

Lucille Lang Day

## THE LIFE I DIDN'T CHOOSE

I'd known Tom Ogden for fifty-three years and tried to avoid him for forty-seven of them, but suddenly one fall Saturday afternoon, there he was, coming out of a Victorian flat on College Avenue in Berkeley as I walked toward King Yen to pick up Chinese takeout food for my grandchildren. He had a beard and his hair was long and graying, yet I knew him instantly, and he knew me. We'd first met when I was thirteen and he was sixteen, tall and gangly, with jet-black hair. At nineteen I'd wanted to marry him. By then we'd both been married and divorced and were already parents, although we ourselves were both still kids.

The last time I'd seen him was twenty-seven years earlier, when I ran into him at a reunion of everyone who was in with the out crowd—the beer-swilling, school-cutting kids—in North Oakland and Piedmont, California, in the 1960s, when we were teenagers. In his early forties then, he hugged me in a way that said he still cared. I was at the party with a boyfriend who wanted to leave early, though, so I didn't have much chance to talk with Tom. After that party I considered breaking my moratorium on seeing him, but I was still rendered weak-kneed by his black hair and penetrating green eyes, and I didn't want to begin again, so I never called. I'd made it clear long ago that he shouldn't call me.

I climbed the few concrete stairs to where he was standing in front of his flat, and we embraced. Now that we were both in our sixties, I felt reasonably safe as we exchanged phone numbers and talked about getting together. The danger of my attraction to him was gone.

In the days and weeks that followed, I had trouble summoning the courage to call him. I kept remembering the dream I had after we broke up: He was driving fast on a winding road on a sea cliff, and I begged him to slow down. He responded by flooring it, and we became airborne, sailing out into the night, far beyond the cliff, with the stars above us reflected on the sea below. Waking as the car started to fall, I saw the dream as a metaphor for the direction my life would have taken if I'd stayed with him. I trembled, thankful to be free.

It took me a month to call him and set a date to meet on a Sunday afternoon at The Beanery, a café near his house. He said he had my memoir, *Married at Fourteen*, and asked if he could bring it for me to sign. I said yes.

“Did you recognize yourself in it?”

“No.”

“I called you Tom Ogden.”

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When I arrived at The Beanery, Tom was out front on crutches, with a canvas bag hanging around his neck. Wearing a plaid shirt and baggy overalls, his hair pulled back in a scraggly ponytail, he looked bedraggled. We decided to sit outside and selected a table at the edge of the patio in back.

Leaning his crutches against the fence, he said, “I need them because I have a tumor on my spine. It’s inoperable.”

“What about chemo?”

“I’ve already had that.”

“I’m so sorry.” Wanting to say something positive, I added, “You look like you’re doing okay.”

He smiled slightly and gave a small nod.

I ordered chamomile tea. Tom had nothing, not even water. Withdrawing my memoir and several of my poetry collections from the canvas pouch for me to sign, he said, “You’re still beautiful. Why do you put photos on your books that make you look so old?”

I shrugged. “I thought they were good photos.”

“They’re not.”

I didn’t know what to think, except that possibly no photo of me past the age of nineteen would look good to him. If I didn’t look like the girl he’d slow danced with to “Yesterday” and bicycled with in Golden Gate Park, the photo was bad.

I was touched that he’d bought the books, but not surprised. I already knew he’d been following my work because seven years earlier the publisher of one of my poetry books had given me a list of people who had ordered it. I wrote thank-you notes to most of them, but I didn’t contact Tom. Even then, forty years after our breakup, the idea of being in touch with him made me uncomfortable.

As I signed the memoir “With many good memories,” he said, “Do you remember when Cindy tried to run over you?”

“Yes.” Cindy, his ex-wife, had tried to run over me in a parking lot outside a bar where she hung out. At the time, I thought she had it in for me because I was dating him.

“I was surprised you didn’t write about it.”

## NONFICTION

“I left out a lot of things that happened to me. It’s impossible to include everything in a memoir. How is Cindy?”

“She died of breast cancer in 2004.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t need to say this. At the time of her death, they’d been divorced for about forty years.

Tom and I met at a party in 1961. I was drunk and several boys were trying to feel me up in the kitchen. As I struggled to fight them off, Tom pulled me away, saying, “Leave her alone,” and led me to a bedroom. We locked the door and lay on a bunk bed, where we kissed and talked. He did not try to touch my breasts or put his hand up my skirt as the other boys had. He was so handsome and sweet! In the manner of a drunk thirteen-year-old, I was in love.

