

*Hold Everything Lightly*  
**And Nothing Will Hurt Us**

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TAMA HOCHBAUM

*I'm driving north on I-95.* The asphalt rushes beneath my tires, and when the speedometer hits eighty, the steering wheel vibrates in my hands, this little sedan protesting. The trees along the interstate burn orange and gold, and the northern half of the East Coast stretches ahead of me. I'm driving north on I-95 in October, which means I feel like someone is dying.

My stepfather's death two years ago, in 1998, was quick. In September he drank his coffee every morning, went to work as a chiropractor, and treated patients with crooked spines. In October he stayed in bed. By November 1 we'd buried him. That's not exactly true. We cremated him, and a few days later my mother received the ashes in a cream-colored pot that we couldn't open. I tried. The lid wouldn't budge. I was twenty.

Now I'm twenty-two. I'm not driving north to stand around my stepfather's bed and stare at his pale, gaunt face, once round and full and colored by poolside sun. I'm not driving north to watch him sleep or to mix him another nutrition shake he won't drink, can't drink, because his abdomen is swollen with fluid — a defense against the cancer cells' rapid reproduction.

Why am I thinking of him in the present tense again? This is two years later. This is now. This is the unmistakable present of a Saturday sunrise, and I'm driving north from Baltimore to Delaware to visit a man I've started seeing. To hang out, make out, see where this relationship is going. There might even be sex — my first. There's nothing sad about the occasion.

But this strip of interstate is too similar to the one that took me home to Pennsylvania. Leaves the color of rust on a knife. Leaves like saffron about to fall. Everything about to fall.

Toward the end, when I came through the front door of my parents' house, I didn't toss my bags down. I placed them gingerly on the brown linoleum tiles because he was upstairs dying, and when a person is dying, it feels best to go about things gingerly. And so I tiptoed into the kitchen, noted the new pill bottles on the counter, smelled the hopeful herbal tea simmering on the stove, and read the title of the latest book they'd bought (*Sharks Don't Get Cancer*) before I headed up to my parents' bedroom, where a little war was being fought inside his body, a conflict none of us could see. We mostly watched television.

I press my foot on the gas, push the car past eighty, and turn up the music, something by R.E.M. with wah-wah and hard downbeats. I want to make this trip go faster, to get to this boyfriend of two weeks in record time. Justin's cute. He's kind. His lips are pink and full, and they kiss mine easily. And he studies Zen Buddhism, the religion I touted months after my stepfather's death, because it explained to me how attachments cause suffering. "Attachments are causing your suffering," I told my mother, because I thought if only we could cut ourselves free of passions like scissors snipping through string, then we'd be fine. We'd never hurt again.

I also said to my mother that, according to Buddhists, there is no such thing as an "essential self." She cried when she heard this. How could there be no essential self in her deceased husband? It was his essential self that she planned to be reunited with in the afterlife! "No, no, I cannot believe that," she said. As I watched her eyes well up across the kitchen table, I real-

ized that perhaps Buddhism — or my limited understanding of it — wasn't making me a more compassionate person.

Justin seems compassionate. He listens to me, he prays, he reads the Psalms. He's ecumenical: both Catholic and Buddhist. And he just spent a year in a Catholic monastery. Of course, a man who was once a monk — who isn't yet sure if he should *still* be a monk — is not the likeliest of people with whom to start a relationship.

Still, my foot is heavy on the gas. I'm not sure I can accelerate any more without the steering wheel jiggling off. And that's when it hits me: I am both longing to reach Justin's door and afraid to reach it. An invisible string pulls me toward him, and a grief-stricken part of me holds up scissors to sever the cord before someone or something else does.

*Blues bursts from the open window* as I peek in and call Justin's name. I spot his head in a blue wool ski cap, and he shouts back, "Hey, girl!"

Inside the house the music is louder. The drum and cymbals tap out a pattern, the piano saunters up to it, and the saxophone sways like a drunk at a jukebox. Then comes a voice I don't yet know belongs to Muddy Waters.

*You need meat?* The guitar strums. *Go to the market!*

The harmonica calls, as if urging the singer on.

*You need bread?* The guitar strums again. *Try the bakery!*

It's been a week since I last saw Justin. His spunky Jack Russell terriers race to nip at my ankles.

*If you need love, baby,* Muddy shouts, *don't go no further. Just come. On home. With me.*

I kiss Justin. It's quick, uncertain. What am I doing here with these terriers and this blues music?

When the next track comes on, I'm in the kitchen watching Justin cook breakfast, and Muddy sings, *She's nineteen years old and got ways just like a baby child.*

"No man," I say, "should call a woman a 'baby child.'"

"It's a classic blues song," Justin says. "Everybody covers it."

Justin knows I'm a feminist, but he doesn't know that, because of some experiences I had as a girl, a grown man wanting a "baby child" doesn't sit well with me, regardless of blues history. The line turns my stomach, brings out an urge to raise my fists and fight, a reflex from the shadowy past when I didn't feel safe.

But Justin doesn't seem to notice. He pops open a can of Guinness and pours the foamy beer into a pint glass. "I love to watch it settle." The caramel-colored bubbles trickle through the black liquid, and a creamy head forms on top. Bacon sizzles in the pan, and I hear Justin's foot tapping to another tune.

*Good morning, li'l schoolgirl. Can I go home with you?*

"Now he's singing to schoolgirls?"

