

Trading lies about our earliest memories, my mind rewinds to 1987 when I was young and fragile but too naive for a bad girl to be living alone in Hollywood. You were there too, of course. I wonder what lies you will trade back with me.

A series of calamitous events propelled me that year to a place in West Hollywood, a Lion's Club meeting hall that resembled a cabin built with Lincoln Logs. I had been unwell with depression and self-loathing and had spent the week after New Year's in the cardiac intensive care unit of Cedars-Sinai hospital. This was one of the calamitous events: Trying one more time to take my life but surviving, only then to face a plethora of very inconvenient consequences.

After several meetings in the Log Cabin, you had heard enough of my story that you said, *Oh wow, you're fresh out of the mental hospital.* It was true, but you didn't recoil. You yourself were fresh off the road — a singer and songwriter of some renown two decades ago — and you didn't seem much more comfortable than I was. But you were so much older than I was, when it became clear you were interested in being friends, I felt I was being sent to the principal's office. I said *No* and then *No Thanks*, when you repeatedly invited me to join the group for lunch after the meeting. Ninety minutes in a room full of strangers was just about all the exposure I could stomach then, social rehabilitation be damned.

Why do I want to tell this story, I wonder? I was living a life of abject survival, nothing more. In my heyday I had partied fairly hard with some hipsters from San Francisco and later, Los Angeles. But now the carousel had slowed to a crawl and the music had begun to sour. I had no reference point for a friendship with a man 19 years my senior. You had a beat up old woody station wagon and a wife and daughter at home. Seemed safe to me.

Let me flesh this out in somewhat broader strokes: I was not looking for a man and I don't know whether you knew what you were looking for. I was adrift — my goal to be dead by the age of 30 had failed numerous times. There was no such thing as safety on any level. We were just solitary souls walking in circles around each other.

You always said that the first time you saw me, you couldn't decide what ethnicity I was: Italian? Greek? East Coast Jew? That was the day Walter Martinez introduced us, to little effect except then we had met one another. You had been sober for more than two years and were secretary of an enormous Hollywood meeting, someone whose telephone number I filed away in my Rolodex. I was counting days, going to these weird-ass meetings, fresh out of the mental hospital.

It wasn't the act of a feminist, getting involved with a much older married man. It was in fact a crossroads in my shattered life where joy was out of the question and you'll pardon the expression, it was every man for himself. Later, your ex-wife said who she'd felt betrayed by was ME. We were both treading life's waters, unmoored, waiting for something to happen. What was it like to go to meetings down the block from the scene of the crime, The Troubadour nightclub and Dan Tana's old showbiz watering hole?

Perhaps this is a confession. *You call yourself a FEMINIST?* the enraged Black writer with the lower-case name screamed at me upstairs at Moe's, the Berkeley bookstore. I had proverbially tripped over myself and into this vitriolic confrontation by virtue of some seduction her college professor partner had tried on me. Naive again, my thoughts and my choices so completely divested of any connection to other people. I was alone, far from home, and always surprised when anyone was nice to me. My father had been so cold that I was always shocked when a man wasn't an asshole.

You called yourself a recovering asshole, said you weren't out of the woods yet, but I could envision the trajectory of your hard-scrabble journey because you were all-in, devoted to the program. *The first step is admitting you're an asshole.* You had a love of crows, hawks, pelicans and more, dating back decades, when your stick figure birds were published in an anthology by your band members. Even as someone who couldn't be bothered with life, I began to notice the birds you identified and their pastimes. You were always thrilled when a murder of crows ganged up to flush a hawk out of the nest or away from some valued caught prey. I was fresh out of options but at least I could see that birds could be cool, and I had you to thank for that.

You were the first person I ever met who was patient enough to explain your way around the art of being human: try not to curse during an argument, you said, stay in the room and keep talking during an ordinary conflict — do not go to the front door and exit stage left. Years later after we were married, I had a moment in our high-rise apartment when I felt sorry for you, marrying someone as emotionally feral as me. I loved you, of course, but it was suddenly clear to me how uneven was the playing field between us. You were a grown-ass man who had already lived decades through a fraught marriage and loads of West Coast therapy from the 60s and 70s. But I was now five years out of the mental hospital, had completed my course of group therapy for childhood sexual abuse and was struggling with mood swings and the continuum of dark thoughts, even while working a pretty serious recovery program.