We went on a couple of dates, but then Cindy, who’d previously gone steady with him, heard about it and invited him to her house for dinner, and he didn’t call me again. A few months later, she was pregnant and they were married. Like Tom, she was sixteen.

“She got a gun,” he was saying now, talking about when she was in her twenties. “She kept it under the seat in her car. She had trouble with men, looking like she did.”

Cindy was one of the most beautiful women I have ever encountered. Think of the young Brigitte Bardot, but with dark hair and eyes. I didn’t know what to say about the gun, but I don’t think a beautiful woman needs to carry one unless she hangs out with dangerous men.

“How are Becky and Bonnie? Did they get married?” I asked. Becky and Bonnie were Cindy’s daughters, born two and a half years apart.

“No, neither of them ever married.” He paused. “Bonnie isn’t my daughter.”

“Yes, I remember. Cindy told me.” I’d relayed this information to Tom in 1967 after he told me he didn’t think Bonnie looked like either him or Cindy.

“When did she tell you?”

“When she was pregnant.”

“That makes sense. What did she say?”

I’d told him this forty-seven years earlier, but now I told him again: “She said that Jimmy had gotten her pregnant, but she was going to put your name on the birth certificate because she thought you’d be a better father.”

“Bonnie never believed that I wasn’t her father. She used to call me all the time, screaming and trying to make me admit that I was her father. She said terrible things. I told her to call Jimmy Harris, that he was her father. I also said I’d have a DNA test anytime, but she never took me up on it.”

“What did Cindy say? ”

“She said I was Bonnie’s father.”

“Until her death she said that? ”

“Yes.”

I felt queasy, and glad that Cindy didn’t have a gun that night in the parking lot. Could she have been angry because I’d told Tom about Bonnie? I told him out of loyalty when we started dating again in 1967. It seemed like the right thing to do. At the time, I didn’t think about the ramifications, but even if I had, it would not have occurred to me that Cindy would never admit that Tom was not Bonnie’s father or that Bonnie would grow up without a father. When Cindy was confronted, I would have expected her to admit the truth.

“Bonnie had a hard life,” he said. “She was in and out of foster homes while Cindy partied.”

I was sorry I’d ever opened my big mouth. I realized that Becky could have stayed with Tom or his sisters instead of going to foster homes. Tom had also accepted Bonnie as his daughter until she was two, and maybe he could have made a difference in her life if he’d continued to think he was her father. Of course, other people might have told him about Jimmy too, so maybe I wasn’t completely responsible for his rejecting Bonnie. Besides, he was already suspicious of her looks, and he must have had some sense of when he’d had sex with Cindy. Nevertheless, I felt a sudden burden of guilt. More things ran through my mind: first, Jimmy Harris was not the right Jimmy. It was a different Jimmy, one with a Latino surname, who Cindy said was Bonnie’s father. I met him when she and I went out on a double date during her pregnancy in 1964. Both of us were separated from our husbands. I was sixteen, and my own daughter, Liana, was nine months old. Anyhow, Jimmy had a last name like Lopez or Sanchez or Hernandez, although he didn’t look Latino. He was short, with sandy hair, hazel eyes, and a longish face. Perhaps only his father was Latino, not his mother. I didn’t find him the least bit good-looking, but Cindy said she was in love with him. The evening consisted mostly of Jimmy and Cindy making out and drinking beer in the front seat, while I fought off one of his buddies in the backseat. I was glad to finally go home.

## NONFICTION

It occurred to me that maybe Tom really was Bonnie's father. Cindy was manipulative and lied as necessary to get what she wanted. In the case of the double date when she was pregnant, maybe she told Jimmy that he was the father because a lot of guys wouldn't want to party with a girl who was pregnant with someone else's baby. Maybe she told me that Jimmy was the father because she'd told him that and also because she thought I might think badly of her for partying with Jimmy while she was pregnant with Tom's baby.

