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Love in the time of climate change

Caroline Woodwell

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Caroline Woodwell

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THESIS OF CAROLINE WOODWELL APPROVED BY

_____ DATE _____

NATALIE KUSZ, CHAIR, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

_____ DATE_____

RACHEL TOOR, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

_____DATE_____

AMANDA REEDY, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

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He didn't look like a person who should command a spotlight of his own: rumpled khaki pants, a white shirt unbuttoned at the top, a blue blazer, brown hair and a weathered face. But there he was on stage, alone, in a circle of light. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets, no notes, no lectern, relaxed, unhurried. It was 1981 and we still had time.

I watched as the man on stage cleared his throat, puffed gently into the microphone on his lapel and stepped forward to address an auditorium of college students. This man was my father. He is an ecologist, one of a group of scientists who recognized early on that humans are changing their own habitat, raising the temperature of Earth by burning oil and gas, with potentially devastating consequences for the human race.

By the time he began his lecture on that day, my father had been talking about science and conservation for years. I had heard many such presentations about toxins, radioactivity, deforestation and then, about climate change. He always started with the long arc of life.

"Welcome to a world of five billion people," he said. "Twenty years ago, about the time you were born, it was three billion. Twenty years from now it could be seven billion. By the end of your lives it could be ten."

What does that mean, he asked?

He started with a story about how earth's big biological processes work: The forests, the oceans, the atmosphere. The miracle systems that, together, sustain life as we

know it. It was a story about the silent infrastructure of our lives, the finely tuned systems that support life.

Then he turned to carbon dioxide, the trace gas, comprising just .04 percent of the atmosphere. The little gas that will determine the future of life on earth. His hand came out of his pocket as he gestured up and up to show us how carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had been rising steadily since the discovery of oil. He turned to simple slides showing data collected over decades, incontrovertible evidence that human activities are affecting the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere and raising the temperature of the earth.

His voice remained calm but firm. He talked about the ways in which a small change in the temperature of Earth could be devastating for humans. Melting ice, rising seas, dying oceans, dying forests. He predicted that a miniscule change in the composition of our atmosphere would dry the center of continents, flood coastal cities, produce bigger and more frequent storms, launch mass migrations of people, undermine stable governments, incite war.

Change forever the life we love. He didn't put it that way, of course. He is a scientist. He does not talk about love from the podium. But I heard it. And I knew from the electric stillness in the room that all of us in that audience were thinking about the lives ahead of us, thinking about the fate of our children and grandchildren long before we had them.

And then he said there was hope. Because we know what to do. We know the cause and we have the answer.

Stop burning fossil fuels, he said. Start with coal, the biggest emitter of carbon. Plant forests, he said. Forests store carbon.

It is, he told us, your job as young people, to build political will, to invent alternatives – renewable energy sources. To curb runaway population, to protect forests and oceans, which absorb carbon. To support strong governments that will protect land and water. It will require us to do something big, he said, but it is possible to make the choice to save the planet.

That afternoon, as he finished his last sentence, the audience sat in exhausted silence. The people in that room understood they had just heard something transformative. Something outside the conversations of normal life.

He had opened a window to a world most people hadn't seen, ideas most people in the 1980s didn't understand. I was only beginning to understand the ideas, myself. Back then I was working on one question. I didn't yet know the answer, but I knew the question. On that day, in that auditorium, I knew someone would ask.

After the silence, clapping. Then some shuffling.

First, the "are you sure" questions. Yes, he said, they are sure. There is evidence from all around the world, collected analyzed and synthesized by the best minds working on the subject. The data are flawless and the story they tell is clear.

Then the "what about this and what about that" questions.

What about photosynthesis and respiration in plants--photosynthesis absorbs carbon dioxide, respiration produces it. Have you accounted for the rates of each? What about the flow of carbon between the oceans, the atmosphere and forests--have you

accounted for that? What about the rate of deforestation? Have you thought about how much carbon is stored in forests?

He answered efficiently. Yes. The data are clear, he said.

Then another little silence before the "we're all in this together" questions.

What can we do about it, someone would ask?

We can stop cutting forests, my father always said. Stop burning the Amazon. Plant new trees. We can stop burning fossil fuels, he said. Find alternative sources--the wind, the sun. Stop burning coal. We can slow the rate of population growth, he said. But that wasn't quite enough for the room. Even when all the “are you sure” questions and the technical questions and the what-can-we-do questions had been asked, there was always another question hanging in the air. An uncomfortable question that only surfaced during a long, heavy silence.

My father stood quietly and waited for it.

I squirmed. I knew what he would say and I knew it wasn’t quite enough.

In retrospect, I can see that it's the question that has hovered around my life forever. The most powerful question motivated by a sense of utter powerlessness. It was just starting to take root back then.

"What can I do," someone finally asked. "What can I do in my life?"

What can I do in my little life to stop global climate change? To save all that I know and love? What can I do to save my planet when nothing I can do will be enough?

* * *

No one who knows him would believe that my father could inspire despair. He is pathologically curious about life, delighted by the world.

The question at the center of his life is, “how does it work?” He has disassembled and reassembled most of the machines he has owned. He fixes everything. To walk into my father’s shop is to understand that he is a Yankee tinkerer, someone who saves everything because it might be useful as part of something else.

With a curiosity about how things around him work, it was natural that my father would eventually ask that question of the natural world. How does a forest work? How does a field work? The oceans? The atmosphere? What are the invisible processes that keep Earth working as it works?

As a young scientist at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York, he put a small piece of radioactive cesium at the center of an oak/pine forest. Over the next ten years he collected data about the death of plants and animals living under that chronic disturbance. He used those data to tell the world what would happen to the invisible processes of earth under chronic stress.

He extrapolated to say what is now commonly accepted in science: that chronic disturbance will affect the structure and function of an ecosystem in a predictable pattern. The most complex, sophisticated plants will die first and the simplest, hardiest plants will survive for longest. His most important point--one he continues to make today--as that the accumulation of small assaults will so impoverish the biological systems of earth that the planet will no longer function in a way that supports life. Death by a thousand cuts. It applies, he said, to stress from a whole range of toxins: DDT, radiation from nuclear bombs, pollution from coal-fired plants, and from the steady drip of industrial chemicals in a rapidly growing world economy. He saw similarities in the effects of many individual disturbances. It is, he would tell his audiences from the stage, “biotic

impoverishment." It is the gradual impoverishment of the remarkable processes that keep Earth habitable. Climate change is perhaps the most significant chronic disturbance and the assault that promises to outpace the earth's ability to replenish itself.

My father is among a group of scientists who came of age shortly after ecologist Rachel Carson published her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, a cautionary tale about the danger of accumulating the pesticide DDT and other toxins in the environment.

The country was bristling with environmental urgency. In 1969, three million gallons of crude oil spewed into the Pacific Ocean when an oil rig exploded off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. Six months later a chronic oil slick on the Cuyahoga River in Ohio caught fire. Smog was common in the nation's big cities and widespread use of DDT had reduced the population of bald eagles and other raptors. On April 22, 1970, millions of people marched on the first Earth Day, asking their leaders to clean up and protect the nation's air, land and water.

So this group of scientists and a group of lawyers put their expertise to work in support of revising old laws and creating new laws--the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act, the Endangered Species Act--all passed in 1972 and 1973. They helped to set up national non-profit conservation organizations: The Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and later, the World Wildlife Fund and the World Resources Institute.

I remember the crackle of possibility in my father's conversations, both with colleagues who came through our living room and as he talked with us about his work at home. Those scientists believed they were going to make a difference. They believed that information was power, that scientific data could be a policy motivator. They believed

that once the world heard their story, citizens would demand action to begin reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. I believed that too. I believed that these ingenious scientists were showing us the way out of a predicament of our own making. I believed that the world would spring into action and do what no individual could do alone. I believed the world would listen.

In many ways, it did. Governments, working with non-profit organizations crafted agreements to limit the use of fossil fuels and move to renewable resources. The renewable energy industry took root. Scientists established beyond doubt that human activities – burning carbon – were raising worldwide temperatures and changing Earth's climate. Climate change was covered by the mainstream news.

But in spite of all their work, these scientists could not make the difference they had hoped. For decades, since the mid-1980s, climate scientists have been outspent by oil companies in a coordinated campaign to sow confusion and uncertainty about climate science, and squelch government action that would curb the use of fossil fuels. The single most important measure of climate health – the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere--confirmed, year after year, that the scientists were losing, the oil companies were winning, the world was warming.

It took me a long time to understand that. For years I believed that the science would prevail, that at any moment, political leaders would articulate a plan to protect the human habitat. But then, slowly, I began to look at climate change through my own lens, not my father's lens--through the lens of someone who does not see a humanity that is full of good intentions. I began to watch the numbers.

Humans evolved in an atmosphere that was steady at 280 ppm carbon dioxide. Measured at 320 in 1960 and 338 ppm in 1981, it is now almost 410 ppm. Most climate scientists believe that we must stabilize the atmosphere at 350 ppm in order to maintain a climate that will preserve human life. Equally important as the data are the effects of climate change. We all see them now -- rising sea levels, powerful storms, searing heat, wildfires, floods and migrations of people.

It's the future my father has predicted for decades. Still, where I see the inability of humans to act collectively, my father sees a call to action. He remains an irrepressible optimist. He lives in a house with hot water provided by a solar hot water system he designed and built. He has super-insulated the home, put photovoltaic cells on the roof. Installed a wind turbine for electricity at his work building.

Not long ago, more than 30 years after his lecture in that college auditorium, I sat in another auditorium listening to him give a similar talk. We must stop burning fossil fuels, he told us. We must plant forests. And then, with excitement, "we can make electricity, he said. "If we can make electricity from hydrogen, we can meet almost every energy need we have." It's possible, he said, to make electricity from hydrogen.

This time his audience sat quietly. There was no electric edge in the air, no whisper of young minds stretching to understand their role in their own future. This audience had heard it before. I looked around me and people were sitting back in their seats, their faces unmoved. My father saw it too. He stood quietly looking around the room, then stepped to the front of the stage and came back to the line that has puzzled me for so long. "There is no alternative to optimism," he said firmly. In that moment I heard

the paradox that has shaped my life: my father's stubborn optimism about the future, even as he outlines a story of annihilation.

* * *

My first brush with existential despair arrived innocuously enough. I was sitting at the kitchen table with my parents the summer before I left for college. They were talking about sprawl, bemoaning the rapid development of their town and rapid development spreading across New England. They talked about the strain it put on the water supply, the traffic congestion. They talked about land conservation –about the percentage of earth that should be left completely undeveloped, free to carry out the biological processes of green plants.

But more significant to me than the facts was the feeling in the room. In their completely normal afternoon conversation, I heard my future disappearing. I heard the best and most beautiful pieces of life slipping out of reach, consumed by others who got here before I did. I saw my piece of the world used up by people just like me, acting as I hoped to act in life: building houses, drilling wells, driving cars, making fresh salads and chocolate birthday cakes, together using up a finite planet. I felt the biological processes of earth grinding to a halt before I had a chance to breathe the clean air of adulthood. In spite of the sunshine coming in the window, I felt a dark hole seep outward from deep inside.

