

Celia Unburdened

It was that morning that Celia had decided, at the age of 45, she was going to retire. She had decided that she could no longer go to someone's home every morning to care for an old person. She could no longer spend her days tending to the needs of someone who was on that slow but unmistakably downward rocky path toward death. She could no longer watch someone furrow her wrinkled brow as she barked a command. She could no longer feel exhausted from focusing her mind on anticipating a need before it's spoken. Unburdened, weightless, she would discover her true self again.

She told her husband at breakfast. She said she wanted time to herself, time to try singing again, really singing. She had sung everyday these past years, mostly to her children as they grew up, or when she was driving alone, but it was only singing for herself. She needed more. She knew Kent thought this was just a phase, a symptom of the oncoming of menopause. She could start slowly by joining a choir. "What, a church choir?" he snorted, and laughed, nearly choking on his bagel. They hadn't been to church since their youngest's first holy communion. She looked at him silently, lacking the emotional energy to generate a comparably snide response. Music had been a part of her identity when she was young—completely defining her, in fact, at that time. She sang all through high school, in the school chorus, in the Madrigal singers, and then toward the end, in a band with her friends. She had made it into the all-state chorus two years in a row. It seemed to be all she thought about back then. "All your eggs are in one basket," her mother would say, when Celia talked about studying music in college. Money wasn't there for music school, so she enrolled in the local community college, where she decided

to study nursing but keep pursuing her music on the side. Neither dream was realized: she never got her nursing degree and she stopped performing when she met Kent.

Kent worked repairing small engines. Surprisingly, he made a pretty good living. He managed, through a connection he'd made with a local politician by way of his military service, to gain the local Sears store's service contract. Thanks to the shoddy workmanship in many lawnmowers and snowblowers the past five years, there was a steady stream of work. His business had outgrown their two-car garage and was now based out of a local spot that used to be a cabinetmaker's workshop. Kent's dream had been to build racecars. He had studied at Universal Technical Institute with that goal in mind. But, he spent more time there taking things apart rather than building them and once his certificate was in hand, he realized he had spent two years taking classes and had never designed, or built, or even dreamed of, anything new or anything that hadn't already been built. Celia would sometimes stop at the shop on her way home from work, and she would see his large frame oddly compacted as he bent over a mower engine, so intent, and wonder if he was happy doing what he was doing.

She sighed, suddenly feeling the excess weight she carried on her middle, the stiffness in her neck, the tightness in her lower back. She turned back toward the counter, resting her upper body weight on her left hand as she reached up to grab a vase from an upper cabinet. Mrs. Martin was going to want tulips today and last week's roses were still vibrant, so the tulips would need their own vase. Mrs. Martin had plenty of vases and would surely want Celia to use a particular one for the tulips, but Celia needed to bring one with her to the market (Mrs. M never liked Celia to bring home the flowers wrapped in paper; she didn't want people to see that these were supermarket flowers and not from the florist), and Mrs. M. always made a big fuss about Celia not breaking one of her good vases in transit.

“I am going to stop at Walmart on the way home.” She smiled to herself, her green eyes brightening just a bit underneath her too-long blond bangs. The new Pioneer Woman dishware was now in the store: a beautiful spring pattern with the most magnificent blue color, and the pattern was named “Celia.” When she saw the email with that seemingly providential news, she was filled with a wonderful sense of hope. The “Pioneer Woman” on television lived a life so different from hers, but they shared a sense of wanting to fill life’s little cracks with elements of simple beauty. She would buy just one dish today, with the hope of buying more over the month. “Retirement” was going to put a bit of a wrench in that plan, but she had set aside a small chunk of money ahead of time, a cushion in their checking account, to cover what had been her usual contribution to their expenses: groceries, gifts for the kids, little items for the home, and there was some leftover for her new dishes.

