

Another memory comes back.

I lie in the dark bedroom crying about the cat who has become very ill, about the trip to Europe we will have to cancel because of the cat's terrible illness, about the blood that I have found seeping out of his nose and ears and anus, when I hear from the kitchen a terrible thud, and then another, and another. The thud becomes a crack, a breaking of something that is not fragile. I stop crying and instead listen to the silence that follows, trying to understand what I have heard.

The front door opens and closes.

From the window in the living room I see The Man I Live With walking to the dumpster, carrying something dark and limp in a blue plastic shopping bag. He comes back inside and I ask what he has done. He walks into the kitchen in silence and leaves the apartment with a knife. *Still breathing*, he says, and walks out the door.

I tell people we have put the cat to sleep. I leave a short message on My Older Sister's machine. I call my parents and they say it is for the best. For years I also say this. But, sitting with My Good Friend in her living room, I can't remember how and when I came to believe that lie. I can go back to that dark bedroom. I can close the door and turn out the lights. I can swaddle myself in layers and layers of wrinkled sheets.

My love for the man requires the cat to be living. My fear of him requires the cat to be dead. Each needs and negates the other: the dark bedroom, the warm black dirt in my hands.

I STAND IN the parking lot outside the offices of the literary magazine where I am an intern, unlocking my car, when I hear my name and turn around. I see him crossing the lawn, climbing the hill, walking toward me through the grass. At first I don't recognize him. He wears a twill bucket hat, which is strange because I have never known him to wear hats. He perspires, looks pale. His pupils dart like pinpricks. Then I think, *Oh. He's high.*

He clears his throat before announcing he no longer wants me back. Actually he's moving far far away. He's going back to Arizona, to be close to his mother. He'll teach in a school. He'll finish his thesis. Maybe he'll write a book.

Relief floods me, and a breath leaves my body, taking with it all reason and care. *But I still have some of your things*, he says neutrally. *Give me a ride to the moving truck—it's just up the block—and then you can follow me home.*

I should know better, should ask him to mail them to me instead. But then he will make excuses. And then we'll argue. And if we argue, he'll pull the words right out from under me. Anything I say, he'll twist around and use against

me. He'll twist my words until I'm apologizing and he's in a rage. I should know better, but agree.

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Pulling into the abandoned parking lot, I think *Where is the moving truck?* And just as I suspect but do not believe that something is terribly wrong, I turn to see the stun gun in his out-stretched hand. My mind goes blank, empties completely. My stomach enters free fall. He says he will drive now and I can either go peacefully, or in the trunk with permanent nerve damage.

My hand reaches to open the door to run. My legs move so quickly. An opening between the bushes. A backyard. A bike. A ball. He moves more quickly. He catches me by the hair and reels me back in.

You won't escape. He whispers this with his lips near my ear, my hair in his hand, holding the stun gun to my throat, in the place where blood enters my face through the jaw. I hope, but do not pray to God, that he does not pull the trigger.

He pushes me into the passenger seat, sliding me over his lap, puts a black wig and a hat on my head, sunglasses over my face. The lenses are covered in thick black tape. I can see out the sides, but I don't tell him that. When he asks whether I can see, I tell him I can't see. I don't want him to know that I know exactly where we are the whole time he's driving around in circles. That when we pull up to a

stoplight near the apartment we once shared, I can see the woman in the next car over. So close I could almost reach out and touch her. She sings to the radio and looks straight ahead, tapping her fingers on the wheel. I could open the door. I could scream or flail or run.

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He makes a U-turn at the stoplight near the apartment we once shared and goes the opposite direction, fast, through an intersection and down a hill. We exit the boulevard and turn to the right, onto a quiet residential street lined with redbrick apartment buildings I've never seen before. When we pull off the street, into a driveway, behind a tiny four-plex, I can see that half of it is buried underground. I know, having lived here all my life, that burying things during a long summer keeps them cool.

While he comes to my side of the car to open the door I wait in my seat. Terrified. Obedient. He leads me by the arm toward the building, fishes a ring of keys out of his pocket. He opens the storm door first, leans against it while he unlocks the deadbolt, and pushes open the heavy steel door. He leads me across the threshold, into the dark basement apartment, through a dark living room. Out of the edge of the glasses, I see building materials stacked on the floor: scraps of two-by-fours, boxes of nails and screws, a hammer, a drill. Plastic shopping bags discarded in corners. The first door on the

right is the one he opens, leads me through, closes behind us and locks. The light comes on. The glasses and wig come off.