The climate that summer was far tamer than it turned out for us in the twenty-first century. No boiling oceans yet though there were always hurricanes

in Florida even then. We sweated out our Log Cabin meetings, air condition-less and filled with cigarette smoke. Breathing through cigarette smoke in the hot smog was a concept, especially when compared with abstaining from getting and remaining loaded twenty-four seven. One afternoon following the midday meeting at the Improv comedy club and our chic lunch at Fred Segal, we found ourselves sweating impossibly in the front barrel seat of your station wagon, enduring a level of visceral discomfort unfit for the faint of heart, when I leaned over to you in the driver's seat and licked the rivulet of sweat from the side of your neck.

Nothing happened.

Silence.

I leaned into your neck a second time and this time pressed my lips against you.

Oh *Shit*, you said breaking the silence. Oh *Shit*.

It seemed I had fucked up.

I'm not sure what that means, I said. Would you like me to stop?

NO! you gasped emphatically, No Of Course Not...

But *what?* I asked you. There's a *but* in there.

But I had things all worked out for myself already — I was going to be this AA *monk* for a while.

Sorry to fuck up your plans, I said, at which point you finally turned your head to me and kissed me for the first time. And there we remained for some time, pretty freaked out by one another.

It was so hot in the car that our damp clothes stuck to the leather seats. When we finally parted, I drove my tiny Toyota back to the Hollywood studio from which I had been hospitalized twice in the last two years, and I remember thinking, I'm not sure he's into me like that. When I got inside I peeled off my sticky clothes and took a cold shower. By dinner you were on the phone to me, wanting to know how I was.

By the time we moved here our marriage had become an institution in our community: a model of what a sober marriage could be. But our coffers were bare and we were embarrassed that we could no longer afford to live in the city. You tried to warn me about how different the new place was from Los Angeles but all I could get out of you was that most people here had never met a Jew, something for which I had little reference point. This time it was another series of calamitous events that propelled us to this dry, conservative town 40 miles east of the city, where AA members were suspicious of anyone from elsewhere

and no one cared about our entertaining sex and drugs and rock and roll stories. We were starting over, from scratch.

Within two years you had prostate cancer and so it began, your first illness. We needed a grant from the Grammy Foundation to pay our bills while you were having radiation. The doctors recommended hormone therapy to annihilate your prostate specific antigen but now I think it must have lead to your heart disease. That's what Google says. I became increasingly depressed although I typically got out of bed every morning, blaming myself for being depressed when really I was scared and trapped and unhappy. Internalization sucks.

So we cobbled together a transitory group of friends and went about the business of living, still in love and grateful to have each other. First, Anna fell through an open manhole in front of her apartment and broke her leg. Then Spanky died in his sleep after a Las Vegas weekend replete with poppers for the sex marathons. Then with the settlement money from the Gas Company, Anna and Chris left town for New Mexico. Soon two more of our program friends were dead: Greg too soon from a rare blood disease and Goombah from cancer and old age. My mother was in a Los Angeles memory care unit no longer convenient for me to visit though I made the roundtrip weekly — more when she had medical needs.

My mother's Alzheimer's was a waking nightmare, so much that you complained I was obsessed with her. But it was such a mindfuck to lose in plain sight someone you've known all your life while still needing to care for their body. And my mother had been such an intellect, and previously so hilarious. Just because I'm losing my memory, she scolded me once, doesn't mean I'm an imbecile. Then she stopped smiling. Later she stopped talking. Finally, she stopped swallowing.

It was then — not on the occasion of our marriage or my father's death seven years earlier — that my family started to fall in on itself and seriously hate on one another. In her decline, mother of course wasn't available to help sort it out. Estrangement abounded. Childhood cousins now grown fell out and stopped speaking. My idea to move mother to an assisted living nearer to where we lived now so that I could see her more frequently was summarily vetoed as too risky for mother, and possibly too stressful for me. My attempts to address these matters with my Aunt Tobi resulted in her melting down on the phone so thoroughly that her doctors said it might have been an undiagnosed stroke. To my complaint about her daughter Erica, my cousin and maid of honor, ghosting me came the blood curdling screed "OH MOVE ON! EVERYONE ELSE HAS!"

Nothing like being powerless with unmanageable lives sans divine intervention. You stayed occupied with your writing, with your spoken word engagements and with meetings, but seeing my mother was primarily a solo activity for me once she was moved to memory care. Perhaps the Grammy Foundation funds were in fact divine intervention but it was too little too late by then and hardly mattered. We got by but we were no longer celebrating ourselves. I put up a wall plate in the kitchen that read "Life Isn't About Surviving The Storm. It's About Learning to Dance in the Rain."

