

When I was 26, I had my first stork. Stroke. I was living in the mansion my parents left – not so much “for me” as “behind” when they went back to Poland like they’d always wanted – in Queens.

“Corner of 8th and 56th,” I remind my Tuesday therapist. “Lots of black brick, potbelly stove my dad put in himself.”

“You need a project.” He holds his hands on either side of my face like gutter bumpers for bowling. “Focus.”

My doctor’s orders, though. Workout your brain without using your mind. Because clearly, I thought my way into blowing a blood vessel.

“You know, something with your hands.” Gerald rubs his chin in remembrance of goatee.

“I’m not so crafty,” I say, shift around on the squeaky leather couch cushion. “Catty.” Gerald frowns like he disagrees. “Craftsy.” He smiles like he disagrees.

I started teaching my father to drive when I was 14 and he was 50. He asked me and not Lorn, my 20-year-old sister. Me. Used to throw me high into the air because he knew I could fly. Knew I could do anything. He was just there to catch me till I learned.

But then he learned the driving age in New York State was 16. We waited but, the moment it was legal for me to drive, I was, in Tata’s words, ‘typicating the teenager.’ Exhibit A of a googolplex of reasons to avoid association with parents. What I was really doing was sneaking out to friend’s houses to read – the only effective use of the revolving door of thoughts – while *they* partied. The parents thinking I hate them gets Dad’s pouty phase. The parents thinking I’m not an expected American teen would get me on a shrink’s couch and

we're a decade out from me being ready to raise my hand, state my name and admit I have a problem.

Then the Iron Curtain fell. I was 20 but still (Exhibit B) "on foal's legs." We hadn't finished our driving lessons but by then, he didn't trust me. He said he was hungry for home – he and Mama hadn't been in Warsaw since just before Lorn was birthed – but he'd lost faith in me. It was my wobbly horse poles, I'm sure. At my age, a Poland-raised girl would be fat with at least her second kid, chasing chickens to boil whole and hanging liturgy to dry on the lines you shared with the neighbor or some shit. My name sounds like motherhood would be a joke on me (Exhibit C – who names their precious baby Maja?). Anyway, he went back with Mama, only half knowing how to drive, leaving all his faith in me behind.

Ah well. More for me.

"I think I need a hobby," I tell my Friday therapist.

"A project, yes. You do tend to think a lot," Perri nods slowly, like she's thinking. Her nods bounce her on the springy cushion one away from the more subdued square I'm sitting on. She's the only one who sits on her couch at the same time as clients.

"I mean, to pass the recovery..." Bowling pins capsize somewhere in my temperate lobe. Where the stroke was, I think they said.

"Time." Perri's learned quick when to tack on the end of one of my sentences and when to hang out. "Don't you live in a large house? Surely, there's some upkeep work."

It's true. I am staying in a big house. All kinds of crap in here I don't know about. I get off the Number 62 Couch as it's still coming to a complete halt – that bus never really

stops – and walk the six blocks to my front door. Start at the bottom then work my way up? Topsy-turvy it? Upside down, I decide. Work it like a fall.

The back bedroom at the very top of the last flight stairs is plugged with the sharp light from the round hole of window. I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to climb stairs, so I go slow. Slow enough that it might not look like anything's happening, even in a stop-motion viral.

"Whoa, stop the time." Dust glints as my breath pushes it around in the sunbeam. A long, faded blue checkered couch with a queen's-throne back on one side and no armrests sits in the middle of the room, a cursive note in thick Sharpie on hand-lined parchment propped against its hollowed back. It wouldn't have been my parents' fault had I not learned enough Polish (Exhibit D) to read it; they wouldn't have believed if what the real problem was that I couldn't remember.

I pick up the note and it's like the damn Dust Bowl in here for a minute. Typicating an abandoned, aristocratic bedroom. The handwriting is Mama's – For Repair. It's odd that I manage to pull off the Polish, even more that Mama the minimalist wanted anything saved. The few boxes that are in the room are labeled with Tata's square, shouting letters. BOWELS. KITCHEN. DICTIONARIES.

Suddenly, splotchy water insults the couch. The dust balls up like an island around a burgeoning ocean. This couch is in bad shape, but the crying spiels started before the strokes. I fold Mama's note not carefully and hand it off to my pocket.

"How long was this one?" Monday's therapist, the original one, hired to halt the waterworks, thinks the strokes are a new symptom. I'm a regular magnet for symptoms of

a ghost disease. At least it's an interesting one. Researchers want to pay me for the permission to study me, one instance of a damaged mindbody. Videos, interviews, chart-notes access. It's because I fit the Sexy Sad Girl protocol and they have the final say on my care since they're stepping on the bill, but my other option is the streets; all this house, this big faith my parents had in country, family, me specifically, would go to waste.

