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August 2009: North on I-5

*We the globe can compass soon,
Swifter than the wandering moon.*

—Oberon in William Shakespeare,
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM



WHENEVER I ARRIVE IN SAN DIEGO, THE FIRST THING I WANT TO do is leave. It's the sun, which shines without mercy. At the airport, I'm surrounded by happy travelers streaming in from sun-deprived cities, their compasses set for the beach and SeaWorld. I want to stop them and ask if they'll take me home with them—to Minneapolis or Des Moines, Seattle or Detroit. San Diego is stingy with its shade, and the ever-present sun makes me feel not lifted but low, unsure of my footing.

The summer sun, of course, is the worst, and today, in late August, it's already relentlessly bright at 9:30 A.M. To my relief, I've arrived with plans to stay no more than a few hours. I'm on a mission. I've flown to San Diego to help my mother carry out her plan to leave after nearly forty-five years.

A seasoned mover (some would say a compulsive one), I've spent weeks helping my mother with the logistics, even recruited my favorite moving man—a burly and jocular Irishman named Kieran, who special-



izes in transporting pianos but hauls around entire households, too—to drive his truck down from Northern California and collect my mother’s possessions. And now it’s time for us to get on the road and start the drive to San Francisco.

I take a taxi from the airport to my mother’s house, and when I arrive, Kieran and his crew are already there, loading the truck with the possessions my mother has chosen to bring with her. Among them are two pianos—one Steinway grand and one Yamaha upright. I pull up just as Kieran and two of his guys are rolling out the stunning Steinway, my idea of perfection embodied in a single musical instrument.

Cheryl, the professional downsizer my mother hired a month ago, is directing the movers and making a few last-minute additions to the contents of my mother’s Honda sedan, which Cheryl has packed expertly with several boxes of legal files, a Waterpik, various driving pillows, a couple of large exercise cushions held together with duct tape, or paper bags filled with a month’s worth of various vitamins, medications, or Metamucil, and at least a dozen rolls of paper towels. I notice right away that my delicate, birdlike mother, for years reluctant to venture much beyond a ten-mile radius from her house, is surprisingly calm, and I guess that Cheryl is the reason.

A large woman in her early sixties who towers over my mother, Cheryl gives the car a final inspection. Then something happens that’s completely out of character—not for Cheryl, I gather, but for my often skittish and always hyper-cerebral mother. Cheryl folds my mother into a lingering hug, then stands back, sets her large hands on my mother’s shoulders, looks deep into her chestnut eyes, holds her gaze, and takes several deep inhalations. “Remember to breathe,” she says, like a football coach sending a nervous freshman onto the field. My mother nods obediently.

I climb in behind the wheel. We wave goodbye to Cheryl and the movers and pull away from the house. Pretty soon, we’re zooming north on Interstate 5. With nearly five hundred miles to travel, I hope to reach San Francisco in nine hours, a calculation trickier than your average Google Maps reckoning, as I’ve had to figure in frequent restroom breaks for my mother. Once we’re out of L.A. and heading inland, we hit the southern Central Valley and long, monotonous stretches of I-5. But the miles aren’t

boring to my mother, who sits in wide-eyed wonderment at towns with names like Buttonwillow and Lost Hills.

For the past thirty-five years she has been living with a bland accountant named Norm, their routines carved with exacting precision into every hour of every day. Over time my mother became not merely unadventurous, her world became smaller and smaller. She seldom left her house except to go somewhere she'd already been—hundreds of times. Yet I'd always known that a worldly, interested person lurked in there somewhere, waiting for a chance to break out. Now she seems to delight in everything she sees. For here we are, a seventy-seven-year-old woman, her adult daughter, and a dozen rolls of Scott one-ply Choose-a-Size paper towels, sailing toward a new life. With each mile we clock, I see her body relax, her face soften.

In the car, my mother talks. She talks a lot about the urgency with which she felt she needed to leave San Diego after so many years. She talks about what happened with Norm, whose confusion “presented,” as a doctor would say, in the usual small ways at first, then escalated. But it was Norm’s sudden and intense allegiance to his fifty-six-year-old daughter that ultimately drove my mother away. Of course, she’s rehashing a drama I lived through right alongside her—all within the past few months. I’m familiar with every twist and turn of the tale, yet I understand that talking about it for the umpteenth time is something she needs to do. So I nod a lot and punctuate the ends of her sentences with sympathetic sounds and the occasional “Yes, it’s unbelievable” or “I know. Crazy.”

