A Balanced Life Chapter 3

Skating boots and blades are like diamonds and their settings: when the cost is worth the intent, they should be purchased separately. A skater will be mindful of her blades — they are, after all, what she will balance on — but her truest attachment will be to her boots. For the most basic ones like mine, she'll pay around $350 and, for a molded-to-her-foot, custom-cut pair, she'll pay the price of a carat or more.

Once upon a time, skating boots, like the ones my uncle Leo gave me, were beautiful. Reaching hallway up a woman's calf, their leather was soft and their design complemented the curve of the female leg. But that design interfered with athleticism. Now, skating boots reach just above the ankle and are heavily padded. They look like clunky booties. That matters not at all: skaters still crave new boots, which hold a strange hermaphroditic appeal: their leathery scent and boxy design are masculine, but their intricate craftsmanship and pristine appearance are feminine. Comingling the need for speed with the desire for grace, they represent the yin and yang of sport.

And whether they're her first pair or her tenth, new boots signal a skater's deepening devotion. Spending her money and hours of her time for fittings shows she's serious about being on the ice. Nor will her commitment go unnoticed. Other skaters will congratulate her on her choice of manufacturer and assure that her new boots will enhance her abilities. They'll remark on the height of her heels and inquire whether she's selected lambs wool or foam rubber to pad her tongues. And they'll tell her that whatever she's paid, her new boots are worth it.

Over time the connection between her boots and herself will become like that between the partners in a good marriage: comfortable and satisfying. Well-fitting boots will support a skater, absorb her sweat and become indented from her toes pressing their insoles.

Her boots will be the sounding board for the 15,600 nerves in her feet that take nanosecond readings telling her the position of her foot, the angle of her blade, the tenor of the ice, the degree of her thrust, the distribution of her weight, the rate of her speed, and any other information she may need to stay upright and safe. Even if she's leaping through space, in her boots, a skater will feel grounded.

I once watched a tiny ice dancer powder her boots. She pulled aside their tongues, assessed whether she'd powdered enough, then shook a little more into one, but not the other. Then, into her boots she slipped her small, bare feet. No socks. No stockings. Nothing between herself and her boots but a few grains of talcum.

I have neither her focus, nor her willingness to forego comfort. When I skate, I always wear a barrier of fine gauge nylon between my soles and my insoles. And, given that skater's laser-like purposefulness, I suspect I regard my boots differently than she does hers.

I've had my current boots for fifteen years and when I look at them I see the Christmas morning Bill gave them to me. I see the two of us together in the house we moved to once our two boys had grown. The trimmed tree in front of the mullioned parlor window, cookies and coffee and oranges in front of the fireplace. A Christmas ritual of our own. A slow handing off of gifts, first one of us opening a present, then the other. A sip of coffee. A cookie. Then another gift. And finally the big box. The boots. I knew I was getting them — I'd been measured for them, but, still, lifting the lid, folding back the tissue, the pungency of their leather, their pristine whiteness.

In the fifteen years I've owned them, not once have I polished them, and now their leather is scuffed and dull. And if I put my hand inside I feel the indentations my toes have made, and realize they're more pronounced in my right skate than in my left where a partial orthotic offsets

the difference in the length of my legs that polio has made. I also feel how the foam rubber lining of their tongues has begun to degrade and crumble. And I see that the leather around the last hole for the laces of my right boot is splitting. After years of tying and retying, its laces have started to slice through its leather, and someday the hole will give way entirely, like a pond whose banks have been breached.

Still, for me, they are beautiful. Even scuffed and dull they're as precious to me as the bronzed baby shoes people once kept on mantel pieces as reminders of a more innocent time.

# # #

Nancy Sinatra could have been my wedding singer. Nineteen sixty-six, the year I marry Bill, Nancy's anthem of independence, "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'," hits the charts, and the rainy October afternoon I march up the aisle on my father's arm, the only phrase resonating with me is "you ain't had time to learn."

Twenty-three and pregnant I feel I don't know Bill at all. Know neither his highest dreams nor the weight of his past. Don't know his secret sorrows or his greatest joys. Don't know his blood type, GPA, Social Security number or Marine Corps discharge date. Don't know his neck size, sleeve size, glove size; his inseam or his outseam. I don't know why he wears white socks, never whistles and doesn't like caramel corn. But I knows he loves me. And that he wants our baby.

He and I never had "dated." Not really. No his ringing my bell, going out to dinner, kissing good night at the door. And when we had sex it was like everything else, perfectly natural . . . perfectly.

Everything felt so normal with him – *I* felt so normal with him. A few weeks after I began teaching, I developed mononucleosis and my mouth became grossly infected. I managed

to work, but then I'd come back to my apartment and collapse. Weekends Bill would come over and I'd sleep. I'd wake up to find him reading in the chair beside me. He was just *there,* a guardian beside me. He and I never lived together, but almost from that first date we *were* together.

In late October, he took me to a University of Maryland football game and, then in the parking lot of an Italian restaurant, he asked me to marry him. I laughed – if I was going to marry anyone, of course it would be him. And when my chemist called and I told him I was sort of engaged, he said he doubted that knowing someone two months was long enough to marry them. And in a sense he was right. Except that the person I didn't know wasn't Bill. I *knew* Bill. No, the person I didn't know back then was myself.

One Sunday morning, the spring before we get married I wrap his bathrobe around myself and read the *New York Times* spread over the floor of his tiny apartment. I am hunting through the classifieds for a summer job.

I didn't appreciate it then, but the most serious difference between us, one that will take years to negotiate, will be our attitude toward money. I thought that if you wanted to be happy you should get stuff to make your life easier, and Bill held that if you wanted to be happy, you should forget the stuff and just take it easy.

But that spring I insist that if we are going to be together he must get a summer job, something he eventually does at an ice cream factory, and I get one, too. The job I find is for a babysitter to help a woman who's driving from Massachusetts to Colorado with her four young children.

When the trip starts, Jane Rich tosses a map into the back of her station wagon and asks me if she's heading in the right direction. She almost always is – the only time we got

completely turned around was outside of Chicago. Once we hit the plains we don't even need maps: we just follow the sun.

Approaching the Rockies outside of Denver, where the plum-colored mountains sit on the horizon like malignant storm clouds. I think about the California-bound settlers, who were days, maybe even weeks outside of their point of departure in Council Bluffs, and knowing that whatever they'd endured up to that point had been a stroll through the grass compared to what lay ahead.

My family hadn't travel much when I was a child – a few times to see my aunt Jane when she left Stratford and moved to New Hampshire, and when she and her second husband took Sally and me to Florida. So experiencing the great scope and breadth of America from the back of that station wagon fills me with a hunger to see more. Whether majestic or merely mildly interesting, I hunger for more.

During the six weeks I'm with the Rich family, Bill and I write to each other: he is working hard making popsicles, and is sorry that the pet hamster I'd entrusted him with has died. And he is counting the days until he can see me again. Meanwhile, I am seeing the lights of Denver, the incredible scope of Mount Rushmore, and, ultimately the sweeping shoreline of Cape Cod, where the Riches end their summer.

I am alone in my parents' house the afternoon Bill arrives to bring me back to Baltimore. He knocks on the backdoor, we kiss on the porch, and I tell him, "I don't want to get married."

"I understand," he says.

And then we make love on my little twin bed across from the one where Sally used to sleep. That was the end of August.

In mid-September I tell Sally "I think I'm pregnant." We are sitting at her kitchen table in her little house on Red Pump Road thirty miles outside of Baltimore.

She gets up, fills a baby bottle with milk and water for her fourteen-month-old little girl ─ her little boy, Mike, nearly three and a half, is pushing a yellow truck across the floor. Sally lights a cigarette. "What are you going to do?

"I'm going to get married."

"He'll never make any money," she says. "Bill's a great guy, but a school teacher . . . come on, Pat! He'll never make any money"

"The money doesn't matter if the feeling's right."

