

*Excerpt, Pas de Trois (Novel in Progress)*

It hurts less if you close your eyes. Even little Dahlia knew that much, when she was a girl entering a new school year and had to submit to the vaccinations. She squeezed her eyes shut as shut as they would go, relied on that old-lady nurse to guide her up onto the white-papered examination table as if she were blind, and who cared so long as she never caught sight of that long needle with its gleaming steel point sharpened to pierce through her skin and more than that it looked like. Measles, diphtheria, tetanus—blindly, Dahlia would shove up her sleeve, bare her naked bicep, bring 'it on, Doc.

But Dahlia learned soon enough. We all do. Keep your sleeves rolled down and your eyes open, because no matter what you do to avoid pain or ugliness or truth, that won't stop it all from hurting like hell. We are innocent and then we are not.

And yet, lately, I spend an unhealthy amount of my days eyes closed. Like here, like now.

I could hear Connor's agony before I barely had the front door open, and my impulse was to call out to him, to rush to his side. Except I'm not a woman who acts on impulse. I took my time—hung my keys on the hook by the door, went to the kitchen and deposited the bags of groceries on the counter, walked into the bedroom to get a sweater from the drawer because even if there was a major heat wave just two weeks ago, today the wind is raw, almost wintery, and I didn't dress for it—I'm chilled through.

Five minutes, it took no more than that, I'm not heartless, and here I stand on the threshold of our bathroom, the sleeves of my sweater pulled over my knuckles, hugging my arms across my ribs, eyes closed. Honoring this moment, where our old life ends and our new one begins. This is something I know from past experience I can do, though that doesn't make it any easier.

When I do open my eyes, I see what I see and yet I cannot reconcile this diminished form of a man with the husky firefighter whose waist I used to wrap my arms around and only with effort could I stretch enough to interlace my fingers at the small of his back. Only a matter of months ago. This past Memorial Day weekend when we drove out East and nestled our butts in the damp sand to wolf down lobster rolls from that place we've always liked—we don't know the name of it, but it's the one with

fluorescent colored buoys dangling over the entrance. From lumberjack to Ichabod Crane, but oh, that's an exaggeration, though the first time I saw him, he did remind me of Dahlia's father, without the height. Not that six feet is short.

I don't so much watch Connor as I look at him. In a v-neck undershirt worn inside out and a white pair of briefs, wedged into the narrow space between the bathtub and the toilet, his legs flung out haphazardly from his hips, his spine twisted, his head weighing down his neck in a tense arc over the toilet bowl. His hands grip the white porcelain and his knuckles shine even whiter than the rest of his pale skin. It's like looking at a photograph and you can't tell what it is you're seeing and so you bring it closer to the light, you tilt it to the right and to the left, and you look and look and it's not until you hold it at arm's distance that the image crystallizes in a flash of recognition, and that's how it is now looking at this man I know to be my husband but instead resembles a mangled, miserable creature, an animal snagged in a trap and slowly dying. No, not dying, you don't know that yet, not for sure.

"I'm okay," Connor says, or rather croaks.

The toes on his left foot fan out and then shrink back. Fan out, shrink back. It's just this sort of thing I haven't appreciated properly.

Meanwhile, the pigeons coo in the narrow space separating our apartment building from the next, a vibrato hullabaloo that I normally find kind of charming, but today their babble sounds more argument than love. Probably it's the weather that's riled them up. *From summer to winter in a day!* they're griping, and I can't fault their complaint. An affliction: early onset winter. Their shit is splattered all over the tiny rectangular window, a window I can't open more than a couple of inches or else we'll have one of those filthy birds flapping around the apartment. I made that mistake once and I'm about to say to Connor, *hey, remember that time?*, except it's not the time, or maybe it is, but I'm unsure, I've never been so unsure, not with Connor, never, and Jesus Christ, you've got to stop this or you'll never make it.

My husband is crumpled over like some derailed train car split in the middle, puking again, and I get down on my knees and crawl over to him. The bathroom tile is cool and slightly scummy beneath the worn knit of my workout pants and the stench of vomit reaches into my nostrils, a despairing stench, and my own stomach roils, the smell

penetrating straight through to my soul if I want to get dramatic about it, which I don't, and I reach out and massage my husband's back as he heaves, as he chokes out beseeching words to a god he doesn't believe in anymore, at least that's what he tells me, and after what he's seen, what he's been through, even his devout Roman Catholic mother with her gold-filled crucifix dangling from her neck, her rosary in her pocket, doesn't dare say a word, and the question is, *what about me? do I believe in some higher power?* The most painful of questions are not those you can't answer, but those you don't want to. Someone who meant well said that to Dahlia once, and it made her think.

