

CODA

This morning I got out of bed and put on black. Ted would have said that was melodramatic.

Ten years ago tonight, I sat in a curtained hospital cubicle, holding his cold left hand. The sheet reached his chin. His thinning hair was grayer than I remembered. His face had no scratches, no blood. He was too calm to be dead. "I bet you didn't wear your glasses," I told him. "I bet you didn't wear your seat belt. I bet you were drunk and stoned."

I hoped he didn't know what had happened. I hoped it happened fast. I should wrap him up in the sheet and take him home or I'd never see him again. My mind was metal.

I fell in love with his conviction, his intensity, how he'd jump from the car in the snow, waving his arms as heavy flakes fell. "Get out," he'd shout to Rebecca and David. "Look how beautiful this is."

"Jesus, it's freezing," they would say.

It was 4 a.m., too early to call Rebecca. I'd wake up the whole dorm. Didn't college kids stay up all night? I patted my coat pocket for the address book I grabbed when the hospital called me. I must have dropped it when I got out of the car.

Outside, it was almost dawn. On my knees, I felt along the ground, parting the bushes until I found it. What luck, I thought, forgetting why.

I take out the journal I kept of our trip to Grand Canyon the summer before Ted died. Reading it every anniversary has become my ritual of mourning. Yesterday Rebecca offered to come read it with me. But she added, "Remember that poet Rossetti your uncle always quoted: *Sing no sad songs for me*. Isn't ten years enough?"

The Journal

May 19, 1982, Left at 8 a.m. Left the first time at 7:30. I had to go back, tell Rebecca good-by again.

Ted says I'm too attached to her. How can anyone be too attached to their child?

Rebecca and her boyfriend Jake are staying in the house. Ted told Jake he couldn't plant pot in our garden. We told each other we never should

have smoked pot around the children. Ted says, “It’s not the pot I mind. It’s Jake. He isn’t good enough for her.”

He doesn’t think anyone is good enough for her. I worry that she’s too good. He says, “Let her alone. She has plenty time to learn to be selfish.”

“I want her to keep her idealism and still be a Woman Warrior. “

“I thought you were a pacifist.”

“It has nothing to do with war.”

“I get the point. Men always screw up. Right?”

We stop outside Paoli at a B & B. The large Gothic armchairs in our room remind me of the Hall of Armor, where the battles have already been fought. Ted gets take-out Chinese, three bottles of wine, drinks half. I remind him he promised no drinking, no pot when he’s driving. “I’m not driving now,” he says.

“Begin the Beguine” is playing on the radio. I sketch Ted in his striped underwear, embracing an imaginary lover as he two-steps around the room. “I love the way you dance,” I say.

“Care to?” he asks.

I put aside my pencils and we dance.

May 20, Wagontown, Pa. Ted insists on our customary three-mile walk. He pulls an apple and an opened bottle of wine from his backpack. “It isn’t even noon,” I protest.

“Let’s talk about your faults,” he answers.

May 21, Gettysburg, Pa. Remember me, the end of every story.

On fame’s eternal camping ground

Their silent tents are spread,

And glory guards with solemn round

The bivouac of the dead.

A vast, peaceful sward where war’s horrors — torn, bloody limbs, stacked dead bodies — are long past. As though everyone buried here died clean, intact.

FICTION

May 22. Pittsburgh, Pa.

We are going to the Grand Canyon by way of Pittsburgh and Dallas: Pittsburgh, to visit my parents; Dallas, to visit friends. My father has been in a wheelchair since his stroke two years ago, my mother, in a nursing home for years. I arrive arms full. Flowers, candy. Ransom.

My father slumps in his wheelchair. In my college years, when I came home, arriving late at night in the December station, he always waited for me on the empty platform, brisk, and fur collared. It hurts to see him this way. Sad stories of the death of kings.

I tell Ted I couldn't bear these trips without him.

"That's why I'm here," he says.

I take my father in his wheelchair to the Museum to see the Book of Kells. He wants to buy it for me to read on the trip.

The Greenwood Nursing Home. "You look wonderful, mother." She is wearing a purple dress over a white skirt. I kiss her cheek where the nurse rouged it. She pats where I kissed. I give her the corned beef sandwich I've brought and the ice-cream sundae. She smiles and pats my hand. She touches her face, repeatedly. Maybe she's checking that she's really here.

My father says she has no memory. What is a person without a memory, he asks.