"There won't be anyplace left for me," I cried through tears. I knew I was looking for something basic. I was asking the world to wait for me. Don't go under before I get there. Before I have a chance to inhale the beauty and wonder of this place. Before I have a chance to see and be seen by the universe. Before I have just a moment to

matter, in celebration of this remarkable life experience, this stunning planet, this sun, this wind and water, these smells and sounds.

My parents were surprised into silence, then immediately contrite. My father floundered, grasping for something to say. I watched them realize that what was an ordinary casual conversation to them was frightening to someone just launching into independence. Surprised and slightly embarrassed by my outburst, I closed up. All was back to normal.

Except that it wasn't, really. I didn't know it then but this feeling of missing something huge, something primal, would be with me for decades. It whispered to me from the shadows for years, asking to be understood. Asking me to fill a void I knew I had but couldn't quite find.

And then, during a quiet space in midlife, when the past meets the future and I began looking for fresh purpose and meaning, I heard despair calling. I knew, suddenly, that I was a pretender to laughter and joy, an imposter in my father's world of optimism. So I went in search of despair. I found it immediately, all around me, in forms directly related to climate change and forms only distantly related. I found it in big stands of dead trees in the West, victims of the bark beetle now able to live long enough to reproduce through an extra cycle as summer warmth continues into fall. In the fate of Yellowstone's wolves as Congress, for the first time ever, used its power to strip protections for a single species, out of the Endangered Species Act. I had spent years as a fundraising officer at a conservation organization, raising money to protect wolves, for nothing. I found it at the door to my public library where a young man was seeking signatures for a ballot measure that would cut taxes in my state. Asking me to help him close the door to the library I was

entering. Despair hovered in the gridlock I found as I travelled--in small New England towns, in airports, on highways. People squashed together everywhere, hot, hurried and angry, snapping, straining, leaning on horns, crying out in anger.

I was relieved to be there in that painful world, to explore despair in all its forms, from all its sources. To gather in its richness and depth. It was like coming home. Coming home to a full recognition of death. Coming home to the peace of surrender. Coming home to the certainty that I was right. I am right: We humans live with a paradox that makes it possible to destroy ourselves. We see this paradox. We have answered it by creating religions and governments, policies and laws. Because we can see that what's good for an individual is often not good for the species. That we are greedy when we want to be altruistic, that we act as individuals sometimes and in community at others. And, for all that knowing, for all that insight, it is also possible that we don't quite have what it takes to save our species.

My father did not set out to tell annihilation stories, he set out to share remarkable scientific discoveries about how the world works. Even better, he set out to share those stories in support of life on earth. I heard his excitement. I believed him. But I also heard a steady drumbeat of darkness as all of his stories led to one inescapable conclusion. Over time, as forest fires burned around my city every summer, as reports of scorching heat and massive storms came in from around the world, as stunning photos of Arctic ice melting circulated, as massive hurricanes obliterated cities, his optimism became jarringly incongruent. I began to want him to admit that despair lurked in his stories. I wanted him to admit that despair is a reasonable alternative to optimism. I wasn't sure

why, but I had a powerful need to be right. What I didn't know then is that I was asking him to give up.

* * *

He will not give up.

When I was about 12, my father led our family in an eco-guerilla campaign at a tree. A tall Locust tree on public land at the corner of South Country Road and Beaver Dam Road, across the street from the little church where we went as children in Brookhaven, NY. As trees go, it was not spectacular. Locusts are abundant and hearty. They thrive in impoverished soil and they grow everywhere.

But they are trees. Living, growing trees. Through photosynthesis, they are responsible for all life on earth.

The campaign began when a company bought the farm field next to the town's high school, for a housing development. Mill Run is what they called it, not because there was a river or mill anywhere near it, but because it sounded historic and pastoral. It sounded like a name that would sell houses in the dry dirt of a flat, Long Island farm field.

Long before a shovel hit the ground, the developers claimed our tree. They nailed up a neon green, wooden sign: Mill Run, it screamed, with an arrow pointing left. They wanted drivers out for an afternoon on South Country Road to turn at the next intersection and take a look at the farm fields. Imagine a brand-new home, right there next to the high school. Indeed, it would take some imagination to ignore the rotting cabbage and envision a modest ranch house, a paved driveway, a mailbox, a swing set.

My father hated to see the farm fields of Long Island fall to sprawling subdivisions. But it was the sign that really offended him in every way: it's garish color, the fact that it was up before the houses were built, and mostly that they nailed it to a tree. A tree--the giver of life. It was a crucifixion of all that he held sacred.

So he enlisted his tribe, his four children. Every time we passed that tree we jumped up and knocked the sign off, broke it in two and left it on the ground. Every single time. If we biked by, we stopped, leaned our bikes against the tree and knocked the sign off. If we walked by, we veered over and swatted the sign to the ground. If we drove by, my mother would pull over and one of us kids would hop out and pop the sign off the tree, crack it over a leg, leave it in a heap on the ground and hop back in the car. The company had many signs and every time they lost one, they put up a new one. But we were relentless. They left us a note asking us to stop. We didn't. They increased the size of their hardware. We got a hammer. They put it higher and higher. We took a ladder. It gave us an exhilarating sense of freedom and effectiveness. We were under their skin, festering in their lives, like a nail in a tree.

We knew we weren't going to win this war--the company broke ground as we were in pitched battle on the corner. But we were doing something. We were saying something. We were united as a family, defending a tree, defending public property, standing up for life on earth.

Soon the bulldozers and well drilling rigs, the graders and asphalt layers arrived and transformed the land within minutes. Soon the houses were going up, every one of them alike, with an attached garage on the side and a small tree in the front yard. It took

no time at all for Mill Run to take shape, for the houses to be sold, and our fight for that tree to be over. They no longer needed the sign.

But we saw the fight to its end. We did not give up.

And now, for the past several years my father and I have been in a polite, pitched battle of our own, as I question his optimism. Recently he told me that we need to cool the earth. It's no longer enough to stop burning fossil fuels, he said, we must cool the earth. We need a commitment at the level of the constitution, to cool the earth. I smiled. I smiled from my new home in despair. At one point in my life, I would have believed him. I would have heard that as a call to action. Now I smiled at my father's supreme faith in human beings. I smiled at my father, who sees the world as one big mechanical system that can be studied, figured out and fixed. On one level, he's right. Humans have minds that are inventive enough, creative enough to do that.

But we can't cool the earth. As Verlyn Klinkenborg, observer of rural life, wrote in *Rural Life*, "Humans are competent to do many things. But we're not competent to run a global ecosystem. Something has been irretrievably lost by the time we begin to believe that we can manage nature in perpetuity for people."

I want my father to understand that we can't cool the earth, that we can't reverse climate change. From the peace of despair, I want to explain that his story is wrong. I admire my father's deep faith in human beings. I admire his persistence, his drive, his unending stream of ideas for making the world better. But I don't believe him, this man who has been right about so much.

I want to tell him that I can't join his crusade. Because he can't save the planet, I can't save the planet, all of humanity can't save the planet from humans. And for some

reason, if he will simply acknowledge that, I can get on with living. In some distorted way, I want this man, who has been so certain, to give me the certainty I need to make a plan for living in a world that is most certainly dying.

So I have asked him, this optimist, to tell me the truth. To tell me that he knows we cannot possibly stop using fossil fuels. We cannot possibly change our trajectory in time to stabilize the atmosphere.

Invariably, he looks serious for a minute, as if he's really considering my question, then says "we must." We know how to and we "must." He turns to the science and then to the examples of renewable energy success. He always says "we can," "we must," "we know how." If we know how, and we can, and we must, he seems to believe that we will. It does me no good. It's enraging. An enraging tautological cycle, begging me to abandon optimism without his help.

Then one summer not long ago I spent a month with my parents and I pressed my father hard. He had written a book and his publisher had sent it out for review. One of the reviewers gave extensive and glowing comments. He knew my father's work well. At the end of the review he said that he was left with one question not answered in the book. You have lived through the climate change debate from its very beginning, he wrote. How do you feel about it?

"That's my question," I almost shouted. "How do you feel?"

"That's not my book," said my father. "I'm a scientist. I can't go back and write that book."

I paused. Are we truly that different, he and I? He cannot go back and write that book. I cannot think of a more important book. How could he not have that question--the

only, the biggest, the most important question in a story where every shred of data points to death? How do we feel about death?

Mystifyingly, he is not wired that way. I began to think that I would have to accept this difference between us.

Later that month I casually reported a bit of news: The temperature reached 120 in Southern California early this month, I told him. I had caught him between the kitchen and the dining room, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Oooh," he said, sagging against the doorway. His blue eyes were the same color as his shirt. They opened a bit and filled with tears as he whispered "oooh, that's not livable."

I watched in surprise. And then, in the silence that followed, I knew. As we stood in the doorway and looked at each other, I knew.

He knows. Of course he knows. He knows he's telling a bleak and desperate story. He knows exactly what's ahead for humanity. It's not that he's a blind optimist. It's not that he has been willfully ignoring the truth. It's not that he can't see what I can see, what anyone who is paying attention can see.

It's that he *chooses* optimism. *It's a choice*. He chooses to believe in his decades of work, his decades of hope. He chooses to believe in the marvels of his species, to believe in a future. He chooses to persevere. The intensity that makes him curious, that propels him to optimism in his daily life, also demands optimism for the future. Suddenly, just as I think I've finally wrested an admission of despair from him, I realize how powerfully I depend on his hope. As I watch those eyes, that familiar weathered face, his wrinkled hands around that coffee cup–hands that have, over 90 years, fixed

engines, built an electric bicycle, built a solar power installation, felled trees and driven tractors, served their country in the Navy, planted seeds, held my children, hands that have led me through life--I know that I need him to do what I can't seem to do myself. I need him to keep showing me. Showing me how to live as an optimist in the shadow of extinction.

Hot Cars. Hot Planet

July of 2019, the hottest month on record worldwide, a father in New York City was charged with manslaughter and criminally negligent-homicide after leaving his twin one-year-olds strapped into their car seats while he went to work. He found their bodies eight hours later as he glanced in the rearview mirror on his way home. Their internal temperature reached 108 degrees that day: they died of heatstroke as sunlight streamed through the car windows, but heat could not get out.

The father told authorities that he had dropped his older child at school and somehow thought he had also dropped his twins. He drove to work, got out and went into the building.

I have not been able to stop thinking about that family. I imagine my own two children as toddlers, strapped into that car. I imagine their wide, trusting eyes as I close the door and walk away. Then I can see them looking around anxiously, squirming, turning slightly toward each other. I see sweat appearing on their beautiful faces. I imagine finding them. Finding my mistake. I imagine my family hollowed, forever lost because I forgot. Because I was thinking ahead to my day, because the car was quiet when I got out, because I forgot and left my children in a hot car on a hot day.