"I'll call your mother," I say, "make some excuse about tomorrow."

Connor shakes his head. As weak as he is, his vehemence comes through—there will be no discussion. How he thinks he'll be strong enough by morning, how he thinks he can hide this thing from his family—he knows my questions without my speaking them, just as I know his answers. How efficient our communication has become.

I push my sneakers off my feet and toss them into the hallway. "At least promise me no football."

"Fine," he says, peering down into the porcelain bowl, though I know he only agrees to shut me up. "Fine," he says again, clutching at the sides of the toilet, his grip tensing and untensing.

I shut up. I wait. When Connor finally lifts his head again, I dab at his mouth with a damp washcloth and he clamps his hand onto my wrist, turning my palm over and kissing it as if it were the soil of a land he thought he'd never step foot on again.

There's no other way to describe how I feel than grateful, immensely so, because there is love, and then there is this. *This* is something else—more, higher, over, beyond.

I gaze into the blue of his eyes, faded and worn, but in the way of a favorite pair of jeans. I shake my head at him, damming the tears he might mistake for sadness. "I—"

But Connor gasps suddenly, he's not through and he's almost hugging the toilet now. I pull my body along the floor, even closer to him, stroke his back, rake my fingers through his sweat-drenched hair. I like his hair like this, could never have imagined it long before, doesn't life have its little surprises. My husband's body convulses as if it would expel his lungs, his kidneys, his heart.

When finally he pushes himself away, exhaustion has drained his ruddy skin of its color, depleted the bulb of his Gaelic nose, slackened the heroic set of his jaw. It's possible in the ten years I've known Connor I've never paid such close attention to his individual features. I flush the toilet and gently lower the lid, dab at my husband's cut lips and stubbled chin with the washcloth. I'm using the cloth with the yellow roses, but no macho remark today. Perspiration or teardrops perch on the red-blond curls of his eyelashes and it breaks my heart in a way different than it's been broken before.

When I turn away, "I disgust you," he says, and the despair in his voice, the self-pity—not the man I know.

I take hold of his hand, press it in mine. His calluses clammy rubbery dead. He doesn't disgust me, not even close, and thank goodness for that because it's going to get worse, a lot worse, before it gets better, if it gets better, and yet there is nothing to say, I defy anyone in this situation to have something to say.

Outside the pigeons coo louder and there's a furious flapping of wings, some sort of squabble. A salsa beat starts up in the apartment above, making the ceiling dance. I listen to the rasp of Connor's breath, laboring in and out of his lungs—in, out, in out, lagging far behind the quick-quick-slow rhythm of the music playing upstairs.

"It's gotten so cold out," I finally say, and it's pathetic, I should be able to offer something more than a weather report.

"What am I always telling you?" he says, "This New York weather..."

The schizophrenic New York weather is one of the main reasons we've talked about moving to North Carolina or Florida or even Mexico when Connor turns fifty and retires from the department. I've never quite believed my native New Yorker husband would leave the city—now we may never know. Another five years till he's fifty.

"Are we going to sit here all night?" I say. "Let me help you to bed so you can rest."

Connor manages to push himself off the floor. "I'm not going to bed."

"Where *are* you going then?" My little joke doesn't come out funny, though.

"It's Tuesday," he says. He forces a smile, or not a smile, a grin. He's always been a grinner, a leftover of the mischievous boy he was. "I want to have dinner with my wife. Isn't that what we do on Tuesday evenings?"

He announces he's going to take a shower.

"It'll make you feel better," I say, and I wonder if he notices me cringe at the emptiness, the meaninglessness of my own words. So this is how it's going to be.

Towering above me, Connor holds out his hand for a lift. He's always been a big man, the fireman you want to see at the top of the ladder come to rescue you from the towering inferno, but the last several weeks have scooped him out to the point that he now appears no more than a suggestion of himself. He lets me help him off with his shirt and his skivvies and I watch as he leans into the shower to twist the faucet and then eases himself into the lukewarm spray of water.

There was a time I'd have peeled off my own clothes, parted the curtain and stepped in with him, and it's shocking to think that was only several months ago, when we believed we'd lived through the worst life was going to throw our way and whatever else happened would seem like gravy.

No gravy. Not tonight, not tomorrow night. In the kitchen, I pour takeout chicken soup into a saucepan to reheat while I unpack the groceries—bouillon cubes, Saltines, cottage cheese, ginger ale. At the bottom of the bag I find the barbecued potato chips I snatched at the last minute, overtaken by craving, at the checkout. The shower's still going so I shove handfuls of chips into my mouth, licking the red dust from my fingertips when they're all gone. The joy of crunch, the sharp saltiness on my tongue.

