LYNN SCHMEIDLER

DON'T JUST STAND THERE, STEAL SOMETHING

There's an ocean of wanting and cups for having
and it's up to me to ferry the future to a smarter place.
Walk with me, little soon, up to our knees in creek
where sunlight splatters in the birch leaves along our path of summer
and breezes sweep like secrets across a sudden cheek.
It is the sound of a dog barking at a flower bluing, and
the best songs are landscapes that can read your mind. I know about
furnishing planets and wolfhounds.
I will weave baskets of mothwings and sing. Even now, just beyond
the garden wall, I hear
pebbles speaking. Nothing bad can ever happen here in the first person
singular present tense.

ZACC DUKOWITZ

MY OWN DAMN LIFE

THE BACK OF MY HOUSE IS ONE BIG WINDOW. My mother and I were sitting in front of it at John's scarred wooden drafting table, planning her death. This was about five days after my sister had dropped her off, about a week after she'd been given the final word by the doctors.

"The thing is," she said, "I'm going to freeze up."

"Oh, you'll be fine," I told her. "I mean, it's not a performance piece. I'm pretty sure death is one of those things where you just show up."

"No, silly. I mean my body." I gave her a confused look, though I understood what she was talking about.

"Let me draw you a picture," she said, patting my knee. "If you put me in the car just after, then I'll freeze like this." She mimed a death mask, sticking her hands out like a zombie. "And if my legs are bent from sitting in the car, you'll never be able to get them straight. So that's a problem."

"Maybe we're missing the upside here," I said, putting my finger in the air. "I mean, we could freeze you doing something cool. Like this!" I twisted my torso and held my arms out in a vaguely artistic way, like a ballerina might do.

That made her laugh. We both laughed. And then suddenly I was crying, holding her at the waist, and she was murmuring into my

hair above me. Cooing to me, and singing a song I remembered from childhood.

• • •

My sister was jealous that Mom had picked my house. When the cancer came back and the doctors gave her three months—three months at the outside, in their cool phrasing—we both assumed she would spend her last days with Maggie. Mothers aren't supposed to have favorites but there has always been a spark with Maggie, who is older, who has more going on. A husband and three daughters, for example, with a successful career selling ceramics and pottery at various galleries on Canyon Road. A sparkling personality, for example, and the ability to talk to anyone, to make anyone at all feel at home.

Me, all I have is my adobe house in the middle of nowhere. My hermit life, my puckered smile, my love of long and punctuated views. Which is why John put in the window. And also why he never finished putting in the others, because my quiet, my tendency to sit and watch—what he used to say he loved in me—was also the very thing that drove him back to his wife in Ojai.

He said it was too still out here. That I was too still.

Though my little house does have its charm. From here you can see the desert spread out for miles. The outhouse is completely open on one side so you can gaze at the cholla and dirt while doing your business, can watch the sun rise over the hillside if you're up early enough. When it rains the water comes tearing down the arroyo, beautiful and terrifying, brown and swollen and carrying all manner of detritus in its sweeping torrent. Car parts, bits of cactus, cans and bottles, a goat once, and once, even, an ancient, glistening motorcycle.

But other than these small draws, there isn't much to recommend it. Maggie must have wondered, how could mom choose my home over hers? How could it be possible after all these years that I would win, and she would lose?

• • •

Maggie drove our mother out here from Santa Fe on a Sunday afternoon. It had been just two days since the doctor's pronouncement. This was fast moving for Mom, who has always been known to deliberate long and hard on every decision, no matter how small. I remember her once at the grocery store holding a jar of Kraft mayo in her hand, turning it around in the light, murmuring in a dubious voice that her friend Joann

said Hellmann's was better. Every time we'd go shopping she'd pick up the Hellmann's, then pick up the Kraft, as if she could tell which was better by feel. She finally bought them both one trip, and, liking them equally, decided to mix them together.

I'm not trying to equate the decision of which mayonnaise to use in your tuna salad and the decision of where to die, but I am trying to illustrate something about my mother—not just that she took her time, but also that, once she made up her mind, that was it. She was all in.

I know Maggie wanted Mom to stay in Santa Fe, and I know she wanted Mom to take more time deciding, probably hoping that she would get too weak to leave. Not out of spite, but because she wanted our mother to stay there. To not die, really.

And I can't blame her for that. I wanted her too, and I didn't feel bad about getting her. In fact, I was giddy knowing that she'd picked my house. It was like someone had knocked on my door with one of those oversized checks. Because here I'd been feeling like the world's biggest failure, with John leaving me alone and then realizing I didn't know anyone anywhere who would want to come over and visit on a summer evening, and then this happens, and Mom picks me over Maggie.