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The room, maybe a bedroom under any other circumstances, is small. Thick blue Styrofoam covers every surface but the gray-carpeted floor: the walls, the ceiling, the door. I can see no windows, but I'm not looking for them yet. All I see is the moment of my death, not far away.

In the middle of the room there's a giant wooden chair constructed of two-by-fours and four-by-fours. Like an electric chair. A hole in the seat opens to a bucket underneath. Two steel u-bolts are attached to the thick wooden arms with galvanized fencing staples. A choke collar hangs from the headrest.

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I'm going to rape you now, he says while I undress. *Or I'm sure that's what you'll call it, anyway.* In the corner of the room there are several sheets of paper folded into a neat square: a letter he'll read to me after he's bolted me into the chair, after he's fed me a turkey sandwich, his hands hot and sticky with his own semen. While I'm swallowing and choking and spitting it out he explains that I'll call My Good Friend to tell her I've decided to take him back. On the phone, I clear my

throat nervously and tell her I'll come by in a few days to pick up my clothes. She wants to know what clothes. *Sorry, I can't come by tonight*, I say. *I'll come by in a few days.* She's so confused. *Where are you? What is happening?* I can't speak, with him sitting right beside me, demanding I hang up the phone. I want to say, *Send help.* Instead I say, *I don't know.*

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Or maybe the phone call happened first. At one point he tells me to put his penis in my mouth—he's so angry he can't get it hard for this—and at another he tightens the dog collar around my neck, gesturing toward the places he's planted explosives in the walls, a camera in the corner, a detonator in the kitchen. All the possible outcomes play like a movie in my head: He cues the explosion. Pieces of my body fly in every direction. But then he puts his face close to mine and says *No one can hear you. Go ahead and scream.*

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I do not scream.

I sit on the edge of the mattress, which is sloppily dressed with a fitted white sheet covered by a clear plastic sheet, covered by a goose down duvet, the same one he gave me on my birthday. The mattress lies on the floor in the corner.

He doesn't live here. No one lives here.

He asks who might be expecting me. I consider whom to call, who could best handle answering the last phone call I ever make. Not my parents. They aren't expecting me. I have just moved into my new apartment, and I planned to spend the night unpacking. Yesterday, my parents took me to the store to get new sheets, new towels, a new comforter for the bed. The mattress hasn't been delivered yet. Mom said, *I don't think we can afford to keep setting you up all over again like this.*

I lie and call My Good Friend. She'll tell me later that she knew something was wrong. She spends the whole night driving around looking for me: the old apartment I used to share with him, the new apartment, my favorite bars downtown, ditches beside the road.

He says, *I'm going to rape you now.* And it doesn't matter that I am on my period, because he pulls my tampon out by the string and lays it beside the bed. The police will find it later and catalogue it into evidence. My blood pools on the clear plastic sheet, which they will also catalogue into evidence.

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At first, I have a body, a wild animal body I throw and thrash against his cage. I almost break a limb before he catches me

in his hands. I growl and hiss and bare my teeth. But then, my body is not a wild animal body. It's a human girl body: the two arms pinned, a cross; the two legs spread, a tomb. It's the mind that goes thrashing so wildly. The body remains calm. The body undresses and lays itself down.

But the mind goes thrashing so wildly. The body lays itself down on a clear plastic sheet, hears but does not listen to the soup of human-like speech boiling in its ears, spilling exactly the length and width of the room. The mind skitters safely out of reach.

The body lays itself down but does not know with precision in which direction or at what point, if any, in the future it will rise and go. Or if it will be physically possible, the future having maybe splintered the body into a thousand wet-shining shards.

Underneath: bedrock unbuckles with the thrust of vast tectonic plates, skidding at this very moment over an ocean of white-hot magma in the body's every orifice.

But the mind goes thrashing. The mind goes thrashing away from the body, which does not move a muscle, does not move an inch from the spot in which it is unraveling, will be unraveling, has been unraveling since.

AT OUR FIRST session, my newest therapist asks me to write two lists: one that describes every terrible thing The Man I Used to Live With ever did, another that describes each thing he ever did that made me feel special and loved. I start to panic. I make excuses. I say, *I have a lot on my plate right now*. She doesn't fall for it. She points to the door, says only, *Write*.