And by October I am marching up the aisle.

# # #

Back in my senior year of college, when I was still wobbly from my breakdown and scared about my impending future, I nevertheless had a startling insight about the man I wanted to marry: he would have to love his job. In that era of the stay-at-home mom, I couldn't imagine anything worse than a man going out every day to a job he hated in order to support me. And Bill, with his bottomless grab bag of teaching methods, certainly had the passion for his work that I admired.

And there was something more. Even though abortion wasn't legal then, women were flying down to Puerto Rico all the time to have "operations." But I had always known that Bill wanted children. An abortion would have hurt him beyond measure and certainly would have ended our relationship. And so hardened my heart against his pain that my capacity to love whichever man came next would have been lessened.

And so, we get married and move into an apartment on the fringe of a neighborhood called Charles Village. Our apartment is a fourth-floor walk-up, but it has French doors overlooking West Baltimore, which I think are grand. We paint the smaller bedroom blue, and it becomes Kurt's.

I'm fascinated by my infant son, but also tentative. I feel awkward talking to him, so mostly I handle him silently. Nor do I breast feed him. But I do learn to let myself relax while I rock him and feed him his bottle. I learn to let myself enjoy the moment and not feel as though I should be washing the floor or hemming curtains, or tackling whatever other task the template of my mother's housekeeping has impressed on me.

She sends Kurt a set of bell-shaped rattles strung on an elastic string that we stretch across his crib, and Bill and I lie in bed, listening to him kicking them. When my mother calls and asks what else I want, and I answer "a baby carriage."

"That's too much," she tells me, but then sends a check and a note saying that "Your father wanted you to have this." Wheeling Kurt down the streets and up the alleys behind Charles Village's rowhouses becomes one of our principal recreations ─ the other, in those days of thirty-five-cents-a-gallon gas, was going for rides in the country.

Wherever we go, Bill always has his camera, is always on the lookout for the unexpected bit of primitive sculpture in a back yard, or a particularly stunning rose bush, or is simply calling my name and snapping me. Always something to see, our eyes triangulating on a stained glass transom, or a wrought-iron railing, our sightlines meeting, and the two of us discovering ourselves in each other.

In the evenings, sometimes a friend of Bill's named Bill Barnes comes over. A Texan who's teaching in a special program for urban youth, Bill Barnes is new to Baltimore, lonely and

shares my Bill's passion for history. One October Saturday, we three adults pack up the carriage and take Kurt to a street festival in Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood. Now thoroughly gentrified, in those days Fells Point still embraced its rough maritime past, and the festival's organizers hadn't anticipated the crowds thronging the neighborhood's cobblestone streets. The hotdogs we buy from the festival's sole vender taste raw, but we don't care. Kurt is five-months-old then, and we are beginning to realize that our lives haven't stopped because we've had a baby. They are just different. Richer in many ways. And less our own in others.

Bill is in a Master's of Liberal Arts program at Johns Hopkins when we get married and he urges me to enroll, too. But, when I apply my grades from Albertus Magnus are too low, and I have to take additional courses to get my GPA up. I start with one titled "Existentialism and the Thriller," taught by an Episcopal priest from England named Ralph Harper. The course is a tonic. At Albertus, I'd been rigorously trained in knitting together diverse subjects, so finding the common thread linking mystery and existentialism is fun . . . almost easy.

In order for one of us to be with Kurt, Bill goes to class on a different night than I do, and he's at school the April night I turn on the TV and find every channel carrying the same awful news: Martin Luther King Junior has been killed.

A contagion erupts: first Newark explodes into flames, then Philadelphia, then Atlanta. The contagion seems to have spared Baltimore, but only because the city's fury hides itself while it gathers strength. When it bursts forth, nothing can contain it. With Kurt in my arms, I stand on the balcony outside our French doors and count the fires raging in West Baltimore. Thirteen in all. Who knows how many rage in the city's east?

My mother calls. Bill's father, Henry, had been a lieutenant in the Maryland State Police, and she wants him to escort us out of the city.

"Call him," my mother yells. "Tell him to get you out of there."

"We're staying, Mom."

"You've got a baby now," she says. "You've got to think of him. What about him, Patsy?"

But the three of us stay, through the screaming sirens, the whirring helicopters, and the acrid smoke and curfews, we stay. Someone must bear witness.

Two months and two days later, another shot rings out, and Bill says "Let's go." Not out of Baltimore, but to the train tracks. An honor guard of citizen-mourners reaching beyond the city limits has lined the tracks, where they will wait for hours to see the south bound train carrying Bobby Kennedy to Arlington National Cemetery, so he can be buried beside his brother.

Until two weeks before Kurt's birth, I had taught ninth grade English, and one of my students had been Bruce Altman. Bruce was the sort of student a teacher hears about and then prays he never walks into her classroom. Mean, disruptive, belligerent . . . that was the word on Bruce Altman. But the year before I taught him, one late afternoon when the school day had long been over, Bill and I went down into the building's basement for some reason and found Bruce crying. Someone had kicked in the metal door of his locker, jamming it against its frame. He had no way to open it and needed his coat.

"Go ask the janitor for a crowbar," Bill told him.

"I did. He won't give it to me."

Bill got the crowbar and pried open the locker. Maybe because of that, from the day Bruce walked into my classroom, he never gave me a bit of trouble. Older than most of the students, he paired with an unlikely buddy, Ronnie McKnight, a sweet-hearted child who affected a grouchy exterior. Together, after school they would wash my blackboards and

straighten my desks. One day, I was correcting papers when Bruce said, “Guess what, Mrs. Schultheis.”

“What, Bruce?”

“My mother told me she’s not going to get married anymore. She’s just going to have boyfriends. Isn’t that great?” That was the word on Bruce Altman.

And then, as we wait by the train tracks in East Baltimore, a lanky figure separates himself from the crowd, shades his eyes from the sun and shouts, “Hey, Mrs. Schultheis.” I shield my eyes too, and shift Kurt on my hip. The figure strides through the crowd. A little taller now, and definitely more filled out. Bruce Altman.

“This is really something,” he says, his right hand sweeping in a loose semicircle.

But I don’t know if Bruce means the assassination, the crowd, or the general horror that was America in 1968.

“Yeah, it is,” I answer.

“Well, I thought it was my duty to come, you know.”

“Your duty?”

“I’ve enlisted. I’m joining the Marines! I’m going to be a Marine, Mrs. Schultheis!”

America is shoveling its young men into Vietnam and Bruce Altman has enlisted.

”That’s great, Bruce,” I tell him. “That’s great.”

# # #

Bill and I buy a little house on Ranny Road in Mount Washington, a bosky neighborhood in northwest Baltimore. When Bill totals up the budget for our mortgage, insurance, car payments, food, and utilities, we have a fifty-dollar-a-month margin for the unexpected. He’s offered a second job teaching at Ner Israel Rabbinical School because the rabbi has heard that

he's an excellent teacher and the school wants the boys to have some interaction with gentiles. So Bill takes the job, giving us a financial cushion. But it also means he's working long hours weekdays plus Sunday afternoons.

I had pushed Kurt's baby carriage up and down the alleys of Charles Village just to find someone to talk to, and in Mount Washington, I'm even more isolated. Ranny Road, where the houses are small and semidetached, is an anomaly. Most of the other houses in Mount Washington are large, set back from the street, and owned by professors at Hopkins whose wives quickly compute that I have nothing to add to their social standing.

Salvation comes in the form of Mary Mead who three doors down from mine. Practical, kindhearted, she's the mother of a little girl named Katie and a boy named Billie, the same age as Kurt. Mary and I never have to arrange "playdates": the boys are always at one of our houses, usually Mary's. And sometimes I'm there, too, talking about a skirt I'm sewing or the Ming-yellow lamp we've bought, or how I like cake and Bill likes pie.