Knowing Cindy, I couldn't fathom why Bonnie and Tom had never followed through with the DNA test. Ultimately, I'd broken off my own friendship with her because she used me and lied. Both of us were only children, and when our friendship started, she said I was like a sister to her. We told people we were sisters, and it delighted us that no one ever questioned it. Sometimes we even said we were twins, though she was prettier. But for her, being sisters meant she was entitled to ask my mother to buy her clothes, cosmetics, and costume jewelry. We got several identical outfits, like gold lamé stretch pants and sparkly gold peasant blouses at Frederick's of Hollywood. She always said she would pay my mother back, but she never did. Similarly, when we went out together, if there was anything to pay for—bus fare, booze, food, or cover charges—I was the one who paid. Cindy always said she'd get it next time, but it never happened. I loved her and wanted to trust her, but she used my mother and me the same way she used men.

The worst lie she ever told me was that her next-door neighbor would babysit for Liana and Becky one night when we wanted to go out and my mother couldn't take care of Liana, as she usually did. The neighbor was not there when we were ready to leave, and I said I didn't want to go without talking to her. Cindy accused me of being paranoid and not trusting either her or the neighbor, so we left Liana in the bassinet and Becky in the crib, each with a bottle. Cindy had a couple of guys lined up for us, but I couldn't get into it. I was terrified all evening and kept saying I wanted to go home. When we got back, there was no neighbor to be seen, but both babies were sleeping and the bottles were empty. Cindy said sarcastically, "See, your precious baby is fine." I said my silent thank-you to the powers of the universe and never left Liana unattended again.

I wanted to tell Tom both that Jimmy Harris was not the right Jimmy and that he and Bonnie should have the DNA test, but he was ready to move on to another topic and pulled a stack of photographs from his canvas bag. They were of Anaïs, his last child, and her four-year-old son. He and Anaïs's mother had never married. He raved about how proud he was of her and the boy.

I said, “I’m glad you have them in your life,” then took out my own album of photos of my two daughters, current husband, and four grandchildren. After pointing everyone out, I told him that Liana, who had become a marriage and family therapist, had died of lymphoma a few months earlier, about a week after her fiftieth birthday. He said he remembered her as a beautiful, mischievous little girl with blond curls. After a moment of silence, I did my own raving about the beauty and intelligence of my grandchildren, and we agreed that everyone’s grandchildren are the best in the world. Then I drained the last of my tea, and we said good-bye.

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During the following weeks and months, I felt bad that I hadn’t said anything about either Jimmy’s true identity or the DNA test, and I wanted to talk with Tom again. It felt like a moral imperative: long ago I’d played a role, possibly a major one, in creating a problem, and I now hoped to make it right. At the same time, I wanted to leave well enough alone and let the past be over, which was what Tom seemed to be doing. Hadn’t it been enough of an accomplishment to sit down with him and share photos of our grandchildren at The Beanery? I tried to let it go, but my conscience kept gnawing at me. Finally, six months later, I called him again.

“I can’t go out now,” he said. “I have friends who help, and a hospice nurse comes twice a week. Can you come here?”

I said yes, and we set a date. The thought of being alone with him was unsettling. Our breakup had been so horrible that it still frightened me to think about it after nearly fifty years, although I was certain he posed no danger to me now.

On the designated day, I stopped at Whole Foods and bought two cups of organic vegetarian minestrone soup and a bottle of Pellegrino. The door to his flat was unlocked, and I let myself in. He was lying on his side on a bed in the living room, which was crowded with bookshelves on every wall. A flat-screen TV beside the bed was on without sound. The only empty floor space was a small area in front of a floral-print sofa perpendicular to the bed. I sat down on the sofa, in the place closest to Tom.

“I got dolled up for you,” he said. “I put on a clean tee shirt and combed my hair.”

“Thanks! You look great.” I looked at the hundreds of beer bottles lined up on the picture rail that went all the way around the living and dining rooms. “You have quite a collection of beer bottles.”

## NONFICTION

“Every one is different.”

I had no trouble picturing him drinking the beer. “How long have you lived here?”

“Forty-three years.”

I handed him a cup of soup. Photos of Anaïs and her son hung behind the bed, and I admired them.

He said, “I was a Toyota mechanic, in business for myself, and I saved enough money for my retirement. Now I’ve given it all to them.” He gestured toward the photos. “I split it three ways.”

“Did you keep a third for yourself?”

“No, I gave one-third to Anaïs, one-third to my grandson, and one-third to Anaïs’s mother. I don’t need anything. This is the end of the line.”

“It’s good that you could do that for them. I’m sure it helps them a lot.”

There were no photos of Becky on display. “Do you have any photos of Becky?”

“No. My sister Judy took them all.”

“How is Becky doing? Where does she live?”