Kent didn’t respond as he read the newspaper and continued eating, but he did nod to suggest he’d heard her. She looked over at him as she placed the vase carefully in her Commerce Bank tote bag, hung from the back of her chair at the table. She wasn’t sure what she felt toward him at that moment: it was surely a sense of caring, a detached feeling of looking after. But was that something he truly inspired in her or was that sort of feeling just a part of who she was? She was a caregiver, had been all her life. Even when singing was her passion, when she sang with her band, she looked after each of her band members. The guitarist Tommy lost his mom their junior year. It was Celia who went over to his house everyday to just sit with him and listen to him talk or just cry, wondering if they would ever play music again. Celia had always been a good listener, someone able to see things from the other person’s point of view, or at least she always made the effort to do so. Somehow, she felt a compulsion to try and make things right, to make another person feel better. And thus far, that compulsion within her had not met with any limitation.

She held the tote bag in one hand as she bent to kiss Kent on the forehead. “Have a good day. Be safe. See you tonight.” She felt the warmth of his skin on her cool lips, an affirmation of his

otherness. This fueled a sudden sense of urgency in her love for Kent, odd after all these years, that reflected how much she wanted their love could be a counterpoint to the step-by-step rhythm of her life as a caregiver.

He looked up. "Be safe too. Say hello to Ursula for me." His nickname for Mrs. Martin, after the evil character in *The Little Mermaid*, always made her laugh and cringe at the same time. She sighed, "I will" and turned and walked out through the garage door.

As she drove to Mrs. M's, Celia began to plot how she would break the news to her. When she brings her lunch tray? She imagined Mrs. Martin as incredulous: "What will you do? How will you and Kent manage?" She would surely project her need, her fears, on to Celia like a headlight on a darkened stretch of highway.

She thought about the vases. She pictured them all lined up on the pantry shelves, more than Mrs. Martin would ever use. Who needs more than 30 vases? Yes, some had sentimental value, a gift from a friend or a souvenir from a special trip, but not all. Letting go. It's the most difficult thing to do and seems particularly difficult for some elderly people. Why? After a lifetime of some many actual experiences, people known and loved, times of joy, pain, hard work, fun, why do material things still matter? Is there a feeling that the experiences did not amount to enough to create an identity? Experiences are fleeting, that's true, and maybe, as one approaches the end of life, those experiences feel like sand that has slipped through one's fingers. Holding a vase feels like you are holding on to your life, holding on to who you are and who you have been.

Celia would never be as wealthy, never have as many things that set the life of luxury above the life of necessity, but somehow, she felt no resentment toward Mrs. Martin, at least not in this regard. It wasn't that she felt anyone's life was pre-determined, or that any one person deserved something just because she was born into certain circumstances. Celia found a certain hope in the *idea* of wealth and

luxury because it somehow expanded the scope of the world for her. It broadened the horizon, a horizon distant, but it also created a vast and wonderful space to *live within*, a space of possibility. She could simply exist in that space without having to know with conviction how much her own life might grow or expand.

Celia knew it was safe to stay, still, in that space, but she wanted more. To step forward, closer to the horizon, to claim more of the vastness of possibility as her own. At the same time, she realized that she could guide her mind to settle in a place where she can feel content, even happy. She just needed a sign to show her whether to stay or go. Maybe she was crazy to want this change. Change in people's lives can be harsh, violent, like losing someone you love or enduring a painful illness or injury. Why would she deliberately bring this upon herself?

As she drove on to the highway to Mrs. M's apt, Celia's mind continued to wander, as it usually did every morning, but today's grey and sullen sky made her feel more pensive. A slow welling of anxiety began to make her chest feel warm—probably just another hot flash brewing—but she attributed this particular wave to the impending challenge. Her life had always been so pragmatically planned and carefully guided. Making such a bold decision felt incredibly empowering and utterly frightening at the same time. Her work identity was her whole identity; it was who she was through to her very center, a caregiver, a follower of instructions and commands, all steering the universe (so it seemed to her sometimes) to the greater good, or to at least a measured equilibrium. But, she knew, deep-down, that power was not hers to hold.