All over America women are slippin' into a whole lot of liberation and not a little collective lunacy. Everywhere they're gettin' on their boots. Getting' high in their boots. Gettin' down in their boots. Gettin' it on in their boots.

White plastic ones favored by Go Go Tootsies. Or Muddy ones from Woodstock Nation. Or chunky-heeled ones resting on coffee tables amid wine glasses at "consciousness raising" sessions. All across America, women are marching forth, standing tall and walking away in their boots.

But not Mary. She's steadfast, realistic and focused on what she values most: her husband, a telephone lineman, and her children. In short, she's like Bill. And she's one of the first people I tell when I get pregnant again.

With Kurt I had felt tired all the time, but with this pregnancy I'm almost giddy with energy. I especially enjoy the clandestine communication between the baby and me, when I'm standing in line at the supermarket or at the Post Office and feel a summersault or a kick. And I silently say, "Well, hi there, kid."

"I think I'm having a boy," I tell Sally.

And I do have boy. It's a warm mid-November mid-week morning when I feel a little rip and see blood. Kurt is on the floor playing a record player that my mother has sent him, and he doesn't want to shut it off when I call my obstetrician, who tells me to get to the hospital. Nor does he want to shut it off when I tell him to go to Mary's who said she'd watch him when the time came. So I tell him to take his damned record player and Go!

Bill's main job is at Frederick Douglass High School, where he's one of the few white teachers in a school with an all-black student body and administration. He will tell me later that when his principal, Edna Campbell, learned that I had called, she marched into his classroom and told him, "I'll handle this lesson, Mr. Schultheis. You go home. Your wife needs you."

And his wife does need him. At the hospital, he helps me breathe, tells me to relax my legs, gives me a lollipop, and, as strange as it now may sound now, he smokes. Matt is born at 6:30 that evening, two weeks early, but precisely three years and six months after his older brother.

"This kid knows what he's doing," I think to myself.

The assassinations, the Kent State shootings, Vietnam, I know about them, even voice opinions about them, but they register as abstractions. What is real is the warm bundle of Matt in my arms. When we bring him home and show him to his big brother, Kurt says, "Oh, I love him." And, then asks "Can I hold him?"

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I remember how hurt I'd been when my mother brought newborn Susan home and Sally had been allowed to hold her, and I was considered "too small," so I tell Kurt to sit way back on the couch and lay Matt across his lap, where they search each other's eyes.

I had bought a toy garage with an elevator for little cars driven by little spool-shaped people, and I give it to Kurt, saying it is his reward for having been such a good boy when I was away. The garage amuses him while I focus on Matt, who begins showing symptoms that quickly ratchets my concern from worry to downright alarm. He is vomiting so violently that his little body seems to be trying to eject not only his food, but his very stomach.

Our kind pediatrician, Gino Zarbin, diagnoses pyloric stenosis, a condition preventing food from entering a baby's intestine. Some babies outgrow this condition within weeks, but Matt's case worsens. A few days after Thanksgiving Dr. Zarbin says that Matt needs an operation. Mary Meade watches Kurt the morning Bill and I sit at the end of a corridor in Mercy Hospital. Down the end of the corridor a gurney with a patient no bigger than a loaf of bread rolls toward the operating room. And we wait. And wait. And then the surgeon comes down the corridor. The operation went well, he tells us . . . but it was more extensive than he had anticipated . . . Matt's situation was a little complicated . . . these things can't be known until "You get in."

Bill and I go home and wait again. Elsewhere the world is getting ready for Christmas, but in our little house on Ranny Road, we're frozen in stasis. My mother is working at Bridgeport Hospital now and Sally's a nurse at Stella Maris, a facility for the aging, and my sister Susan, who's studying at the University of Maryland, has final exams, so Bill calls his mother to come help me take care of Kurt while I'm with Matt. At that point, he'd been in the hospital for over a week and wasn't showing many signs of improvement.

So my mother-in-law Susan comes. She is a coalminer's daughter who grew up knowing the snatching hand of fate can light the single spark that ignites the inside of a mountain. Grim-faced, unsympathetic, and not especially helpful, she's sitting in my kitchen and I'm in the den writing a paper on the semiotics of *Bleak House* for the Hopkins Master's of Liberal Arts Program that I've finally gotten into and Kurt is playing with his garage on the floor beside me when the phone rings."

Mrs. Schultheis," Dr. Zarbin says, "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"What?"

"Last night Matthew passed a runny stool. It could indicate that he has caught a virus. Or that he has begun digesting his stomach juices."

"What does that mean?'

"It means that he is starving, Mrs. Schultheis. I'm sorry. We'll know in twenty-four hours if he'll make it."

When I tell my mother-in-law that, she comforts me by saying "Well, if you're going to lose them, it's best to lose them early before you get too attached. That's what I always say."

What I say is "Shut." But then I manage to lock my lips around "up" and turn on my heel and go back to writing my paper.

An hour later the phone rings again. "How's the baby?" my father asks.

I tell him what Dr. Zarbin had said.

"I'll say a prayer," my father says.

Maybe his grandfather's prayers are why Matt lived. Or maybe it was because of the skill of the doctors and nurses at Mercy Hospital. Or maybe because of Matt's own willful determination. If I had to choose, though, I'd choose my father's prayers.

Matt's been home less than a week when Kurt catches the flu. Vomiting, diarrhea . . . just a flu, I think. But then he becomes lethargic. Kurt is a quiet child, but the nature of this quiet is profound and malignant. He doesn't feel like watching "Sesame Street." Or want me to read *Go Dog, Go.* Or like it when I make one of his garage's spool men dance on his arm. I take him to Dr. Zarbin who says that he's getting dehydrated.

"Have him drink Coke a Cola," he orders. "As much Coke a Cola as he wants."

But Kurt doesn't want to drink Coke a Cola. And when he tries to, he throws up.

Dr. Zarbin calls the next day to find out how he's doing, and I'm tempted to lie. I know that dehydration is cured by fluids delivered through a catheter into the arm. It's a simple procedure, but requires hospitalization, and I don't know if I can face that again. I want so badly to lie, but I don't. Instead, when Bill comes home from work, I leave him with Matt and drive Kurt to Mercy Hospital.

"Is the baby not doing well?" one of the interns asks when I get off the elevator.

"It's not the baby. It's his brother," I say.

Hospitals at that time weren't as accommodating to parents as they are now, and once Kurt is changed into a hospital gown and the catheter inserted I'm allowed to stay with him for less than an hour. When I say I have to leave, he begins to scream, "Stay, Mommy, stay!" But I can't stay. I hear him screaming for me when I walk to the elevator and while I watch its dial move from floor to floor, and when it stops, and when I step on, and when its door closes . . . "Stay, Mommy, stay!" I'm hearing him even when I'm not, even when I clutch his little striped shirt and blue overalls to my chest and bury my head into them.

And then someone asks, “Is there anything I can do to help you?” A kindness from a stranger I hadn’t even noticed on the elevator. Two days before Christmas. A gift outright. I tell whoever it is No, there is nothing anyone can do. But to this day I’m grateful for the offer.

The next day is Christmas Eve and I ask Mary if she will watch Matt for a few hours in the morning while Bill and I visit Kurt. When we go into his room, he’s sitting up in bed, looking like a red-headed little angel in his white hospital gown, but he’s swearing like a Marine.

“Get this God damned thing out of my arm!” he commands.

But we tell him that he has to be good because Santa Clause is coming that night. That night, that very night, Santa Claus is coming. But he will not be consoled and we cannot stay: it’s Christmas Eve and even Mary’s helpfulness has its limits, so we leave while Kurt screams and screams for us. The next morning, Christmas, he’s discharged but still is somewhat lethargic. When he walks in the door, he looks at the tree and wrapped presents without enthusiasm.

“Is today Christmas?” he asks. I catch Bill’s eye. We don’t even have to say what we’re both thinking.

“No, Kurt,” Bill says. “Tomorrow is Christmas. Today is just a day to take it easy.”