“She’s okay. She lives in LA.”

“What does she do there? Does she have a job?”

“She collects SSI. She’s mentally retarded and can’t hold a job.”

I wondered if she was retarded because Cindy had drunk alcohol when she was pregnant and neglected her when she was small. Cindy even went off to Reno one weekend and left Becky and Bonnie in their cribs with bowls of dry cereal and bottles of milk. The neighbors heard the girls screaming and called the police. When they broke in, the food and milk were gone, the girls covered in filth, shit smeared in their beds and on the walls. They were placed in foster homes, but Cindy soon regained custody. When Tom told me all of this in 1967, I couldn’t understand how she could so easily get the girls back.

“How did Becky end up in LA?”

“She went there with a boyfriend. Then they broke up and she stayed.” Maybe he was worried I might think badly of him for not giving any of his savings to Becky, because he added, “She inherited \$53,000 from her mother, and I begged her to let me invest it for her. Instead, she gave it to friends who promised to make her rich, and she lost it all.”

“And what about Bonnie? What is she doing?”

“She’s a bad person, selfish, dishonest, and maybe a little crazy. She has a bad heart. Cindy really messed her up.”

“Where does she live? Does she work?”

“She and her boyfriend are petty criminals. They move around to different small towns in Northern California and open bank accounts and get credit at stores. Then they write bad checks, and when warrants are issued, they move on.”

This was not an opening for me to suggest that he get a DNA test to see if he was her father after all. Suddenly, I wasn’t even sure it mattered anymore whether her father was Jimmy Harris, Jimmy Lopez, or Tom. If he’d said she was a lovely, lonely woman working in Santa Rosa, I would have opened up. As it was, I couldn’t bring myself to speak, although I wondered if she might not have become a petty criminal if she’d grown up with Tom accepting her as his daughter.

Tom kept talking. “Cindy lived for a while in Montclair. Two men kept her in a house there like a rich woman. She lived off her looks for a long time.”

Montclair was and still is a ritzy area of Oakland, with many multimillion-dollar homes. I knew that Cindy had lived there when we were in our twenties, but I hadn’t known she was a kept woman. I thought she’d married a wealthy man and was divorced or widowed. My cousin Jan ran into her swimming at the Y and gave her my phone number about six years after the incident in the parking lot. Cindy called me and said she was living in Montclair. Not knowing the circumstances, I was a bit jealous that she was doing so well. I lived with my daughter in the married students’ housing for UC Berkeley, in an apartment that had been built as temporary housing for dockyard workers in World War II. Cindy suggested that we get together for lunch, and I readily agreed, willing to have a fresh start. I actually looked forward to seeing her.

The day before we were supposed to meet, she called again, this time to say she was broke and ask if I could pay for her lunch. She would pay me back in a couple of weeks. Up to her old tricks! How could she be broke, I wondered, if she was living in Montclair?

“I’m broke too. I can’t pay for both lunches.” I could have paid, but I didn’t want to be used by her.

“Jan said you have your own lab at UC and make a good salary.”

“I don’t have my own lab. Only professors have their own labs. I’m only a graduate student. Plus, I don’t have any salary. I’m living on a fellowship.”

“I have to cancel unless you can pay.”



## NONFICTION

“Then let’s cancel. Give me a call when you’re able to reschedule.” I never heard from her again.

“What do you remember that we did together?” Tom asked, as he finished the minestrone and I poured him some Pellegrino.

“You rented a plane and pilot and took me on a flight over the Bay Area. It was only the second time in my life I’d been on a plane, and it’s still the only time I’ve ever been on a private plane. Also, you took me out to dinner at a restaurant where we selected our own steaks from a case at the front. It was twelve dollars, the most expensive dinner I’d ever had.”

“I remember that restaurant. I ate there a lot when I worked at the Chevy plant.”

“We went to Sacramento together and visited Senator Petris. He’d written to me after I won a State Scholarship, and he gave us a tour of the capitol.”

“Yeah, I remember that too. I left you and Petris at the end of the tour and went to get cigarettes. Some guys in dark glasses followed me. I guess they were protecting the senator.”

“Then we went skiing at Tahoe. It was May and the snow was slushy. It’s the only time I’ve ever been on skis.”

“I couldn’t keep my skis straight because my feet kept spreading apart, but you were really good. You were able to ski all the way down the slope.” He smiled, then changed the subject. “Liana called my old green Chrysler Leapin’ Lena. Do you remember that?”