Somehow, the terrible list is easier to start: how he kidnapped and raped me, how he murdered my cat in our kitchen, how he threatened to abandon me in foreign countries. It's harder to write about how he saved me from getting crushed by a surge of people rushing the stage at a concert in Denmark. How he dragged me to the outer edge of the crowd, his arm around my chest. *We watched the rest of the show at the crowd's perimeter, his arm around my shoulder*.

It's easy to write about the argument we had while traveling in Spain, how he shook and shook me by my shoulders until I wound myself into a tight ball. He left and didn't

come back until I was asleep. *He lifted me from the bed so gently, so lovingly, it seemed. I thought he was going to apologize. Instead, he put me on the floor.* I remember it so clearly: the fluff of hair under the bed, the cold seams of the parquet.

It's easy to write that I'm afraid of him.

It's harder to write that he taught me about film, and cooking, and to admit that I'm probably a writer because of him, because of all that happened.

It's hard to admit that I loved him.

When I give the newest therapist the list—not two lists but one—she does not put it in my folder like I expect. She puts on her glasses and reads. Occasionally she sighs, or shakes her head. I have nothing to do with my hands, or my face, or my feet. Panic washes over me. Eventually she looks up, her eyebrows slightly raised, as if expectant. She says nothing. She waits and waits for me to speak.

It's possible I'm not remembering right, I finally mutter, my hands in my lap, my head pointed in the general direction of the floor.

She laughs out loud, puts down the list. She asks, *Is there any other way of remembering?*

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~~I remember how a late spring rain darkens the tarmac as we board the plane for Europe: a smell like dirt, like exhaust,~~

The Man I Used to Live With, about all that happened, but instead I write about addiction, or my children, or the dreams. I say, *I can't write with all these distractions. All these interruptions make it impossible to think.*

I try to write at night, while the children sleep in their beds, while their father sits beside me on the couch or reclines on the pillow next to mine, his own computer propped open on his lap; instead I shop for houses we can't afford, clothes I will not buy, vacations we will not take. I say, *Maybe if I could just get away for a while, if only I could have a little time and space to think*, and I apply for an artist residency in upstate New York, where the windows of my studio look out to the green edge of a rolling mountain range, the tall grass licking at the trees.

Start
here →

The first day, the day I begin writing this book, I sit at the computer, in front of the window, my eyes on the grass, my fingers on the keys, and tears stream down my cheeks. I down whole glasses of scotch and crawl under the desk.

After dinner, I call home from my computer and watch the small lithe bodies of my children tangle over My Husband, who tries, in earnest, to talk about his day while they whine or cry or paw at him or the image they're seeing of me. It's past their bedtime and they need to go to sleep. I say, *I love you. I miss you.* And mean it. And they say, *Please come home.* I blow a kiss and My Husband mouths the words: *Are you okay?* And I say, *No, not at all, actually.* I want to come

home. I want the tangle of their bodies in my lap. I need that. I need My Husband's breath in my hair before I drift off to sleep. Their love is all that saves me from the dreams.

After we hang up, there is only silence. There's only darkness lapping at the window. There's only an empty page on the screen.

Only the story can bridge it.

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The funny version of the story goes like this: A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . . I was kidnapped and raped by a man I used to live with. I'm kind of fucked up about it. ✓

It's not the kind of joke I tell at parties.

Most of the time I don't tell the story at all. Whole close friendships have come and gone or continue to this day and I haven't breathed a word.

Other times it takes only one glass of wine and I'm spilling the beans to near-strangers. Or it doesn't take wine. Maybe it's ten in the morning. A new friend tells me a secret. I tell mine. It's usually the same reaction: first there's shock, a hand over the mouth or to the chest, always *I'm so sorry.*

I'm the one who's sorry. I'm sorry I keep telling this story. ✓

Here is the shortest version: For five hours on July 5, 2000, I was held prisoner in a soundproof room in a basement apartment rented for the sole purpose of raping and killing me.

I could also say I lived with my kidnapper for two-and-a-half years, and during all the time we lived together he didn't call it rape but fucking. When I finally moved out, he thought it would only take a few days of good, hard fucking to convince me to come home. If I refused, he planned to shoot me in the cunt and then the head.

His words, not mine.

I'm afraid the story isn't finished happening.

Sometimes I think there is no entirely true story I could tell. Because there are some things I just don't know, and other things I just can't say. Which is not a failure of memory but of language.

