

## Through Sickness and Health

**I**nstead of walking through the apartment turning on the lights and then going into the kitchen for dinner at its large wooden island, she'd remained on the sofa and left the room dark. It was a good feeling, like she was borrowing time from a hidden dimension. And in the silence and darkness of this unfamiliar segment of time, she saw many things about her life that alarmed her.

For thirty years these set of rooms had housed her and the man she loved, who was dead and had remained dead for the past ten years, although his cologne behind the mirror still scented the hallway outside their bathroom, and his jackets crowded out her dresses in their closet. To avoid resurrecting the man she feared, who lived inside the man she loved, she had never argued with him about his cologne and his jackets. This man, the hidden man, had been a dreadful creature.

Never outwardly aggressive or mean or even rude, Lowell imprisoned her by the power of his sulk. When he sulked down the hallway and disappeared into their room after feeling misunderstood, he brought all of her power and enjoyment of life with him, and left her with the terrible responsibility of their happiness. Lowell had always made it very, very clear, without ever saying a word, that their relationship and happiness was in her hands, and how it was her responsibility to make things work. Now that she was used to living in their spacious apartment alone, she had begun to wonder why she had put up with such a bargain.

She liked the silence, and the creaking pipes that revealed that silence by contrast, in the same way she used negative space in her artwork, which reminded her that she still had tidy the study, and to close the caps on her watercolors.

She sat up and then stopped herself. When was the last time she had let things go to hell? When was the last time she had really gone to the dogs, and not done the dishes, not showered, not returned phone calls; drunk all night, not gotten dressed, not checked her mailbox, not been polite — had *fun*? Why not give it a go? Go to the dogs. Let the house go to hell. Leave the study a mess and the paint caps lying around. Ok, the paints were expensive and would be ruined in the morning, so obviously she was going to put the caps back on, but that didn't count, there was still so much hell to go to without doing irreparable damage. She would cap the watercolors and then go to hell, go straight to the dogs, and stay there until everything in her life was unrecognizable.

“You were a bit of shit,” she said to the portrait of her dead husband, Lowell, on the wall, “good lord what a shit you were.”

She walked through the dark room and the white caps lay on her worktable, standing out amidst the shadowy piles of unfinished sketches, Ball jars of brushes, and oily torn up t-shirt rags. She smirked while putting the caps on because she was putting them on all wrong and it felt great, because he'd hated it. The reds would be mixed with the blacks and the yellows with the blues and she would regret it but she liked feeling that way.

She walked through the main room with its high windows and view of the river, and felt compelled to clean everything once again, but she resisted. Dusting had been his job. Lowell used one of the t-shirt scraps she liked to save for paint rags. His method had been to walk through their four rooms at a slow pace tracing all

surfaces within reach with his mind elsewhere, allowing the rolls of dust to fall on the floor.

‘Whose collecting dust now, sir’ she said to his portrait, but the jibe didn’t work because dead people don’t collect dust. Still, he would have gotten the point. He had been good at performing laughter as a social function, and she never revealed that she knew that he was laughing because he saw that that was what other people did, and not out of his own joie de vivre.

**S**he met Lowell in New York City on a night out with ‘her girls’ when they were all eighteen, and he was twenty-four. She broke away from her clique to join him in a quiet restaurant in a booth at the back where he explained his job. He was working a desk job for the Air Force. Something about his solidity and straightforwardness reflected what she wanted to be in her own life, and she began unconsciously to copy his movements. When he asked what she was doing these days, she heard the words slip out of her mouth, saying that she wanted to get her life in order and take a quiet desk job and settle down. It wasn’t a lie, she just didn’t realize it until she met him.

Until that evening she was living as a rebel. It was the seventies and New York was a different city. Her parents pestered her to come home. She lived in a tiny apartment with her two girls, her best friends. They had a fire escape from where they dropped their cigarette butts on people walking underneath them. That ashamed her when she remembered it.

The three girls would go out at eleven and wake up everyone in the building on their way downstairs. They’d pick up boys in the nightclubs and bring them back home, swapping partners back and forth throughout the night and sending them

packing at daylight. Remembering *that*, almost broke her heart —she missed the vitality of chaos.

When her parents sent letters, she'd stash them in the pile beside the stove, wait six months, remember, and write back a few words asking how they were, telling them all was good with her.

She and Lowell went on several dates and liked each other. She cleaned her small apartment in preparation for him coming over and then wondered why she'd put up with the chaos in the first place. It was during the first cleaning that she found an unopened letter from six months ago. Her father had recently died, around the time she met Lowell. At the family home in his final days, there had been a great sense of remorse and unfinished business that went beyond her defiance of their wishes. Opening the letters she found the reason why: she read that he wanted to discuss the difficult relationship they'd always had before it was too late, and to come to some kind of peace.

