

Going Home

I'm lying in a hammock under a rustling tropical tree, staring at my heat-swollen feet, and absently checking for phone messages. I see that yesterday I missed a text from my childhood friend Dana. The message is both simple and charged with meaning: "Mom passed away. Can you come?"

Of course, I can. No matter where I am, no matter what, I have to be there—for Dana. And because Dana's Mom is my Mom, too, in ways for which I'll forever be grateful.

I head out on the grounds of the old health clinic where our team is staying, looking for David, our leader on this two-week mission trip. I find him playing soccer with a bunch of village kids and explain that I have to leave. One of the other nurses, of which there are six, will take over my role as unofficial pharmacist for our medical aid group, which has been providing rural health care in southern Honduras. I throw my sweat-stained scrubs into a spare duffel, make sure I have my passport and wallet, borrow some extra lempiras from David, and catch a long, expensive cab ride into Tegucigalpa.

I'm sitting in an airport cafeteria having my last meal in Central America, and the television is tuned to the news, which is broadcasting, simultaneously, images of the inauguration of Donald Trump and the Women's March in DC. It's a strange day, full of heartbreak, dislocation, and disbelief. But all I can think of is Home.

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I use my frequent flyer miles to buy a one-way ticket to Cincinnati. And then, I text Dana to let her know that I'm so sorry. And that I'm coming. Finally, I close my eyes and let my weariness take over as the 747 taxis down the runway and lifts into the heavy tropical air.

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A mere seven hours later, after changing planes in Houston, we land in Ohio, my birth state. I don't like coming back here, and I don't want to be here now. But Dana, my forever friend, is counting on me, and there is no way I am going to let her down. Growing up, she was the friend who held my hair as I threw up from drinking too much, the friend who drove my car home when I was too upset because my boyfriend dumped me on my birthday. And, of course, there were occasions when our roles were reversed, upon her pregnancy scare, and after the piano teacher's creepy husband felt her up when he drove her home from baby-sitting. More sister than friend, Dana is someone I often don't speak to for months, and when I do, nothing has changed. There is only the certainty that we get each other deep in our bone marrow. Her auburn hair, pale skin, and galaxy of freckles are as familiar to me as breathing. And I don't think that will ever change.

I pick up my rental car, throw in my duffel, and hit the frontage road that leads to the highway, and then to the series of turns that will lead me from a bustling city, to increasingly smaller towns, and finally, to Home, Ohio. A strange name for a city, perhaps named by a wistful pioneer.

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I drive up to the farmhouse Dana bought with her third husband, Tom, a simple red-headed man who loves her deeply. Not like the first one, who was a handsome, manipulative asshole—or the second one, a shy, blonde child who never grew into the man she deserved.

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I step out of the car into the familiar mid-western humidity. She opens the door, stands on the stoop as I grab my duffel and approach the stairs. I drop the bag and we move into each other's arms.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else," I reply.

We open up a bottle of white zinfandel and sit for a couple of hours. It's four o'clock somewhere, and wine is definitely called for as we fill each other in on recent events. Tom is at work. Bizzy, their young boxer is, finally, quiet in her kennel. Nothing interrupts our slow, easy conversation but the tick of the antique clock on the mantel—a sound that takes me back four decades.

After the catch up, we can't help telling stories. Dana's Mom, Elsa, helping us play dress-up, or teaching us to sing, play the piano, and make a flaky crust. She supported our efforts to practice our pie-making skills until everyone in the neighborhood had been gifted one and her pantry was bare.

Elsa's Mother was originally from Oklahoma, and in response to life's little curveballs, Elsa taught us all the silly southern cuss words, like "fiddlesticks," "dagnabit," and "fudge." Elsa was a huge presence in her daughter's life, and I can't imagine how much Dana misses her.

But Elsa was also the neighborhood Mom. All the scruffy little boys were in love with her and all the little girls wanted to be her. So many times, she rescued me: when I fell out of the apple tree and got the wind knocked out of me, when I was an overwhelmed teenager feeling unloved

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and sorry for myself, when I came home from college and began dating an older guy who wasn't good for me, when my own mother was in the hospital, and finally, when she died. Elsa's kind words and Dana's steady presence were my only sources of comfort on that gray, November day.

But we aren't the only ones with memories, or the only ones who feel Elsa's loss. There are Dana's younger brothers, her older brother, Sam, and our third musketeer, Charles Frances.

"I haven't talked to him yet," Dana says. "But he'll have heard the news."