"Fifteen." I say. The turquoise tassel on one of her couch pillows comes off in my fingers and falls to its pieces. I wrangle my fist between the cushions and try to release all the strings but it's tight and sticky.

Hannah looks at me like "yeah?"

My parents have been gone for fifteen years.

Exhibit E: imagine you're at a restaurant and your dad asks to substitute their beef for mutton. They, of course, don't have mutton because you're at a burger joint in the pit of The Apple but your dad explains what mutton is like that's the problem. The poor, zitty-faced kid behind the counter leans to the side to look at you, the raving man's family, as if there's something you can do.

"You think a different answer will come from behind?" Your dad grabs all three of you in a hearty bear vice and, as he's clapping your lungs out, says, "We're Poles. And how do you know we're good Poles?" He tosses his head back and mouths along with one of you, whoever's turn it is, as she drops her eyes to her saddle shoes and says, "We make a consensus."

My senses, especially touch, say the upholstery defiantly needs redone and the cushions are unaired but maybe it's just a stuff-and-cover job. It takes me a week and a half to find a sewing kit with a thick enough needle – all the store-bought ones snap on the first stab and nearly pole my eye out. Surprise, surprise, there's a mundo one on the bookshelf in the corner the same room the fainting couch is in. The new fabric – purple velvet because why not, and also it was, believe it or not, the cheapest at AnnJo's Fabrics – is quite snazzy already. 'D'likely be more so without the family-size holes the needle is punching in the perimeter.

This is going to be more than taxidermy. Velvet is thick and so is the checkered stuff so it's hard to get through to –

Until it's not. I'm almost on the final whoosh of the backboard when I yak the velvet just lightly and the checkered stuff pops from the base and the velvet lunges toward me and the chances of catching my balance are forever low, anyway. But that damn spring leaping out and shoving into me sure doesn't help. You wouldn't expect so much power, but I drum my damned head four feet from the couch on the bare concrete regardless. I remember.

Maybe my father asked me to teach him how to drive because Lorn actually did have two kids by the time she was 20. Chickens, too. She boiled them with the laundry in her futuristic, blast-off dryer. My brother-in-law was as old then as I am now.

My mother wanted him to know about Poland, so she nagged my father until he promised to polarize him.

"In Poland, we name our demons," he told Jason, who had no context for my father's newborn interest in educating him. Could have been "In Polish." But I learned no names for

his screaming nightmares that perforated the childhood I grew up in. Actually, it was that I had to figure out the nightmare part of his screaming on my own that left so many holes. That's why I got into more therapy. That, and I didn't know the words, the names for things.

That and the friends I might have time for without the revolving door of medical stuff would probably direct me that way if I ever expressed inert in social contact.

I open my eyes; it's the same cracked dark as on the closed side of my lids for a minute. I'm watching a freezing-scared woman get stuck into the infinite cave of whirring and weeping and pulling of teeth that claims to image everything inside you. They've let Jeanne in and she's singing nursery rhymes to the woman in sort-of Polish. Polish if it were cantered by a Clydesdale. Jeanne took up learning Polish when I became her client three years ago; she speaks it as well as my dad drives. Unless my dad's gotten by the wheel ever again.

She wanted to quit when she learned there were seven genders and as many cases. Don't blame her: the average Pole can drive a car in America before she's fluent in her own language.

"I have fate in you." I didn't expect to make a big deal of it. I didn't think I really did. I leaned into the couch, its back like folds of a satin wedding dress, beads and ribbon and lace festoons and everything.

"Your think so many," she said in Polish.

She's still batting those translator dictionaries; she's brought one here to look up words like "magnetic resonance imaging," "stroke," "again" to the woman getting her brain's picture taken – not on its good side, looks like.

Gerald brings a square Get Well balloon and a card with a sparkly daisy on it.

"Mom wants it better."

"You mean you?"

"Hmm." I hum a music-box song Mama used to sing. It sounds made up, like I made up the whole memory, when it's in my voice. "She left a note." My voice doesn't sound like my voice.

Something cool on my forehead. "I'll be back next week, Maj." That must be the woman lying here in my body.

"How long was she unconscious?" Hannah points to where some people still wear watches.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, we can only release that information to friends and family." The nurse in the room checks the woman's pulse on the wrist.

"Did she say fifteen? Did you ask her?" Hannah tapes her wrist.

"Ma'am, as I've said, we –"

"Can I have an information-release form, then?" She shifts her wait so far to the right I'm afraid she's going to pop a hip socket.

"Tie down the string and redo the stitching? Can I do that?"

“Are you in pain?” Perri taps my shoulder, then my knee.