“No.” I was grateful that he’d brought it up. I appreciate hearing other people’s memories of Liana, no matter how small.

“The car always lurched when I changed gears. She sat in the back and said, ‘It’s Leapin’ Lena!’”

I had a lot more memories, ones I didn’t want to share, such as the tray of dozens of purple sugar cubes saturated with LSD that he kept in my refrigerator before selling them. He invited me to try one, but I didn’t want to. So many people had bad trips! Instead I pleaded, “Get them out of here.” LSD had become illegal a few months earlier, which would have been reason enough not to want them in my house, but I was also afraid that Liana might find them and eat them.

And I remembered that his friend Harry, who had a crush on me, broke into my apartment and trashed my kitchen in a jealous rage one night when Tom and I were out at a movie. When we got back, Harry was sitting at my table. Broken dishes littered the floor, and beer and ketchup were

splattered on the walls. I told him I considered him a special friend and really cared about him, but if he ever did anything like this again, I'd call the police. After he left, I told Tom that in the future he should not tell Harry about his dates with me.

But what I remembered most vividly was the night Tom and I broke up. He asked me if I'd ever had sex with anyone besides him and my ex-husband, Mark. I was in love with Tom, I expected to marry him, and I wanted to be honest with him, so I said yes and proceeded to tell him about the others. There was Bill Arthur, with whom I'd lost my virginity. He never called me again after the one time we had sex. Years later he told me he'd been afraid of being arrested because I was fourteen and he was nineteen. I also had a brief involvement with Jerry, one of my fellow students at the Oakland Adult Day School. I broke up with him after he told me he'd invented a perpetual motion machine and that in his mind we were already married. I'd also had passionate but unconsummated encounters with two other boyfriends.

This infuriated Tom. "You're nothing but a whore!" he yelled, adding, in a very menacing voice, "I'd like to run over your head with my car and watch your brains ooze onto the street."

In general, I didn't think having sex made a girl or young woman a whore. In particular, I knew that I was not a whore, but a confused girl who had been looking for love in the wrong places. In a moment of sudden clarity, I realized that now, with Tom, I was still such a girl. "I don't want to marry someone who thinks that way. I love you, but I don't want to see you again."

He went to the kitchen and opened a beer. He also retrieved a large bottle of Seconal that I didn't know he'd hidden in a cabinet behind some canned soup and told me he was going to kill himself.

I started to cry and said I was going to call the police. He said if I did that, he'd kill me too, and he proceeded to swallow all of the pills, chasing them down with the beer while I continued to weep. Then he went out, banging the door behind him. I followed. He didn't get into his car but started walking down the street. I was afraid to call the police because if they picked him up and took him to a hospital, I thought that after he'd recovered, he might come back to kill me. Instead, I called his friend Joe and told him what had happened and which way Tom was headed. Joe said he'd go look for him. A few hours later he called to say he'd found him staggering down the street a few blocks from my apartment and taken him to a hospital emergency room. They'd pumped his stomach and he was recovering. I said I was glad.

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I wept all night but resolved not to give him a second chance. His ex-wife had tried to kill me, he'd threatened to kill me, and he'd tried to kill himself. Moreover, he was prone to substance abuse and had no qualms about possessing and selling illegal drugs. Cindy had told me, "I even saw him shoot heroin." Now I believed her. When he called a few days later and asked me to take him back, I said no.

Yet here I was reminiscing with him about the good times as he lay dying. "I always hoped to see you again," he said. "I knew you lived in the Grand Lake area, so I thought about hanging out at that bookstore on Grand Avenue, Walden Pond, or at the Coffee Mill. Do you go there?"

"Not often. I spend more time on Piedmont Ave. Sometimes I meet friends for coffee at Caffè Trieste."

"Well, I'm glad you're here now."

"I'll come again."

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I let go of the idea of talking to Tom about Jimmy's identity and a DNA test. He had long ago accepted that he was not Bonnie's father, and I didn't want to cause any pain or confusion now for him by suggesting that maybe he was her father after all. Also, if the DNA test was positive, Bonnie might be even more angry about his having rejected her through the years, and if it was negative, she might be incensed that proving she wasn't his daughter was one of his final acts. However, I couldn't let go of the idea that Bonnie, as well as Tom's family, might benefit from a DNA test. I knew that paternity could be established or rejected by testing the DNA of Becky, Anaïs, and Tom's two sisters and seeing how much DNA Bonnie had in common with each of them. Was Becky a half sister or a full sister? Was Anaïs a half sister or unrelated? Were Tom's sisters Bonnie's aunts? I decided that after his death I would offer to help them get DNA tests.