My sister is a strong woman, with thick muscles on her forearms from spinning up pots, a solid midsection that's not fat just—hard. Her hands have a reliable look, a good place to put a screwdriver, or a baby. She is always in motion, always fixing, always putting things in their proper place. When they arrived that Sunday she ducked through the doorway ahead of Mom, put her hands on her hips, and looked around.

"Hi Mag," I said, reaching my hand for her shoulder, but she was already moving. She walked across the front room and dragged an old coffee table—a stump whose top I'd sanded down and finished a long while back—out of the corner and sat it in front of the couch. It was a place for Mom to put her feet up, that was clear to all of us. Maggie stood for a moment with a finger on her lips, looking at the arrangement, then nudged the table a little closer.

Maggie twisted her head around at the other things in the room, pursing her lips and nodding to herself until she finally put her hands in the air and opened them both at the same time, as if to say presto chango. Only then did she look back at me and Mom, who were standing by the door, watching her.

"June bug!" she said, crossing the room to kiss me on my cheek. "Hey Maggie."

I hugged her, and it was good to feel her in my arms, such a solid, warm body.

My mother hugged me next, as if Maggie hugging me had given her permission to do the same.

We went into the dining room, or I suppose I should say the other room—there are only two rooms in the house—and sat at the drafting table. But Maggie was hardly down before she got up and went to the kitchen sink, which is also in that room, and started washing dishes. There was only a bowl, a pot, a spoon, and a coffee cup, but I could see her clucking to herself as she did them, shaking her head like I'd seen her do when one of her children had fallen and skinned a knee.

I scooted toward my mother and asked her how she was feeling.

"I'm alright," she said. She shrugged, and I noticed how thin she'd become. Her shoulders were all bone—they reminded me of the wooden ligature of a marionette. I wondered at the animus that moved her, a fire I could imagine burning somewhere behind her eyes, her breast.

"I am in pain, though I can handle it. And I can't hardly eat, because everything tastes like cardboard."

"You know, it's not too late Mom," Maggie said over her shoulder, shaking the coffee cup upside down and placing it on the drying rack. "We could still call Dr. Stalnaker."

My mother shook her head, and this was the most tired she'd looked since arriving. "No thank you," she said, her voice firm.

Maggie crossed the room, wiping her hands on her jeans to dry them. She sat between us, facing away from me, and put her hand on Mom's cheek.

"Think about Lucy," she said. "What it would mean to her, to see you fight through—"

"You're not listening, honey," Mom said, and there was an edge to her voice. "You haven't been listening, not since I made this decision."

"Mom, I—"

"And fight through what, exactly? We are all so terrified of death in this country. What about dignity, and peace? What about—what about letting people do what they want, instead of insisting that any kind of *acceptance*, any kind of solace, any kind of— that you're just giving up.

It's this whole win or lose mentality. Us against them. You fight strong, you fight through, and if you don't well, then you're a quitter."

My mother was trembling. And I could see where the fire was now, could see it right there in her shining green eyes.

"Mom, I didn't mean—"

"Sure you did. You go on and call Dr. Stalnaker, and he'll have me on another round of those pills, radiation half the day twice a week, and I'm throwing up and can't think and sicker than ever. At least right now I have a clear mind."

"All I meant was that I know Lucy, and, and Gwen too, they—"

"That is unfair, that is simply unfair, to bring up those little girls when you know this isn't easy for me. It isn't easy to die, and it isn't easy to make the decision I've made. But I've made it and I'm turning my mind now to preparing myself."

My mother was shaking all over. I was worried she might fall out of her seat, and got up to support her.

"No, hold on," she said to me, and I sat back down. "Listen, Maggie. I love you. I love you so much. And my dying, my choosing to accept what is happening to my body, it doesn't mean I love you any less."

"I was talking about the girls, Mom."

"You were talking about yourself." My mother gave Maggie a stern look. "And it's OK. It's OK to be afraid of death. Death is scary."

Maggie tried to talk, but my mother held up her hand.

"Here is what I want to say, and I want you to hear it loud and clear. All of this Santa Fe talk, this *namaste* and gemology and past life regression—a bunch of death-fearing claptrap if I ever saw it, but anyway—the yoga, and the talk about being in the moment, all of that, well, I think it's great in a way. I think it's wonderful that our values are shifting. But I also think it's the biggest load of *bullshit*—"

"Mom! That is not fair. Bikram's has helped me—"

"Hang on. It's the biggest load of *bullshit* if you're not preparing yourself for death. Isn't that what all religions are about? Isn't that what all this Eastern new age all- is-one talk—isn't it about death? What I'm saying is, if you just do lip service to the idea that all is one, that we should

live in the present, that God is everywhere, *is* everyone—is me, and you, and you—"

She looked from Maggie to me, and tears came up in my eyes. Maggie was crying too, her shoulders jumping softly up and down.