Dana pulls out a photo album. A few pages in, we find a single black and white photo of the three of us, Dana, Charles Frances, and me, sitting on the low wall in front of Dana's parents newly built ranch house. There are two spindly apple trees, newly planted, then, and long gone, now. Charles Frances has scabs on his knees, and both Dana and I have those awkward, too-big, front teeth, just grown in. I remember Dana's Dad Jim snapping the photo, after Elsa made us sandwiches for lunch: Jiff peanut butter and marshmallow fluff on white bread, washed down with strawberry Kool-Aid. What didn't kill us made us stronger.

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Everyone files into the church, which smells exactly as I remember: clean, polished oak, faintly musty in the way of any 100-year-old church in a river town in southwestern Ohio, and now, faintly floral with the carnation-heavy vases on display. I stop and touch Dana's arm.

"Who's the tall dude in the bomber jacket?"

She laughs, and says, "Come on, don't you recognize him? That's Charles Frances."

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I blush and laugh, “My God, he’s turned into a stud. What happened to the skinny, geeky kid?”

Dana nods, agreeingly. “Yeah, he turned out to be pretty easy on the eyes. Who would’ve guessed?”

As with Dana, there is a palpable thread of energy linking me to Charles Frances. Without hesitation, I follow it up the aisle and catch him just as he’s about to sit down.

“Hey, Annie! It’s so good to see you!” he says, pulling me into a bear hug. It is as if no time has elapsed—as if we haven’t been living thousands of miles apart for four decades, and instead, have been passing our time fashioning tiny boats out of Juicy-Fruit wrappers and sailing them down the ditch that used to run along Walnut Street. Or playing our version of “Gilligan’s Isle.” I was always Ginger, and Dana was always MaryAnn. Charles Frances preferred to be the Captain, but, being a good sport, would play any role in a pinch. The three of us together again seems remarkable, even under these circumstances. And I can feel an inappropriate little nugget of joy glowing inside my grief.

“Come sit with us,” I invite.

Charles Frances follows me up the aisle, but I am pulled aside by Dana’s older brother Sam, and Charles Frances ducks in to sit beside Dana. After giving Sam a quick hug and offering my condolences, I slide in after Charles Frances.

Soon, the pastor begins the service. After opening remarks, he tells us that we’ll be listening to some recordings of Elsa, who was blessed with the voice of an angel, with Jim accompanying her on piano. The same piano that still sits in the living room of their small house up in the

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heights, where Dana and I took turns playing chop-sticks louder and louder until Elsa came and covered the keys and kicked us outside.

He pauses and clears his throat, and then says softly, “Soon, she’ll be adding her voice to the choir of angels in Heaven,” which is exactly the right thing to say. We all get it—as anyone who heard her voice would. And then he continues, “we’ll begin with Elsa singing her favorite hymn, ‘Ave Maria.’”

I glance first at Tom, who is staring straight ahead, bleary-eyed from driving up from Kentucky, and then at Charles Frances, who is staring blankly at the program in his lap. I whisper into his ear that I need to sit next to Dana, and then I awkwardly squeeze past him in the narrow space and nudge him to trade places with me. He is startled, but compliant. I’ll explain later.

I do this because I know that the second Dana hears her mother’s soaring soprano, she is going to lose it, and I need to be there when she does. As I settle into my seat, nerves revved up, I can’t help but wonder why Dana’s daughter, A.J., isn’t with her Mom, but sitting stiffly fifty feet away. But there isn’t time to worry, as the opening strains of Ave Maria drift into the church, and the eyes of three hundred and fifty people well up with tears. Dana breaks into sobs, and her entire body, beside me, begins to shake—as if the past three weeks haven’t happened, and she is, only now, experiencing the shock of her mother’s death. I turn and wrap both arms around her, hug her hard, and whisper into her ear, “just breathe.”

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The ladies of the church have laid out a spread: stuffed shells, pigs in a blanket, a dozen salads, brownies, cheesecake, Jeni's ice cream, and of course, peanut butter and chocolate "buckeyes." I grab a plate and hit the buffet line, and just when I do, Sam slips stealthily up behind me.

"You're lookin' good, Annie." His deep voice can still raise the hairs on the back of my neck, in a good way.

"You're not too shabby, yourself!" I reply.

"Looks like I missed my chance with you, all those years ago."

"Really? Don't you think that Jim and Elsa would have had a fit if you'd tried to rob the cradle? They kept a pretty good eye on both of us."

He *is* looking good, in a dark suit, and with a hint of mischief in his rich, brown eyes. I always had a thing for Sam, and visa versa, but we never got past second base. He did, however, contribute heavily to my skill-set by teaching me how to French kiss. But there was that considerable age gap, which seemed enormous when I was seventeen and he was twenty-four—possibly pervy, even.

We catch up on our lives, and Sam threatens, for the third or fourth time, to come out and see me, but I know he never will. Sam has full custody of a developmentally disabled daughter—and he's not quite divorced from his second wife. He's stuck in Home, as so many people are.