I now thought that telling Tom about Jimmy had not been my primary error, although it would indeed have been better if I'd kept my mouth shut. It had, in fact, been a much bigger mistake in judgment to be friends with Cindy in the first place and to go out on that double date with her and Jimmy in 1964. It had also been a big mistake to get romantically involved with Tom again in 1967.

But all that was in the past. I had told Tom I would visit again, and I wanted to follow through. I knew that time was short, so I called him two weeks after my first visit to his flat, and we set another date.

When I called before leaving home to confirm our visit, he said other people were there, but I could come too. On the way, I picked up more soup at Whole Foods.

This time the door was locked when I arrived. I knocked and a heavysset, curly-haired man answered who identified himself as Rod and said it was good to see me again, that he'd also been at the out-crowd reunion twenty-seven years earlier. With him were his wife, Cora, a large, plain woman, and Peggy, a small woman with short brown hair.

I sat down on the sofa near Tom, and Rod, Cora, and Peggy stood in the small space behind me. Peggy said, "He's selected his own music." Evidently, I had barged in while they were planning his memorial. I felt in the way, and I didn't know what to say. Again, she said, "He's selected his own music." I probably should have said, "What did he select?" but I didn't feel ready to participate in this conversation, so I waited for any one of the other four people in the room to speak next, maybe to tell me what he'd selected. Nobody spoke immediately, then Peggy said she was leaving and headed for the door, with Rod assuring her she didn't have to leave and Tom calling out, "Peggy, don't go."

I went after her and said, "I don't want to drive anyone away. Please stay."

"There are too many people here."

I was well aware that no one had thought there were too many people there before my arrival, but Tom had said I should come, and I didn't want to just turn around and leave, so as Peggy left, I went back to the living room and sat down again. Rod and Cora left me alone with Tom. It was hot and the room stunk of urine.

Although he had a full plate of food in front of him, he said he wanted to try my soup, and I handed it to him. It needed salt and butter, he said, so I asked Cora to get some from the kitchen. Everything seemed wrong.

I looked around at the shelves lined with hundreds of books. "Have you read all these books?" He nodded. I said, "I'm impressed."

"I can't read now. I have trouble concentrating. Inside, though, I feel like the same person I always was. I guess we're all just old kids." He laughed.

"Yes." I thought about that. I'm the same person in many ways, but in other ways I've changed. If I had my life to do over, I'd do some things differently, based on what I know now. "How are your sisters? Did they ever get married?"

"No, and I never married again. We came from a dysfunctional family, so marriage wasn't for us. Did you have a dysfunctional family?"

"I think so." My father was a compulsive gambler and my mother was depressed and emotionally abusive, but there was never any discussion of or

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acknowledgment of these things while I was growing up. If I had not come from a dysfunctional family, I don't think I would have been a junior high dropout, child bride, and fifteen-year-old mother. Nor would I have hung out with Cindy or fallen in love with Tom.

I didn't say any of this. "Where do your sisters live now? What do they do?"

"Irene is in Santa Barbara, and Judy lives in Novato. They both became elementary school teachers, but Judy is doing private tutoring now." He proceeded to tell me a long, rambling story about what Irene had been doing since she left teaching. I couldn't make any sense of it. Finally he said, "I'm really messing this up."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it."

"What time is it? I'm supposed to go somewhere."

"It's five twenty. I don't think you're supposed to go anywhere. People are coming to see you."

I meant that in general these days, people were coming to see him, but he took it to mean that their arrival was imminent and said, "Someone will have to go to the store, so that I can offer them something to eat and drink."

"You don't need to offer refreshments to anyone."

At that point, Rod came in and sat down by me on the sofa. "Who's coming over?" Tom asked him.

"I think Lucy is the only one."

"No, someone called and said they were coming."

"I think that was Lucy."

I felt like I was in the way here, adding to Tom's confusion, and I wanted to leave, but I thought this might be the last time I'd see him, so I stayed.

Rod started talking. "I've known Tom for fifty-eight years. We met when I was eight years old."

"I've known him for fifty-three years," I said. "I fell in love with him when I was thirteen, and again when I was nineteen."