When scientists first described climate change, they termed it “the greenhouse effect.” They recognized that increasing the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by burning oil, coal and gas, made the atmosphere function the way a piece of glass in a greenhouse functions: sunlight streams in but heat cannot get back out. It’s what happened in the car in New York in July and it’s what’s happening to the planet

today. Now we call it climate change, but it is the same thing. Sunlight is streaming into our planetary car and we can't open the windows. We are burning up.

The temperature reached 114 degrees in France this summer and 90 degrees in Alaska in early July. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration records show that July was the 415th consecutive month with temperatures above the 20th century average.

But it's not just the heat that's lethal to humans, it's the heat index, a measure of the combination of temperature and humidity. A heat index of 90 - 103 requires "extreme caution." A heat index above 103 is considered dangerous to human life, leading to heat exhaustion and the more deadly heatstroke. In July the heat index in Washington, DC reached 110. In Chicago, 113. During that July week when the father left his twin children in the car, the heat index in New York reached 105.

In 1968, psychologist Garrett Hardin, writing in Science Magazine, articulated what has he termed the Tragedy of the Commons. He noted that individuals, acting independently in their own best interests, will, together, end up degrading a shared resource. Using a grazing field – the common -- as his example, he posited that every farmer around the field has an incentive to put one more sheep out to graze on the common. And then one more and one more.

In the absence of regulations, rational farmers will add sheep to the grazing patch until the patch has been grazed down to nothing, he said. The principle holds for fisheries, clean water, air, land, sidewalk space in a busy city, dogs in a dog park. And for carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

The beauty and the tragedy are that no single individual farmer is responsible for ruin of the pasture just as no single individual or company is responsible for climate change. Each of us individually, and every country in the world has an incentive to add a marginal amount of carbon to the atmosphere in search of incremental economic growth, better quality of life, more money.

So here we are after that blistering hot summer, nearly eight billion of us strapped into our car seats, the windows stuck shut, political chaos unfolding all around. We are thirsty, hungry, angry and scared.

Scientists have been warning us about this future for decades, warning us that we are rolling up the windows on our children. But we have done almost nothing. And no one has been charged with anything.

Not the fossil fuel companies that crafted a deliberate campaign to sow doubt and confusion about the rock-solid climate science that discovered the cause and provided a solution for stabilizing the atmosphere.

Not leaders of the political party that repeatedly pulled out of international climate agreements, choosing to believe the fossil fuel companies over climate scientists who made careers out of studying climate science.

Not the current president, who pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement, which offered the last best hope for worldwide action.

Nor have I been charged, sitting here at my computer a five hour fossil fuel-powered plane ride from my home in Spokane, Washington, my sweaty son beside me in an air-conditioned room, a car at the ready in the driveway. I have not been charged.

The New York father who left his young twins in a hot car all day is facing the possibility of up to five years in prison. It is also possible that prosecutors will drop the charges against this devastated man because they will confirm that it was, as he says through tears, an accident. He would never deliberately kill his own children.

Just like loving parents in the oil industry, in political leadership, like parents who hold shares of stock in the fossil fuel industry. Like me, flying across the country to see family. None of us would ever deliberately kill our own children.

Elephants and Dip Pots

The day before her 90th birthday, my mother applied for a passport. Her driver's license had expired, and she needed a photo ID. Even at 90, no one goes anywhere in this world without a photo ID.

We filled out the application together, I reading the questions to her, she answering, I writing the answers in the little boxes. Her mother's year of birth? Her father's birth year? 1899.

1899. Two people, just one mother away from me, born not in the last century but in the century before that. Born half-way between the signing of the Declaration of Independence and today. Born at the other end of the industrial revolution. The end before flight, before the internal combustion engine, before juice boxes, McDonalds and long-haul trucking. Before climate change. Born when winters were cold and summers were clear and predictably warm.

We dropped my mother's application at the post office then went to the kitchen store nearby. Towels, Panini makers, cookie cutters, canning jars, gift cards, and a row of baskets full of small charms on the counter near the cash register. Tiny glass likenesses of ladybugs, mermaids, flip-flops, bees, and elephants. I lined them up on the counter so we could see them all. "And an elephant," I said, putting the last one down. So we can remember what once roamed the earth when we have killed off the last one, is what I thought to myself. But I didn't say it. I kept that depressing thought to myself.

My mother however, didn't.

"They are dying of thirst in Africa right now," is what my mother said. "People are moving the herds to places that still have water, but those places will run out." She took a step away from the counter and stood there looking at me, this tiny woman in a

blue raincoat. “We’re all going to die of thirst,” she said, “except for those of us who die of hunger.”

There was silence. A few other customers looked over.

I am part of a family that’s immersed in the science of climate change. We understand climate change. We share a dark view of the future. For the most part, however, we don’t stand in the middle of a store and talk about it. We keep our reflexive end-of-the-world thoughts to ourselves in public. At 90, though, my mother seems to feel a new freedom. Not long ago, when a weather event made it difficult to get lettuce, the grocery store produce shelves were almost empty. My mother stood in front of these empty shelves and said “climate change.”

Now, in front of the cashier counter in this gleaming kitchen store, we are talking about how elephants will die. How humans will die. Okay, then, I added “or fire.” Then, in the spirit of dark conversation, “or flood.” We stood silent for a moment then laughed. “Are we really talking about this,” I asked? “Yes,” my mother smiled. She smiled the smile of a woman whose parents were born in 1899. A woman who inherited the optimism of pre-industrial life and lived to see humans moving elephant herds to vanishing water holes.

I picked up a small carafe with big red flowers painted on the outside and a shallow insert sitting inside the top rim. “What is this,” we wondered aloud, leaving the gloomy moment behind. We turned it over, removed the ceramic insert and looked inside. An employee in a red shirt came by and explained that it was for keeping dip warm or cool. You put water in the bottom to control the temperature of the dip in the shallow dish, he said.

Of course! A water bath for a spot of creamy dip. All clean lines and bold colors, it would look good on a red runner in the middle of a white tablecloth at a new year's party in the suburbs. A woman in a small black dress could pick up a baby carrot, shaved to smooth perfection, and coat it with onion dip, appreciating without really noticing, the cool freshness of dip on carrot as she bit down. So good, that carrot with dip might be, that it would cause her to reach in again with another carrot, unaware of the ice cubes melting to cool water just below the dip, a small bath of thermostat hidden behind those cheerful red flowers. "Happy New Year," she might say to a dear friend as she turned from the table. "You must try this dip!"

In 1899, there were 12 million elephants in the world. Today there are 350,000, most of them on the move in search of cool water.

Ancestors

A year ago, when my mother was turning 90, she took her four children through her house to talk about "the things"--all the things that we would, someday, inherit. On the sunny morning after that talk, I found myself unexpectedly claiming a chair. My siblings didn't object. No one else wanted it; it is the ugliest chair in the world.

"I bought this at an auction," my mother reminded us on the tour, her hand stroking the wool headrest. The four of us stood in a semi-circle around the chair. It's a rocking chair without rockers: a tight-looking wooden frame that sits on a fixed base and bounces back and forth on springs like a piece of playground equipment. The tall, narrow back, the flat seat and the ornate wooden arms are upholstered in a hooked rug with big maroon flowers. Who puts a hooked rug on a rocking chair, we have asked her for years?

"Did anyone actually bid against you," I asked during the tour? My mother didn't answer, but edged around the front and sat down, her unflappable smile a forcefield against family derision. She has never stopped being pleased with herself for that purchase.

My chair epiphany began early the next morning. I was sitting lotus in the living room near a corner that has become an eddy for relics. The bookshelves in that corner are bowed under the weight of two sets of encyclopedias: the World Book Encyclopedia with green bindings all lined up in numerical order, and the Encyclopedia Britannica with maroon bindings lined up alphabetically. Stacks of picture books too beautiful to give away but not used enough to keep, pile up on the top shelf, and there's a little basket of hand carved wooden animals I bought on a trip to Czechoslovakia before it was divided

into two countries, before it joined the world economy. The entire basket of animals may have cost a dollar back then.

The faded plastic globe from my childhood floats in that eddy, the USSR stretching around the top, Germany united as one country, Czechoslovakia still one. And on the floor beside the ugly chair, a simple country scene in needlepoint fills a big picture frame. My great grandmother did that embroidery at a time when the world was mostly simple country scenes. It leans against the bookshelf, facing away from the window so it won't fade in the sun. The corner is a forgotten part of the room--a shrine to the past, without adoring crowds. And front and center of it all, like a gargoyle guarding the entrance to a library, is the ugliest chair in the world.

On that morning I was feet away seeking quiet nirvana. I breathed into the past, back beyond the ticking clock that had belonged to my father's family, beyond the portraits of my mother's ancestors that hung on the walls, beyond the room, breathing gently into my mother's 90 years. But the chair called. "Come, come, come" it said to me with my mother's smiling face. It was louder than the clock, more insistent than the eyes.

I knew I would peek. And then I did. I peeked. There it was in the sunlight and somehow, I found myself easing my body into the seat, leaning back against the thick hooked rug. It was, I found, surprisingly comfortable. The wool on the arms had frayed and slipped and my mother had wrapped white thread around and around in a tight spiral to hold it all together--a time-consuming labor of love.

I was alone in the room on that morning, but not quite alone. The solemn faces of the ancestors in their high collars and styled hair peered quietly out of their frames, each one of them watching me rock back and forth. They are, the story goes, brother and sister.

They could be 20 in those paintings, just leaving the saucy sarcasm of their teen years behind. What would they say if their eyes could move, I thought back then, if they could look at each other, raise an eyebrow, tilt their heads? Would they recognize anything in that room? Would they, as my sisters and I had, roll their eyes at the ugly chair? Or did they, I wondered, watch with compassion when my mother came in as she sometimes did, to sit quietly in this corner?

The ticking clock hangs over a small sewing table that came from my mother's grandparents' house--the grandmother who embroidered the country scene in the frame on the floor. Did she keep her colorful yarn in that table? Her husband was a bishop in the Moravian church, by all accounts an enormous man who required an enormous chair made especially for him. On that sunny morning a year ago, the big chair sat in a glow of ancestral heft in the other corner of my mother's living room. When did he sit in that chair, I wondered? Did they talk while she stitched? Did the big man read scripture out loud as his wife did needlepoint in the evening?

When my son was about seven, when he was beginning to realize that he is small in the grand span of time, he talked about people who are "on the line" with him. It took some conversation for me to glean that he meant the ancestors behind him and the unborns ahead of him. He was grappling with the continuum of life that has made his life possible and meaningful. Now, years later, he knows these ancestors on the wall are "on the line" with him. He knows the family stories of others on the line--the ancestors buried under identical flat stones in the Moravian graveyard, each with just a few simple lines of text, because Moravians believe that everyone is equal in death. Those rows and rows of people rendered equal in death, have captivated my son.