Mom continued, her voice softer now. "Look, if you're saying all that but you can't just sit and *be* with yourself, can't just be with the fact that you are not in control, that you do die, that everything passes, that things *change* and it's not good and it's not bad, but it just *is*—well, then you missed the boat. You just took your plain old death-fearing materialism, your old American consumption and all that you were trying to run away from, and slapped on a new coat of paint. Whole Foods or Walmart, yoga or football—it's all the same thing, if you're not also working on *yourself*."

She put her hand on Maggie's shoulder. "Maggie, I'm talking about changing yourself," she said. "I'm talking about what it takes to look at something that terrifies you, something you know you can't escape, and just sit looking at it until you're alright. Even if it takes the rest of your life."

She pulled Maggie into her thin arms and hugged her.

"That's where I'm coming from right now," she whispered, and I wished she was holding me, that I was the one in her arms, but I was also glad just to be there. I put a hand on her back, and a hand on Maggie.

"That's what I need you to understand," Mom said, her head resting on Maggie's shoulder. "That's what I need from you right now."

• • •

Maggie stayed for about an hour longer. Once we'd dried our eyes I made us all coffee, and we sat in the dining room looking out into the distance. You could just see the rim of the dusty mountains that surround Lake Abiquiú, and I found myself wondering what the water might be like right now, even though the last time I'd been there was the previous spring.

When it was time for Maggie to leave she kept her head down, like a dog that's been whipped. She stood by the front door hugging Mom for a long time, then turned and touched my shoulder. "Call me if, if anything . . . You know," she said.

"Of course."

Mom stood at the window, watching Maggie's station wagon pull away down the dirt drive, disappearing into the juniper. "I love her so much," she said, "but I just don't have the energy for it anymore."

It looked like she was about to fall over. I put my arm around her to prop her up, helped her over to my bed in the other room, in front of the big window, so that she could rest.

"The thing is," she said as she was falling asleep, "I'm at peace, June. I've worked hard, and now I'm at peace."

The words were so final that I thought she might die then and there, as if she could just will it. But a moment later I saw the cotton sheet I'd put over her rising and falling steadily with her breath, and I sat down at the drafting table with my coffee, watching her carefully, staring at her face, as if she were some rare creature I might not ever get to see again.

• • •

We had a few days of peace, wonderful days where we sat quietly at the window, went for long meandering walks, and did not talk much. And then, on Wednesday morning, Maggie called me.

"Listen," she said. She was out of breath. "Dr. Stalnaker just called. There's a new procedure."

My mother was watching me. She could hear what Maggie was saying, and she shook her head, opening her eyes wide. "No way," she said.

"What was that?" Maggie asked.

"Nothing—Mom's just talking about what we might have for breakfast."

"Oh. But wait listen, listen. He said Mom's a perfect candidate, and the risks aren't too great, and—" I held the phone away from my ear so Mom could hear what Maggie was saying. But she wouldn't even look up from her granola.

I heard Maggie out, agreed that I would talk Mom into it—she made me promise—then told her I had to run.

When I hung up we sat down at the drafting table on two stools John had brought along with him, which were tall but still a little too short for the table, so you were always holding your arms above you, making me feel like a little girl at the dinner table. And this is when I brought up planning, both as a joke and as a way to address what was going on, which is the part I already told you about, where I ended up crying in

my mother's lap. But what I haven't told you was what she said before the planning, the statement that brought the planning conversation on.

When we sat down, just after I hung up the phone, my mother looked at me and said, "She's never going to stop. I'm just going to go ahead with it."

"Go ahead with what?" I asked. "With dying."

And, not wanting to know exactly what she meant by that, I asked instead how we would get her body to Santa Fe. About how we would handle the logistics, instead of the thing itself.

• • •

The next morning we went for a walk up the arroyo, picking our way through the low cactus and yellow chamisa. The sky was a brilliant blue, and I felt like I could see what Georgia O'Keefe had seen out here, the colors and shapes somehow bigger than their physicality. Like the land itself was an altar, the reality of things being offered up to you, making you look at the world's incredible specificity by placing it in relief against the vast brown desert, the great blue sky: a clutch of spines on a lone stalk of cholla, a rusted can with the mouth jagged and worn out like an old man's craw, a brown cerro in the distance limned upon the blue surrounding.

I took my mother's hand and she squeezed it, and that was the one moment in my life that proved to me that people can communicate without speaking, that there is something more to this life than what we can know with reason. For I knew when she squeezed my hand that she would die the next day. I have no explanations—the knowledge was as much a feeling as a thought—but there it sat, as true as the clothes I wore.

When we got back we made lentils and rice and ate them at the drafting table. Everything had the solemnity you might expect of a last meal, except my mother kept poking me in the ribs and telling me to lighten up.

