

Lessons

The teller from the Royal Bank of Scotland dropped bundles of cash into my backpack, the Queen's face disappearing into the darkness...8K, 9K, 10K. Did the teller contemplate this transaction later, picture me with a heroin shipment or a black-market kidney?

My backpack didn't bulge, the way I'd imagined. The bundles took up less space than my schoolbooks. I scurried down the high street, navigating cobblestones and waves of bobbing heads. Midday, pedestrians flooded the Lancaster city center. What if I tripped and the bag burst and money spiraled into the drizzly sky, raining onto businessmen and hairdressers and tiny old ladies in pink hats?

The weight on my back represented everything I had, everything I'd done—my overloaded schedule at the university, a couple years with no car, cramped quarters in a shared house. But I felt light, comforted that after two years of teaching in England, I still didn't qualify for debit or credit. The only UK card in my wallet was for the loyalty program at Sainsbury's, a grocery store chain. With an absence of a credit history, it was as if I didn't exist. Even though I was on my way to put a down payment on a house, I still fantasized about disappearing.

My bank account was empty, and there was only my body and this featherlight bag. The gray faces of lunching workers were trained on faraway obligations, so much so that they didn't clock what was in front of them—an outsider, a backpack that contained thousands. It thrilled me. I felt as if my edges might soften and I might evaporate.

The giddiness scared me a little. I liked to think I was simply an introvert, but sometimes I wondered if I was a commitment phobe for whom visibility created the frightening prospect of connection. I tended to dump potential romantic partners when things threatened to get serious. In some other part of town, at that very moment, there existed an English guy I'd been seeing. Conversely, he'd been seeing me—and therein resided the problem. We met at the dog park, and he was besotted. Maybe his adoration reflected a person I didn't recognize. I kept him at a certain puzzled remove. Tiptoeing over cobblestones with my backpack of cash, I didn't think about him at all.

This was my twenty-eighth move in thirty-three years. I loved a new place because of the fresh start, the anonymity. Putting down roots seemed dicey—the deeper they got, the more complicated and painful it was to rip them out. By the time my parents separated when I was six, Dad loading my favorite orange velour swivel chairs into his moving truck and Mom keeping the plaid couch that matched, we had already relocated several times, working our way east from California. I spent my childhood with my bags packed and my dog leashed, the little terrier and I shuttling back and forth weekly between my parents' places, each of which continued to change addresses.

Yet, here I was, transporting the down payment on a £103,000 mortgage for which I had, against all odds, qualified. Owning a house had always seemed the deepest of commitments. In England though, everyone owned property, even a lot of my students. No one blinked an eye at a twenty-year-old owning a house. There is the sense over here that owning a place and leasing aren't that different—but mortgages cost less. This gave me a push, though I'm not sure I needed it. I really, really wanted to move out of the shared house.

I hated leaving Clark, the yellow Lab I'd brought from the US, in my attic bedroom all day. I lived in Golgotha Village in a row of houses that had, before the urban sprawl of the 1800s, comprised a little town unto itself—a town where people were sent for execution. They were marched up the hill in chains, jeering townspeople trailing them.

The aura of death was just one issue though. The place had narrow stairways from the 1600s that doubled back on themselves, switchbacks too dainty for a dog whose feet scrambled for traction, clambered like Clark's did. Even though her head came to my knee, I always had the sense that she was crouching in that house, contorting to fit. And I felt like that too, both of us ducking, cinching our shoulders, inching past our roommate's bicycles and motocross equipment that occupied the tiny hallways. Tom—and his girlfriend, Mandy—were both nice but irrelevant to our lives. I wasn't ready to leave England though—the job and the visa had been so hard to obtain, and I was enjoying the work. But I was restless, something I contemplated when I observed Tom and Mandy happily sharing a space smaller than I had to myself.

What I wanted was a tiny fortress, a dwelling that could erase me from others' notice in the same way as a fresh start. The place I was prepared to purchase with my bag of money was a terraced house, meaning it was a middle-of-the-row house. Stone, built in the relatively modern 1800s, it was a “two up, two down,” with two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. There were thousands like it in Lancaster, but what made it special was that it had both front and rear yards. Most front doors opened right onto busy sidewalks, where strangers' heads drifted past the living room windows all day. Rear yards were usually concrete slabs and clothes lines, which was more than we had at

Golgotha Village, but this house had two small rectangles of grass. Postage stamps, really, by US standards, but here, a luxury.