Celia recalled the painful image of her son when he was a teenager nervously touching the top of his head, over and over, repeatedly moving certain locks of hair in and out of place and then smoothing them down each time. It was the clearest sign of his anxiety, anxiety that he had managed to find a way to cope with on his own, and the behavior seemed to be a harmless manifestation of

something that could have been much more debilitating for him. His brave struggle to cope on his own, represented in this image of his repeated gesture, reminded her of the limits of her ability to be a caretaker. She could not comfort him enough to calm his anxieties. She could not fix it for him.

She decided, abruptly, to stop at Dunkin Donuts for a coffee—she only had fifteen minutes, but, anyway, who cares—she was quitting her job!

She thought about using the drive-thru but decided to park and go inside instead. Each moment of this day seemed to punctuate sentences in a narrative that she was watching unfold before her. The moments framed her thoughts in segments. Celia looked across the store as she entered, and an older man caught her eye as he bent to sweep a straw wrapper into a long-handled dust pan. As her glance lingered, he looked up, and she smiled. He paused a second and then smiled back, their common humanity acknowledged. He was taking care of things too.

As she ordered her coffee, she looked over at the donuts and other baked goods, thinking, “should I buy something to bring to Mrs. M?” Buying a diabetic a donut, on the day Celia planned to quit her job taking care of her, seemed both kind and cruel. She bought three, one for Mrs. M, one for Kent, and one for herself. She knew it was terrible to eat a donut, more terrible for Kent who himself was borderline diabetic. But, when life is so stressful (and often sad or lonely) food is such a comfort. In that way, she knew what Mrs. M felt, eating foods she shouldn’t eat, drinking her nightly bourbons.

As she reached in her purse to grab her wallet, a voice called, “Celia!” Jolted by the sound, Celia turned toward the voice, behind her at a table. It was her neighbor, Katie, with her young son and a man Celia did not recognize. “Hi Katie,” she called, and she pulled \$20 from her wallet and handed it to the stone-faced bright red-haired lady behind the counter. She grabbed her change and walked toward the door, stopping at Katie’s table. “Good morning, Liam!” she said brightly to Katie’s son, “not in school today?”

“He’s got strep. Again.” Katie sighed. “We just needed to get out of the house for a bit.” Katie did not introduce the man, but on closer inspection, he seemed familiar. His hair was chestnut brown with flecks of grey, cut short but still a bit shaggy. He looked up only for a minute.

Was he the guy who works at Pep Boys, at the repair counter? Or, does he own the pizza shop on Route 71? Or was he the lawyer who works in the office next door to the tax accountant? She had that odd feeling when you see someone you know is familiar but you can’t place him. Outside of whatever was his normal context, he was a mystery.

“On your way to work?” Katie asked looking up from her iced coffee.

“Yes. But I am quitting my job this morning.” She blurted it out without even realizing it, and with those words came a tumble of thoughts: maybe Katie could take the position for her? She had been a home health aide, of sorts, before Liam was born (really just a housekeeper who ended up taking care of an older man who’s house she cleaned). Maybe Katie knew someone else who could take the job? She was jolted out of her panicked reverie by Katie’s friend looking up again and asking, “don’t I know you?” Celia gazed down at him, and his face slowly became familiar, like a blurry image coming into focus. It was Tommy Bangs, the guitarist in her high school band, still slim and lanky, just a bit worn around the edges. “Tommy!” She instinctively placed her hands on the top of her head as if to say, through gesture, “how did you recognize me, an older, fatter, wrinkled, bottle-blond?” (she had been dark-haired when a teenager).

“How have you been?” he asked sweetly.

“WHERE have you been?” she exclaimed back. She had to sit down. Mrs. M could wait just a bit longer.

Katie was stunned, “you two know each other?”

“We were in a band together. In high school. Close to 30 years ago,” Tommy laughed, and his blue eyes lit up as he looked back and forth between them.

“You left town. You basically fell off the face of the earth. I tried to find you on Facebook and that turned out to be impossible. There are a lot of Tommy Bangs on Facebook. Where you’ve been?” Celia felt like she had just stepped into a parallel universe. Mrs. M and her home and her flowers in their specific vases began to fall back in her mind, fade from view.