During a bathroom break at the halfway point—break number five, I’m guessing—I receive a text from Zoë, my only child and for the past sixteen years my main reason for getting out of bed every morning. Where are you? (Somewhere in the Central Valley, I respond.) Will you be home in time for dinner? (No.) Is it okay if I use your Visa card to buy flowers for Grandma Helen? (Of course!)

As I drive, my attention toggling between my mother’s Norm recap and my own freeway-induced series of free associations—mostly about Zoë, who is soon to be a junior in high school—my mother suddenly changes the subject.

“I’m going to take driving lessons,” she says.

“But you know how to drive.”

My mother explains that she is in fact scared of driving, particularly on freeways. She confesses that she never learned how to parallel park. “I never needed to learn,” she explains. “No one in San Diego parallel parks.” Besides, when Norm was still in possession of his faculties—and even after he began to fall apart—he did all the driving. I tell my mother I’m impressed by her pluck. Driving lessons sound so enterprising, so independent.

It’s nearly 9:00 P.M. when we approach San Francisco from the East Bay, and as we pass Oakland’s baseball stadium, we see fireworks. My mother is spellbound by the show.

“Stop so we can watch!” she insists.

Stopping isn’t an option. We’re not ambling down a country road on horseback, taking in a full moon. We’re in the farthest left lane of a six-lane freeway in Northern California, 1.2 tons of metal traveling at 75 miles an hour. But I do slow down a little, just in time for the finale.

“Mom!” I say. “They knew you were coming!” I look over and she’s smiling. For a second, I think she believes it.

An hour later, we’re in my neighborhood of Lower Pacific Heights, and I turn each corner slowly so that my mother can take in the lovely old houses. My mother has been to San Francisco only once in her life, and although it’s dark I hope she can see how beautiful it is here—the silhouettes of the mansions against the night sky; the Golden Gate Bridge shimmering just beyond the hill’s crest.

We pull in to the garage and I unload the car. We’ll be spending a couple of weeks in my apartment before we can move in to the house I’ve found for my mother, Zoë, and me, an experiment in multigenerational living that I’m embarking on filled with high hopes. As I walk through the back door, I see to my amazement that my soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old daughter, who has never tidied so much as a square inch of her own room, has cleaned the entire 950-square-foot apartment. The place sparkles. Not only has she decluttered, dusted, and scrubbed (how did she even know where I keep the cleaning supplies?) but, knowing that I was intending to give my mother my own room until we move, she has made up my bed on the living room couch, complete with slippers set out on the floor. At the center of the dining room table, Zoë has placed an extravagant bouquet of

roses, lilies, and peonies from a nearby flower shop I seldom dare enter for fear of its prices. Propped against the vase is a handmade card: “Welcome Home, Grandma Helen.” My mother is overcome. And so am I.

I’m disappointed that Zoë’s door is shut, with no light showing underneath. But within a few minutes, having heard us come in, she emerges from her room, rubbing her eyes. She greets my mother with a long hug.

“Hi, Grandma Helen. How was the drive?”

My mother squeezes her granddaughter hard. “Hi, sweetie! The flowers are beautiful. And I love my card!”

I’m thrilled. I thank Zoë for the superlative cleanup. She acts as if it were nothing and excuses herself to go back to bed. After showing my mother to my bedroom, I settle into my makeshift bed and drift off. I don’t know how long I’ve been asleep when I’m awakened by the sound of someone’s tread against the hardwood floor in the kitchen. I open my eyes and, with a clear line of sight to the refrigerator, I see a brief burst of light with the opening and closing of the door, followed by the uncorking of a wine bottle. It’s my mother. I hear her pour herself some wine, then pad away. I’ve known for many years that she still drinks at night, to help her sleep, but I don’t know when, exactly, or how much—and I’ve never asked her. My senses are on full alert; a whorl of emotions—fear, helplessness, panic—streaks through me. *Stop it*, I tell myself. *You’re not ten. Those years are long past. Everyone’s safe. It’s all fine.* I will myself back to sleep.

The next morning my mother and I are in the car and, as I have learned to do when broaching a delicate topic with my teenage daughter, I stare straight ahead as I speak. “There’s one thing that’s nonnegotiable for me,” I say to the steering wheel. “Excessive drinking.”

I see out of the corner of my eye that she has turned to look at me. Her response is immediate. “It’s nonnegotiable for me too.”