On the morning of my epiphany I sat in the ugly chair and pushed myself back and forth slowly, breathing into a memory, a gliding rocker I bought at a thrift shop years before to rock my babies on my own front porch. Is that why my mother bought that chair I wondered then? Does she have rocking memories? I noticed that my elbows sat nicely on the arms. I could hold a book in my hands, I realized, rest my elbows on the arms and the book would be in perfect position for my bifocals. Did my mother know that? Like my mother, I am short, and the contours of the hooked rug curved perfectly for my body. This chair fits us, I remember thinking. She must know that.

Now, a year later, my mother is turning 91. From my own living room nearly 3,000 miles away, I close my eyes and breathe myself back to the morning a year ago in that corner when I knew, suddenly, that I wanted to inherit the ugliest chair in the world. I remember how the thick wool felt against my back, I remember the quiet of the room. I remember that suddenly, the chair was not a chair at all, it was a messenger. I looked around the room then as I heard that chair, or maybe it was the clock, or maybe the ancestors, whispering to me, my siblings, my children–to all of us who are ancestors-in-training for the short time before we are rendered equal. The ugly chair was calling me backward and forward and I knew, in that moment, that before long I would be telling my children that their grandmother bought this chair, this family treasure, at an auction. She used to sit, I knew I would tell them, in a patch of sun in the corner, and rock back and forth.

We Reluctant Soccer Moms

We don't know what "off-sides" means. We never have enough warm clothes. We can't tell you the score. We are relieved when our children are sitting on the bench. And we hate selling beef jerky.

We are the reluctant soccer moms, the women who never dreamed that their soft, fuzzy-headed, sweet-smelling, smiling, gurgling babies could turn into ferocious midfielders, demonic left-backs. Or something called striker. What mom yearns for her kid to be a striker?

It starts gently, this soccer thing. Some dad gets a pick-up game going in the neighborhood and it's all fun and neighborly until suddenly, it isn't. Suddenly, it's competitive and our kids want to play real soccer. Real soccer with practices and a team. So we find a team. A parent volunteers to coach, kids come together and practice once, maybe twice a week. A game on Saturday close to home. It's sunny and warm, the field is full of love. The sideline conversation is light and joyful.

Except for that one outlier, that big, mouthy type-A dad over there screaming at his kid. "Push up, buddy! Push up! Drop back! Get out there! Get in there! Get over there! Make the play! Pass the ball! Go!" Go somewhere, do something, be someone. Be the best, be the fastest, get all the goals, stop all the goals. Do something. Anything. Anything you are not doing, anyone you are not being, anything that's not going on right now, make that happen out there before I scramble onto that field and make that goal myself.

Check his shoe, there, buddy-dad, we moms grumble. While you have your mouth open, tell him to tie his shoe.

Reluctant soccer moms care more about having their kid finish the game intact than they do about winning. They want the shoes tied and the shin guards securely in place. They want their kids to guard someone smaller, not bigger. They want their kids to turn away at the last minute if they are going to be run down by a linebacker. Reluctant soccer moms like it when their kids cycle out of a game. It's a reprieve from the fear of concussions, bloody noses, cleats on ankles, bashed teeth. When our kids are sitting on the sidelines we can truly relax, turn to the other moms and talk.

Unfortunately, at no point in time are all the kids on the sideline at once, freeing all the reluctant soccer moms to talk unencumbered. So, we talk in shifts: the mom with the kid on the sideline looking at the mom with the kid in the game, who is looking at the field. Or, let's be honest, she's not looking at the field, she is looking at her kid. Reluctant soccer moms know that if they turn away for a moment, their kid is going to break something.

Not long after real, competitive games start, soccer kids get a massive flush of adrenaline and team spirit. They want more. Better players, more practices, more games. Here is where the soccer mom culling begins. The soccer mom heroines just say no. They take their kids back to the field with the volunteer coaches and (mostly) love on the sidelines. The zealot soccer moms (and there are plenty) step forward. They volunteer to manage teams, to carpool, to bring snacks. (This is also the mom who does the science fair projects. Just so we are clear here. Just so we all know who we're dealing with.) A

zealot soccer mom is a valuable commodity. And of course, if she makes herself valuable early on, it's likely that her kid will get picked for a team.

The reluctant soccer moms groan but say yes. They take their kids to formal try-outs, they pay money to a soccer club, which hires a coach, they pay for uniforms, and they sign papers that promise their kids will take soccer seriously, be at almost every practice, be at games. At games all year round, in cities far, far from home. Hours from home. Motel overnights from home. Because there are only 400,000 people living in the Spokane Metropolitan Area and that is not enough to provide opponent teams for all the kid soccer teams in Spokane. There simply aren't enough kids in a city of nearly half a million people, to play meaningful soccer.

Okay, I'm veering into sarcasm and we're not talking about human rights or social justice here, challenges where the often-limited ability to make progress might call for sarcasm about human nature and political will. We're talking about youth soccer. This topic does not require sarcasm. Let me redirect to a factual account.

What happens is that soccer takes on a life of its own. Coaches who make money think they must enhance the player experience. So, they add a skills training practice to the weekly schedule, a third evening of practice. They sign up for tournaments that begin on Friday and run through Sunday. They have annual try-outs for these clubs, which makes kids want to get in. Who doesn't want to be picked? A reluctant soccer mom has no idea from year-to-year, what clubs exist or how to find them. We just know that if our kid wants to play high level soccer, we had better find a club tryout and have our kid there, on the right field at the right time on the right evening.

Our kid makes a team and there is some (selective) rejoicing at home. We pay all the dues; we buy the uniform and take our kids to practices and games. And then one day, the team manager (who is often a formerly reluctant mom) announces that the kids are cold on the sidelines and the team is going to buy a big tent to keep the kids warm when they are not playing. No reluctant mom ever seems to wonder aloud to the right people why kids are playing soccer in the snow. Reluctant moms who have, reluctantly, bought into the soccer conglomerate, are reluctant to turn around and question corporate decisions.

And so we find ourselves holding boxes of beef jerky in small, shriveled packages, the shrink wrap clinging to every muscle and sinew of the cow. We are expected to sell this cow, lots of this cow, to pay for the tent that will keep our kids warm. No one thinks that maybe the team should buy a cow to put in the tent, to keep the kids warm. And that excellent idea is just not something a reluctant soccer mom is going to say out loud. That would out her as reluctant and no kid wants a mom who is actively reluctant about soccer. Or reluctant about selling cow, which of course some reluctant soccer moms are because they, themselves, don't eat meat. So occasionally we reluctant, non-meat-eating soccer moms find ourselves selling meat to pay for a tent to keep our kids warm while they play soccer in the snow. A conundrum in all directions.

In end, of course, reluctant soccer moms must learn something about the game. The most important, and sometimes the only soccer rule that a reluctant soccer mom will learn is "off-sides." Off-sides is the elephant in the rule room in soccer. The rule that no one understands, and everyone breaks. The off-sides rule prevents an offensive player from one team from standing in front of the goal, behind the opposing team's defensive

players, and waiting for the ball. Because a player standing in from of the goal could kick the ball into the goal and score. Which, of course, is the whole point of the game. To score. The point of the game is for the offensive players to kick the ball into the other team's goal.

A reluctant soccer mom will have many conversations with her soccer-playing children as she sits through games where the combined score never reaches four. Why can't you just score, she will ask? Those kid-eyes will roll, deep sighs will issue, "off-sides" will come up and the reluctant mom will suggest that this rule does not benefit the spectators or the players. We are both there to see goals, she will say. The kid will explain earnestly about fairness, about this move and that play, this rule and that, maybe a little about a spectacular off-sides avoidance move by a European team in game three of last year's World Cup. The reluctant soccer mom will listen but the truth is, the bottom line truth for the reluctant soccer mom is that she is just making conversation with her kid, who has survived another game intact. That, the reluctant soccer mom will eventually decide, is her job. To enjoy a conversation with her soccer-obsessed kid as they both move inexorably through the soccer years.

Pandemic Growth Spurt

Ten weeks into our pandemic homestay and I am almost an empty nester. My youngest son was 13 and five months when the governor issued his stay-at-home order. He is 13 and almost eight months now. That difference, as it turns out, is monumental.

This son has always been a people person. He can read the emotional content of a room instinctively. He knows who needs a conversation, a word of encouragement, he knows who needs a hug. Never interested in things, his focus is people. And for 13 years and five months, his primary focus was me.

"Hi Ma, what're ya doing," he would ask, stopping on the way by to nod appreciatively at my work? More often than not he would lean in and listen to the answer, give me a pat on the back and a "nice job." Or passing by he would stop and wrap his arms around me for a quick hug, waiting for me to wrap back before disentangling, leaving me with a suffusion of the soft feel and smell of son. He's the one who asked the kind of questions I asked as a child: would you rather be rich or famous? Would you give up your life to solve world hunger? How much would you pay to save the whales? He has never wanted material things; he has always been able to imagine outside his own life. It intrigues and delights me.

Eight weeks ago, this son was shorter than I am. Today he is taller. Eight weeks ago, his voice was the high, light voice I have known for 13 years. Today it is a deep, resonant sound. Today I can't tell the difference between this son and my 17-year-old as they talk in the other room.

And they talk, which I should love. I should love hearing them build on an idea until they are laughing with the absurdity of what they have imagined. I should love

hearing them talk about school, about soccer, showing each other moves, grabbing a ball and dribbling around chairs. I should love hearing their predictable jousting, the older one full of facts, the younger one dismissing them with a laugh. I should love all the talking and laughing. But eight weeks ago, my youngest son talked and laughed with me. I was his person. His brother was another human who occupied space in the house. Today, his brother is his person. Together in the same small house, often the same room, for ten weeks, they have discovered each other. They have developed a secret language, the language of the low voices, the laugh of the basso profundos, the knowing looks of the people who can see each other over the top of my head.

This son used to be a game for his older brother. His brother would drive small, remote controlled cars up to this son as he lay on the floor. The car would whiz up, the younger son would laugh and reach for it, the older son would back it up, just out of reach--a boy dangling a ball of yarn in front of a cat. I laughed but watched with a proprietary mama eye, making sure this son didn't a become a toy.

The first time they actually talked with each other, it felt as though we had a real family. "Look," they commanded each other, focusing on something together. They began to call each other by name, to wander around the house looking for each other. Suddenly, we were all communicating independently. We had linear relationships with each other. It was surprisingly satisfying. And this new relationship they have, this new pandemic closeness should also feel satisfying. They have found each other. They are friends. It's what we would want, my husband and I, if we were both to die of the virus.

Strangely, it feels like the beginning of a long goodbye. Goodbye to the kind of motherhood where I am leading, not following. Where I am a source of wisdom, not just

food. Where at least one of my children thinks I know something more than he does. Goodbye to all of that. Goodbye to the last of the little boy faces, as this son's face takes on structure, begins to show signs of the man he will be. Goodbye to things we have not done for years: to reading out loud, to holding hands, to lying on beds at night listening to free-flowing kid thoughts. Goodbye to Lego creations and forts. He is moving on. I must move on.

Most years, spring creeps in. I look up from admiring the crocuses and the maples have leafed out in full-sized, deep green leaves and I realize, with surprise, that it's truly spring. This year, about five weeks into our homestay, my sons showed me a meme mashup. They asked me to watch a little video and as I watched, they stood back and predicted that I wouldn't understand half the allusions.