I shake a swimmy head, which feels like kittens and moonbeams, so I keep shaking until it lifts off and laps the room. It got this way before, the head. I was in Katie May’s basement, unbeknownst to her, reading a heavy book. It smelled like earth and sweat and stung the eyes a little, but the book started to make senses. And then, briefly, the world did, too. Why I snuck out of my house – the one I’m staying in now, but the top two stories had been roped off then – and into my friends’. Why reading and not drugs, if there’s actually a difference. The crying. Why? Now, I couldn’t tell you.

“Maybe let’s reconsider this want you have of trying again when you’re feeling a little more feeling.”

They release the woman, Maja, from the hospital after four Wednesdays. Maja wanders downtown. Maja craves that soiled smell of books in the basement. Maja shivers. I am Maja.

Maja, me, I, I rummage around in my purse for the houses while squinting at the rows of keys. I must not be at my block yet.

I’m not lost for long. Upstairs, the fainting couch’s spring still shivers, like it just freshly pushed me. The only way to tie the spring down is to strip the couch to the bone. I check the calendar. Holes. Perhaps I need a Wednesday therapist.

Samantha has the squared-off face of an athlete, a jock law and ears so small they seem pinned back. She’s the only one who takes knots. Hannah used to, when I started with



her in the '90s. It makes sense with Sam, though. Even I need a list anymore, which I hand her to photocopy.

Hannah - Mondays

Gerald - Tuesdays

Jeanne - Thursdays

Perri - Fridays

Dishes unload

Water

Grocery shopping

Laundry???

Unshake horses

Chickens

Samantha's also the only one without a couch. She points at the names and looks at me.

"Therapists."

"Yours?" Same tone. She looks down to write.

"Mmm."

"Former?"

"No."

"They know about each other?" Flat as paper.

"Not sure. I haven't said anything."

"And how come so many?" Her pen stops, quivers.

“How come you got so few couches?” is the thing I use my mouth to say.

“I see.” She writes for a long time.

“Guess I have no fate in myself is what I meant.”

She keeps writing. When she’s done a hundred years later, she says, “I think it shows much you do.” She looks up and melts all the ice.

“Mmm?”

“I mean, that’s a sizable investment you’re making in yourself.”

I see if I can shift in this Poang chair nonsense without causing it to groan. Fail. “I had thought of that, but it’s not my money.”

She raises an eyebrow, raising her glasses.

“It’s America’s.”

Her smile is small, more like pushing the corners of her lips in like buttons. “Would you like to disclose your disability?”

“I want to talk about a couch.”

“Is your chair uncomfortable?”

“My mother wants me to fix this old fainting couch she’s kept for Lord knows how many years in the spider room.”

Samantha’s pen twitches like a horse haunch under a fly. “Help me follow your relationship with your mother.”

I pull the note up from my jacket pocket, smooth it on my knee, my shoulder blade, on myself and hand it to her.

She copies the letters on her yellow pad actually pretty closely and looks up when she’s done.

“For Repair.”

“Your mother’s handwriting?”

“Yeah. Might as well have taped it to me.”

“How did you learn about this couch?” is what she says, though her lips started in the M position.

When I tell her, I’m just a girl wandering around a house my parents are going to come back to – not today, not even maybe soon, but sometime, I’m sure – and I’m the most-alone version of myself, prowling the home I grew up in as if I might fall through the floor at any moment.

“You think you’ll do the repairs?” Pen is poised.

“They’re kind of kicking my ass,” which the Poang chair complains under every move I make.

“That’s not the point?” She winces and stands up, quickly walks to her bookcase, which has zero justice on it and pulls a door stopper down from a high shelf. “I apologize. We can get into my psychological philosophies some other time.” She dings the service bell on her desk, leans over her chair and sets the book at my feet: *The Handyperson’s Right Hand*.

From Jeanne’s office on the 17th floor of a downtown skyscraper, the streets looked machine-stitched into the city. People dread through it like it can hold. I usually stare out the window for the first ten minutes of my session until Jeanne walks in after start time. Today, I lean into it and time my head on the inside pane just as she clicks closed the door.

“No!” Jeanne leaps and bounds over to me and basically drags me to her poofy sofa. Bowling ball droppings clang out my sight in parts. When I can see again, Jeanne’s waving her hands over me and whispering.

“Praying,” she says when she sees my eyes.

“Never knew you were the type.”

She leans over and grabs a fake turkey feather, fans up my left side, down my right and up my middle three times like a GIF.

“Religion is the most important thing in my life,” she says, surprised. “But I don’t take it seriously.”

My head feels like an echo tower even after the chantras and banishings and Hail Marys, so she lets me stay flat out till the end of session.

“Faith on the other hand.” She taps a pencil eraser on her front tooth. She has impeccable nonchalance.