I looked over at Tom, and he was grinning from ear to ear. "I fell in love with Lucy too," he said. "It was love at first sight."

"It was love at first sight for me too."

Tom looked happy now, very content and peaceful. He shut his eyes and soon started to snore.

Rod told me that he and Cora came over every day to clean Tom and give him a hot meal, although he couldn't eat much and had lost half of his weight. Sometimes they came more than once a day. He said Tom didn't know how hard it was for them. "We're trying to keep him at home as long as possible. That's what he wants, but eventually he'll have to be hospitalized."

"That's good of you. He's lucky to have you as friends."

"He's confused a lot now. I think it's the drugs."

"Norco and Oramorph?" These were opiates Liana had taken during the final stages of her cancer. She'd been overmedicated for a time and developed a condition called ICU dementia.

"I don't think so. I know he's taking methadone, though, and drugs so he won't reject the liver transplant."

"I didn't know he had a liver transplant." *I even saw him shoot heroin.* I looked around at all the beer bottles once again.

"It was two years ago. He needed it because he had hepatitis C. Peggy was in his hep C support group. During the surgery they found the cancer. He bounced back for a while, though."

While Tom snored, Rod talked about what a good friend Tom had always been and read me a short piece he'd written about Tom moving his hands like he was tuning a car in his sleep.

At six o'clock Tom was still sleeping, and I said I needed to leave. Rod said, "You should wake him up to say good-bye."

"I don't want to disturb him."

"I think he'll be disappointed if you don't wake him."

I went to the bed and gently touched Tom's shoulder. He opened his eyes. "I must have fallen asleep. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. It's good for you to sleep. You should keep trying to eat what you can and sleep as much as you need to." I'd also said this to Liana.

I leaned over and kissed his cheek, then said good-bye to Rod and to Cora, who apparently had been standing in the kitchen all this time. In the doorway between the entry hall and living room, I stopped one more time and blew a kiss to Tom. He blew one back to me, and again smiled broadly. I figured that if I'd given him a couple of moments of pleasure, this visit had been worthwhile.

\* \* \*

Tom passed away about a month later. Peggy officiated at his memorial. As it turned out, she was an Episcopal priest. I spoke at the service, recalling the party where Tom rescued me from boys who were trying to take advantage of me, our airplane ride, our ski trip, the day we rode bicycles through Golden Gate Park, and other good times we'd had together. Anaïs and Tom's sisters were there, but they had decided not to tell Becky and Bonnie about his death until later because they were afraid that Bonnie might disrupt the memorial.

I told Tom's sisters that if the family wanted to find out if Bonnie was his daughter, I would pay for DNA tests. By now it seemed to me that anything was possible: Tom, Jimmy Harris, Latino Jimmy, or someone else. When we were teenagers, a mutual friend had told me that Cindy was working as a prostitute. Maybe even she didn't know who Bonnie's father was.

Judy called me about a week later to say that the family had decided against the DNA tests. They were all afraid of Bonnie, she explained, adding, "She's threatened all of us, and she's probably mentally ill." She was silent a moment, then said softly, "We don't think she's his daughter. She's a short, stocky blond and doesn't look a bit like any of us."

If I could go back in time, I would not tell Tom that Cindy said Bonnie wasn't his daughter. He might have come to that conclusion anyhow, and it would have been better if he'd reached it on his own. It was never really any of my business. What came out of my concern about it after our re-meeting, though, was a fuller reconnection with Tom. I'm glad we had those two last visits. When I think of him now, the dominant image isn't the night of our breakup, but the day we went skiing in 1967. I was wearing black stretch pants and a sleeveless blouse printed with little purple flowers. The sun was beating on slushy snow, and I wasn't cold. The truth is that Tom was the better skier. I went only halfway up the beginner slope. Although he had a hard time keeping his legs straight, he skied all the way down the intermediate slope without falling. He was lean and agile, and I can still see him coming down the slope with his black hair blowing. He was smiling and his eyes were aglitter when he reached me where I waited at the bottom. We were young and in love, with most of our lives still ahead of us. I don't think now there was ever a danger of his being violent with me. Nevertheless, I believe I did the right thing for myself by breaking up with him. The life I didn't choose was one with a troubled, handsome drug addict whose life was inextricably intertwined with that of a dangerous, manipulative woman. I could not have saved him from any of that, but at least I could still make him smile after forty-seven years.