When Sally calls and asks how my Christmas is going, I tell her that Kurt still seems a little out of focus, and she wants me to take him to the hospital, but I don’t. I can’t. And the next morning proves I had been right. Kurt bounds down the stairs and rips into his presents. Nineteen seventy, December twenty-six, the best Christmas ever.

# # #

The ‘70’s is the decade of the boot. Put anything you wanted on the rest of your body – hotpants, a miniskirt, bellbottoms ─ but on your feet better be boots.

Only I don't have any boots. For weeks before Matt's baptism, I work at my sewing machine in our leaky basement, making myself a red wool dress and a grey wool coat with a Nehru collar and brass buttons. But on the slushy February Sunday of the ceremony I have no boots. I have only galoshes like the ones Leo had worn the afternoon he brought me my first skates. My mother is horrified.

"Look, Ralph," she says to my father. "Look what she's putting on her feet."

My father says nothing. Neither do I.

Two weeks later a check arrives with a note from my mother: "Patsy, buy yourself some boots."

I do, but boots aren't what I need. I need something I can't identitfy. I clean the house, I cook, I take another course toward my master's degree and take care of the boys, but none of these are exactly what I need. I go through my days like a robomom, efficient but unsmiling.

"Talk big to me, Mommy," Kurt says one day when I'm tying his shoes. He puts his hands beside my mouth and actually tries prying it open. "Talk big to me."

"What do you mean?"

"Talk big. Like Grandpa Ralph." He means he wants me to have a conversation with him. He's three and a half and full of ideas, and I'm twenty-eight and full of ideas too. Vague ones about maybe writing a children's book or a mystery, or learning fine tailoring, or how to bake bread, or something.

I tell Kurt to finish his breakfast.

Perhaps I was troubled by the sense of emptiness that Betty Freidan identified as the feminine mystique. Or perhaps having both my boys nearly die had depleted me, as I now realize that my having polio and her own mother's stroke probably had depleted my mother.

During the following long winter those fears and anxieties for my boys metastasize into something fetid and exhausting.

I'm alone with them a lot ─ Bill needs our car. Plus, teaching at two places exhausts him, so that when he comes home he doesn't want to hear my niggling complaints. And even with his second job, money is tight. Every time something breaks, it feels like a crisis. When the drier dies, I string a rope between trees to hang clothes until we have money to fix it. Bill's old foam rubber studio couch serves as our sofa – we won't have an actual one until we've been married ten years. Two new tires sets our budget back for weeks.

He and I are at our best when we play. To decorate the boys' rooms we make large papier mache animals, a big yellow hippo and a red turtle. We put together puzzles and one night, when the boys are asleep go sled riding down Ranny Road one. In the spring we go scavenging for old bottles in a nineteenth century dump Bill discovers by following an overgrown roadbed. And there are evenings when Bill sets up his projector on a wicker chest, one of the first things we bought for our apartment back on St. Paul Street. He drops a carousel of slides in, while Kurt and I lie on the living room floor and Look! There's Kurt crawling out of his bedroom doorway, back in our apartment on St. Paul St. And one of Katie Meade. And another of Kurt and Billy looking down at Matt in his baby carriage. And of Matt looking back at them with a newborn's frank stare. And of me, sitting on a log on the beach near my in-laws' house, my hands thrust into the pockets of the coat I'd sewn for Matt's baptism.

Those fun, intimate times seem so precious now, but, as we were living them, they didn't offset my sense that I was missing something, something like the "it" Gail, the girl at the boarding school, thought would fulfill her if only she weren't thwarted by " a giant block of ice."

I feel exhausted and, at the same time impelled to sew another skirt, bake another cake, straighten another drawer.

That summer, Matt is eight-months-old and when my mother calls saying she and my father are coming to visit, I ask her to bring my bike and my skates, My mother is nearly sixty by then and happier than I've ever known her to be. She never remarks that a bike and skates don't really go with cribs and carriages. Maybe she remembers her own nights washing dishes when she recalled her own girlish self " . . . *I used to be good at it . . . I used to be good at it."*

Or maybe she wants one of her daughters to be happy in marriage. Susan will wed her high school sweetheart later that summer and my mother will rightly predict the marriage won't last. And she's seen how Sally's frantic efforts to juggle three small children, a career and a suburban houseful of cats, dogs, and even ducks has spun her into perpetual distraction. And Hank into angry rigidity. Whatever, my mother's reasons are, she brings me my girlhood toys.

But I don't use them very much. I try to interest Bill in biking with me, but he doesn't like it, and whenever I go alone, I sense the negative judgment from him that I had expected from my mother. As for the skates, to protect them from rust, I coat their blades with the Vaseline I use for Matt's bottom and hang them from a nail jutting from our basement's knotty pine paneling. I pass them every day whenever I carry a basket of dirty laundry to the washing machine.

Four or five times the next winter I take them down and go skate. And I buy Kurt a pair of strap-on double runners. On a Saturday afternoon he and I go to the private rink at the bottom of the hill of our bosky neighborhood. But he doesn't like it, so I go alone to skate at the outdoor rink operated by Baltimore's Department of Parks and Recreation in the parking lot of the municipal stadium, where it's cheaper. The raucous crowd there is kept in check by genial

guards. And no one seems to worry about looking foolish if they trip or fall. The music from the loudspeakers rings tinny through the chill air, and concession stand's the hot chocolate is scorching and flavorless, but I don't care. In my old skates I go round and round under the winter sky. For those few hours I'm not anyone's wife nor anyone's mother. And I'm certainly not nearly thirty years old. I'm simply an anonymous skater going round just like that girl who had skated away her winter afternoons on the frozen pond of Stratford's Longbrook Park.

But then the session ends, and I go home and hang my skates on their nail in the basement where I pass them on my way to wash laundry.

In those days, I feel like Leda who finally had gotten her swan. She had wanted him desperately, but then discovered that his feathers are scratchy and his feet are webbed and his beak is gross. How I had wanted the security of being loved, but I hadn't computed the algorithm by which one choice eliminates others. I had chosen a husband and children, but I still wanted all the possibilities that the girl skating in Longbrook Park had. And, then Mary and her family move to Florida and I feel more alone than ever.

# # #

In the last house on Ranny Road, at the bottom of the hill, a beautiful woman named Jennifer Skolnik lives with her husband, Barney. Jennifer had gone to Radcliffe and Barney to Harvard, and the scuttlebutt on them is that one night at a Cambridge dinner party their wit and repartee had charmed another guest named Eric Segal so much that he was inspired to write *Love Story*.

But whenever she's asked if the scuttlebutt is true, Jennifer tosses her head to one side and laughs. "No . . . no . . . no! The Jennifer in *Love Story* dies. And look at me. I'm alive! I'm alive!"

And, indeed she is. In addition to her good looks, she's almost incandescent with vigor and confidence. She and Barney have three children, two little girls and a little boy, and they soon adopt a fourth.

The older three, the two girls and their brother, sometimes trundle up Ranny Road to watch Bill build a trench he hopes will better waterproof our basement. The little boy, who's two, is as roly-poly as a cub bear and has the world weariness and gravel voice of a Mafioso. Bill takes to calling him Bruno. And Bruno takes to calling Bill "Bill." Bill and Bruno become very mano a' mano, while Bruno's sisters remain solemn and shy.

And then Jennifer's children don't come up the hill anymore. And the new scuttlebutt is that she has taken them and gone to New York. Without Barney.

I can understand why. Jennifer had grown up outside of New York in Westchester, and doubtless she had felt Manhattan's magnetic pull as I had. Felt it so badly, she finally succumbed.

My answer to that pull is much less drastic: I subscribe to *New York Magazine.* And once a week I get to read all about '70's swirling around me, while I'm immobile and isolated. I read about cultural icons like Baby Jane Holitzer, Andy Warhol, and crazed Edie Sedgwick. According to *New York Magazine*, the whole world is trying to cram into Studio 54, powder its nose white, and disco 'til dawn. While back on Ranny Road, I vacuum the living room, teach Kurt to tell time so he won't pester me if it's time for "Sesame Street," and notice that the For Sale sign in front of Jennifer's house is still up.