Not that Home is a terrible place—it just hasn't improved at all in the past four decades. Far from it: the opioid epidemic followed on the heels of the housing crisis and near economic

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collapse, and it's hit nearly every family in the area in an up-close and personal way, including Dana's.

This area of Southwest Ohio has the second highest rate of opioid-related overdose deaths in the country. There seems to be an endless supply of meth, oxy (or hillbilly heroin), fentanyl (a hundred times more potent than morphine), and smack—black tar heroin.

Tom's son Nick, from his first marriage, is an alcoholic and heroin addict who has been in and out of jail for a decade. He's not a cute teenager any more—he's a grown-ass man nearing thirty. And now, he's involved with a woman who has three small children she can't take care of. So, of course, Nick gets her pregnant with a fourth.

It's a sore subject that I've heard an earful about in late-night phone calls—but during this difficult time, it's more than Dana needs to deal with. Nick is either laying low at the moment, or in jail. And there has been no mention of the pregnant girlfriend, but I hope, for the baby's sake, she's staying clean

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As things at the church begin to wind down, Charles Frances and I shyly exchange contact information and promise to keep in touch. Sam smiles devastatingly at me and repeats his vow to visit. I help the church ladies clean up and wait for signs that it's time to leave. Finally, Tom, Dana, and I make the drive back to their house in the surrounding hills, and Dana and Tom head upstairs to rest.

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I tidy up my room and then get online to book my return ticket for the next afternoon. A parade of images from our past lives, and from today's celebration of life for the woman who was a second mother to me flit through my mind. There was real love here, and I can feel its absence. But in my own family, it was a different story, one that made it impossible for me to stay past the night of my high school graduation. Now, I have the surreal feeling that I don't belong anywhere. Since leaving this place that didn't quite feel like home to me, have I ever found another place that has?

In the morning, Tom leaves for work, making the long drive back to Kentucky. After breakfast, Dana and I take the dog for a walk in the woods. It's spring in southwest Ohio: beautiful, moist, and fragrant, with a hint of rain in the air. The dogwoods are fading and the lilacs haven't quite come into bloom. We walk for a while in silence, stopping to let Bizzy sniff at things and read the news in the weeds that line the road.

After a while, I ask, "so...what's happening with Nick and the pregnant girlfriend?"

Dana rolls her eyes, "Those two can't seem to keep their hands off each other, and can't manage to use birth control. Ange can't even take care of the kids she already has! It is just so stupid of them to be bringing another baby into the world. Tom and I are both disgusted!"

"I'm so sorry you're having to deal with that, especially with everything else you've got going on."

Dana is the executor of her Mom's estate, and she has a demanding full-time job in the natural gas industry.

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“Yeah, it really sucks—especially when Tom’s away for weeks at a job site, which happens at least once a month. I have to lock the doors at night, and when I’m at work, because I don’t trust Nick not to come in here and steal from us. He’s done it before. He is just so damned addicted to that stuff, that I don’t think there’s any hope for him. And Ange? I’d like to think that eventually she’ll get herself straightened out and try to get custody of her kids again. But Nick is so immature and selfish—I don’t think he’ll ever get it together. And, honestly, it wears Tom out. I worry about him.

“It sounds like an awful situation. Well, hey, I know I’m far away, but I’m always happy to listen. You can call me, day or night. I mean it.”

“I know. And I will. Thanks for coming, Annie. You’re my best friend and always will be. And I couldn’t have gotten through this without you.”

We hug for a long time in the cool woods, breathing in the earthy scent, remembering all the springs before, of picking violets, playing hide-and-seek in the neighbor’s rhododendron nursery, and catching tadpoles, as we waited impatiently for summer and the swimming pool to open. It was always just the two of us, and Charles Frances.

The pervading feeling of this short visit is understandably one of loss. But I’m also feeling sad, and sorry, that I haven’t put much energy into these relationships—that I’ve distanced myself as if I *had* to in order to build a different kind of life. But now I see that it was always a choice. And that, very possibly, it was wrong to stay away, to keep what I perceived as a safe distance.

Later, I head down the highway, away from Home, wondering when I’ll come here again, wondering if it will ever change, wondering if it will ever feel like home to me.

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I fly back to Portland and resume my low-key existence: I'm divorced and childless, with a career I love, and a job that I can do anywhere. Although I'd love to have a dog, working twelve-hour shifts at the hospital, it wouldn't be fair. My life is such a contrast to Dana's that sometimes I feel both guilty and perplexed. I was the youngest of three children born to a single mother. We never had any money, and our house was chaotic, bordering on *Lord of the Flies*. In contrast, Dana had the perfect parents, the perfect nuclear family, with clear-cut rules and boundaries, and an abundance of love. But her life as an adult has been so hard, and mine, with the notable exception of my divorce a decade ago, has been relatively easy, and devoid of chaos—just the way I like it.