If people ask what my book is about I do not say it is about the time I was kidnapped and raped by a man I used to live

with. That level of honesty borders on rude. It is against the rules of polite society to admit having been raped to a near-stranger. I change the subject. I point to the sky and say, *Oh look, a flock of turtles!* Or I ask the near-stranger whether he thinks the housing market has finally turned around. *Should I buy stock now or wait until closer to retirement?* This is usually enough to get him off the scent.

To my acquaintances I say I'm writing about violence and memory and the body. Or I say it's about violence and desire. I say I'm writing about a traumatic event in my past. Most people understand this as code for *Think long and hard before asking more questions about this.* Together we observe half a moment of silence before my acquaintance cocks his head back the slightest bit and opens his mouth to say, *Ah . . . I see.*

In the story I have, I am always escaping, always moving from one place to another, or standing still where there is nothing to do with my hands, and everywhere, in all of it, the walls are high, covered in thick blue styrofoam, the ceiling out of reach. I might turn the corner and stumble into terror or love or loss. The story does have seasons. There's the breeze of hands up Sunday's dress, the bruise, the blue skirt I left. There's the lure of infinite sleep. A sea route. A route down the river. The story I have is a map for this

place, which has no actual location, no axes of orientation. In which direction do I travel today? Away and back. Away and back. Over and over. Am I not endlessly circling? Have I not been here before? This temple. This harbor. There is no outside, no inside. Am I not close to the center? Here is the forest. The fog. The last leaf slipping, the rub of my thumb and finger. And, like that: it's gone.

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I admit to My Husband that I'm afraid to post a schedule of my upcoming readings on my website. He sighs, closes his laptop and turns to me. *What do you think is going to happen?* he asks. *I think he's going to show up and shoot me with a gun,* I say. He sighs harder.

It's not the only outcome I imagine. Sometimes I imagine he is dead. Or he is still alive, barely eking out a living in Venezuela. He loves another woman, I imagine. Or he has murdered her. Or he is not in Venezuela, but is lying low in the States, waiting for me to show him where to find me. And when he does, I imagine the ways I will struggle, how I will open the door to run. I imagine what I would give him in exchange for the lives of My Husband and our children.

There is nothing I would not give him.

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The story becomes the mind's protection. The story becomes the mind's defense. An apology. A collection of excuses. A set of forgivable lies. As when my children come to me for affection and I give them something to eat. Or a fresh shirt. Or I busy myself with sweeping the floor and making the beds. *I don't have time for this,* I say.

But I do have time. There's nothing stopping me. Not really.

To My Husband I say, *I'm too far gone. I don't know how to love.* We might be standing on opposite sides of the island in the kitchen. I might be pouring him a glass of wine or stirring a vegetable stew. *I'm trapped on the other side of a wide, dark chasm,* I say. I might break down in tears. He holds out his arms, but I cover my face, look down, turn away.

In this story, I'm always turning away. ✓

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My daughter asks what I do while she's at school all day and I tell her anything but the truth. *I'm working. I'm reading. I'm teaching,* I say. But the truth is: sometimes I put my head against the table or the desk or the cool edge of the toilet. I puke, or scream, or pull my hair out in handfuls, and I weep. The blood rises to my face until it feels like his

hand is here, right here, squeezing, squeezing. He is spitting into my face, kneeling on my chest, heavy as a pile of stones. *He will kill me for this*, I think.

But I don't stop writing. I cover the screen and type without looking at the words. I crawl into my bed and pull the covers up over my body, over the computer, up over my head. *This cave of making*. It's the last place he'd think to look.

By the time I pick my children up from school, I've cleaned the streaked mascara off my face and reapplied my lipstick. At home, I play with my son on the floor. I make dinner. Or if I do not make dinner, we order pizza and the four of us eat in the living room watching an animated movie. We take walks and work in the yard on the weekends. From the outside it all appears very normal.

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My girlfriend asks how this book is going and I say, *I'm sooooo ready to be done*. It's not fun to write this, you know. She picks at the tip of her straw, or fingers the arch of her eyebrow, and tells me that my children will someday feel lucky to have this book. We might be sitting on her porch or at a picnic table in the park or the only outside table at a restaurant. I say, *This will be the last version of the story I ever tell*. I know how ridiculous this sounds. How foolish. How naive. Because the truth is: I'm afraid of what will happen

when it's done. *I'm trapped*, I say. A prison I've built with this story. *I don't know how to escape it*, I say.

But I do know.

The story is a trap, a puzzle, a paradox.
Ending it creates a door. ✓