And, then, one rainy May morning, she's back. Jennifer Skolnik. On Ranny Road. Smiling. From the cover of *New York Magazine.*

In a very clever article she describes the death of her marriage and her rebirth in Manhattan. With a lover. Who's completely wrong. And utterly right. How together he and she sing tunes from her children's Sesame Street songbook, while she's wrapped in his challis bathrobe. She's brutally honest about her pain over the end of her marriage and then of her affair. And she poignantly recalls how the sight of a single daffodil on a Manhattan median strip summons memories of riotous springtimes in Baltimore. But, in general, she's upbeat and hopeful. A smart woman who convinces her readers she's made the right move.

At the community swimming pool I overhear a man remark that he didn't know how "she could do that to Barney." But I won't know if the man's remark refers to about how Jennifer left Barney. Or how she broadcast to the world about how she sang in her lover's bathrobe.

Doubtless Jennifer's story is humiliating for Barney. He is the U.S. Attorney who carefully put together the case resulting in the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew. While his children were trundling up Ranny Road, and his wife was dreaming about Manhattan, he was preparing to discredit someone a heartbeat away from the presidency of the United States.

I wonder what Barney felt that March evening when he came home and found his house empty. Had he known she was leaving? In the kitchen did he notice Jennifer's handwriting on a note reminding herself to call the washing machine repairman? Was the note stuck to the refrigerator next to a picture of a blue boat that Bruno had painted? And what about her black bra in the laundry? Or her half-empty bottle of jasmine-scented shampoo? Did he notice those and cry? Or did he just open a beer?

# # #

Late summer, 1973, and I've graduated from Hopkins and am riding shotgun in Sally's station wagon; our five kids, aged two to nine, rattle around in back. Sally, cigarette between two fingers, steers with three and downshifts up a narrow dirt road. We're going to a West Virginia cabin she and Hank have bought. Again and again she punches the button on the tape player for John Denver's paean to Mountain Mama. Her feet dance from gas to clutch to brake and her eyes squint at the last pink rays winking over the blue mountains. Unlike me, with my city-girl genes, both my sisters find self-renewal in nature's endless change. And on this trip, Sally is desperate for renewal. Or maybe just desperate.

We unload the kids, feed and bed them, and then the two of us watch the woods darken until they disappear into the night. We're having beers on her deck, when she stubs out her cigarette and stares at the vanished forest as if her eyes could penetrate the black, and she could see the pathway to transcendence.

"I'm thinking about leaving Hank," she says.

They had married too young, especially Sally, who graduated one weekend and married the next. For the first year of their marriage, Hank was still finishing his Ph.D. in Philadelphia and Sally worked at a hospital. When her shift would end, she'd go out drinking with the interns.

"Not a good sign," my aunt Jane later will say. "Right from the beginning, not a good sign."

And then she had three children in four years. Her body grew gaunt, and her legs became laced with varicose veins. She always looked haggard. Always had another cigarette, a can of beer. Her housekeeping was the opposite of mine. Where I obsessed; she ignored. Sticky floors, grimy bathrooms, even dog turds, she ignored.

She'd call: "Can you come up Sunday?" If it was Bill's one Sunday a month off from Ner Israel, we'd go. She would be rushing about, nursing a sick kitten, finding a clean table cloth, chopping onions. And Hank, stony, would flip on the TV. Hand out drinks. We'd watch.

But on her deck that night Sally is beyond standard marital unhappiness. She's had affairs, told me about two of them. One with a doctor, a weekend in Pittsburgh. Another with a psychiatric patient . . . dangerous, she could have lost her nursing license. But staring into the woods she sees yet another man. Someone she imagines making a life with, another, better life.

Tom's a social worker at the VA hospital where she's working, and he listens to her. Appreciates her. Sees the world as she does.

That she wants some solid advice from me, some insight into how life had brought her to a cabin in West Virginia surrounded by a midnight forest and hemmed in by seemingly insolvable complications makes me feel threatened. I need my loving, funny big sister too much to help the troubled woman staring into the impenetrable pines. I need to stay in the role I always have played: the dependent one. So I toss out a feeble argument, one I know Sally's ready to rebut: "What about the kids?"

Her cigarette flares. "Anything would be better for them than living in this horrible tension. Hank's always angry . . . sometimes I think he can't stand to look at me. I can't take it anymore. That's no atmosphere to raise kids in."

She and I stay in West Virginia for two days. When we get back to her house in suburban Maryland, and Bill comes to collect me and the boys, she gives us a kitten.

"Zoro," she says. "See how his markings make a mask? We named him Zoro." And I cling to her "we." It suggests a mutual undertaking, maybe begun with laughter and shared silliness. The sort of memory, along with a thousand others, that binds two people. Sally and

Hank together. That's what I want. I want things to stay as they'd always been, want it so badly, I hold back from warning her that she's making a mistake.

But Sally doesn't hold back. By Thanksgiving, she's taken her children and moved into a suburban house she rents with Tom. And I watch everything change anyway.

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# # #

In the fall of 1973, I decide to go back to work, and quickly discover that the world of work doesn't especially need someone well versed in "The Romantic View of Man" or the "Prophets of Ancient Israel" or any of the other courses I took for my master's degree. For a few weeks I try teaching at a nearby Junior High, but can't control of my classes – one glance from Bill would have silenced them, but nothing from me worked. I quit and resolve to take the lowest position I can get as long as it's faintly related to working with words. The early 70's were the waning days of linotype, and I answer an ad for a copyholder at a typehouse. I don't know what either a copyholder or a typehouse is, but when I'm offered the job, I take it.

Until I've saved enough for a second car, I have to take two buses to get to Service Composition on Baltimore's Westside, where I sit in a windowless office and silently read a set of page proofs, checking for errors, while Helen, the proofreader, reads an identical set aloud. I'm so starved for stimulus, I actually find the work interesting.

To me, words and the books containing them have always been magical. Until I worked at Service Composition, however, I had never thought of them as being manufactured as well. But, of course, before words can be read, they must be printed, and before they can be printed they must be typeset. Serif, sans serif, leading, point size, dropcaps, small caps . . . they are a secret language spoken by hardworking people and I learn to speak it too.

I have been a copyholder for two months when I get a call from a printing company looking for a proofreader. At Garamond Pridemark Press, my knowledge of publishing's secret language grows. Just as "rock," "edge" and "hollow" mean one thing to skaters and another to everyone else, "signature," "PMS," and " stripper," have one meaning in the outside world and another in the world of giant presses. Learning these secret meanings makes me feel like an initiate into a productive, highly skilled cabal. And I learn other things as well.

I learn to stretch a Bloody Mary lunch to three hours by befriending the boss's fiancée. And I learn to drop ten pounds, wear a pink dress, and have a pressman shout, "Hey, Pat, the more you lose, the better you look."

In February, after I've been at Garamond a few months, Baltimore's teachers go on strike. It's a heady time: I push Matt in the old baby carriage and Kurt walks beside Bill as we march in solidarity for smaller class sizes and better pay.

When I began working, Bill quit Ner Israel, and now my salary is our only income, yet it never occurs to me to urge him to cross the picket line. He was never a radical. Never made a decision that wasn't well considered, and if he says it is time to strike, it is time to strike. Besides, I feel more relaxed leaving Matt home with him rather than in daycare. This arrangement represents a role reversal for Bill and myself, one that works fine during the strike, but, which, as it's played out over the course of several summers will make me increasingly resentful.

At Garamond I make friends with a woman seven years younger than myself, who's also just graduated from Johns Hopkins. We like to go out to lunch together and talk about books. Once, we even split the contents of a Clinque gift bag. And then Sue announces that she's leaving for a job in New York, and I learn I'm not quite immune to Manhattan's pull just yet.