A month of calm drifts by during which Dana and I talk regularly, and I try to be supportive. She tells me she's working on healing her relationship with her daughter A.J., who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and it's going well. I tell her what I know about medication side-effects, and say that I'm encouraged that A.J. finally has an accurate diagnosis. Dana is coping with everything on her plate, and Tom is making more of an effort to stay in touch with her regularly.

And then, a couple of shitty things happen simultaneously.

Dana leaves a message asking me to call her. I have no idea what to expect, but the news she shares is devastating: her older brother Sam, the first man I ever kissed, has just been diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer. We talk until after midnight. As she describes the scene, I simply can't imagine Sam lying in a hospital bed—my mind won't go there. I can only picture him

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flirting with me at the church, threatening to visit me...someday. But, for Sam, someday is never going to come.

Tom rushes home from his job site in Kentucky to be with Dana, but before he can get there, disaster strikes again. Tom's son Nick and his girlfriend/baby-Mama Ange are both on parole for possession. They're also jobless, and would be homeless except for the generosity of Dana and Tom. Dana has been helping with the new baby, who she tells me repeatedly, is a "good baby." And Dana and Tom are carrying all of the expenses that come with an infant. It's been stressful, but as long as they stay clean and the baby is well cared for, it's been a pretty good deal for Nick and Ange.

Then, while Dana is at Sam's side in the ICU, helping her brother make the most-difficult decisions of his life, her phone rings. It's the police. Nick and Ange have been caught shop-lifting at Walmart, and they have the baby with them. On that late June morning, when the social worker arrives to take charge of the infant, a little girl named Serena, she finds wrapped up in the baby's blankets two syringes, a hefty foil package of smack, and all the tools of the trade used by serious heroin addicts.

As I'm digesting this news with shock, Dana tells me that she and Tom have taken custody of the baby. There is no one else. Nick and his Baby Mama are in prison and expected to remain there for a long time. Serena is six-weeks old, fortunately healthy, but needing constant care, as all infants do. But with Tom out of town so much, I know it will be Dana left holding the bag for all of it. It's too much: grieving her Mom, caring for her gravely ill brother and a newborn, and

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scrambling to meet with specialists, hospice nurses, social workers, and judges. It's a giant cluster of epic proportions.

And Dana faces her own health challenges. High blood pressure. Type 2 Diabetes. Living in an environment of near-constant stress is taking its inevitable toll on her body and mind. I've loved her since we were both three years old, since our mothers introduced us in a neighborhood field of dandelions and Dutch clover, while Charles Frances watched us from behind a hedge—the perfect companion to complete our threesome. It all seems so long ago, a pristine age of innocence. The truth of our lives is turning out to be stranger and more challenging than any fiction we could have imagined—even when we were shipwrecked on a tropical isle for entire summers, forced to survive on peanut-butter and fluff sandwiches and Kool-Aid.

In only five days, Sam is gone. Acute kidney failure. He'd refused dialysis, not seeing the point, with a terminal diagnosis. Sam certainly never lacked courage. With Dana's help, he quickly put his affairs in order and said goodbye, while a dozen people who loved him wept in the hospital waiting room.

The Sam I knew was a high school football star, a consummate athlete who excelled in whatever sport he attempted. In his early twenties, he grew a mustache seemingly overnight, assuming movie star good looks. And, in the mid '70s, he came in third, out of thousands, in a Burt Reynolds look-alike contest. All the girls in Sam's vicinity swooned in the presence of his black Irish charm, including me. But he kept growing in courage and tenacity, into a single father of a disabled daughter, who managed to work full time, build his own wheelchair-friendly house in the

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country, and never appear to be less than his charming, affable self. It's impossible that he is already gone.

And so, I do the only thing I can do. Because we love each other, and she'd do it for me. I tell Dana I'm coming. I take a leave of absence, making arrangements to be gone for a long time.

Then, I dial an increasingly-familiar number in the 513 area-code.

"Hey...do you think you could pick me up at the airport tomorrow morning? With Sam's death and Nick's arrest, Dana's life is kind of falling apart. So, I'm coming to stay for a while. Help take care of the baby and whatever else Dana needs. I'm not sure for how long."

"Sure, Annie. I'll be there," Charles Frances says easily. "Text me the details. Maybe we can catch a bite to eat on the way home from the airport."

"Yeah. I'd like that. Thanks for picking me up. I'll see you soon."

"Annie? I'm glad you're coming back."

And then I get on a red-eye and travel back across the country, across the years, to the Ohio of my childhood. I'm going home.

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