If only there was rain in this godforsaken desert chaparral. All of the stress and the relentless heat served to induce a few peripheral visual hallucinations, to which Dr. Horvath noted, *We all* have hallucinations.

Really? I thought, Not me, not until now.

And the road less traveled? We were in free fall in a place called the Inland Empire where all the freeways were under construction at the same time and strangers to a one were hostile to us. We walked in to a hair salon without an appointment and the woman intoned, Can I HELP you with SOMETHING? And remember when you got called out by a neighborhood boy for staring at his mother's large spider tattoo while we were eating pizza at the Costco food court? You had this thing about staring that kept getting worse the older you got, and certain ethnic groups really took umbrage it. Is there a *problem*? the young guy said, standing up so he could loom over your largesse. You were lucky to back down, talk your way out of the challenge to his mother's honor.

The road less traveled was that you were so aggrieved with the turn in our fortunes, you ceased to appear as if you had my best interests at heart. You were mortified, not grateful, not sorry, when I contacted Harold at the Grammy Foundation. I considered my options about leaving you and found it economically unsustainable, considering my shadow hallucinations and the closing of my private practice. Besides, whatever would I become if I wasn't your wife any longer? That ship had sailed a long time ago.

Nothing but succulents could be grown in our garden, a fact I learned by systematically killing an untold number of nursery plants. Any run of the mill garden variety, even a sprig of rosemary, burned to a crisp in the arid ceaseless down-bearing sun. We tried to take heart with the brown grasshoppers, the green praying mantises, the opossums our cats took great interest in after sunset. And then came the termites which initially presented as a swarm of yard swallows hovering over the ground, and the exterminator that we somehow managed to afford. The bedbugs infested much later, requiring a different kind of exterminator after it became apparent that home remedies were not going to

cut it. You were incredibly stunning if not a tad too overweight, with the deepest, sexiest voice and you came by your raconteur-ship naturally, having once lived in the A-frame house below the Hollywood sign all those many years ago. You loved City Lights Books and Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*, which for me had sealed the deal for all eternity. Literary history was non-negotiable with me, and with you as well.

I had broken up with you again a few weeks after the winter holidays, when all seemed well. You'd thought my Christmas gift had especially pleased me. And then, despite your professed lifelong barrenness, I discovered I was pregnant. Judith had left you five months earlier but there was no divorce in the offing as yet. She had left before, once for a year when she moved in with Bob Gunner in Venice and wrote screenplays, leaving you with the baby to take care of now that you had quit the band.

And now it had been a year since the mental hospital. Not exactly the recipe for parents of the year. I did what we of my generation learned to do when overtaken by the consequences of the sexual revolution, and that was to ensure that a pregnancy never came to term, a de facto type of birth control. We never even gave that pregnancy a second thought. It was embarrassing, particularly in light of the ongoing-off going nature of our May-December chemistry. On the day of the termination appointment, you tried to act like it was just another work day and head over to the sound studio. But I had said "Hold on there, partner" so that you were shamed into accompanying me. As if what I had to endure was too much to ask you to witness.

Part of the Log Cabin community included a fried acid-head who always smelled heavily of booze and called himself Billy Sunshine. Billy used to say he was the forgotten Carradine brother — sort of an inside show business joke -- but no one ever believed him. Due to his inebriation, Billy was often disruptive during meetings, reacting with paranoia in response to someone's direct eye contact, speaking out loud in answer to one of his audio hallucinations. A committee was formed whereupon it was decided that you with your lumbering hulk and a few other imposing sober gents would try to de-escalate Billy at such times and escort him out of the meeting to minimize further disruption. Just seeing you and your fellows stand up and start moving toward Billy was enough to siphon off some of the collective anxiety in the Parks and Rec center, while the gathering worked even harder to hear every word being spoken from the podium.

On one of these occasions once safely out of earshot of the group, you asked Billy what he needed in order to move on with his day. Clearly he was in no shape to reconstitute himself and rejoin the meeting. He said he thought a hot dog and a coke at the 7-11 on the corner of Third and Gardner would come to about four dollars. Without hesitation, you pulled a five dollar bill out of your chinos. Thanks, Billy said, Now you can quit pretending that you're Friar Tuck and I can quit pretending you're not an asshole. True story. Out of the mouths of the acid-fried drunks of West Hollywood.