The chance I turned down at *Commonweal*, the chance Jennifer Skolnik risked so much for, opportunities like that are only possible in New York, and I assume that Sue, who's very smart, organized and sensible, is leaving for New York to give her abilities full rein. Even the next Thanksgiving, when Bill and I take the boys up for the Macy's parade and I stay behind to spend an afternoon with her, I assume she's having the time of her life in New York. But I'm wrong.

Years later, one rainy March night after Bill has died, Sue will tell me that she spent years working in New York in the hope that her boyfriend from Johns Hopkins would call and say, "Come back to Baltimore, Sue. Come back to me." Smart, capable, sensible Sue had gone to New York not because she loved New York, but because she loved a man.

# # #

Printers make blank mockups of publications called dummies so customers will know a publication's exact size and weight. And when a bindery man makes a high-grade vellum dummy for me, I use it as a diary and begin filling it with a catalogue of my itchy dissatisfactions.

Dec. 4, 1974, I am very, very tired. I ask Bill for help and there is no help coming.

Dec. 23, 1974 Bill's father offered him some money for the roof (we needed a new one) but he turned it down. Jan (a woman at Garamond) said he'll be buried with his pride.

Jan. 27. 1975 Bill and I just had the best fight, Saturday, where we say all the hateful things in a very controlled manner and then we made love.

Psychologists tell us that the only marriage any of us knows is our parents', so we begin our own marriage playing the husband or wife of someone who doesn't have a clue what we're doing. For most of his childhood, Bill and his brothers had lived with their mother in a little town nestled in the Allegheny Mountains, while his father taught at the Maryland State Police

Academy in Baltimore. On weekends, my father-in-law Henry would come home like a conquering hero, while my mother-in-law's stony resentment grew as hard as the coal in the surrounding mountains.

In contrast, my parents had suppressed nothing. Every hurt, slight, misjudgment, and failure was a weapon — hours before he died, my mother would hold my father's hand and recall their "battles royal." And then she'd say, "But the making up was good, wasn't it, Ralph?" And I'd see him manage a thin smile.

Coming from such opposite ways of negotiating a marriage it's understandable that Bill and I argued, me chafing under what I considered Bill's rigidity, and he unhappy with what he called my "nagging." But in our late twenties and early thirties, our marriage is still green, flexible and resilient enough to absorb his obdurateness and my anger. Plus we both sense that we balance each other.

In June of 1975, I quit Garamond, and Bill and I take the boys on a cross-country camping trip, an adventure I've been planning ever since I had traveled to Colorado in the back of Jane Rich's station wagon.

"Don't go," my mother says. "At least wait until the boys are older. They'll appreciate it more."

But Matt is four and Kurt is nine, good ages, I reason, for maximum adaptability. And I'm right. Within two days of riding in the backseat of our little VW Squareback the boys learn to make toys out of a tin plate, an empty Animal Cracker box, or even a sneaker. We're tenting, and Bill grumbles about disassembling and putting up the boys' small pup tent and our larger one each night. But when we reach Colorado and are standing at an overlook, gazing at the majesty of Grand Teton I feel his hand on mine.

"Now I know why you wanted to come," he says. And then he snaps a picture.

We push on to the coast of California, and after a few days visiting San Francisco, camp near Palo Alto and then head back. In Kansas we hit bad weather and the wind twists our tent poles into corkscrews, so the rest of the way home we stay in whatever motels we can find. By the time we return to the East Coast the boys are so accustomed to answering the call of nature wherever they hear it that when we stop at a gas station to use the rest rooms, I find the two of them have ignored the Men's Room sign and are out back peeing into the bushes.

The trip took us into the great expanse of America, but it also expanded our appreciation of each other. We learned to be more flexible as individuals and more unified as a family. We've shared something unique to the four of us, something that called on inner resources from each of us and gave more self-assurance to all of us.

But it had been a wonderful adventure undertaken out of our regular lives, and those lives were waiting when we came home. That September, I enroll Matt in Grace and St. Peter's, an Episcopal Day School which has an extended day program – all its students are the children of working mothers. And I get a job as the production manager at *Baltimore Magazine,* Baltimore's counterpart to *New York Magazine.*

But I feel I don't fit in there. My job is ill-defined and to meet the printer's schedule, I'm at the mercy of the designer, a friend of the publisher. She flounces into work at noon some days and out at two on others. And whenever I ask her when I can expect a particular article, she smiles and says, "When I'm done with it."

The Chamber of Commerce owns the magazine back then, and when the Chamber throws a big party, the magazine's staff and their spouses are invited. But Bill is enormously uncomfortable in such a setting and doesn't care that he makes everyone else at our table

uncomfortable, too. He barely talks to them, refuses to dance, and grumbles that the music is giving him a headache. I'm furious.

The next day, Sally calls, and I tell her how he behaved, and she asks me to come up to Pennsylvania where she and Tom now live in an old brick farmhouse with a zinc bathtub but no running water. There, she serves me roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and wine, and I fall asleep on her couch.

A few weeks after that, the magazine's publisher calls me into his office and fires me — I've just upset his friend the designer too much.

It's near Thanksgiving and Sally tells me. "Enjoy your holidays. Don't look for a job until after Christmas."

But I don't enjoy anything.

Dec. 1, 1976 I've begun taking sleeping pills, and I really like the way they make me feel.

Under the tree that Christmas I find a leather-bound book of blank pages.

"I thought you'd like a real diary," Bill says.

Most of its early entries are about my trying to get a job. I need one because we've decided to enroll Kurt in Grace and St. Peter's along with Matt. We had moved to Mount Washington for its excellent elementary school, but Kurt is a quiet child whose hand doesn't shoot up as quickly as those of his classmates, and his teachers brand him a daydreamer. Grace and St. Peter's, with its small classes and highly structured but inventive curriculum, seems like the perfect fit for him. So we reverse plans, but that means two tuitions.

That spring, I go to work at the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting as a researcher for a program called "Consumer Survival Kit." One of the shows' writers is a blonde sylph

named Robin Ward who had gone to Princeton and was a highly ranked competitive skater. All bubbly with commiserative spirit, I gush to Robin that sometimes I skate and how I'm trying to learn to go backwards. Robin regards me as an eagle would a dodo ─ at that point, I really have no idea of how really extraordinary Robin's skating achievements are.

At the tv show, I'm a second stringer at best, but working there gives me an unexpected opportunity.

Situated in trailers behind the center's main building, our offices are so small that my officemate and I have to coordinate pushing back our chairs. Her name is Mary Helen Williams, and she's so considerate and cheerful that her presence behind me feels like sunshine on my back. She's also the daughter of Harold Williams, the editor of the *Sunday Sun Magazine.*

For years I'd been seeing trucks with "Mrs. Posey's Cheescakes" on their sides and wondered if people were as curious as I was about just who Mrs. Posey was. It is a Friday afternoon when I tell Mary Helen that I think there might be a story behind Mrs. Posey.

"Call Dad," she says. "He'll like it . . . I know he will."

I give myself a deadline: two weeks. At three o'clock, Friday, fourteen days later, I pick up the phone and tell Harold Williams my idea. He thinks it's a good one, so I call Lois Posey, and arrange a meeting.

Hers is a story of guts, determination and a vision for selling super cheesecakes baked from a recipe given to her by a Viennese seamstress. She started baking in her own kitchen, then rented her neighbors' ovens, and by the time I interview her she's is selling cheesecakes to restaurants in nine states.

Harold Williams likes the story and runs it with only minor changes. The Sunday it is published, Bill calls his mother and asks if she had seen the newspaper. "There wasn't much in

it," Susan says. "The only thing I read was a story about some woman who makes cheesecakes." She hadn't noticed my byline.