Tommy took a sip of his coffee and suddenly looked mildly uncomfortable, as if he wished he hadn’t said anything to her at all. “It’s a long story. You know I left to go to school to study psychology. Ended up staying in Philly and working for an educational non-profit. Got married. Had two kids. They grew up then we divorced. I quit my job. Yesterday.”

Katie chimed in, “he married my cousin. Or should I say divorced my cousin,” she chuckled. “He’s Liam’s godfather.”

Celia barely registered what Katie was saying. She was stunned by Tommy’s rapid revelations, particularly by the last thing he said about quitting his job. Celia was fascinated, maybe a little obsessed, with coincidences. How was it that she should run into Tommy, someone so connected to the past she sought to recover, and that here he was back in town, having done the very thing she had decided to do this morning. He was back in his old hometown and surely was as ready as she to start again. What could all this mean? Her mind raced. Now, her path became clearer: she and Tommy could get together to jam, just informally at first, maybe write some songs, then start getting some local gigs. They had gotten along really well when they were young; Kent would even like him. She and Tommy could practically pick up where they left off—that last gig at their bassist’s house at the shore, a late-summer goodbye party after senior year. It was so far back but suddenly seemed real again, the smells of the beach, the sounds of their playing, the feeling she had singing those 1980s cover songs.

The sun began to burn through the morning haze, and she felt its warmth through the store's front window. She could do this. They could do this. Her heart began to pound.

"Yeah, so he's here to say goodbye," Katie continued, "Liam's always been his special buddy, so Tommy wanted to visit before leaving. We're driving him to the airport in an hour."

"Wait, what?" Celia swallowed hard.

"Yep, heading out to LA," Tommy said without any hint of the apology Celia now ridiculously felt due. "Gotta start over. Gonna look into a possible music licensing venture with an old friend from Drexel."

Celia just stared back at him.

Tommy reached across the table and touched Celia's arm. "I'm so glad I ran into you. What are you up to? You look great. I hope you're still singing. Just on the drive up yesterday 'Purple Rain' came on the radio and of course I thought of you. And the band. Turned it up real loud. Felt great."

Celia stood up, "I-I am great thanks," she stammered, "yep, still singing away. Even sing every day at my job caring for an old lady down at Seacrest." The ridiculousness of that notion stung her to the core. She wobbled as she stepped back from the table.

"Is that the job you're quitting today?" Katie asked with a deliberate slowness that seemed mindlessly cruel.

"Um, well, yeah, but not sure how that will all pan out. Better go, I'm late." She bent down and gave Tommy a quick hug across the shoulders. She realized as she did this that he had not moved to hug her or even stand up when he first realized it was Celia. Maybe that's the sign she should have been reading. "Good luck in LA, Tommy, you'll do great. Bye, Liam. Feel better. Catch you later, Katie."

She turned and hurried out the door and to her car. As she got in, her legs felt leaden, her mind swirled in a muddy puddle. What now? She started the car and drove back out on to Route 47, heading toward Seacrest. The rapid pace of her thoughts slowed to an almost imperceptible crawl. No thoughts, just a deep feeling of loss. She wanted to cry, but could not. The meaning she had always found in coincidences, in what she thought of as “signs,” was really a yearning for hope, a grasping for a rope up to some higher ground. This trust in life’s moments as meaningful relieved her of the responsibility of creating her own path. She could have seen those signs as affirmation that her own willful choices were the right ones, but instead, she had always surrendered her will to the fate that these moments seemed to offer.

“No,” she said aloud, taking several slow deep breaths. On a final exhale, she laughed. “Well, actually, yes.”

She pulled into her usual spot at Seacrest. Just as she was about to turn off the car, “Purple Rain” came on the radio. Her tears flowed. As the song ended, she grabbed the donuts and went to grab the tote bag with the vase but hesitated and then left it on the front seat. She got out of the car and walked into the late morning sun.