Things my mother used to remember: the plots of all Verdi's operas: the first page of Genesis in Hebrew; much of Emily Dickinson.

You're my daughter, aren't you? she says.

I tell her I love her. "Yes," she says. "You do."

May 23. Sparta, West Virginia.

What is my mother doing right now? I have an old photo, me at seven, hair in braids, sitting next to her on the front stoop. My head is tipped up towards her and I'm smiling.

I buy Rebecca and David postcards with Sparta, West Virginia, the Home of Ham stamped across the state map. Ted takes one and writes:

Dear Rebecca, This is the best sandwich of my entire life. Barbecued ham and chopped onions. You would love it. Yrs. Ted

"That's your lunch?" he asks, as the waitress brings me a butterscotch sundae.

“I need something sweet after Pittsburgh.”

“You have me,” he says.

May 24. Blue Ridge Parkway. Ted is congratulating us on the landscaping, the spring purples, when suddenly it rains, then fogs, then snows. We take the next exit to the Interstate.

May 25. Robbinsville, North Carolina. I read from *History of the American Indian*: The Cherokees were ‘resettled’ ... after Georgia (found) gold on their land. The Supreme Court ruled for the Indians. Georgia defied the Court, President, Andrew Jackson supported Georgia. “How many troops does Justice Marshall have?” he asked.

Ted lights a joint. “Why do you always identify with the losers?”

“What if I were a Cherokee?”

“You’re impossible,” he says.

In the Snowbird Rec Room, after dinner, Ted beats me at SCRABBLE for the tenth straight time. It makes me mad. I’m better at words, but when I win, Ted sulks.

May 27. Rain, rain, rain. Rain in the morning with sausages and pancakes, rain on our three-mile walk. Rain when we play SCRABBLE, when I do Yoga, when we listen to the radio. Ted sings along with Number One on the Snowbird Hit Parade: “*If love had a face, it would be yours.*”

I’m remembering that we didn’t play much Scrabble on our two-week Paris honeymoon. Ted worried about his job. I worried about leaving David and Rebecca in camp. I had given them stamped, addressed envelopes, but I didn’t get any mail from them till the day before we came home.

David’s letter read: *Dear Mom, You didn’t put enough stamps on the envelopes and all my letters came back. I hate it here. Everybody is stupid or they’re hippies like Rebecca.*

Rebecca wrote: *Dear Mom, I got my period last week. Why didn’t you tell me about it?*

Guilty.

From *North Carolina Mountain Lore: Tips for butchering: (do) not ... pity animals at the slaughtering. It will take them longer to die.*

I ask Ted how he feels about killing animals to live.

FICTION

He says he doesn't like the killing, but he does like the eating. "It's ok if you become a vegetarian, just don't get on my case."

What we argue about:

Who should be nicer to whose children.

Why I won't cook meat.

Why he won't cook more often.

When he's drunk, we fight about his driving, why I won't sleep with him when we get home.

I tell him he's offensive when he's drunk.

He tells me I'm puritanical when I'm sober.

I accuse him of wanting to own me.

He accuses me of not loving him enough.

We forgive each other for everything. We make up and make love.

More bad weather. We leave Snowbird earlier than planned, drive through Alabama: Scottsboro, Guntersberg. Guntersburg State Park Motel. I sit on the porch eating oranges, reading *Lives of a Cell*

When two...coelenterates are placed in close contact, the smaller of the two... disintegrates...

"That's me," Ted says.

I think it's me.

I'm anxious traveling to a different place almost every day, sleeping in a different bed. My identity slips. Each morning I wake up feeling less like me. Each night, I locate myself on the big Rand McNally atlas.

Ted loves the unknowingness. He refuses to make reservations anywhere.

I ask him if those nomadic tribes 20,000 years ago knew where they were going.

"Do we know where we're going?" he says.

May 28 Hiking in Mississippi. I see a turn in the road. I'm standing there as though someone stopped me to take a picture, mountain to my right, drop to my left. I feel light and airy, despite the wearing uphill climb.

It's my birthday. We stop to celebrate. Ted takes our lunch from his backpack. I eat an apple, drink coffee from my thermos.

"That's all you're eating? I thought you were celebrating."

"I'd rather celebrate being thin than being older."

"With your ass you can afford to be older," he says. "Here's looking at it."

Why does that bother me? I quote Yeats. "Only God could love you for yourself alone and not your yellow hair."

"I love your yellow hair. I love yourself alone. How do I count the ways," he says.