It didn't matter. Not then; not now. Since that story ran in the *Sunday Sun Magazine*, over a hundred articles, essays, short stories of mine have been published, and I'm proud of each of them. But that first one is the only one whose headline I remember as easily as I do the street numbers of our little house on Ranny Road. It's "A cheesecake Worth Millions." To me, it was worth much more.

# # #

Those days, I rarely get home before six-thirty, and when I pick up a spatula or spoon to help with dinner, Bill barks "Put that down. I've got everything taken care of." Most women would have wept for a man who cleans and cooks, but I'm confused. I sense a slow anger shimmering off him, but I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

Feb. 6, '79 Took Matt ice skating this past weekend. Bidding on the show isn't going very well. Bill's trying for a summer internship in Israel.

Our lives that spring converge into a perfect storm of change and stress. TV shows like the one I work on are renewed when other local stations bid on them, and few local stations want another season of "Consumer Survival Kit." And the only job I can get is with Kiplinger Washington Editors, meaning I have a three-hour daily commute.

And then, Bill gets a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Israel for the summer. And Grace and St. Peter's only goes through the sixth grade, so we have Kurt apply to other private schools. Because it's not far from Ranny Road we ultimately choose Gilman, without fully appreciating how competitive the school is, nor the extent of the financial commitment we're making ─ for most of the families whose sons go to Gilman, the expense doesn't make the difference between

a summer vacation or not, but for us it does, and much, much more. For us, it is a commitment that will define the next ten years of our lives ─ as a colleague of mine once said, "You don't send your son to a school like that and then send him to a state college. You just don't."

To complicate things further, Bill and I have a contract to write a series of workbooks, which are due for completion right before he leaves for Israel.

He and I hardly are speaking on the evening we sit in the remodeled kitchen of a young lawyer in Mount Washington. We know Harriett and Herb Goldman from the swimming pool we've joined and have heard that Herb's a rising star in the legal community. While Harriett pours iced tea we chit chat about her newly remodeled kitchen and the wall of windows she and Herb had installed, and how it gives them a fresh vista of their back yard. And then Harriett knows to excuse herself. This visit is business; it's about an essential detail we need taken care of before Bill leaves for Israel.

"Wills," Bill says. "Pat and I need wills."

Herb laughs. "That's a relief."

"A relief?"

"Yeah, a relief. Nowadays whenever a couple asks to see me it's for a divorce. I didn't want that to be you too. Wills . . . they're easy. Wills I'm happy to do for you. But that other thing? I didn't want that to be you two . . . not you guys."

In less than the fourteen years from the Sunday afternoon when Bill took my hand in the Baltimore Zoo until that evening in the Goldmans' kitchen, the divorce rate in the United States has doubled. All across America, leafy neighborhoods like Mount Washington echo with the sounds of doors shutting and footsteps walking away into the night. It is impossible to take two steps in any direction without crunching someone's broken heart. The marriages of our

neighbors, friends, and relatives have all been swept away by an avalanche. Those couples who survive wander a ravaged landscape, their eyes holding the vacant stare of people who know they'd been only a foot or two away from being buried alive.

Bill and I laugh at Herb's remark, but it's a nervous laugh. We both know that our marriage is barely breathing. The afternoon he's to leave for Israel, I'm sitting at my big desk in Washington, surrounded by fine old lithographs selected from the Kiplinger Family personal collection, when I decide to call him for one last good-bye.

But when he answers, he asks, "Who's this?"

Married to him for thirteen years, and he doesn't recognize my voice. That is the state of our marriage. Separation saves us.

# # #

July 8, 1979 Bill has been in Israel for a week and a half and I have not heard from him. The washing machine broke and I had hysterics.

July 2, 1979 I have had two letters from Bill. Most of my days have been placid.

On the four days a week I work, I wake up Matt, get him to daycamp, then take the train to Washington and the subway to K Street. Kurt is on his own. When a colleague asks what he does while I'm at work I answer, "He runs the streets." But the truth is he handles himself very responsibly. Gilman wants him to take a summer course, and he takes the bus there every day. Then comes home and goes to the Mount Washington Swimming Pool. He's twelve years old.

In addition to the washing machine, the dishwasher springs a leak and ruins the kitchen floor. And I have to wrestle with Sears about who's responsible. Then a thunderstorm knocks out the electricity in Mount Washington for three days. When I see my neighbors' lights coming back on, I call the utility company to complain and am told, "Well, someone has to be last."

I fill an ice chest in our basement to hold our perishables, and when the power finally surges back, it fries the refrigerator's motor. I tell Kurt to take care of Matt and rush out to a discount appliance center for a new one.

Still, we manage. The three of us manage, and that scares me. If Bill had been there, I would have experienced all these broken appliances as crises, but here I was handling them with relative ease. And in that case, what did I need him for? I wonder if all those women stompin' out the door in their boots aren't onto something.

Sally comes. Tom had left her on the farm in Pennsylvania and moved to California, but then he got lonely and wrote, asking her to join him. So she had sent her three children to live with Hank and drove out to the West Coast. In January, she, Tom, and her children were all together again, and she and Tom got married. Now it's July and the marriage has already been history for a month. Tom had moved out on Memorial Day.

But whatever chaos is going on in Sally's personal life, her professional life is always exemplary. She practices nursing like she had studied, shutting out every distraction, rising to the top, outshining everyone around her. Six weeks after her second marriage has fallen apart, she's on the East Coast to give a paper at a conference, and she comes to see me.

All granny glasses and jeans, clothes jammed into a duffle bag, she stays a weekend, borrowing my car to go visit friends from her days in Maryland, first in one suburb, then another. When she's around I tell her about the troubles in my own marriage, but she's a whirligig, sympathetic, but only to a point. She, after all, has problems of her own. When she's ready to leave, she can't find her plane ticket and starts tearing through her duffle bag.

"Stress," she says, "when people are stressed, they lose things. Damn Tom. What a shithead." But then she finds her ticket and grins. As if holding her ticket means she's holding

everything together. Then, a quick hug good-bye. Fingers already reaching for a cigarette. And she's out the door. My big sister. Gone.

One day, on the train, I meet a man, a handsome, unmarried, flirtatious man. And I flirt back. In college I had spoken very high badinage. Many Yalies thought so. And with Joe my mastery of all that charged teasing comes flooding back. Like riding a bike. Or skating. You never forget. And when Joe's knee brushes mine, what can I say? . . . .my skirt scorches.

"Stay on the train, Pat," he urges. "Stay on. We'll go to New York. We'll make mad, passionate love." It's tempting. So very tempting. New York, roiling with electric energy, the very spark of sex. And I want to stay on the train as much as I'd ever wanted anything.

But I don't. I laugh Joe off, and tell him I have the boys. But I still feel the heat of his knee when I get into my car and when I turn the key and when I drive up the expressway for home.

At night, when the boys are in bed, I sit on our front porch and watch the fireflies winking up and down Ranny Road. I've seen the energy splitting apart exacts on a family. All that effort into dividing up, moving out, settling down again. And for what? Jennifer Skolnik, Sally, they had both raced straight into the arms of other men. But what happens when that love's white heat burns down into the slow tick of ordinary warmth? What happens to love when life goes on?

Bill's steadiness has given me the luxury of picking at the other corners of my life. The source of my unhappiness, I realize, is me. When he comes home I decide I will ask only three things from him: to recognize the importance of my career to me; for him to handle all major repairs in the house; and to work during the summer. Having him home to mind the boys had seemed sensible when they were small, but these weeks without him proved they don't need that

kind of care any longer. We need the money more. Once I have those three conditions set in my mind, I want him home.

The evening he is supposed to fly back, I make certain that the house is clean and the lawn mown. I put on a millefleur dress and the three of us wait for his call telling us to pick him up. And we wait. And wait. At ten o'clock there's still no call, so I tell the boys to go upstairs to bed.

"Maybe his plane's been delayed. Baltimore's a long way from Israel," I say.

Matt goes up readily, but at the stairs, Kurt turns. "You're sure you'll wake us when he comes?"