"Oh, you won't understand that one, Mom, but keep watching," one said. "She's not going to get this one." "Nah, she won't," they said to each other, over my head. Like a group of doctors discussing a patient who can't hear them. Like neurologists of doom. Like teenagers. Like teenagers all leafed out and ready for spring.

I am not sure what these months would have looked like if we had not all been at home, together. Would they be as close? If so, would I have noticed? Would I have cared?

The other evening I sat in a chair staring out the window at the gorgeous spring evening, feeling the press of the world – the uncertainty of the pandemic, the rolling fear of a hot, smoky, climate change summer, wondering if our new normal will be lived inside, behind masks, behind a line of virologists and firefighters, hoping that at some point it's safe to go outside and live again.

This son watched me for a moment, holding his guinea pig in his lap.

“Are you okay,” he asked? I said I was.

“Are you sad,” he asked? A little.

“Do you need a comfort pig?” No, thank you.

He watched me from across the room. I watched him back. I willed him to think about the hours we spent in a rocker on the front porch that warm October when he was born, about the sticker from *Katy and the Big Snow*, which he stuck on the bathtub faucet more than ten years ago and still sits there today, all faded and tattered. Silently, I urged him to remember the first time he grabbed my arm and wrapped it around his body as we lay in bed, holding it in place with his fleshy little hands.

But those steady eyes just watched me as his hand moved slowly, back and forth across the back of his guinea pig. It was silent in the room, empty and still on the street through the window behind him. We watched each other, my thoughts of yesterday and his thoughts of tomorrow drifting silently between us.

Rope Swing

My sons didn't know, on that sunny summer day. That day, as I stood at the top of a rock cliff holding the knot at the end of a rope swing, paralyzed as my body, mind and spirit played rock, paper, scissors with my mind. My sons, urging me to move, could not hear the debilitating conversation.

"Your body," said my mind, "its better days are behind you." "Your mind," said spirt, "cannot be trusted to protect you." "Your spirit," said body, "succeeds by intoxicating where rational thought should prevail."

I heard them all, each speaking with separate cadences. In that deep breath, the one that has served so well in the past to calm, I heard that immobilizing conversation. I stood there, rope knot in my hand, blue sky above, cold lake below. Beside me, the future, young and full of life, urging me to do something that requires the full commitment of body, mind and spirit.

You can do it, Mom. Just lift your feet.

Don't think, just lift your feet. Lift your feet and let your body do the rest.

It's about timing, Mom. One second you are here and the next you are there in the water.

Grab the rope here, no not like that – like this. They think I don't know how to use a rope swing!

I'm going to tell you an inspiring story, one of them launches. I can't discern the inspiration for the cacophony in my mind.

Just lift your feet. Don't think, just lift your feet. Lift your feet. Lift your feet. Go ahead, lift your feet.

Those faces, momentarily free of teen cynicism and quick sarcasm. Those beautiful, open faces are on my side. They want me to do it, to share the thrill of this afternoon on this lake, swinging from this rope into this blue, blue water in this very moment. These faces are exactly why I must jump and why I can't, why I sag against the tree in defeat at the very moment I feel the muscles in my legs contract in anticipation. These faces assure me that my body will do what it knows to do, my mind will let go, my spirit will take over: my feet will lift and I will swing out in a slow arc, feel the wind pass by, then, as I reach the apex of the arc, I will look around at the mountains, the sky so close, the giant cliffs, the treetops. Time itself will nearly stop until, at the last minute, when the world is too beautiful to wait a moment longer, I will let go of the rope and fall into the water like a like a missile, like an Olympic diver with contoured arms, ribbed abdomen, toned legs, like a teenaged boy with supple bones and the unity of body, mind and spirit as one. Down, down, down I will go and come up clean. Reborn.

Or, I know, as I lean against the tree, mind screaming at body, body shrieking at spirit, spirit braying at mind, that my arms will not hold me for the full swing of the rope. I will break my newly brittle, arthritic neck or pop a shoulder out of its socket. I stand, mind engaged in a furious cost-benefit analysis: thrill versus death, motherhood versus orphans. Those children need you my mind says calmly. What are you trying to prove?

I am not trying to prove anything, I answer angrily. I just want to. Or I don't. Yes, I do.

I stand; I sit; I sigh. I relinquish the rope: can you show me, just one more time, show me? The question confirms their assumption – that I don't know how, that it's a

problem of technique. And they show me. They swing out, turning in mid-air to shout some encouraging words, then all wet and shining, they are climbing back up the rock.

It's easy, really, it's easy.

Look, it's not even that high.

Lift your feet. Don't think just lift your feet.

They don't even know, those shining faces, that they are the reason the stakes are so high. They don't know that long before them, there were rope swings, deep dives, boats and turbulent waters.

Don't think, just lift your feet.

Without warning, I grab the knot and lift my feet. Lift my feet and swing, fully clothed because I didn't expect to jump today, the thick black soles of my sandals slapping the water first. I'm going down, down, down, not like a missile or an Olympic diver or even like an exuberant boy, but like an open umbrella, my clothes pulling up around my face, around my body, arms and legs spread out until suddenly, I am back at the surface and my sons are cheering and I am laughing and the water is clean and cold and the sun is warm and I am reborn.

Only later will they acknowledge the Humpty Dumpty look of my jump, the small swing I really took, the small plop I really made. Gently, the truth will unfold at dinner on the porch.

She did it, they say as we eat.

I don't think I reached the apex, I say. *It's hard to hold onto the rope.*

You can put a knot in the rope, my husband says. *Then you won't slip off.*

Oh, there was a knot, my son says and I know he has been waiting for an opening. He raises his clutched hands above his head to show how fast that knot slipped through my fingers. They are dancing in their chairs now, mimicking me, trading stories in which I am gradually diminished, and they are suddenly heroic. It's a jubilant one-act dinner theater for their father.

She needs to work on her arms. More pull ups.

More, I say? As if I have a pull-up routine. As if I have ever done a complete pull up in my life. I join the play, a bit player with a starring role as a foil. I object without objecting, I let them believe in their pull-ups, their technique, their timing, their strength. I let them believe that who I am today is who I have been forever. I do not tell them how they have changed me, how their very existence started fissures between the unit--body, mind and spirit--that sustained me for years. In this play, all of that is backstory. So I don't tell them their time will come. But it will. One day, if they are lucky enough, they will find themselves standing on that rock in their Humpty Dumpty sandals, ready and not ready, able and not able, to lift their feet and swing out to the very end of the rope, where sky meets water and the mountains look small.

A Marriage That Works

For years he was just my uncle--the man who married my great aunt when her first husband, who said he didn't want children, left her, childless, for a young woman who was pregnant with his child. I never met my first great uncle, but my new great uncle was tall, bone thin, and gray; gray hair, gray skin, gray suits. The only relief in his columnar being was at the bottom. His long, polished black shoes angled out from the bottom of his pressed trousers, like a man stuck in first position in a ballet class for solemn, gray adults.

She was taller and wider, with perfect skin. She wore colorful pencil skirts, drapey cream blouses and a bright jacket thrown casually over her shoulders. Her speaking voice, with its slight southern accent, was deep and melodious. Her humor, like her analysis of life, was dry and surprising. She was 20 years his senior but looked ten years his junior.

They met as professional singers in a chorus in New York, the same chorus where she met her first husband and where that first husband, who so adamantly did not want children, met his second wife who quickly became the mother of his daughter. I mention this again because that betrayal--that he who had not wanted children, had one and she, who had wanted them, didn't--weighed heavily on my aunt. It was only later, after I had laughed at all her wry observations about her first husband, about the new, young wife and the puckish, squirming baby, that I realized how deep a cut she carried. It was the first of many realizations.

My aunt and my new uncle left the muddy drama of their chorus behind and moved to California where she worked as a sales associate at Gumps. In her voice, said with her eyebrows raised in surprise because to find herself working at Gumps was

completely surprising, the word became “Guuuuumps” which conveyed every broken lamp, every toppled display she left in her wake as she moved herself through a high-end department store. Or so she said. It’s possible that she didn’t break a single lamp but lasted long enough in the job to gather some hilarious, self-deprecating stories.

He found a job as an undertaker at a funeral home. It was a perfect fit.

Fortunately, she did not need to go back to work after Gumps. She had money, left to her by a grateful older friend she had cared for in the last years of that friend’s life. Money, as it turns out, papers over. Like spackle on a wall, it smooths the bumpy intersections and sharp nail heads of a marriage made in the heat of anger. I didn’t know that, then, however. I did not see those layers of spackle until much later.

They did everything together, my aunt and uncle. They traveled, they read the same books, they played bridge, and they went out to eat. They dressed up in the middle of the day and went out, always at the same lovely restaurant where the staff knew them and where my uncle flirted with the maître d’, quoting Evelyn Waugh in his erudite, cadaverous way.

Not long after I graduated from college, I spent several weeks with them in California. We talked about family, books, we dressed up and went out to eat, and we celebrated a big achievement for my uncle. He had stopped smoking after decades of heavy smoking.

One afternoon, I cooked with my great aunt. We talked and cooked, I listened to her beautiful voice, I learned about my family. She asked me to run out to the garage and get a can of beans from the shelf. I stepped from the kitchen into the garage and there was my uncle standing in the shadows on the other side of the car bay, in front of the shelves.

A gray man with gray clothes standing silently on gray concrete in a cloud of gray smoke. I stopped for a moment. He wrapped his hand around the cigarette and dropped it to his side.

Cheerfully, ignoring the smoke, I walked toward him, toward the shelves.

"I've come for a can of beans," I said.

I reached out in front of him and he stepped forward, the cigarette behind his back, smoke rising around his shoulders, his face close to mine. In a low gravelly voice, one I had never heard him use, he said, very slowly so I could not miss it, "if you tell your aunt, I will slit your throat."

Beans in hand, I looked up quickly at his watery eyes, his big, rubbery nose and all that sagging gray skin. I had no doubt he could slit my throat. He slit throats for a living.

Back in the kitchen, I opened the beans in silence. My aunt didn't speak either. Could she smell the smoke on me? Did she know? The silence felt interminable and finally my aunt did her Gumps thing: she made a self-effacing joke about cooking--the least domestic woman in the world actually making soup--and we started talking again about family history.

Years later, many months after she died, I found myself replaying that day in the kitchen. I came to realize that if I hadn't been there, she would not have added beans to the soup. She would not have stepped through that door to the garage herself. Because she knew. She knew that just below the spackle of money and self-deprecating jokes, of fancy gray suits and pencil skirts, was a marriage born when this beautiful, childless woman found herself abandoned by the man she loved. Nearly a generation older than

her new husband, she was making it work. She dressed up and went out in the world, pretending that he didn't drink, that he had quit smoking, that he didn't pucker his mouth and arrange his wrinkles in obsequious layers as he leaned in too close, every single day at 12:15 pm to quote Evelyn Waugh to the maître d' at their restaurant.