The front rested on top of a brick retaining wall, elevated from the street. A tall hedge shielded the windows and the red door. The long, narrow backyard also had a gigantic rhubarb plant and a stone garden shed. The moment I saw it, I knew it was just the place for us.

At this point in our relationship, I had long since stopped distinguishing what I did for Clark from what I did for myself, and it wasn't clear if the two could even be extracted from one another. I didn't know if this was a good thing. I was supposed to feel this way about people, the guy I'd been seeing. Perhaps, this canine relationship was a continuation of the one I'd had with the terrier as a kid. He'd been the "person" who was always present, in every sense of the word. He possessed few expectations and zero skill for withholding parts of himself. Dogs are terrible at keeping secrets. They don't even have pockets.

Imagining the way Clark would lounge on that back lawn, rolling around and snorting, and the way we'd play with that pink floppy Frisbee she loved—it was too good. It sent me to my calculator, to the scraped-out bottom of my bank account for a down payment on an extra £20,000 that I didn't quite have. Sure, I could have bought a cheaper house, one with little light, positioned between warren-like streets where cars zoomed past, shaking the windows. But thinking of Clark in such a house, alone while I was at work, saddened me. And I could feel the way a concrete slab backyard would make her elbows sore.

With my bag of cash, I continued down the high street, past Poundland, Costa Coffee, Leisure Lakes Bikes. Merchants from France sold soap at makeshift stalls, and a big man with a train conductor's voice yelled, "Six for a pound, ye bungee balls!" He did complicated tricks with a yo-yo (or, I guess, a bungee ball) without ever looking at it and without ever messing up, the neon orb flicking in and out of complicated networks of string.

Groups of chavs hung together on corners or in the mouths of alleys—low-income locals who wore designer track suits and Burberry baseball caps and jewelry and spoke a heavier version of the already heavy local accent. (Other people, non chavs, never ever wore baseball caps. What—did they want people to think they were chavs? No one seemed to know the origin of the word *chav*, but there were documented uses of it as far back as 1860. It isn't a kind thing to call someone.) Chavs communicated with each other in short outbursts that involved erratic hand gestures. They paraded Staffordshire terriers in spiked leather harnesses reminiscent of bondage gear. At night, they have been known to smash all the side mirrors, or *wing mirrors*, off of cars or to assault lone pedestrians, often college students. A lot of these chavs were probably nice guys in tough situations, but enough of them had spat on me while I was running or yelled about my "tits" that I kept a wary distance, sidling along edges, the store fronts, where gray cobblestone met gray wall. Was I walking strangely? The more I tried to stop doing it, the more I slunk and sweat.

In part invisibility appealed to me because I could sometimes be oblivious to the reality of a situation. I focused on the wrong things. I come from a family that has secrets going back generations—secret suicides, secret abuses, secret mental illnesses. On my

mom's side, I knew about a lot of them. We found an old postcard with an image of a mental institution from which one relative had written to another during a "vacation." There were secret affairs and adoptions. We were genetically related in ways that were different than what we'd thought growing up. No one acknowledged for decades that a great grandfather had hung himself. My favorite aunt, a teenager when I was a little kid, had shot herself and survived then came to stay with us during to recover and acclimate to her paralysis, but she didn't reveal the horrific reasons for the act for many years. More secrets related to that event came out like aftershocks sometimes during gatherings at my grandparents' house, and the whole family, normally a jokey and laughing bunch, would erupt into screaming matches that often devolved into a glass of water being thrown in someone's face or some other act just short of actual hitting. Upon learning these truths, the most puzzling thing to me was how obvious they seemed.

On a smaller and ridiculous scale, there was even secret baldness in my family—I didn't know until I was nearly grown that my grandfather's hair wasn't his real hair. I stayed with the grandparents on my dad's side in the summers. When I woke early one morning—definitely not my habit—I went into their room to ask a question. Grandpa pulled the sheet over his head and disappeared. Grandma yelled at me to get out. Then I spied the mannequin head on the dresser wearing Grandpa's unmistakable side-parted, salt-and-pepper hair. I asked my mom about it later, and she said, "You thought that was *real*?" Dad's family had other secrets I was aware of, like Grandpa's stint in prison for rum-running and the time he burned down his auto body shop for the insurance money. Also, I knew that my dad hadn't been informed about his niece's existence until my aunt showed up at Christmas with a toddler (an out-of-wedlock situation in the 1960's). In

general, no one talked. If I asked a question, it was met with a blank stare or “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The family attitude was, “Secret? What secret?” Strange remarks slipped out occasionally that alluded to more secrets, but I never knew for sure. I never knew if there were scores more or none at all.