But Justin loves the music too much to scrutinize the lyrics. He's possessed by blues. When he moves to the rhythm, he doesn't let his head lead his body the way a cousin of mine does at weddings, biting his lip and sticking his neck out like a pecking chicken. No, Justin feels the rhythm from his middle. The music courses through his stomach and sends shock waves down his legs and arms. He flips thin strips of bacon to the beat.

It's too much: the loud blues, the smoky aroma of bacon, the dark beer before noon. I don't know how to say yes to all this sensory input. To pleasure. To loving the beat instead of analyzing the lyrics. I don't know how to let go.

"How about some John Lee Hooker? Maybe you'll like him better." Justin changes the disc.

Hooker's voice sounds like a dark beer, thick and rich and coming straight from the bottom of the barrel. And the guitar almost skims over it, like that creamy foam at the top of the glass. I lift my toe up and down. I pick up the pint and gulp, taste the bitter foam. This is my first beer before noon. I don't have rules for these things exactly, but then again, yes I do: Keep everything clean, spotless, pure, untouched. And now look at me, a twenty-two-year-old virgin. I chew on bacon and, after I've finished the usual amount I allot myself — three pieces — lick my greasy fingers.

Justin pulls out a bar of dark chocolate and offers me a bite. The cocoa, the beer, the grease, the blues, the soulful voice, his body in the bacon-smelling air, my feverish lust (I want to reach around his narrow, dancing waist): I'm in overload. I'm slipping. I'm saying yes whether I mean to or not.

*Whiskey and women*, sings John Lee Hooker, *almost wrecked my life*.

**"Doom and gloom," my stepfather said.** Lightning flickered outside the kitchen windows. "That's what they said. Basically. Doom and gloom."

"They" were his doctors. I was relieved by the word *basically*. As long as I'd known him, my stepfather would add *basically* to his statements whenever they weren't especially well supported. "The government's tracking us in our cars. Basically," he'd said after people started buying little gadgets that let them pass through highway tolls without stopping.

He turned to my mother. "They said I'm a dead man. Basically."

"No." She shook her head, always the optimist. "They didn't say that. They didn't say that!"

I didn't know what they'd said. I'd been waiting outside the doctor's office, reading an old *Rolling Stone* feature on Bob Dylan's album *Time Out of Mind*, a musical musing on mortality. *It's not dark yet*, sang Dylan, *but it's getting there*.

"We just need to act fast, is all," Mom said now in the kitchen. "This kind of cancer just moves very fast."

I stared at the brown and tan linoleum tiles, counted the interlocking squares and rectangles. They'd been there all my life, those tiles, and I'd never really looked at them.

The lightning struck again. How many seconds could I count between it and thunder? I made it to five.

"Do you want a salad?" I asked my stepfather. "I'll make you a salad."

He nodded, though he didn't have any choice: salads fought cancer. I'd already gotten up from the table and was pulling veggies from the fridge. I washed lettuce, chopped tomato, tore broccoli into miniature shrubs.

Then he, the man who normally ate half a carton of ice cream in one sitting, crunched on raw produce and stared into

the storm.

I sat down. I got back up. I boiled water and poured it into a mug and dunked a bag of instant coffee in it until the water turned black. *OK*, I thought. *So he's got cancer. A tumor, to be precise. And let's be precise. The tumor is as big as a "grown man's fist."* Which is bad.

Finally I had a real father, a man who loved me — which, yes, is a fairly sentimental phrase, but he did love me in a way my first father hadn't. For the past ten of my twenty years he'd beamed when he saw me and hugged me heartily, pressed his beer belly into my stomach and lifted me up, squeezing my shoulders until the blades nearly touched. This love was mine, this feeling of daughterhood, and now he might die? Fuck. I thought of hurling the white coffee mug to the floor. But I didn't feel like cleaning anything up. The mug of coffee sat undisturbed. The intervals between lightning and thunder got longer.

I had to say something. I had to make a point. I had to pour words and words and more words into one inevitable point, like water down a drain. "There is no doubt in my mind," I started, "that you are going to get through this. I mean, is there any doubt in your mind? Because there's no doubt in mine. At the very core of me," I said, pointing to my chest, "I think you're going to get through this. Do you think you're going to get through this? Because I think you're going to get through this!" I leaned back against the chair, relieved that I'd said it, believing that saying it could make it true.

I would never again mistake denial for intuition.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "No doubt, Heath. This isn't gonna get me." He shook his head as if shaking away the doubt, which did not exist, and he bit into another forkful of salad greens.

***With bellies full of bacon and beer***, Justin and I leave through the kitchen door. Out back the terriers wrestle in the mud under a huge trampoline. The sun is strong, a golden liquid. I tilt my face up.

When my feet dip into the slippery synthetic weave of the trampoline, the little pups underneath go wild. I jump up and down, and they take it as a game, nipping when my weight stretches the trampoline closer to the ground. Justin joins me until we collapse.

I kiss him. Why is he blushing?

"We're outside," he says.

"No one's here."

"But we're outside."

"So?" This from a man who drinks beer before noon?

He smiles. "Be patient with me. I'm not used to this."

I concede. Three months ago Justin was wearing monk's robes and shaving his head. His blues was an all-male chorus singing the Psalms. I shouldn't let the decadence of brunch fool me: he's still got one toe in the ascetic life.

*(end of excerpt)*