She knelt on the floor and brushed her hand over my hair, my tricep, my humanness. Not even bladder spasms could compete with this motherly pawing, but by the time the clock is over, I had to pee so bad that the release felt like a stick.

“I still support having a project,” Gerald says.

“Well, mine isn’t a person.” The anger leaves hot coals on my lips.

He bounces back, like what I said is a rogue spring. But he’s smiling, the way you would if your face was behind a mask, and closes us up for the day with “don’t be so sure.”

Getting the checkers off is like opening a birthday present. It pushes me a little, then gives way to a satisfying slice and out pops the rift. Or clouds made of thin wire. I've got a dictionary and the Hand Book and waste a clock pawing through the dictionary before randomly opening it to a page on stuffing. 'Tufting' apparently is what crumples all over the room instantly and needs replaced. After I get to the end of it, there's not a lot, I start pulling out overalls like scarves from a magician's top hat, different fades of blue and gray, different sizes. Coins drop from one of the pockets. Copper 3s and 1s, 5s on silver and on gold surrounded by silver, 1s and 5s of brass. Several sets of fifteen.

"So, I'd like to know," Hannah says, plucking her glasses from her face, "more about fifteen."

"Can it be as simple as I miss my parents?"

"Certainly. Is it?"

When you go to therapy, you give permission for this kind of thing. This nothing-is-as-its-seems creeps through your subconscious till something shiny happens.

"Of course not."

"Can you reach them?"

The shakes. "All I know is I'm sad about the passage of time."

This is the last session I have with Hannah before she suffers a career-ending injury. It's probably a breach of confidentiality that I know this but her longest client, which I'm a little hurt isn't me, died of suicide by impact – the guy sat on the 6th level of a parking garage on 2nd Avenue before springing off and cracking the right lane below like a bowling

ball. That last part I know from the news. I put keys in fridge, shoes in tub; I am back to being new at being born.

The notes in the pockets of most of the overalls are handwritten receipts – a quart of milk for 3gr! – or things to remember to tell “Jula.” In a different hand, there’s a deeply creased list of boy’s names – Rudolf, Zenon, Dana. Mom’s Dad’s Dad was Rudolf, I think. Got a girl cousin Dana. Some of the coins are rubles, which Poland used in the 1800s. Being anxious that I didn’t live centuries ago – happens often – makes me feel like a cavity. Just a hole that hurts, giving nothing back but ache.

“I also pulled out a, the word, this word is for an ironic thing to find in a fainting couch.” I pat my stomach, but that’s not right, either, quite.

Gerald colts his head. “Are words getting harder to reach?”

Batting. How you get home runs. Soft stuff for a couch. Handy, but mine’s not ready for that. It might not ever be – it’s been down to the studs for weeks because I can’t figure out how to get the springs back in whack. You’ve got to tighten the mini-chain-link fence stuff just so across the frame. I’ve got this cool spiral bruise on my thigh from another spring that leaked because the fencing wasn’t pulled right maybe? Also, splinters. It’s probably important to my mom to have her exact fainting couch from a thousand years ago, or however long but Samantha’s handybook doesn’t tell you how to fix things older than fifty. Farther away from the end of the world than it is now, anyway. They did springs differently then.

Sometimes, you just want to tell your therapists everything shut up in your mind behind locked words you don't have the unlockers for. Jeanne sticks with learning Polish because there's research showing exposure to a foreign language decreases stroke risk in later life. Also supposed to increase stroke patients' healing. But it's not Polish that's foreign; language is a second language now.

I think she also does it because she suspects Maja misses her Mama.

Maja got released from the hospital too early. Happens with women, especially women in pain. There's research on that, too – even female doctors take women less seriously. When Maja's brain sprung a leak for the third time, it's now “to be expected” with “someone in her condition.” That's some astronomical faith in a transient condition. Or a big lack of it in the conditioned.

She was wandering downtown when it happened even though it was Friday and Perri's office is in Brooklyn.

“Do you remember being confused?” A nurse with a blurry face shines a laser in Maja's eyes.

She does but she cannot say so. *I could but I apparently cannot work this mouth.* She remembers thinking the source of her confusion was too many couches.

A calendar later, I watch Maja look for a place to follow the doctor's orders and rest. I wonder where we are, why she looks around an ancient mansion filled with room and cranny and creak, how she got into this time machine. One bannister has miniature eagles'

wings hand whittled all the way up it on both sides. Maja counts them by touch as she climbs the case; I somehow know before the end that there will be 15 a side.

The room right across from the top of the stairs is the only one with the light already on. It's got boxes in it; the walls are covered in empty bookshelf. No resting furniture.

Except then, off center on a golden area rug, someone has started to raise a couch. The frame needs sanded and the springs need tamed. But whoever got this far knew what they were doing.