For me, the problem became not just a lack of trust in others, but a lack of trust in my own perception of reality. What I saw was not what I got. Or maybe it was.

On this particular day, I was not beset by a group of chavs on my way to the solicitor’s office, nor subjected to an angry (if incomprehensible) diatribe, nor stripped of my bundles of hundred-pound notes, nor left with nothing but the lingering scent of hair gel. I successfully dumped the bag on the receptionist’s desk a few blocks from the bank and—shazam—I became a homeowner.

I had not predicted that the biggest obstacle between Clark and her new home would turn out to be a city inspector who would meet me at the house and say, pointing to the metal box on my kitchen wall, “This boiler is ancient. I can’t let you move in here.”

Maybe he changed his mind because of the charm of my American accent, or maybe it was what I said, which was something along the lines of, “Oh please, oh please, oh please!” He looked at me over his glasses while he filled out the paperwork. “Get a new boiler. Soon.” I promised him I would, imagining I could save up for a while. After all, it was almost spring, and soon there’d be no need to heat the water in the radiators. Plus, the next few months I was so strapped I would actually live on the money in my change jar. Clark would be fine if the heater broke—after all, she swam in the pond at the

park in the dead of winter. I would wear a sweater. We would cuddle for warmth. That didn't sound so bad.

The days grew longer finally, and I could leave the backdoor of my new house open sometimes, just the way I'd envisioned. There weren't many bugs here, so houses didn't have screens. On "fine" days, Clark came and went as she pleased. She liked to lie along the short fence that bordered the backyard. It wasn't much of a fence, really—more the suggestion of a fence, made of wire and nearly invisible. Even when I was busy, I could check from the upstairs window to see if she was digging holes, something she seemed to do for pure joy, and I could yell, "Hey! Cut it out!" and she'd stop, look up, cock her head, then run inside to find me, disappearing under the kitchen roof.

She supervised while I dug a flower bed and planted lilies, sweet peas, and lavender—standing behind me, wagging her tail, craning for a better view. One day, she figured out a route through the back alley to the neighbor's yard. She used it only when I was doing yard work. I'd look up and there she'd be, staring at me from the other side of the fence, like "Hi." I'd chase her out of there, and she'd smile and run back to our house. It became something of a game, and I'd find myself doubled-over laughing. Most days, though, I'd sit in the kitchen, the airy added room with the big windows, and do my work, looking up occasionally at the open door, and she'd blink back at me from the grass, and there was a sweet kind of togetherness in that.

It was a late August morning at 6:00 a.m. when I, in half sleep, noted a chalky chemical smell. Lancaster was so far north that the sun had been up for a couple hours already, the sky bright blue, the birds awake. I liked the way my sheer white curtains looked against

the walls I'd painted light purple, but on this particular morning, my fluttering eyelids wouldn't quite work. I tried to fix on the window, the top part of which opened inward. The weather was always temperate, so there wasn't much need for windows to open wide the way they did in the US. Just a little cool air would do the trick on a day when the temperature pushed all the way up to, say, seventy-two degrees. This was one of the rare times when mine was open.

I thought there had been some kind of chemical spill outside—maybe a tanker had overturned on the highway—and I should probably get up and shut that window. But I was so tired. My eyes wouldn't open. Maybe I'd sleep a little more, I told myself. I drifted in and out.

The smell was awful. Finally, I forced my eyes open, an act of astounding will. I found I was on my side. Clark stared at me, our faces close. Her stare had woken me, I understood now. She had figured out at some point that she could wake me by staring, and she did it most days. I rarely used an alarm clock.

She would normally have been sound asleep at this hour, preferring as she did to sleep until seven. Her eyes remained wide and ready, as if she were waiting for me to command something, and her face was especially close, her breath on my lashes. Should I be commanding something? I looked around the room. Smoke rolled at a boil near the ceiling, drawn toward that open window. "That's not right," I said out loud. And then I said it again, trying to get my brain to work, to comprehend the words. The smell was *inside*. What did that mean?

I flung the covers back, and then I was out of bed. (But why? Wait.) Upon standing, my head was inside the smoke cloud. I had to get her out of there. Yes. That part felt certain. “Let’s go.” Clark trotted at my heels.