I turn to the stove and adjust the flame under the saucepan. I watch the soup come alive as it heats, the bubbles of simmer, the dice of celery then carrot rising and bobbing on the surface, the noodles undulating like the sea kelp on the nature show Connor and I watched last night when we couldn't sleep. I close my eyes. The golden smell of the chicken broth tickles my nose. I scrunch my eyes tight, tighter, until any tighter would rupture a blood vessel or something.

The trick is to get past this part when it's all fresh and raw, and really there's no trick to it other than that of time. We're less than a week in, but when it's a month and then another month, when we've figured some things out, settled into a routine, learned what to expect, it will be like anything, like before—one day followed by the next.

I thought I was going to be more prepared. We weren't exactly surprised. The tests, the sheer amount of them, you just know it's not going to turn out to be all right, and still we weren't ready when they were ready—finally, definitively—to pronounce their diagnosis, use that C word now without their prefacing cautions and the qualifying *if. If, if, if.* The amazing force of a single syllable, of one vowel joined to one consonant. Connor and I perched together on uncushioned chairs in the doctor's office and he—husband/lover/best friend and even that doesn't cover it all—when this man fitted his hand over my kneecap and the urgent wails of the ambulances arriving in the emergency pavilion downstairs made it difficult to concentrate (people were dying down there and look at us, just sitting there) and my husband held or squeezed or gripped my knee and outside the closed door the girls at the long reception desk shouted out their Chinese lunch orders—Dr. Prabaker's assistant wanted chicken with cashews without the cashews because the part she really liked was the sauce—and my husband shifted in his seat and when he laid his arm across my shoulders I squirmed, not meaning to, but my neck was so tight and his arm so heavy and anyway it was too hot in there (a place like Columbia Presbyterian can't manage air conditioning?) and so he withdrew his arm his hand his fingers and when the doctor at last said what he had to say, when he said, as if he says it every day, *you'll have questions*, Connor clutched his own hands together in his own lap and my reaching out to touch him then, seeming like cheap consolation, when it was love that surged through me, and as hysterical as it may seem, and I am not generally a hysterical woman, in retrospect what I wanted more than anything in that moment was to transfer, by force if necessary, the love swelling in me into him because I figured in love there is life, throbbing pulsing unrelenting, and Connor held out his palms and stared at them as if they were stained with the disease and after a while he stood, and then I stood beside him, and neither of us cursed or protested or cried, what would any of that do, and it was gratifying to me that we both reacted or didn't react in the same way, it proved something about us, why we met and why we fell in love and why after so many years we still consider the hour when we come home to one another the best part of every day. Dr. Prabaker held his office door open and ushered us out. I looked into his eyes. They were brown, unremarkable. They said, *you'll have questions*. The door clicked behind us, respectfully, I thought. This is his job. He does this every day. We are not special to

him, Connor's illness is not special. We found ourselves standing in front of his assistant. More insurance forms to sign. The assistant ignored us because she was on her phone and could only focus on one thing at a time, which in and of itself wasn't a bad thing, if you're not the type who can handle two things at a time. We stood there waiting as if we had our whole lifetimes to wait while into her phone, Dr. Prabaker's assistant said, *And don't forget extra soy sauce. Last time you forgot the extra soy sauce.*

"Cancer," I say, trying the word out for the first time, inviting it into the space of my mouth. Go ahead—knock around my teeth and my tongue, rage against the sensitive walls of my cheeks. I try again. "Cancer," I whisper, but it just lies there.

"You say something?" Connor's voice.

I whirl around, accidentally brushing my hand against the hot pot. I rush to the sink and run the cold water. "I'm heating up some soup," I say.

"You know how I love soup!" he says—the smart aleck. He claps his hands, rocks on his heels. "I thought we might go out," he says.

Fresh from the shower, his sandy hair the color of peanut butter and the spidery capillaries on his cheeks enraged from scrubbing. He stands there in his jeans and his NYFD t-shirt. He's wearing sneakers, the ones he used to run in every morning.

It's not something I can get used to, this new nervousness I feel around him. I turn off the faucet and wipe my hands on my hips.

"Did the shower help?"

"All better," he says, brandishing his arms out in front of him abracadabra-like, as if he's just made a dove appear out of thin air.

I continue to wipe my hands on my hips, though they're already dry.

*All better*, he says, and I begin to sob, but on the inside, a staccato under my ribcage that could just as well be suppressed hiccups. *Hold your breath*, I tell myself, *hold it until they stop.*