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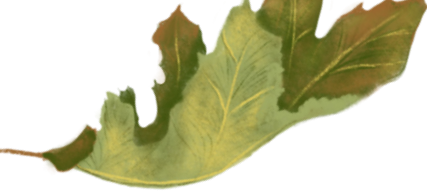
Between Two Worlds

My shivering, dripping, 7-year-old daughter directs her father exactly to where he should catch her when she jumps into the pool. Feet parallel at the edge, knees bent, lips purple, hair gleaming dark and wet, she points. My husband moves forward a little. She points again, he moves back. On and on.

My own childhood is distilled in moments like these. I remember being 7, skinny and pale, cold water dripping down my legs, goose bumps all over, poised at the edge of a pool, prolonging the time between agony and ecstasy. The tall man in the water, arms outstretched, black hair gleaming, was my father.

Now 76 and weakened by Parkinson's disease, he leans all his weight on a cane or walker as he struggles from room to room. He cannot lift his feet to walk; he says they feel like stones. His face is expressionless, his voice a whisper. He cannot call out; he can no longer fill a room with laughter.

I witness my father's losses and my children's gains as if he were slowly pouring from his cup into theirs. As he loses his ability to walk unaided, they are learning to ride a bike without training wheels. As his handwriting becomes too tiny to read, they fill a page with large, neat letters. And as his tall frame shrinks, my children grow to meet him.



All Alone in the Moonlight

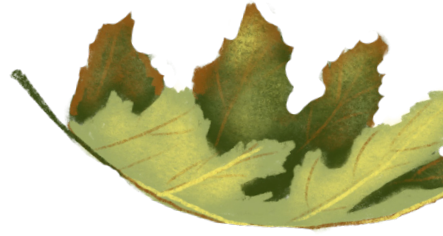
I am on my way to visit my 80-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer's disease, in the nursing home where she lives. My sisters and I take turns showing up on Sundays to escort her to church and out to lunch. Sometimes my husband and children come along, but today I am going alone. I dress in slacks and a sweater with matching earrings and a silk scarf that picks up the colors of my clothes. I wear a little eye make-up and lipstick, my hair is shiny and I smell of scented lotion. These are habits I inherited from my mother. It is winter; I put on a wool coat and gloves. My tote bag is efficiently packed with the many small items I need for both the two-hour journey and the visit.

As I drive, I mentally review my long list of work and family obligations for the next day, Monday. I listen to music. Today I am singing along with a collection of music by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

When I arrive, I walk down the corridor to my mother's room. Her chair is positioned so that I always see her feet first, then the rest of her comes into view. On this cold day she is wearing a short-sleeved cotton dress in need of laundering. Her white hair is sticky from too few washings and too much spray, and very flat in the back. She is holding her purse in her lap. She looks like a schoolgirl, sitting perfectly straight and still, feet parallel, just as the nuns taught her long ago.

As I watch her sitting there alone, I think of the words to the song “Memory,” from “Cats,” which happened to be playing as I pulled into the parking lot.

“Memory
All alone in the moonlight
I can dream of the old days
I was beautiful then”



As a younger woman my mother was indeed beautiful. What is on her mind as she sits there, looking peaceful? Is she making lists, like me? Is she imagining herself a young girl growing up on the upper east side of Manhattan, swimming freely in the East River with her brother and sisters?

When my mother began to lose her memory, her recollections of the relationships and acquaintances she had gathered over the years began to fall away, one by one, like leaves from a tree, beginning at the periphery. First, she forgot distant friends, great nieces and nephews; then closer friends and family members. She talks more often of her own father than of her husband, who died only two years ago.





Henry's Roses

One hot, summer day nearly 20 years ago, my father-in-law, Henry Sullivan, brought home a scrawny rose bush with coral-colored blossoms, dug a hole in the middle of his small front yard on Reed Street, and dropped it in. When he showed it to me, I encouraged his efforts, even though I knew the weather was not optimal for planting, and besides, he had added no compost or fertilizer to his dusty soil. Would he even remember to water it? I was convinced the rose bush would die, but not only did it survive — it flourished.

Henry would often observe while I pruned his beloved lilacs or planted annuals in our shared property, telling stories in his soft voice. He had been a star hockey player in his youth, but to me he was just my father-in-law, a tall, handsome man with splendid hair and an unusual blend of strength and gentleness. His two sons inherited these qualities, along with an unassuming manner and dry wit.

When his oldest son, Ed, and I decided to get married, I asked Mr. Sullivan what I should call him. I waited through an awkward silence for an invitation to call him by his first name.

Finally, he said, “How about Pete?”

“But your name is Henry,” I said.

“I never liked that name.”