The agony — he was waiting for her to initiate a conversation she believed he was doing everything in his power to avoid. She'd been thinking it was better not to discuss their tense relationship while he was ill when that was all he wanted, and he believed she wasn't ready to discuss it. From then on she transformed her correspondence habits and became the model of conscientious; never late, never unresponsive.

They married the summer after her father's death.

As time passed the cracks began to show. She had transitioned from a wild chaotic personality into someone obsessed with neatness and tidiness, and over time she became confused about which one was better or worse. She was tempted to throw everything away, and yet she kept going.

These habits — tidiness, responsiveness, responsibility, had felt impossibly demanding, and maddeningly menial. At first she was surprised by how incessant chores were, and how they never became easier: the effort it took wipe down the counters without ever missing a day seemed wildly disproportionate to the rewards of modest serenity. Her habits began to erode her spirit, a risk she never foresaw because it seemed as unimaganeable as a drop of water driving someone crazy, and yet the Chinese Water Torture did exactly that. Every chore was a drop, every day that drop dripped.

But once she got started it was impossible to take a break from the grind of daily living. Whatever was left undone was compounded with the next days tasks, and if she didn't clean up after dinner then next, she would leave mail unanswered, and then all hell would break loose. If she missed a single day of her habits it would be a catastrophe.

She enjoyed the feeling of togetherness the routines built inside of her, but it didn't change the fact that it was difficult and demanding and she was dying for a break. She missed the fireworks of being young when catastrophic messes were the order of the day, when the chaos of her surroundings fueled a hunt for experience in the broader world that seemed to be impossible while also maintaining an ordered lifestyle, and yet every day for forty years she had persisted in doing the million little things that seemingly could not be left undone without unraveling the totality of her life, and herself, and her marriage.

It was maddening and gratifying at the same time to live an organized life. It was difficult to deal with both emotions at once. It was so tempting to neglect one of her daily rituals; the empty space that neglect left behind seemed to vibrate with potential energy, and of course it did vibrate with energy, literally; she spent energy

doing the chores and so not doing them would free up energy, physical energy. This wild untamed bursting she lived with through her teens and twenties was wrapped up and stored “underground”, as it were, stored up and coiled into chores and appointments and dinner parties, into the clean up and the replacing of books onto shelves, into the tidying of shoes by the door and into the re-adjusting of lampshades when they went slightly tilty.

Allowing everything to go askew would unleash tremendous power into her life. This was what she contemplated while she screwed the paint caps on the wrong jars.

She was terrified. It promised to be all-consuming chaos if she released that much energy all at once. She wanted to feel the ol’ chaos again. She was looking forward to going to hell, to going to the dogs, just for a day or two. She *fucking* missed it.

**S**o, the next morning, she stepped into the open, sunlit living room, ready to go to the dogs. The spring air flowed under the raised sashes, patches of golden light filled the room, and she stood in the entrance to the kitchen feeling free. She walked to the sink and stood over the pile of wonderfully not-done dishes. She moved the frying pan out of the sink to get to her favorite mug lying at the bottom of the wet pile, everything covered in damp coffee grounds, and poured out the grimy water, swirling it under the tap. Her teeth felt all cruddy from not brushing them last night, and her scalp itched from not showering. The crumbs lying on the counter were driving her wonderfully crazy and just for fun, to re-iterate to herself and to the world that she was on her way to the dogs, that this morning was the beginning of

her late-stage hardcore bender, she swept them onto the floor and kicked them around on the tiles.

She ignored the Thursday/oatmeal schedule, and decided to go out to breakfast. She stepped out into the street. Looked up into the trees. Birds sung and reminded her how much she loved spring. It seemed impossibly pleasurable that all around her sweet buds loomed out of nothingness into being, filling the air with the most agreeably pleasant scent, while at the same time spreading entrancingly beautiful colors throughout the city, and all while softest gentle air gradually warmed each day. All of the gifts of spring were almost more than she could bare. She luxuriated in its beauty as she passed the church, sinking into the fine weather's hypnotic pull. Oh a singing chickadee, and the smell of grass! Buds in the bushes!

There was an empty day in front of her. There was not a single thing she had to do this Thursday afternoon, April 19, 2011. Not eat well, not clean up after herself. Not be polite, not make healthy decisions. Nothing! And in that incredible swath of newly freed-up time and space she could do anything.

In the café she bought four sandwiches and a bottle of Chardonnay from the wine wall. The evening would be a lot more fun with booze. Booze and cigarettes? No, she didn't want to die she wanted to live. Booze and pizza, though, was more tempting. Ten thousand days of resisting gluten coming to an end. Another coiled spring of energy released. She bought a frozen pizza. She raised her eyebrows several times to the man her age behind the counter, blatantly advertising to him, and made him blush. She almost laughed but kept it together.