I made it to the bottom of the stairs and stopped, looking back and forth, kitchen to one side, living room to the other. The ground floor was even thicker with smoke. I still couldn’t snap my brain into comprehending *why* exactly, even though I saw it roiling out of the boiler in the kitchen, licking the ceiling. I wandered toward it, Clark’s head close, shadowing every step. The hot water trickled in the sink, and I tightened the faucet handle to shut off the boiler. A bleary image materialized from the night before—chatting on the phone, distractedly washing dishes. The boiler had been working all night to heat that drip, drip.

The back door was locked, and it could be opened only with a key. (The key? No key.) “We have to get out,” I told her, the words almost understandable.

The other end of the house, the front door in the living room—that’s where we would go. I turned toward it. (Why were we going there again?) I looked down at her, her velvet face, the blond whiskers, and she studied me.

The front door. I strode toward it, arm outstretched like a battering ram. I had to get her out, but the doorknob was so far away. I walked and walked. My hand reached. The edges of my vision shrunk, and the door ahead appeared through a black circle, a fish-eye lens—my couch, the bookshelf, the stained-glass transom distorted at the sides. My head floated, drifting toward the ceiling. Finally, I felt the metal of the doorknob. My vision tightened to a pinpoint. I turned the knob and wrenched the door open.

Fresh air rushed in, something solid, and it hit me. The force was like the backdraft of an explosion.

When I regained consciousness, I lay in the open doorway on my back, where the air had knocked me. I sat up. My head throbbed from falling. I'd been unconscious the moment the fresh air hit, and I'd toppled back like a felled tree. Clark lay in the grass outside, ten feet away. She looked sleepy now, blinking at me. She knew, somehow she knew, that this was what you did when there was a fire—you went outside and stared back at your own house from the front yard. How long had I been there?

I stood up I reached for the land line near the front door. I dialed 999. "What's your emergency?" the woman said.

I started to explain. But my tongue was thick, and full sentences wouldn't come out. "Smoking," I think I said. "House."

I woke up on the floor again, on my back again, the front door still wide open, Clark still keeping watch, just where she'd been before. I needed to complete the stupid call to 999. I crawled to my knees and saw the silver handset in pieces on the floor. Apparently I'd flung it against the wall when I fainted the second time. I snapped the pieces back together, reinserted the battery. "What's your emergency?"

This time, when I tried to choke the words out, I started to cry, but I wasn't upset. It was a physical thing, a fight not to evaporate. "You need to stop that crying. Pull yourself together," the woman said. And I sucked in, as if I were tightening my stomach. It worked, and I patted myself and thought, I'm still here. "They're on their way," she said.

"How do they know where I am?"

“We traced the call.”

They could see me.

I hung up and sat in the open doorway, waiting. I looked at Clark while she looked at me, her dark eyes tranquil, no longer forecasting, and her brow smooth instead of wrinkled. With the door open, the air had cleared some. The birds chirped. It was early, and no cars traveled the street. Her cream-colored fur was so fuzzy in the soft light of morning it almost glittered.

Later, when people at work asked about my near-death experience, I figured out what they liked to hear. They liked numbers. A normal carbon monoxide count in blood is below three. Mine was fifteen. The doctors still considered this low because it wasn't in the brain damage range.

People liked it when I minimized what happened with jokes. When the firemen arrived, I was sitting in my doorway in a tank top and underwear. “Why is it you're never wearing the good underwear when the firemen show up?” I often cracked.

“But what did you *learn*?” said one of my colleagues. “About life?” That was the other thing people wanted: lessons.

I shrugged. The truth was that I didn't learn anything about life. Maybe I was reminded that most lives didn't end with village parades and chains, with exciting moments of violence at the hands of street toughs over bundles of cash. They ended with run-of-the-mill accidents or illnesses, shocking only because they revealed themselves when it was so very late that nothing could be done about them. The world harbored secrets from us as a matter of course. I already knew that. I thought everyone did.

The colleague probably expected an epiphany about how to cope with that reality, something about a newfound appreciation for other people, something about the ways I would improve, or open my life to roots and visibility and connection.

What happened, though I could not have explained it to my colleague, was that I sat on a stoop staring at a dog I loved, and she stared back at me with slow blinks of her blond eyelashes. Her whiskers twitched with the faint smell of smoke. Birds chirped under a blue sky, which went on forever. My edges felt crisp. And I didn't think about my family or anyone I knew or about my job or about what my life meant because it was already perfect.

I simply thought, Yes, I want more.