She went to bed shortly after that, hugging me for a very long time before she turned in. "You know," she said as she was letting me go, "it's not so scary as you might think. Death, I mean. I know I told your sister I was scared, but the truth is, I'm relieved. I'm just in so much pain and—"

She saw that I was crying, and she pushed the tears away with the calloused palm of her hand, which felt rough and wonderful upon my cheek.

"You're not listening," she said. "What I'm saying is—it's the same as just going

to the other room." She nodded at the front room, where I'd been sleeping since she arrived. "It's as if I were just to go in there, or slip away for a walk. That's all it is. The only sad part is that we can't go together."

I nodded like I understood, though I didn't. And then I said good night.

• • •

In the morning I found her body lying there, and I did feel a certain lift when I looked at her face, so still, because what she'd said seemed to make sense. This was not my mother. Not here on this bed—this was a body that looked like hers, true, and these were hands that matched her small, calloused ones. But she was nowhere to be found. The fire that she had, the fierce spirit that made her her—that was nowhere.

I put my fingers to her cold neck to check the pulse, but knew it was just a gesture. There was no heart beating there.

The rest of what I did felt as if someone had told me to do it, like I'd read an instruction manual on what to do when your mother dies in your home in the middle of the desert. I undressed her and washed her, dressed her again in a clean cotton dress she'd brought, a long print one, purple flowers on a light yellow background.

I knew she might have taken an overdose of medication to bring her death on— I'm not so romantic as not to recognize this possibility—and I didn't want Maggie to get into the details, to accuse Mom of something and twist the whole thing into a crusade that would have missed the whole point. So I dumped all of her pills into the hole in the outhouse. Which I knew would bring me some trouble later on with Maggie, because now the bottles would be found empty, but I wanted to protect my mother's privacy.

Whatever decisions she'd made, they were hers, and now none of us would know.

And then I did the thing that would really make Maggie mad. What I did was, I used my rusty shovel to dig a deep, irregular hole, far enough away from the arroyo so that her body would stay put. The bottom was clay, dark orange like the walls of my home. I carried her there and got into the hole, placed her gently on the bottom. A strong wind rose up and blew the yellow sand over us, onto her passive face, and that was when I cried, the loud sobs jumping up from of my mouth, cries like

some crazy, desperate animal would make, because only then, with the dirt on her face, did I see the hole as a grave and my mother as a corpse.

I was scared too. Just as scared as Maggie, I realized. That was my mother who'd died. That was her I'd lost, no matter that her green eyes were no longer lit from within, no matter that she was no longer there in the body. No matter to any of that. It was still my mother I'd lost.

• • •

Now I am in a perfect limbo, sitting at the drafting table at night with the moon perched like a fat white grape upon the hillside, shining its silver light on the twisted juniper branch that marks my mother's grave.

I know that soon I will have to answer the telephone. Soon Maggie will come tearing in demanding to know what's going on, and she'll look out the window and see the branch. And she'll know.

It's just a body, I'll say. It's not actually her. As if I've learned something from our mother's passing. As if some of what she had there at the end rubbed off on me.

Maggie will rant and demand to move the body, but I'll win out in the end with my calm, with my stillness. What I'll do is, I'll gaze at her and say, "It's just like she's gone to another room, Maggie, or out for a walk. To move the body, that would miss the whole point of what's actually happened. Of *working on yourself*."

And I'll interweave my fingers atop my chest and smile, and close my eyes while inhaling deeply, as if I've finally achieved peace.

As if any of us can.

JENN STROUD ROSSMANN

RECYCLING

GODDAM PIECES OF SHIT, he swears at the Styrofoam pellets clinging to the inside of the box. Puffed foam curlicues, mint green, taunting him with their bizarre tenacity. This is what comes of trying to do the right thing: preserving the cardboard for recycling, and separating the nonrecyclable pellets into a large trash bag. It is harder than it ought to be.

He stands facing the building's large trash and recycling bins. His neighbors have already deposited their own holiday waste, responsibly: the recycling bin contains several neat bundles of flattened cardboard boxes and smoothed out wrapping paper, all those retired snowmen and Santas. And he is trying, goddammit, he's trying. He has looped the garbage bag around one corner of the box, and tipped the box gently, expecting the pellets to tumble gracefully into the bag.

Fucking gravity, he mutters, as the pellets fall everywhere but into the bag. They scatter onto the frozen ground with an oddly metallic tinkling.

He is staring at the peanuts on the asphalt when the wind picks up, and a breeze swirls them further away from him. He shivers and thinks, not for the first time, that he should've worn gloves. He'd expected this to go more quickly. He'd expected to get something for Trying.

The pellets provided a safe nest for a fragile ceramic owl during its Next-Day Shipping flight. The owl having now been presented to its intended recipient, the pellets are completely useless. Obsolete. Irrelevant.