

**On the eve of the next twenty-five years**

you can't always know,

when you're a newlywed married to a good man and the two of you and your cat move to a little town in eastern North Carolina and get settled in real, real nice and make friends and buy a little house and start to raise a family

and then you find the best friend you ever had when a new girl moves to town with her family

and you buy a bigger house with azaleas in the front and so does your best friend and you have another baby and your family comes from Virginia to celebrate birthdays and babies and everyone is so happy and your babies are so beautiful and things are so good and life is not too hard

and then you fall in love with your best friend and you turn out to be a lesbian, of all things, and everything changes even though it was fine the way it was

and you move out of that house and into the apartment you lived in when you first came to town, the one with the magnolia tree in the back yard, and you feel relieved in a way to have less space to clean and less laundry to do and to take care of other people half the time you used to and you feel like this big pressure has let you loose

but your girlfriend is slower to change and you don't understand that

but you go ahead anyway even though it gives you the most awful, awful pain to do it and you feel like how could it all turn out this way, and still, you know you have to do it and your girlfriend visits you at your apartment and you like your life and you see this

powerful place where you're soaring, you're just soaring, and you know you're right about this

and you and your girlfriend have this sex like you didn't even know about

and you're the talk of the small town, like front page news, and you think what if you just lived in a bigger town and not in a little piece of the Bible Belt where everyone knows what you're doing and you know they're talking about you and you lose some friends who you suppose weren't really friends after all

and you realize that if you were butch it would have been easier to know these things about yourself a long time ago

but you can see it would make being a lesbian in the little town in eastern North Carolina more tiring than it already is, and that the women who live next door to your apartment are clearly a couple even though they look like maybe your mom's friends and you start to see other couples like them

and you and your girlfriend find some lesbian friends and you realize that they're mostly ordinary too, which surprises you because you thought they would be living the alternative gay lifestyle that you're not living either

and you struggle because you see that making a living alone is not your strong suit and you think why can't I do this and the stress starts to show in your face and you and your girlfriend don't live together because you both know that's too many kids and you don't want that life

but sometimes it'd be nice to sleep together on an ordinary night

and you both still feel alone and a little lost and you don't know what to do anymore

when it seemed so clear before but you keep going because what else can you do

and one year you have this party at Christmas for your lesbian friends and many years later it's a thing and you're still having the party and all the while other states start to legalize gay marriage while yours is hard at work changing the state's constitution to keep a thing like that from ever happening there

but you're still a couple and you do things like take vacations together and you talk on the phone thirty times a day and you're a couple but it's not like other couples

and maybe it would be easier if you were better at your money things and maybe your girlfriend still hesitates, especially out in the open where all these people she works with are everywhere and one is a Southern Baptist who looks at her funny when she has an extra drink one night and slips up and slow dances with you in public

and you notice you're getting older and the second half of your life is overtaking the first

and your girlfriend's mother gets dementia and then Alzheimer's and your girlfriend needs you and then your mother has a heart attack and surgery and your girlfriend is the truest person you've ever had and these parents make you see your own life sunning itself before you while you squint to see what else could be coming

and your lesbian friends are going to other states to get married and coming back to celebrate and you're actually happy for them instead of cynical like you sort of used to be

and even though you're not getting married any time soon and you know that but can't say exactly why, you campaign hard against the stupid amendment to your state's constitution, even making phone calls and going to rallies and then someone gets you to volunteer for other things and you start to get this loud voice about your politics and you feel a little good about that and start to see the point of it all but wish the price hadn't

been so steep,

you can't always know

that you and your girlfriend will go to the river's edge one night and sit close together on a bench and watch the full orange moon come up far across the water and you'll sit there and look out and love the moon and try to take a picture of it and watch it a little longer and then walk back to the car holding hands,

even though someone might see you, you'll do this.