But for such an auspicious presence Billy just seemed to fade into the woodwork and eventually stopped showing up to panhandle at meetings. The last time I saw him we were both in line at the cash register of the Boys Town Pavilions. Billy smelled like the inside of The Frolic Room, alcohol and God knows what else fuming out of his pores. The others in the checkout line faintly raised an eyebrow at our unlikely acquaintanceship. Making small talk, I mentioned having just heard that Lucille Ball had passed away, and the next thing I knew Billy was crying. I loved her so much, he wept, she was always so good to me.

Where does a story like this begin? They say it is a fiction that stories really do have a beginning at all. Mother died during the pandemic lockdown. She was found on the floor of her memory care room and the thought was that she had had a heart attack, probably not suffering long but who can say, really? I had seen her last mere weeks prior to her death from the vantage point of an outdoor terrace, everyone including Mom in masks. She sat in a wheelchair on the threshold of her patio door with her caregiver, and it was clear that she didn't know who I was. What kind of sense does it make for an Alzheimers patient to have to look at faces covered in masks?

We had a Covid-19 funeral the obligatory three days later and in his sunglasses and mask my favorite cousin Noel was so anonymous that I introduced myself to him. The six of us in masks stood around the gravesite trying to maintain an arms length distance from one another.

And now in the months since you passed, I have littered the house with photographs of you and of the two of us together, so that my eye rarely falls anywhere without seeing you. Much like the last two years of your life in this house, where you were living in a hospital bed in the front hallway and I was sleeping on the couch beside you so that I could get up whenever you needed me. My eye rarely fell anywhere then without seeing you. The pandemic had further cemented the effect that we were glommed on to each other, this in addition to your inability to stand or walk unassisted. But as soon as the

quarantine was lifted, you began to lose your balance and fall, breaking your arm, going to the hospital. Two different times.

So it turned out our affair wasn't protected by the principle of anonymity after all, because within weeks, someone took it upon themselves to let Judith know that you had an A.A. girlfriend, and within days, she had left for good. That's when you told me the story about learning that the neighbors referred to you as "the yelling people." What did I know? It was still a marriage although you were living in separate quarters, just one that you had wanted out of for as long as you could remember, you said.

Busted, we were stunned but we were free and relatively guiltless. Having survived rock and roll in the 1960s, it wasn't like there was a loyalty clause in your marriage on either of your parts. You became a single father to a 16 year old high school dropout who was working at Coach in Century City and staying stoned when she wasn't at work, wondering what happened to her mother but not for too long because suddenly I was *around*.

Having no plans for Christmas Eve that year, we gladly plunged ourselves in to last minute shopping at the Owl Rexall drugstore on La Cienega, across from the Beverly Center. The Owl Rexall had a pharmacy and a vast mall-like spread of makeup, candy, perfume, household items, clothing, knickknacks, picture frames, greeting cards and even more than that. It kept us busy and kept us from thinking about Christmas the next day and what an awkward time to fill it would be for you and your daughter this year.

There was a soft quiet hush on Sunset Strip where it meets the top of La Cienega and the hill is so steep you swear to God that no amount of gravity can keep your car on the road. And then you're up the hill, level again on the Strip, and the threat of plunging is over. Christmas Eve on Sunset Strip, having a new affair with a guy whose wife had just moved out, 12 months out of the mental hospital. No traffic to speak of, as if everyone were in for the early part of the evening. Sometimes this would happen on holidays in the heart of Los Angeles, where everyone was home and for once the traffic had died down.

There just couldn't have been anything *righter* than riding in the old woody station wagon you had christened the "Humility Wagon," listening to Alvin and the Chipmunks singing Christmas songs on the radio and feeling completely at large just being together. I had you all to myself that evening and you were inspired to take us to dinner at a neon-lit old diner called Ben Frank's. We walked in and it was packed but right away people recognized you, saying hello and Merry Christmas to the both of us.



Do you remember whether we sat in a booth or at the counter? Hard to recall because the monologue you unfurled this night had taken place at that very counter during the heyday of the 1960s when the sidewalks smelled like patchouli and denim and grass, and were packed so full you just had to relax and let yourself be carried along by the crowd, you said. You were an extraordinary storyteller that night and this one ended with you seated next to a stranger, a female teenager, with whom you struck up a conversation and within the hour, she had handed you a gift intended for you from Harmony Levin on Oahu, perfectly blowing each other's minds as well as my own. And I thought to myself, This is the guy.