Peace of Quilts

Quiet rules at the fabric store on Main Street in Bozeman, Montana. Past the display of summer colors in the window, I could see the shadow of people moving slowly around inside the store. Small spotlights shined clear light on patches of fabric. I paced outside, strangely intimidated. Quilters, I believed then, are calm people with capacity for gentle, extended consideration. One week before I stood there on the sidewalk I had stepped out of my car after a long drive from New York City, to begin a new life in Bozeman. All the way across the country, both bringing and shedding my New York City anxiety, I had been thinking about quilts.

Temple Grandin, a high-functioning autistic and consultant in livestock handling equipment design and animal management, invented a "Hug Machine" for people, modeled after the containers used to pacify cattle during immunizations. It recognizes the calming properties of a full-body hug. Quilts are like that. Made of three layers, two cotton layers on either side of cotton batting, all sewn together in a pattern heavy with thread, quilts add a layer of reassuring heft to the covers on a bed. They provide a cocoon at night and a buffer against the morning. They are colors and patterns, soft smooth cotton ringed with a border that consolidates the pieces into a textile tableau that begs the body to relax.

It wasn't my job that made New York city stressful, it was the incessant noise, the hurry, and the need to be on constant alert. At the same time that New Yorkers build a private bubble around them that allows them to navigate a sidewalk without seeming to notice the hundreds of people walking beside them, they are also deeply aware of every potential threat: a pickpocket, a purse-stealer, someone with a bright smile eager to play a

trick. During my first week in New York I was lured by a bright smile into a sidewalk shell game where I lost $20. For the few moments when I thought I could keep up with the ball under three moving cups, I was laughing with everyone around me. Bright Smile, the beaming man who had invited me into the game and his colleagues made me feel so good about this fun challenge that I would have shelled out another $20. But a police officer came around the corner and Bright Smile and his board game disappeared, leaving me alone on the sidewalk with the sudden realization that I had been played. They were laughing at me, not with me. It was not the last time I saw a swindling underway, but it was a good lesson to learn in the first week in New York: always suspect everyone.

The interview for my new job in Bozeman began in a conference room near the top floor of a tall office building in New York City. A dapper lawyer with a name that harkens back to horse drawn carriages and bloody clashes with Native Americans and a Montanan, a man big and hairy enough to pass for a grizzly bear in New York City, sat on one side of a table. I sat on the other. By the time I stood to leave, I knew I would be making a trip to Montana for a full interview. It was there in Montana, after dinner on the last evening, as a rainstorm blew through then a full rainbow stretched across the snow-capped Spanish Peaks, I knew, deeply knew, that I needed to relax.

There were quilts on the last night of my Montana interview. I both saw them and didn't see them hung on the wall at the big meeting. Afterwards, I could not summon a single image and yet, somehow, they hung in my mind. I felt them in my hands, the soft fabric broken by lines of stitches. I saw them on the walls of my New York apartment when I got back, where I could imagine a splash of bright fabric hanging over the couch. They were there with the rainbow and the mountains. It was a surprise intrusion, the idea

that I might quilt. For years quilting, if I thought of it at all, was something other people did, something I considered pointless--cutting cloth apart to sew it back together--a craft activity done by women who had nothing but time and wanted to talk. I didn't have time--I didn't ever have time--and I had come to understand that I wanted silence. Absolute, complete silence.

The sound of the human voice can be the most welcoming sound in the world, a single voice calling out warmly, inquiring about life, family, plans, books. The sound of 1.6 million voices, everyone on the island of Manhattan, is deafening. For nearly ten years I stepped out the door of my apartment building every morning into the fast-moving mass of humanity flowing along the sidewalk. New Yorkers walking in a group are like commuters in a car, each one encased in an individual thought bubble, aware of but uninvolved with the others. And if everyone moves at the same pace, there is no need to make contact with anyone else. As a newcomer, it takes time to join that flow of people, to stop deflecting, halting, pardoning when the new pace doesn't fit with the group. And, I found, even if these often-open New York mouths are closed, as they typically are when they walk in individual cocoons, the sound of humanity is overpowering. People leaning on horns, revving cars, busses stopping and starting, the subway screeching to a stop under my building--the voices of transportation carrying people uptown and downtown, across town, and out of town.

It took me years to learn that sanity in such a city depends on an ability to live inside your own bubble, following your own personal vectors between home and work, work and play, joining the average idle speed of the city, tuning out the other million people who are following their own vectors. The city that births such creativity in the arts

almost demands that its inhabitants protect themselves from each other with a face that says “don’t bother me.” The one exception, inside the office buildings where receptionists wait to connect you with the person you are there to see, where big, comfortable chairs welcome you to sit and wait while the person you are there to see makes her way to the front lobby, is actually deeply deceptive. The chairs look like a place for a meditation in silence, but the tenor of those office buildings is, in spite of the quiet, frenetic. In all those years, in and out of all those lobbies and big, comfortable chairs, I found no way to relax while waiting for a meeting with someone who works in an office building with a lobby five times the size of my living room.

I liked living in New York City and I thought I was happy. But there were small inklings of stress. The time I arrived 15 minutes late for an appointment, convulsed with sobs because I was late, because I couldn’t control the speed of the subway, the speed of the mass of people climbing up the stairs out of the subway station, the speed of people moving along the sidewalk, the speed of the elevator in the building. So much I couldn’t control determined a schedule I needed to control.

“Come in, come in,” the man at my meeting said as he opened the door. “Okay, we won’t tell anyone about this.” This being the tearful mess of anxiety at his door. New Yorkers don’t admit, or maybe they don’t even see, the anxious state of their own lives. Ninety percent of the time, I didn’t see it either. I thrived without ever knowing I wasn’t. Until I reached Montana where splashes of color hung on the walls and rainbows spread out over snow-capped mountains.

Finally, I opened the door and stepped into the fabric store. It was like an art studio without the chaos. Along every wall bolts of fabric nestled neatly together like

books on a bookshelf, browns fading to golds which faded to yellow and white. A kaleidoscope rainbow moving around the edges of the room. Big, spools of cotton thread in rich colors covered the top of a cabinet like a Kandinsky sculpture, if Kandinsky had been a sculptor. In time I understood that these colors, these patterns were exquisite. The women in this shop were quiet because this was inventory to revere. These were the intriguing, the whimsical, the subtle fabric designs in colors found on the most complex color wheels. To purchase these colors, these designs, required thought and quiet and time. I watched these women move quietly around the perimeter, tilting their heads a little as they looked at a clutch of colors, as though imagining this red with that orange. They were calm and unhurried. Even the sounds of traffic on Main Street faded as the door closed behind me.

For a long time, I thought it was the product, the finished quilt that kept me going. I imagined lying in bed under something I had created, wrapped in the heavy hug of a blanket of colors only I could have envisioned together. But I had to make the quilt to enjoy that dream. Without a sewing machine, without a needle, or thread or knowledge of any kind, without a shred of patience or even the physical ability to sit still, I had to make a quilt if I wanted to wake up swaddled in my own creativity. The third time I went into the store, hesitantly, very gingerly, keeping the raw New York energy in check, I threw myself on the mercy of the kind women behind the counter. I want to make a quilt, I have never made a quilt, I need something easy but also challenging, and definitely beautiful– it has to be beautiful, no not a small one, I want to make a big one, one I can actually use on my bed. No, I don't have time for a class (or interest or patience, and the truth is but I know enough to not say this out loud, I could not stand to listen to someone talk about

something as tedious as quilting, and it's entirely possible that I will toss the sewing machine out the front door the first time the thread jams and we all know it's going to jam. This quilt? I want to figure it out on my own and I don't want to hear any more than two voices at a time for the first six months I'm here, so no, I am not interested in a class, thank you). In the silence of my Bozeman apartment I looked through my new book and picked a simple but beautiful country quilt pattern then went back to the fabric store and bought fabric.

Very gradually, I learned that stepping into the fabric shop was like stepping out the door of my apartment building onto the sidewalk in New York. There, I set my eyes for distance and disappeared into my own thoughts as I zig-zagged my way uptown, keenly aware of every human within four feet of me. In the fabric shop, I set my eyes for colors and made my way around the perimeter of the store looking at fabric, pinging with gentle sonar off others who were doing the same.

The quest for quilt fabric is, inherently, a solitary, deeply creative, deeply personal process. I didn't know it until much later, when I began going to quilt shows and when I began to see quilts not as blankets but as art, that every quilt represents one person's distinct and perfect understanding of shapes and colors. Part of being a child is being special and when I was young, people with authority told me I was special. Mr. Rogers, for example, would look right out of the television, into my eyes, and tell me I was special–there was no one else in the world like me, he said. The pastor of the church where my mother took my family told us we were all distinct reflections of God's love. In time, I didn't believe either of them. I didn't believe that humans were that different. From a distance, we all look alike, act alike, move alike. From the center of the mass of

1.6 million people moving along the sidewalk in New York in the morning ritual of going to work, we all look alike. We are all alike

But as I spent quiet time in the fabric shop, as I began to crave the silence and the calm, I became addicted to the act of choosing patterns and colors, of realizing what seemed trite to me, what seemed natural, what choices felt like a bold and daring expansion of artistic expression. I began to feel an exuberance in mixing and matching colors, as though I had a special power to put things together in a way that no one else imagined. This quilt would not only be mine, it would be me. Mr. Rogers was right.

I set up on my dining room table in front of a picture window that looked out on the street. Dave, the mailman-woodworker lived across the street although by the time I met him he was, in spirit, Dave the woodworker-mailman. He was still walking 12.5 miles a day delivering mail to Bozeman neighborhoods when I moved in, but his mind had moved on to full-time woodworking. After his shift he would come home to craft translucently thin wooden bowls on a lathe in his workshop. Not long after I moved in, he retired from the Postal Service. He at his lathe and I at my sewing machine; we were the artistic section of our block.

It was as I had imagined. I had my stack of fabric, a used sewing machine I had bought from someone who upgraded, my cotton thread (polyester thread will tear cotton fabric), a cloth cutter (which looks like a pizza cutter), a seam ripper (for ripping out mistakes--I bought a sturdy one), a rubber pad with ruler markings along the edges (because, as I would learn, it’s important to cut the fabric straight and exactly the right size). Every day after work I would take a bicycle ride--the luxurious, rhythmic buffer between work and art--then settle in at the table, looking over my sewing machine

through the big picture window at my quiet neighborhood. Two quilts became four. Four became five, five became eight and eight became twelve as leaves fell off the maples in my front yard, as snow began to fall, as the temperature dropped and dropped and dropped, to minus 30 degrees.

Finally, I laid my first finished quilt on the floor of my apartment. No one knew that I left work and went home to gaze at my quilt all evening, for days. Even as I started the next, the first one sat on the floor nearby. The perfect colors arranged in blocks, the long lines of thread uniting three layers, the red border with those last slow hand stitches that finish the final inch, tucked between the seams. The stillness of a completed quilt, the quiet moment when we, the quilt and I, sit together in the living room, completely satiated.