A black dog with orange nylon saddlebags tied around him runs past, then turns back and disappears down the trail.

"That dog," I say, "it's a metaphor. The pack means we have to be ready for the unexpected: snow at the top; an accident."

"Why does the unexpected mean trouble? It looks like a black dog to me."

May 29. Tupelo, Miss., home of Elvis Presley,

Tupelo is being rebuilt. We sit in the car and look at the high fence around it. "Talk about drugs and alcohol." Ted reaches into the back of the car for a bottle of wine, pulls out the cork, takes a swallow, starts the car.

"We agreed no drinking while you're driving."

"I can make figure eights driving one-handed, sober or not."

The car skitters from side to side.

"Put away the bottle or I'm getting out."

"So, go," he says. "Get out."

I get out. I take my toothbrush and jeans from the overnight bag.

"Leave the toothpaste," Ted says, taking another swallow.

"I'm taking the toothpaste. I'm leaving you."

I start down the highway. I have my wallet, credit cards, enough cash for a cheap motel, though no idea where to find one.

The car pulls up beside me. I keep on walking. Ted follows, pulling over to the shoulder in front of me. "Get in," he says, "This is ridiculous."

I shake my head.

"What are you going to do," he hollers out the open door, as I walk past him. "Hitchhike in the middle of nowhere? That's safer than me?"

FICTION

It is the middle of nowhere. Nothing but highway, open fields, little dirt roads fading out.

"You're a god damn fool," he says. "You think I'm going to leave you here? I may be a little drunk but I'm not crazy."

"You are crazy. I'm not driving with you like that. You don't have your seat belt on. Or your glasses. You can't even see where you're going."

"My glasses are in my briefcase."

"Wonderful."

"I guess I should wear them."

"I guess you should."

"You're right," he says, "I should. Well, why don't you take the wheel while I look for them and we can get the hell out of here."

He moves over and I get into the driver's seat. He leans back, and goes to sleep.

May 30. Oxford, Miss. Home of William Faulkner. Instead of magnolias, our motel room reeks of ammonia. Ted suggests we let it air out and have lunch in the motel restaurant. I'm bruised from our fight, unsteady, a boxer wondering what the odds are. Maybe Ted feels the same way and we're both afraid to talk about it.

I order salad. Ted orders a hamburger, The waitress brings me a wedge of wilted lettuce.

"I don't think I can eat this." I feel like crying.

Our waitress, an Oxford native, is sympathetic. "The food's lousy. I don't know why anybody comes here."

We tell her we're here to visit the Faulkner homestead, and she sits down at our table. "My Daddy and him were drinking buddies," she says. "My Daddy, used to say, 'For a little guy, he's a great drinker.' Went everywhere on a mule and fell off when he was drunk, which was often."

Rowan Oaks is closed for the summer. We plead and the caretaker lets us in for five minutes. The first lines of *Intruder in the Dust* "It's a little like trying to find the Rabbit Hole," are written in ink on the wall of Faulkner's studio.

"Faulkner's such a hero of yours. How come you don't care that he was a drunk?" Ted asks.

"I wasn't married to Faulkner, and he died from alcohol."

The motel room now smells of air freshener.

May 31. Moundsville, Miss. The Temple Mounds, small, grass covered hills, old burial mounds. Inside the museum, in a glass case, a 700-year-old skeleton of an Indian woman is surrounded by strings of beads, several pots. A wall plaque says she was thirty-five, died with her tribe, of disease and starvation. I ask Ted to make sure I'm never arranged for public view.

"I'll die before you. Women always outlast men. Just bury me next to my mother and leave a place for yourself on the other side."

"I don't want to be buried."

"You're kidding," he says. "Where I come from, wives are buried next to their husbands."

"In some places women are buried alive with their husbands. How about that?"

"Smart-ass," he says.

"You like my ass, remember?"

"I remember," he says. "I'm quitting."

"Quitting?"

"Yes. But don't bug me about AA. I'm not going."

I decide to believe him.

June 1, Dallas, Texas

The Texas Depository is smaller than I expected, the window Oswald fired from, boarded up. I see Oswald behind the window. He eats take-out chicken while he waits for the motorcade, spits chewed-up bones into a cardboard container, stuffs the container in a soiled paper bag. He hates his stepfather, hates his mother. Spent his childhood playing hooky, watching TV, eating Campbell's soup from a can.