You were a singer and songwriter in a 1960s folk rock band you'd helped launch from The Troubadour, and for about four years, the record companies loved you as long as you were producing records in between concert tours. There was a total of eight radio hit songs, giving you and the guys entree to anything and everything you could ever want. And then the record companies retreated, favoring instead the folk rock solo acts your group had paved the way for, and you left the group while the rest of them struggled to carry on despite having been declared obsolete in the music market. Suddenly off the road and out of the recording studio, you fell deathly ill with a raging flu for weeks. Post-production drop is what you called it, and your bass player overdosed and died.

By the time we met, you had a niche in rock and roll history, a lot of street cred but had lost several houses to the financial aftermath of becoming irrelevant. You were one of the countless faded show business stars tromping through the Log Cabin — those who had survived the disease — and you had your own recovery fan club. You were in hock to friends who could afford to loan money, in hock to the IRS and you were freelancing as a copywriter in the video business, writing the copy on the back of the VHS boxes. Your performance and songwriting royalties were leveraged to a specialized loan process known as 'factoring'. After doing so much cocaine back in the day that you snorted up your septum and your daughter's college fund, now you were two and a half years firmly entrenched in the A.A. philosophy that despite all the odds the gods can throw one's way, you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and take the next indicated action. You stayed clean and sober, even though you felt like shit about your life and there was no cessation to the din, as you liked to put it.

The IRS did a walk-through of your rented duplex in order to evaluate the worth of your remaining possessions, just in case they needed to garnish them against your debt. I still thought you were The Guy despite the shitstorm you were living through, now separated from an irate wife who had swung a fireplace poker at your head during a recent conversation. I mean you had gold and platinum records on your wall and a vintage photograph of a clean-shaven you yucking it up with the Smothers Brothers. And you kept going to meetings, kept sponsoring guys — one of the favorite prescribed remedies for what ailed one — even started an audition-free recovery choir. A sober arranger happily charted songs like Lean On Me and Accentuate the Positive simply for the cost of doing you a solid. You even knocked off a send-up of a Christmas favorite entitled Tis the Season To Be Sober (*Do your daily inventories, Fa La La La La, La La La La, Please refrain from bullshit stories, Fa La La La La, La La La La.*)

I knew we were in a new country when you complained about the HOWL bumpersticker from City Lights Books that I affixed to the front of the refrigerator. Who were you now and what did you do with the Beatnik I married?

You were an old man now, an old man who was cranky and had trouble holding his water anymore. An old man whose daughter was fighting cancer and didn't have the bandwidth to visit, let alone stay in touch. Little by little your infirmities conspired to rob you of your mobility to the extent that it was clear I couldn't leave you home alone.

Prior to this level of dependency there was a period of about a year when you could still manage by yourself but it was a worry. You "sent me" back to New England for some respite and friends brought you dinner while I was gone. After another six months I took a weekend in Big Bear with some girlfriends and you were in a rage when I got home. No explanation, only that you took umbrage with my "tone" when I called you to ask to be picked up. You refused to discuss it and I realized the reasonable, soulful Ph.D. from the School of Hard Knocks was no longer available to us. Somebody else was present now, same frame of reference, different M.O.

The Northridge earthquake struck at about 4 in the morning. The old Spanish duplex shifted, made a loud crack and a simultaneous groan, followed immediately by this obnoxious amount of shaking that just wouldn't quit. You rolled over on top of me to protect me from hurling objects while we listened to our bookcases and the hutch in the hallway being thrown against facing walls from the force of the temblor. The previous evening we had been to a fantastic

solo show of Bill Irwin's, and when the earthquake interrupted our sleep, I was still processing the show. Later, when we pieced together the timeline of events, it appeared that the cat had run for his life out of the way of falling bookcases. He spent the next week in bed, under the covers, completely traumatized.

When the shaking stopped, the aftershocks kept coming so I used the stovetop to light a cigaret while you went out back to turn off the gas. There was no electricity and we were still so asleep, we weren't sure what to do. There were phones but no cel phones yet so pretty soon we started calling people to check in and check up on them. Eliot asked you to drive over to the Westside and make sure his elderly mother was safe since he couldn't get a hold of her. Now we had a task to focus on, so we threw on sweats and drove across Pico to the little house occupied by Eliot's mom. Passing the Westside Pavilion, there were a remarkable number of plate glass windows fractured, the department store security alarms all running at the same time. I was out of cigarets so we stopped at the one 76 gas station that was open on the way. *Take it easy, baby,* you intoned while I chain smoked in the passenger seat.