Twenty years have passed now since I spread that quilt on the floor. I have given away most of my quilts. It took some time to make that first gift because, as I found, giving someone a homemade quilt is an act of courage and an act of self-affirmation. I made a quilt. I made this quilt for you. I made this quilt and I want you to have it. I made this quilt because I come from New York. Because the room was quiet, the colors were perfect, the cloth was soft, and there was a rainbow across the mountains in the early evening sun.

Dog Walkers

It's the incongruity that stops me. I pedal around the corner to see a perfectly shingled mansion with a faux New England stone wall in front (I can tell because the stones are set, perfectly, in concrete), the strip of weed-free lawn between the wall and the street exactly one inch high. Beyond the stone wall I can see the ocean stretching out toward Europe. And there, the only relief on that perfect sliver of grass, is the truth of Americans and their dogs. The whole truth, in all its cognitive dissonance, spread out in a patch of sunshine.

There we have two identical black labs standing next to each other in deep blue chest harnesses with red embroidered decorations. Their coats are shiny, eyes vibrant, bodies full of alert animal health, like a splendid team of horses. They are not straining, but looking forward, actively ignoring events at the other end of the leash where, with his back to me, a man has bent over to reach out, reach out with a plastic bag wrapped over his hand, reach out just far enough to strain his belt and separate the hem of his shirt from the top of his shorts. The gap widens as he reaches, revealing a narrow swath of gleaming white derriere. Derriere is an elegant French word befitting the setting, if not the act.

The man is clearly of means. The harnesses alone speak of disposable income; the woven belt is, obviously, useless. French is appropriate here because, having put some effort into his outfit, this man would be shocked to read an account of intimate identifying marks or even crassly descriptive words like rear or backside or butt, applied to him. And yet, there he is, showing to the public what he might never agree to share if asked, doing in public for a dog what he might never do in private for another human.

By now, as you may be able to tell, I have stopped across the street. I am pretending to look at the graveyard nearby, a picturesque and peaceful place in today's sunshine. As I inspect the graves, I see in my peripheral vision that, having pawed around after every small bit, leaving telltale smears on the grass, the man has slung the warm solids in their little plastic bag around the harness on the near dog. Does he have an aversion to carrying this load? Is it mere convenience? A punishment? As if a dog with a bag of smells bobbing around its neck all the way home might reconsider the whole need to poop ever again.

This man, I wonder, as I let my eyes run across the graveyard for a minute, did he change his own child's diapers? Will he, when the time comes, provide for his loved ones the very service he is, right now, providing for his dogs?

Finally, the whole ritual complete, he stands upright, hooks his finger inside the back of his shorts and hikes them up. Voila! He knows! He knows he has a problem with the shorts. He may not know the magnitude, he may not know the full ramifications, but he knows he has a problem.

I am not a dog owner. The truth is that having been charged, knocked down and run over by a snarling, snapping German Shepherd as a young girl, I am a bit afraid of dogs. And, while some people see potty training as the sad end of baby dependence, I was actually happy when my children took on responsibility for cleaning up after themselves. Some people seem to think that potty training is like going through labor: in the bliss of holding a newborn child, you forget about the pain. Similarly, they seem to say, the smiles, the involuntary wiggles, the cooing, then the joy of watching those little minds at work, reduce the hundreds of diapers (and near misses) to an inconsequential

memory. There must be some truth to that because there's a common timeline in growing families: Three or four years after the last child is out of diapers, when the family has settled into a routine, when the mother has regained her good cheer, when things seem to be under control, almost inexplicably, they get a dog. Having cleaned up poop for five years straight, the parents buy something to ensure they will be cleaning up poop for another ten. In public. On the side of the road, in the woods, on the sidewalk, from other people's front lawns, they will be cleaning up poop for another decade.

What really happens, of course, is that the kids want a dog. Somehow, even kids with siblings, with busy sports schedules and enough friends feel a dog void. I can only speculate because I have never had a dog and never wanted a dog. Is it a lack of something? Lack of something that a dog, and only a dog can offer? Attention? Need? Unconditional love?

Or is there a silent psychological angle? Maybe, not long after the mother and child have their first significant conflict, the child begins to recognize that having a younger, smaller, needier being around would diffuse the concentration of attention. Or maybe it's as simple as evolutionary love.

Ecologist Carl Safina notes in *Beyond Words* that "all dogs were domesticated from free-living gray wolves." As wolves spent more time around humans, the friendly wolves got food. "Eventually they were regulars around camps, started guarding human camps as their territories, and began to tag along when humans went hunting. Those friendly genes proliferated. . . .humans and dogs, it appears, learned to love each other in deep, genetic ways."

The front end of a dog is, admittedly, deeply appealing. Puppy smiles, big eyes, all love and play. This is the selling end of the animal, the end on display in the online ads, at the pet store and the Humane Society where the product of the other end is strategically swept away. But understand that dogs are ecosystems: there are inputs and outputs, two ends of a dog.

My man on the sliver of perfect grass has walked off down the street. In spite of the incongruity, I have to admire his honesty. He is not one of those people who never carries bags, who has perfected the surprised look, as if it never occurred to him that his dogs would do outside what he has trained them to do. “Oh! I left my bag in the car. I’ll have to pick it up on the way back.” He is not one of those dog owners whose dogs are active at the beginning of the walk, who ties off the bag and takes it to the nearest residential garbage can, which is often right outside the back door of the house they’re passing. “Do you think this is okay,” this kind of dog owner might ask with a rhetorical laugh?

And this man actually lets his dogs walk when they are out on a walk, unlike the woman who passes through my neighborhood everyday carrying two fluffy, white pooches in a pouch slung around her neck. She holds the two pooch pouches, one hand under each pouch, each pooch facing forward, giving new meaning to the term “walking my dogs.” Do her dogs have an embarrassing intestinal problem that requires them to be confined to a bucket at all times? Or is she simply saving herself the indignity of bending over?

And my man in the shorts does seem to know that his dogs have the physical capacity to make the walk he asks of them. A year ago in my neighborhood, I watched an

end-of-life test of wills play out on the sidewalk. The Beagle Dragger, as my family called him, a statuesque man in his seventies, with thick white hair and a truly impressive white mustache, pulled his ancient beagle down the sidewalk every afternoon. The dog was stiff and white-haired, rocking along at the very end of an extendable leash. They were not actually on the same walk--the man walking with a fierce commitment to life and the dog ready to give up. But this man, this unlikely caregiver, stopped to clean the sidewalk as needed. We did not like the way this man dragged his dog along behind him, but we could tell: this man changed diapers. This man took care of his wife in her last years. This man walked with an iron will to live. Most critical, unlike the man with the team of splendid black labs, this man wore clothing that worked at the very busy end of a failing dog.

As long as we are making lifestyle deductions about people based on their relationships with animals, consider the couple with a clear routine. Three of them walk: he, she, and the dog. He holds the leash; she carries the plastic bags and fills them when there's product. I guess we know who changed the diapers in that family. "Here you go," I can imagine this man laughing as he handed the full-diapered baby to his willing wife.

Only once have I had to speak about this issue to a total stranger. From inside my house one afternoon, I saw a woman and her dog stop and leave something on my front lawn. She did not, as is the typical pattern, reach into her pocket for a bag as her dog squatted beside my tree. She simply stood on the sidewalk, at the other end of the leash, and watched. There was no guilt on her face, no looking around surreptitiously to find out whether anyone was looking. No shuffling or turning away until the dog had finished, and paws had scuffed the grass a little in a pathetic and ineffective evolutionary remnant

of decorum. She simply stood still watching the dog, then she turned, and they walked off.

Out the front door I went with full indignation rising.

"Hi, hello, hello there! You need to clean up after your dog," I called from the porch.

"I don't have a bag," she said. No bag. What kind of dog owner leaves home without a bag? Someone who thinks her dog produces gold nuggets. That's who.

"Well hold on, I'll get you one," I said as I turned to go back in the house. Would she wait? Or would she leave those gold nuggets for me?

She waited. I gave her a blue newspaper bag, the long, skinny kind that holds a rolled newspaper in the morning and has room for a solid knot above a pile of nuggets. Actually, I have to hand it to this woman. She owned it all without pretending, without being defensive. She smiled, she thanked me for the bag, she picked up those nuggets and took them with her. Which was good because I was working up to say no if she asked if she could put that load in my trash bin on that hot summer evening. It was Tuesday evening. Trash goes out Tuesday morning in my neighborhood.

Finally, a threesome jogging around the corner in my neighborhood. A father pushing just one child in a double stroller. Half the stroller is light with the baby's clothing and half is dark with the blue of the canvas. Beside them is a little dog jogging along happily with the man. The dog's face is split in two: half white, half tan. I have seen people who look like their dogs and dogs who look like their people. I have never seen a dog that looks like its family tableau. I am certain they didn't know it and I was tempted to let tell them. Had I been able to make it sound as natural as "I like your coat,"

I would have. “Good evening. Your dog looks a bit like your family. Or maybe it’s just the stroller. Yes, that’s it, the dog’s head looks very much like your stroller, bifurcated down the middle, with your baby there on just one side. Remarkable, really. Remarkable that you found a dog that looks like your family out jogging.”

In the end, it’s not the man with the sagging shorts or the woman with pooch pouches who captivates me, it’s the Beagle Dragger I think about most. This man, who no longer walks through my neighborhood, was so obviously interested in living. But one day, I imagine, his dog stopped walking. Perhaps that little dog saw the leash come off the hook near the door at the usual afternoon hour and sat down on the living room rug. Perhaps he looked away when the tall man said “walk.” Then looked back to see if the man understood. I like to think the man understood. I like to think that he softened, that he turned and hung the leash back on the hook, that he bent down and rubbed his hand along that skinny beagle frame. I like to think that the dog exhaled, rolled onto its side and relaxed.

Now, I imagine, this man lives alone in his quiet house, the purpose gone from the rooms. Perhaps he is walking another route, someone else’s sidewalk, all alone. Perhaps he is weighing the idea of getting another dog: a young dog who will ask him to scamper around the neighborhood and outlive him by years, a middle aged dog who has both maturity and energy, or a dog who is his contemporary, who will have been raised by someone else, have someone else’s predilections and habits but who will be compatible company. I keep expecting him to come walking by on my house on a summer evening, back straight, white mustache gleaming, feet reaching out to devour the sidewalk with

military precision, a new companion trotting along beside him and the corner of a blue newspaper bag peeking out of his pocket.

Do-It-Yourself Guys

The first thing my brother noticed when he visited my family some years ago was the knob on a folding door.

"Oh," he said, "if you moved this knob to the other panel it would be much easier to work this door."

I laughed, as though it made any difference. That door was always open, children's books and art supplies always spilling out. I was sure that with enough nagging, my kids would learn to close that door.

Six years later, after I had painted over all the dirty handprints left in coaxing the door open and closed, I moved the knob to the other side. Now the door slides smoothly and the only handprints are on the knob. I had fought with that door for years without understanding that it was a problem with the door. I thought it was a problem with my kids.

