiss goodnight," she must have said. And Elly jumps up into her father's arms. Michelle can see them looking into each others blue eyes for a few seconds then kissing quickly on the lips. He sets the tiny girl down and she heads right for the stairs and her bedroom. Elly was a very easy child. Perfect really. Michelle grabs her drink from the counter and follows her daughter upstairs for story time feeling slightly disappointed that the costume didn't get a bigger response. But did she really expect it to? The first sips of gin and tonic always tasted like heaven and made her forget what was so upsetting about her afternoons. Back downstairs, she'd asked her husband if he minded her taking the kids to see her parents for a few days.

"That's a long drive alone with the kids," he might have said.

"I'll be fine. We'll stop once at McDonalds, they'll nap, we'll sing. They're good in the car. My mother will get a kick out of the costumes."

"Whatever's right is what I'm for." He said that a lot. She knew he'd be happy to have the house to himself. He wasn't that into babies, even his own. He always said that when the kids were older, he'd be more interested. And he was too. But by then they were divorced with shared custody.

The stroller runs into the side of the reflection pool which has been drained now and is just another long expanse of gray concrete which does in fact reflect the color of the sky. Quinny

shrieks in frustration and Michelle backs the contraption up and sets it back on a straight course.

She imagines her thirty-year-old self talking to her dad on the phone, him encouraging her to visit, yet worrying about her driving so far alone with the kids. He tells her her mother is already asleep for the night. "At eight o'clock? Really?" Michelle shakes her head as she remembers how naive she'd been about her mother's illness.

The next morning she re-dressed the kids in their costumes and, right after breakfast, loaded them in the car. She had a used Subaru stationwagon then, quite a comedown from the new Buick Regals she'd had as a company car until right before Bim was born when she'd quit the corporate world for good, much to her husband's dismay. The Subaru was dependable, but it was kind of noisy—not as well insulated as the Buick. She put lap blankets over the kids and tucked the edges into their car seats. She chose a cassette, and off they went singing about the wheels on the bus—they went round and round. She could see both kids' faces by turning her rear view mirror. They really were the best little travelers, they loved to hear her sing. She was in her element gliding toward New Jersey in her little tin can with her precious cargo. When they fell asleep she switched on the radio.

She and Quinny have walked to the far end of the plaza, so Michelle starts to steer the stroller gently to the left until they're heading back in the direction of the apartment. The wind is against them and Michelle pulls her scarf up over her mouth. Quinny's head is down and she seems oblivious to the breeze. She's watching her own feet. Step step step step.

Michelle can't recall exactly what the news on the radio said that day. But what she remembers clearly is that the story was breaking and on every station, and as soon as it would come on she couldn't get her fingers to the buttons fast enough to change it. A woman somewhere...was it in the south?... she isn't sure... all she remembers is that the woman pulled her car over to the side of the road, took out her two children, and threw them off a bridge into a river. Michelle couldn't bear to hear it. She wanted to listen to the radio—take advantage of the

kids being asleep to do something for herself—a little rock ‘n’ roll would make the trip go faster. But no, it couldn’t be; the news story seemed to be on every five minutes. She was relieved when Bim started crying, waking up Elly, so they could stop at McDonalds. Good grief, *how* could someone do such a thing? It made her sick to her stomach.

At sixty Michelle can’t quite reproduce the raw, unhoneed protective instincts of her late twenties, but she’s been seeing them in Elly, has listened to her crazy instructions about never taking Quinny across the street without her being in the stroller. Quinny has never slept with a blanket over her, and she still hasn’t eaten a strawberry or anything that might contain a trace of peanut. Elly never drinks before she nurses. Well, that’s probably smart, but the rest of it seems extreme. Michelle remembers that her own mother thought she was extreme for nursing at all—and for bearing all the pain of labor. Her mother had her three children while she was *unconscious*. Times change, beliefs change, yet they’d all survived—well, survived into adulthood anyway.

When they got to her parents’ street, she parked a few houses away, quickly brushed her hair, applied lipstick and got out. She dabbed a dot of lipstick on each of Elly’s cheeks, rubbed it in a gently, and smiled as Elly puckered her tiny lips to receive some more. She tied the lavender cloth around her tiny head. “You look beautiful! What are you going to say?”

“Trick-a-treat.”

“Right! Good job, Elly!”

Bim woke with a start as she unbuckled him from his baby seat, but was easily soothed. She slid his clown hat over his white-blond hair. It was warm enough to leave their coats off, at least for a few minutes, and they walked up her parents’ drive and rang the front doorbell. Her father answered the door. She hid so that only Elly stood there looking up to him. “Trick-a-treat!” she exclaimed.

It took her dad a second, but there was such joy in his voice when he answered. “Who do we have here? I think it’s a gypsy!”

“Nooooo.... it’s me,” Elly replied.

They laughed and Michelle could hear her mother calling, “Bring them in, bring them in, Harry, I can’t wait to see!” She clapped as they entered the room and Elly ran right to her even though she was in a wheelchair. Michelle tried to act as nonplussed by the presence of the contraption. She knew the cancer had spread to her mother’s bones, but she hadn’t known what to expect. Her mother’s body seemed to be collapsing in on itself.

Michelle broke down as she went out to bring the car into the driveway and fetch their bags. She went directly to the bathroom when she returned and tried to fix her eyes. When she came into the living room, Bim was on her mother’s lap and her father was bouncing Elly on his knees. “Trot trot to Boston, trot trot to Lynn, careful when you get there you don’t fall in!” The little girl laughed and laughed when he opened his legs at the word “fall” and she felt herself drop and then be caught the instant before she hit the floor.

“How was the drive?” her father asked. “You made good time.”

“The drive was easy, but oh my God, have you listened to the news? A woman threw her two children off a bridge! It’s so awful, I couldn’t turn the radio off fast enough. I hope they throw her in the river!”

“Don’t say that,” said her mother. “When you hear a story like that you say, ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’”

Her mother died two months later, but Michelle never forgot what she said about the woman on the bridge and sometimes she thought back on her childhood and wondered if her own safety had ever been in question. She doubted it; she’d always felt loved. She also remembered her mother’s comment when she lost patience with her own children, but she never felt close to hurting any of them—well maybe she wanted to smack Bim a few times when he was a teenager, but only to make him stop and think, not to hurt him.

What she never thought about until now was how she didn't have to be there for one of her children to be thrown off a bridge. He could do that all by himself. She was supposed to be there to stop him.

When they get back to where they started, Quinny is tired and happy to be put back in the stroller. Michelle lets the wind dry her eyes as she buckles the straps over her granddaughter's thick coat. She hands her another leaf, and says, "This is an oak leaf. They don't all fall, but this one did."