June 2. The Texas Panhandle The earth looks flat enough to fall off. Black derricks like megaliths planted in a sea of orange grass. On the radio,

*You're just a Coca-Cola cowboy, got a
Clint Eastwood smile and Robert Redford hair,
You walked across my heart like it was Texas
And taught me how to say I didn't care.*

FICTION

Ted announces it's four hours till Santa Fe and he is going to grow a mustache. Through the dark car window I can make out sharp outcroppings of rock, the New Mexico mesas.

At The Tucamcari Motel, I call Rebecca. Everything's fine. The tomato plants are in. She's taking weaving lessons. Jake decided to sunbathe on top of the car in the Burlington Mall and the police tried to arrest him. Jake insisted there were no laws in Massachusetts against sunbathing on car tops. The cops decided he was a nut and let him go.

"He was making a point about anarchy," Rebecca says.

June 4. Ted stops the car on a back road near a sage field and jumps out to holler how good the colors of the earth make him feel. "Ah, beauty," he says, stretching out his arms to grab the sky. That's when I love him.

Santa Fe. Mexican lunch in La Fonda Hotel's sun-filled atrium. Hard to sketch the sun. Turner did it

I buy four books in the hotel bookstore,

"There's no room in the car. Where are you going to put them?" Ted asks.

"In my head."

"Your head is big enough," he says.

I go off to an Indian store. "Don't buy anything," Ted warns. I buy a Navajo child's blanket with a brown zigzag for Rebecca; one with red stripes for David.. I sit in the back of the store, unfolding old Indian blankets, trying to find something in me unspoiled and hopeful.

June 6. Chimayo

In the church sanctuary, there are pieces of heavy eight-foot crosses the Penitentes drag on their shoulders to Calvary during Holy Week. Protruding nails cut their bleeding backs as they stagger uphill, while their brothers beat them with heavy cords. It's rumored that, each year, one is chosen as Jesus, crucified on Good Friday.

June 7. Taos Pueblo I'd like to buy a drum. Instead we buy a tour of his pueblo apartment from a child who recites, "One dollar for seven hundred years old." Inside a linoleum-floored room, two elderly Indians sit at a Formica table, turning the pages of an old LIFE magazine.

At Taos Museum I want to buy a rug. Ted says there's no room I the car. I find room for it.

June 8, Mesa Verde

Ted says I'm pontificating when I repeat what Mike, our Mesa Verde guide, said about the yucca plant. The Anasazi Indians used every part of it: roots for soap; leaves for baskets and medicine, fibers for sandals. They strung nets of human hair across the canyons to catch stampeded rabbits.

"You would have wanted one more rabbit robe to hang on a wall," Ted says.

I would have.

The Anasazi died of famine in 1200, just as the Irish did in the 1800's. Ted says, "Primitive people moved on their stomachs. Everything moves on its stomach, not just the Army. History is about not having enough to eat."

June 14. The Grand Canyon. Our destination.

After he puts down the bags at our cabin, Ted suggests a seven-mile hike because it's only 3 o'clock. Seven miles is ridiculous. He thinks we should sneak up on the Canyon, prolong the suspense. I bargain him down to four miles.

The hike is exhilarating. Ted goes first (has to go first) on three feet of snow. The wind blows just enough to shower us with needles. The trail is flat here. Everything disappears but what is underfoot, around the bend. Then the whole perspective changes, opens up to the Canyon. It's so huge, we can only wonder at it.

It feels like the day we climbed Acadia, our first mountain Ted in his old rain hat, his marine jacket. For lunch, he sat on a stone, eating sardines from a can.

We climbed three miles up a floor of roots through pine musk, and came out onto rock face. The mountain spread before us like a plain. Above us, the sky was such a comfortable blue, I knew it could never fall.

I have to stop reading here. As Rebecca said, That's enough.

When I kept seeing Ted on the gurney, a doctor told me I shouldn't go there. That was good advice. It just doesn't work. You can't erase memories.

FICTION

I was cleaning out the big basement freezer yesterday and remembered finding some *Boeuf Bourguignon* Ted had made for a fancy dinner party the New Year before he died. Between desert and coffee, he stood on his head to show our guests how he warmed up to teach a class.

“She does that every day,” he said, upside down, pointing to me, once he’d stabilized. “She taught me.”

It was interesting what he gave me credit for.

I couldn’t throw the frozen food away. So I heated it, set the table with our best china, and sat down to the meal.