My brother is like many do-it-yourself guys. He sees mechanical solutions where others don't even know there's a problem. In some ways he is hardly different from the rest of us. We all see life through the lens of our aptitudes, our skills and our interests. A chef walking through Pike Place Market in Seattle could be imagining new recipes that combine fresh fish and vegetables. A writer watches people and imagines a storyline. A geologist sees billions of years of history on a simple drive through South Dakota. But do-it-yourself guys walk through a built world all day, every day, seeing ways to improve what others have constructed. Some of them are trained engineers and some, like my brother, have honed a natural instinct through experience. What they have in common is an internal voice, a running commentary that analyzes, judges, and critiques what it sees.

Chris Oxford, a mechanical designer and serious do-it-yourself guy in Spokane, calls his internal monologue “a plague.” It’s an automatic instinct to find a better design, a better way to do ordinary tasks. “I have to make an effort not to do that all the time,” he says. “I’m really judgmental about design in general. So if I see something and I think it could be better, I instantly start obsessing over how it could be better and how bad it is right now.”

He says this from a twin sized mattress on a custom-built porch swing at his Spokane home. His wife, Dana, leans against a pile of colorful pillows beside him. Their front door is a handcrafted wooden design, their kitchen counters and sink are custom poured concrete designed and made by Chris. The entire house is a testament to the family design sense and do-it-yourself ethic. Having a do-it-yourself guy in the house is great, Dana says, “because a lot of stuff gets fixed.” But, she says, he has a constant need to talk about it. And so, “it’s also kind of frustrating because there’s a lot of complaining about things not being well designed.”

Talking about how things could be better is part of what do-it-yourself guys do best. Like Dana, my brother’s wife, Marie, listens to many of my brother’s ideas. The good news is, she says, is that they will never have to call someone to repair anything in their house.

“I guess the downside is that he sometimes anticipates problems and he has no one to talk to about them except for me. It will be a little painful at some points,” she says. “I mean I can’t participate in any way. He’s on a completely different plane than I am. I don’t see anything that he sees.”

What he sees is a chance to reinvent the fix for common problems. One night Marie's car broke down on a dark street in the rain as she was headed to pick up her son at a soccer game. She called my brother.

"I thought he was going to have jumper cable," she says. "and he showed up with dental floss and a paper clip. He was like McGuyver." She admits to being a little vexed.

"It was a piece of house wiring," my brother interjects. "You don't have to have a pair of jumper cables."

"Yes," Marie answers "but why can't we just be mainstream? No one else knows how to do it with that wire."

"That's my point," my brother erupts. "That's why it's frustrating that other people don't know how to do this stuff. You have to do it for them all the time." Like Chris Oxford, my brother has a list of projects that others have done and he has had to clean up. The new shelves in his school classroom, for example. The maintenance crew put them all together with the shelf holders upside down so the shelves don't stay up.

"Why don't people see this stuff," he asks?

I have always thought that mechanical ability was innate. I am neither interested in nor capable of inventing better ways to make mechanical systems work. My brother could happily spend the rest of his life figuring out a better way to squeeze a square peg into a round hole.

In our twenties, we both took an aptitude test offered by the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation. Johnson O'Connor believes that "aptitudes are natural talents, special abilities for doing, or learning to do, certain kinds of things easily and quickly.

They have little to do with knowledge or culture, or education, or even interests." The Foundation offers a test designed to help people discover areas of ability.

"It has been our experience that people tend to be more satisfied and successful in occupations that challenge their aptitudes and do not demand aptitudes that they lack," says the Foundation.

That is certainly the case with my brother and me. We both took the Spatial Aptitude test, which measures aptitude for picturing, without seeing it, the structure of a three-dimensional form. It was no surprise to either of us that my brother scored in the 95th percentile and I scored in the 55th.

But Chris Oxford believes that mechanical ability begins with exposure. "It's not a gift," he says, "it's just a thing you do. You just start doing stuff." He points to his father, a mechanical sculptor and his grandfather a lawyer, both of whom encouraged him to try anything. "So I sort of had permission to try anything all the time."

Talking with a serious do-it-yourself-guy for long enough will reveal a group of like-minded friends. For my brother, it is childhood friend Dan Webb of Falmouth, Massachusetts. With a degree in mechanical engineering, Dan joined his father, an inventor, in a business that pioneers and sells deep ocean instruments. Dan has a classic do-it-yourself mentality. He says that for all his life he would "become sort of obsessed with a certain topic or a certain hobby. They were things like fishing and making kites and making fireworks and growing cactuses and cameras. "You learn a lot about something when you're fixated on a topic," he says.

Dan calls it an "adult fixation" that took root in his mind about ten years ago. The result is a wind turbine in Falmouth, Massachusetts. The turbine provides enough energy

to power 700 houses continuously. And why did he build it? “I had this sort of slowly evolving realization that I could both make money and reduce carbon emissions and get to build something 400 feet tall. And it just seemed so compelling that it had to be done,” he said.

Chris Oxford’s big idea friend is Paul Lenneman. Paul, a civil engineer, is Chief Dam Safety Engineer for the Avista Power Company in Spokane. His interest in engineering began at an early age with an interest in solving puzzles.

“I don’t know if it’s a cause or an effect. Do I have an aptitude to do puzzles or do the puzzles make the person?” Either way, his interest landed him with an airplane in his living room.

The plane happened because Paul is also a pilot and a pilot is often in search of an airplane. Several years ago, on a trip to Canada, Paul’s wife, Kristine, was standing in line at a grocery store and struck up a conversation with the woman beside her. That woman’s husband had small airplane kit for sale. They exchanged cards and months later, Paul and Kristine were driving back up to pick up the plane. Paul began assembling the plane in his living room, a long room with space for the fuselage of a plane along one wall. It let him work on the project while being with his family. And, he says, his two daughters got to work alongside him.

Kristine says it’s a quick way to find out who your friends are. Some people don’t understand the plane in the living room. But true friends? “They appreciate your airplane.”

While Paul is mostly a big thinker, like most do-it-yourself guys he also sees small inconsistencies in the world around him. A door, for example, that says “push” but

also has a handle. “You’re going to pull it because there’s a handle. So why don’t you take the handle off and then people won’t even have to read it. It’s a push.”

In the end, though, “you learn to filter what you can affect,” Paul says. “You can’t solve every problem by yourself. So, you acknowledge the awareness of it and you let it go. Because if you can’t let it go, you go insane. It’s like driving a car with too many inputs. You shut down.”

Find My Family

I open the app on my phone and the little dots appear, as if by magic. Find My Family. In seconds, through the power of cell phone reception, I can see the location of each of my family members, and they can see me. The map shows me the street name, the building, the surrounding vegetation, the distance in miles each one of them is from me at this very moment.

There are five dots showing, my very closest family members, clustered in the four corners of the country. Through trial-and-error, we have developed a family protocol about spying on each other. Some of us have no secrets. Our dots stay on all the time. Some of us are private. We take our dots offline sometimes. Or we forget to take our dots offline then silently dare others to question us when we travel to surprising places. The consequence for asking a personal question based on the location of a dot can be swift and severe. Dots have gone offline for weeks, even months at a time. Over-playing access to a dot can make that dot inaccessible. We are all wary, we are all careful. At the moment, we are all visible to each other.

This month I open my app many times a day to check on one dot. I am watching my sister in Southern California. I am watching as though I could touch that little yellow J and bring it to life in my own living room for just one afternoon. As though I could erase those thousand miles by moving that dot across the touch screen of my phone to my address. I would wrap my arms around that dot and hold on tight, reassuring what can't be predicted, soothing what's impossible to soothe, promising a future I can't possibly promise.

Six weeks ago that sister learned that her daughter, the first grandchild, the only girl, the one who brought the sweet smiles of babyhood into our family, this inquisitive, joyful toddler, this lively teen, this extraordinary conversationalist, this 27 year old woman, has cancer.

It seems almost biological that a pregnant woman prepares for an infant. Not an adult, but a baby. The whole experience of pregnancy is prelude to new life, a small being, a bubble of unconditional love and co-dependence. We do not spend much time realizing that we are also giving birth to a 16-year-old who is reaching for the car keys, a teenage alcoholic or a young adult with cancer.

It took me weeks to understand that the most important part of this story is that my niece is a young adult. I'm not sure when that happened, but at some point, while I was still snuggling with her in my mind, she grew up and assumed legal responsibility for her own medical decisions. I still consider her mine by proxy, but she is not, really. She is an adult. An adult making her first foray into the medical system with a big diagnosis.

I didn't know how important this little legal distinction between child and adult would actually be until weeks into this diagnosis after I had been sending my sister information, after I had talked with doctors in my town and texted what I learned, had shared my opinions about second opinions and third opinions. My sister was unable to talk, rendered mute by fear and grief. So I texted. I texted with advice about being assertive during the long, long, interminably long wait to find out whether the initial cancer had spread. Advice about taking care of herself, about getting support from friends.

None of my texts changed a thing. The wait was agonizing. The system moved only as fast as it always moves. My sister heard what she could hear. Her daughter allowed her to go to some but not all of the appointments. Her daughter did not want my sister's anxiety on top of her own anxiety.

One day I realized that I was a capable adult trying to manage a capable adult sister, who was trying to manage a capable adult daughter. All of us trying to spread reassurance around a disease characterized by high anxiety waiting. All of us frantically trying to be calm for the others.

At some point, someone said to my sister or to me, I can't remember because no one ever remembers anything when they are staring at cancer, that cancer is a process. There are no overnight answers. Cancer is the waiting disease. We would have to wait.

So I turned to my phone. I watched that J dot as she waited for busy doctors to read scans, busy administrators to make calls, piles of paper to be shuffled, bills to be sent, conversations to be had between specialists. I watched as the dot went back and forth from work to home and occasionally, to a medical building. When the dot was at work, I knew she was with people, perhaps in distracting conversation. When it was driving, I knew she was alone. I could feel her thinking, worrying, worrying.

Unable to do anything but wait, I joined my sister in thinking. Thinking about people whose children have been snatched, or lost, or died. People who have come up against unending, immovable suffering. People I know and people I don't know. People I will never know. People who lived one hundred years ago and people who will live one hundred years from now, all of them living in a world much different from the one here, now, while I am alive.

While I am alive, in this time and place, I have dots on my phone. Five of us dots watching each other among hundreds of millions of dots. I can't see those other dots but they are there. They are there watching and waiting. Waiting for news, waiting for answers, watching and waiting for their own beloved dots to make their way across the map to home.

CURRICULUM VITA

Caroline Woodwell

Education Carleton College, BA English
Yale University, MES
School of Forestry and Environmental Studies

Employment Environmental Conservation and Fundraising – 30 years

Open Space Institute, New York, New York
Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Bozeman, Montana
Consultant and Coach – Self-employed

Publications Boston Globe Magazine *Connections* Column
Tampa Review
Sisyphus LitMag
Spokesman Review
Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living Magazine
What's Next? Sixteen Little Stories of Big Life Changes (self-published)

AWP Intro Journals Award for Non-Fiction, 2020
Love in the Time of Climate Change