On her way home she passed two girls sitting on the low wall outside the hotel. They were smoking, phones held against their thighs while they talked, both with black hair and a strand of color down the left-side lock, tight black pants and heavy jackets even though it was warm. They were looking right in each other's eyes and

laughing while she walked by, and their laughter went on too long for her to hear what they were laughing about, but she smiled down at them and they beamed back at her, recognizing kindred spirits.

She set down the grocery bag in the center of the living room and fell back into the coach, marveling at how easy it was to be alive when she didn't need to put anything away. She sat there watching the clouds pass over the river. She used her feet to get the wine bottle out of the bag and it slipped away, rolling over the wood floor in a long arc and settling against the opposite wall by the fireplace. She threw a cushion at it hoping to make it roll back towards her but she missed, and admired the little bit of chaos already unfolding around her.

For half an hour she walked back and forth from the window to the coach with the unopened wine bottle, tempted to drink but still held back by forty years of habit, reminding herself how much *nothing* she was doing and of all the things being left undone, and how much freedom she had now, but also...what the hell should she do with it?

As noon approached, she started feeling not so free. She normally would be finishing the first half of her work day, then she liked to tidy the studio and the living room, and sit on the coach listening to the BBC World Service. Instead, she went through the bag on the floor to get to the frozen pizza. She turned on the oven and walked back to the coach to sit and wait for it to preheat. While she sat there she thought about the untidy study and the silent radio and was tempted to go tidy it because it was the pleasure of having finished an unpleasant chore that made the long half hour of British accented news so pleasurable.

An uneasy tick began in her hand, flexing her fingers quickly and then letting go. She jostled her knee up and down and took her first swig from the bottle but the



feeling that she was missing something incredibly important draped itself all over her, so she went to the radio and turned on the BBC.

While the wholesome British tones filled the room, her thoughts had none of the perceptive stillness she'd grown used to feeling as an audience member. She felt scatty and distracted, she couldn't focus on what she was hearing.

The purpose of the news for her was never really to understand what was going on in the world, but to receive the information with perspective and judgement as if the various situations were later to enter her own life, so that when things went wrong she wouldn't feel like she was experiencing it for the first time. She treated the news as an initial introduction to everything that would come to pass for her one day, so that she might discover how she would react when such events came into her own peaceful world.

But now, nothing the newsreaders were saying was as pleasantly relevant in their disturbing way as she'd grown to expect. She changed the station to a hypersexual Latin beat and then turned off the radio entirely. For a moment she sat there with her fingers pressed into her eyes. She stretched her feet out on the coach but couldn't find a comfortable position to lie in. The excitement flooding her system since the evening before drained away.

She felt it return. The blue streak. She couldn't believe she'd fallen for it again. She got up and turned off the oven. She put the pizza in the freezer. Walked over to the dining room table, sat down, and rested for a moment. An evening of wild activity and fantasy. A coming week of deepest depression. And then it would pass, and stay away for a year or so. At least this time she hadn't sold the car.

**T**here had been another guy. It wasn't much, and it wasn't physical. It was only a glance but it had meant a lot to her. It was on the last day of their trip to Italy, while Lowell settled up in the lobby of the small hotel. She'd walked out to the piazza to say goodbye to their little square she'd fallen in love with over the two-week stay, and the other man was watching her from the fountain. He seemed to be waiting for someone too, and like her was enjoying the air. His blue collared shirt was open down to the second-highest button, and tucked into white pants with a black belt. His hair was combed off to the side and glistened with pomade, and he wore sunglasses, but none of that affected the inner thoughtfulness, light-heartedness, and kindness that was evident from his happy stance as he rested against the stone basin of glinting water. She'd waited for something to happen. Maybe something like this: a stranger comes by, leads her by the hand across the piazza to the man, while flower girls twirl out of the side alleys throwing blossoms at her feet, and an elderly grandmother throws open the shutters overhead calls down to them, 'Hope, meet Giuseppe, Giuseppe, meet Hope. My loves, you have waited all your lives for one another.'

Instead, Lowell came out and put his bag on one of the patio tables looking for their passports, and she turned away from the man at the fountain with a sad smile, and together she and Lowell walked in a silent daze through the bright narrow streets, and she would never forget the possibilities in that man's smile.

When they were back in the states all her friends called her radiant. As her radiance continued throughout the fall and into early winter she wondered when it was going to lead to something new in her life; what was the point of exuberant communion with life if it didn't affect the world around her? She wanted to have a

target that she could shoot with this radiance and have it bloom into life before her eyes.