"Promise."

"I thought he'd be home by now."

"It's a long way, Kurt."

"All day, I thought he'd be back."

"Go upstairs, Kurt. I'll wake you."

But by eleven- thirty there's still no call, so I go upstairs too and fall asleep on top of the covers in my millefleur sundress. I never doubt that he's coming back – he's Bill, the person who knows me best. Knows what kind of nightgown I like, and the kinds of jokes I don't. Knows my passion for dark chocolate and yellow Easter Peeps. Knows how I hate to lose anything, a bracelet, a game of chess . . . anything. Knows I love a good mystery, live theater, and well-cooked liver and onions. And he knows my questing soul, restless mind and sweetspot. I first hear him in a dream. *"Pat."* His voice is like his embrace, so very warm. *"Pat."* I believe his was the voice I summersaulted to in my mother's womb just before swimming into the waiting

world. *"Pat."* And then he's not in my dream. He's in our bedroom. He's home. And for the first time in weeks I feel truly home too.

# # #

Herb Goldman is a managing partner at the firm Gordon, Feinblatt, Rothman, Hoffberger and Hollender when Bill dies. Some of our Mount Washington neighbors send cards, but not Harriett and Herb. Why would they? Bill and I had moved away from Mount Washington fifteen years earlier, besides Harriett and Herb hadn't known us well ─ we'd never belonged to the set that circled the pool's deck chairs into tight rings of exclusivity every Sunday

Bill and I had always gotten to the pool late. Once Matt was old enough to ride his bike with Kurt, Bill and I would let the boys go alone, while we stayed behind and enjoyed ourselves the way that lovers do. Perhaps that's what Herb Goldman had seen those Sundays when Bill and I finally came through the club's entryway. Maybe he'd looked up from his deck chair and seen us cocooned in postcoital afterglow and that's why he said, "*Not you two."*

The morning before the day Bill will die, I am sweeping our sunroom. It is a Monday morning in May and we are waiting for the hospice nurse. And, ever my mother's daughter, God help me, I am cleaning.

The weekend before had been beautiful, the weather clear, the world abloom. The time, a poignant procession of farewells. The boys, grown men now, and Bill Barnes, who will read at Bill's memorial service, and his wife from Pittsburgh, all had come. Our minister, too. She and Bill and I had sat on our patio and she had asked him, "What do you think is happening, Bill?"

Bill never hesitated. “I think I’m going home,” he said. “I think I’m going home.” And he had looked at me as if defying me to say otherwise. But, of course, I couldn’t. The eventuality that had prompted us to write our wills so many years earlier was coming to pass.

And now it’s Monday and he and I are in the sunroom where a cabinet from his mother’s basement hangs on the wall. In it are more than a dozen flat metal cases containing the Kodachrome slides that Bill had taken over the years.

His camera never had been intrusive, but it had been always there. Any significant occasion and just as importantly, any incidental day. There’s an indulgent patience behind the camera in Bill’s Kodachrome moments. The eye of a loving photographer who had waited until his subjects relaxed into the essence of themselves. Maybe that was what he was trying to teach us, when, even as the boys grew into their teens, he’d set up the projector and we’d lie on the floor in the dark and hear the carousel going round, flashing one by one our collected days, the whir of the carousel’s fan fluttering like unseen wings.

By the Monday morning Bill and I wait for the nurse, he’s already distributed some of his slides to the boys, but as I sweep, my broom finds one that had fallen between a filing cabinet and wall. It’s from another spring morning, nearly forty years earlier. Newly married, we were living on St. Paul St. Something about the light and atmosphere says it was a Sunday. The air appears calm, not jittered by workday traffic. In a Jackie Kennedy-style yellow dress I’d sewn, I stroll beside Kurt who’s in plaid rompers and white high-topped baby shoes — unborn Matt is watching us from a star, invisible against the sunlit sky. And then Snap. A moment frozen . . .

“Look,” I say and hand Bill the slide. .

He looks at it and immediately hands it back. “It’s Kurt’s,” he says, “I gave it to him on Friday.”

"He must have dropped it," I say.

Bill doesn't say anything. By that morning, we both know words and pictures can only tell so much. I put the broom away. And we wait. Together, we wait.

A few weeks after he has died, Matt says he wants to go through the slides to make CDs for Kurt and myself.

"I tried to pick ones that maybe we hadn't seen before," he says when he returns them, "maybe ones we never knew Dad took." The CD labelled "Family, 1960s-1970's" is mainly from the era of that Sunday morning when I had walked with Kurt in my yellow Jackie Kennedy-style dress and continues to the early Ranny Road years. The years when Jennifer Skolnik moved to New York. And Sally left Hank. And Tom left Sally. And when Bill and I sat in Herb Goldman's remodeled kitchen and heard him say "*Not you two . . . not you two."*

Matt is right: there are pictures that I had never seen. Or maybe they're ones I had forgotten ─ memory is like myth, a shape shifter we mold to fit our deepest needs.

I don't, for example, remember the slide from that arena in every ice skater's most ambitious aspirations, Rockefeller Plaza. The boys shoulders, Kurt on the left, Matt on the right, frame the skaters below us. A man in a blue dress shirt and a woman with a red ribbon in her hair looks at him while another woman in a paisley blouse looks at her. The three of them and all the others swirling round while, like indifferent gods, we onlookers watch from above. When had this picture been taken? The Thanksgiving I was still working at the printer's and we had gone to New York to see the Macy's parade? That would be the Thanksgiving I had stayed behind in New York to visit Sue Woolhiser who was still hoping her boyfriend would call and ask her to come back to Baltimore. Or maybe it had been the other Thanksgiving, the one after Bill had gone to Israel and we again took the boys to see the parade. Who knows?

I don‘t remember going to Rockefeller Plaza either time, just as I don’t recall wearing the coat I’d sewn and sitting on a log at my in-law’s. Or Bill saying *Pat* and me looking up from a pile of laundry. Or Zoro the cat Sally gave us sitting on my lap one Sunday morning. But those moments, they had happened. They’d been strung together like beads on a rosary and made our lives. Look, there’s proof. Snap.

Neither do I remember the winter afternoon the boys and I skated at the temporary rink the Baltimore Department of Recreation would set up in Memorial Stadium’s parking lot. Bill must have been standing at the rink’s edge, because the stadium, now gone, is clearly visible in the background.

Look. Here comes Matt wearing the blue cap with the white rim that he doesn’t know I have stored away with a bell that once hung over his brother’s crib n his grandfather Henry’ s sea chest. See . . . a group forming a conga line behind him. And there’s a woman, not pushing with her blade as she should, but striding like a runner. And a man in a matching blue sweater and cap looking so new they can’t be anything other than Christmas gifts. And snap.

And look, here comes Kurt, maybe ten or eleven, His green hat falling over his eyes, maybe shielding their innocence from the giggling girls in center ice, one with pink pompoms on her boots, the other with red.

And here’s Matt again. And behind him an elegant, grey-haired woman in a wine colored coat and unblemished white boots, maybe given to her as a Christmas gift from her husband as my boots had been given to me by mine. The woman’s face holds a bemused expression at the childish fun she’s having. The sudden wonder of it all. Skating! At her age!

And here comes my younger self. In Cousin Carolyn’s skates, their high, white, old-fashioned boots so devoid of support that my ankles pronate as if their bones want to kiss. But,

still, I'm smiling, too. And going forward. Toward that time when I, too, will be grey-haired and bemused to find myself still skating.

But in that picture, in that moment, we all are together, all skating under the winter sky darkening to the Kodachrome blue of late afternoon. While at the rink's edge, a patient man waits to catch us as we balance and glide counterclockwise, our smiles transfixed by the thrill, or maybe by the idea that we have speed and grace and power enough to move in a direction retrograde to the hands of time.

And for an afternoon, or maybe for just one more cycle around, we can return to who we once had been. And be again the way we were. Snap.