This did not happen. Nothing changed. She started to forget about Italy, and give up hope that her inner transformation might lead to some broader changes in the world around her. It had been such an amazing trip – the light, the man, the food, the mythology – that something had to be done with the beauty of it. As a memory it was too beautiful, it hurt. Her artwork didn't do the beauty justice. She settled on reliving the sunlit streets with her eyes closed when she listened to Rossini. She felt she had to do something with a memory filled with that much beauty, to get it out into the world somehow. It had to be expressed. She found she didn't have the talent, or the skill, or the tools, to properly express a memory like this one. This remembrance became another one of the many coiled springs inside her, that on days like this, when the blue streak descended in the disguise of a brilliant new direction in life, uncoiled and burst apart inside her.

**A**s evening fell she went back and put the paint caps on their proper jars. It got dark and she kept the lights off and roamed through the apartment. She stood in her closet to see what it was like to be in there without doing anything; she lay down on the floor beside the bed, and then stood on the bed; she sat in a corner of the bedroom on the floor that she had never sat in before. She went around to all the parts of the apartment that she had neglected or ignored over the years. The feeling this exploration gave her was good, but it left her hungry. It was like she was looking at a delicious feast through a window, able to see everything she wanted but unable to do with it what she actually needed to do in order to be satisfied.

The curtains were open and the windows in the neighboring building were bright and the rooms she could see had young families living in them, and two kids were jumping on the bed. They stood on the pillow and took turns falling backwards unto the covers, over and over again. She walked across the room to look out on the river. Her windows were floor to ceiling, the ceilings too high to reach with a stepladder. Her and Lowell had lived a life of art and Italy and oriental rugs. And a life of silence, of voids, of a small quirk of genetics in Lowell's body that she thought she wouldn't care about (and she didn't) until the years began mounting and she realized she did. Talks of adoption kept them busy in the long evenings when her decision not to care weighed on her, but they never went for it. The propriety they showed to their friends when the topic of children came up was exquisite: formal language and a straightforward answer that it was not possible for them, but that they still felt this to be a decision, not an imposition.

After such dinners she had to go on long walks and would come back find him reading under the lamplight with his feet up, an insecure yet defiant expression when he had the audacity to ask her if she'd had a nice stroll, when he knew she'd been out there struggling for breath, struggling to once again accept that she'd chosen him knowing this was how it had to be and not to renege on such promises.

Going through her daily grind without anyone but her benefiting from the care she put into her life made her feel like an animal that was removed from its natural habitat but continued to act out the instincts that were unnecessary in its new surroundings. She was like a bark-feeding bird that can't help pecking at its cage, even though it won't ever hit anything but metal.

She woke up. The blue streak had descended in full. She dragged herself to the window and watched a family moving slowly down the sidewalk towards the grass

park along the river. The toddler took a few steps and then became utterly absorbed in the telephone pole, poking at the dark wood, eyes enraptured by it. The dad waited and watched, the mom stood off to the side looking contently at the clouds. They looked happy and were in no rush at all. She watched them from her window.

The next day she went back to work in her studio. Painting her daily landscape with the pleasure of a full days work in front of her, smiling along as her brush pulled her through forests and mountains that rose in front of her vision from nowhere, leaving her gasping for breath hours later unsure how much time had passed, and as she painted she began to feel better.

Exhausted at the end of the day she sat on the couch again waiting for the right moment to turn on the lights and go to the kitchen for dinner.

That evening she let her compulsion to walk when it got dark take her out the door and down the street, even though it was terrifying to be out in the world in such a state. The good weather hadn't lasted. The blossoms hung on the trees in the cold blustery air like tricked jesters called into the summer court to be imprisoned by the evil King Winter.

This one didn't seem like it would be that bad. A lot of times the highs were the same but the lows were catastrophic. This time it seemed to be the other way around, but it was never possible to tell until it was over how bad it had been. It was one of the strange things about the blue streak, that when she was in it, it wasn't possible to remember what life felt like before it descended, and once it lifted, it wasn't possible to remember what living with it felt like. Last time, seven months ago, she'd stolen a sandwich, bummed a cigarette, slept all week...she'd really gone for it. It wasn't really possible to smile in the blue streak but she felt her face do something involuntarily that she'd grown to recognize was her body smiling for her,

and she was fond of her smile. 'If you want to really go for it this time,' she said to the blue streak, 'you can go for it, I won't mind. Just don't go overboard.'

And poor Lowell, who had always taken the brunt of her highs and lows. Poor Lowell. She'd make sure to give his portrait a big kiss and an apology when she got back, and he'd understand, he always had, it was 'just one of those things'. She'd apologize, and things would return things to normal.