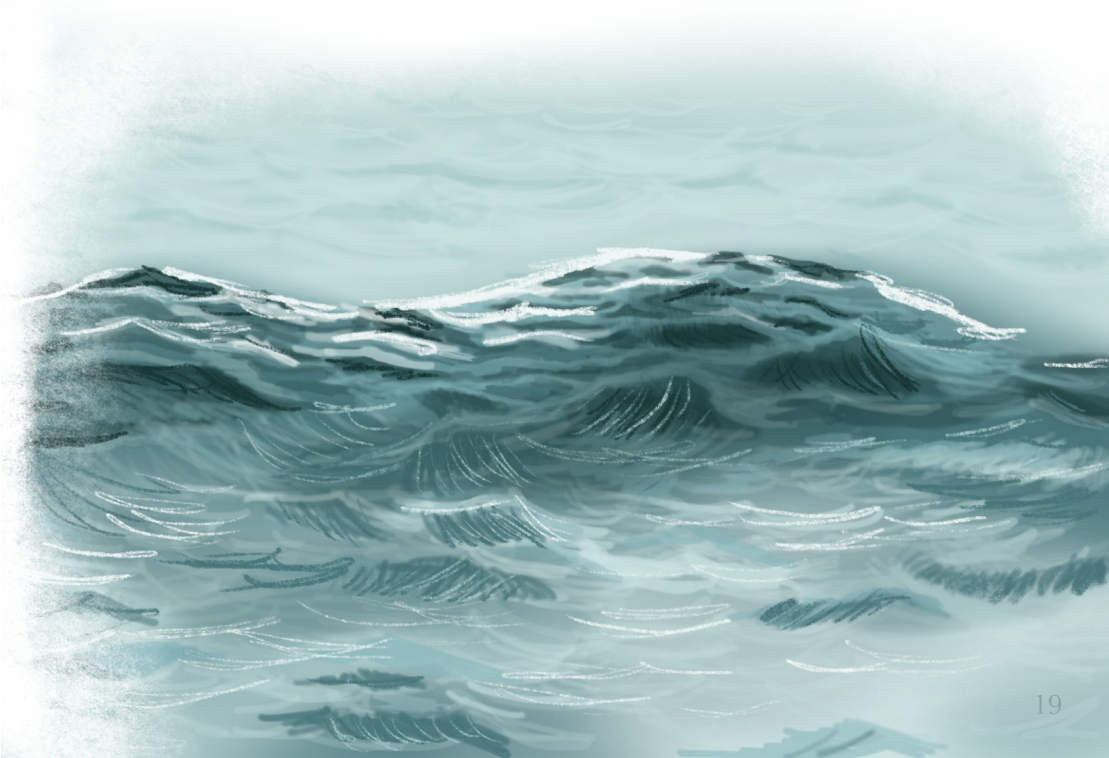
Wives

A friend invites you to a gathering of women you don't know. Tea is poured, small plates are dotted with appetizers and pastries, and conversations expand, like rice in a pot of hot water. Work, family, children, husbands.

The middle-aged women chatter in first person plural, as you once did. "We decided the school wasn't right for Sarah," someone says. They speak with conviction; the husbands come and go from the house, leaving pocket change on the bureau, and the wives believe it will always be so.

Stuck in first person singular, you can tell when the conversation is about to turn painful, just as you know which ocean waves are going to crest and break, and which ones will simply diminish. Specifics are exchanged and you will soon have to say that your husband died of cancer at age 44.

For your listeners, the information is just another fact about you, like your appearance or profession; for you, the words trigger a memory of the night you staggered away from a hospital with your husband's belongings in a plastic bag, including a note he scribbled in shaky handwriting when he could no longer speak.



around all day with her little sneakers, fastened with Velcro, on the wrong feet. He knew when it was time to take the training wheels off her bike.

She is the fruit of her father's labor as she faces you. Still, she has the same wide, green eyes as the child who once depended on you, and you are like a mother deer watching her fawn glide into the forest.





The Deeper Well of Memory

I believe that memory is never lost, even when it seems to be, because it has more to do with the heart than the mind.

At the same time my 44-year-old husband, Ed, was losing his life, my mother was losing her ability to remember. As Ed's lungs filled with cancer, Mom's brain was becoming tangled in plaque. She forgot how to start the car, whether or not she had eaten, and which family members had died — including my father.





Toy Soldiers

Our house sits in my husband's former playground: his parents' backyard at 120 Reed St., where he grew up, as did his father, grandmother, and so on, back to 1871.

Building our house in 1988 required many choices, from where the rooms should be to how the doorbell would sound. Yet, when I think back on all the steps leading to our life here, one image stands out. It is my memory of how, when the excavation took place, the soil was sprinkled with toy soldiers.

As the only open space in a densely populated, urban neighborhood, this yard was common ground when my husband, Ed Sullivan, was a boy in the 1950s and 60s. Every day, it filled up with children; it became a ball field in the summer, a skating rink in winter, and the place where Ed and his brother Dan or best friend, Steve LaTerza, would lie down in the grass on their bellies, lining up their three-inch, army-green plastic soldiers. They hid them behind blades of grass, shielded them with small rocks, and buried them in the earth.

ill, and every day since you died, I have gingerly stepped over the hole you left. It is all too easy to fool people into thinking I am resilient.

“Can you go for a walk with me?” you ask, with a twinkle in your eye — as if I would say no! Your request reminds me of the night we met, at a party, when you shyly inquired, “Would you like to get a bite to eat?” “Oh, sure,” I said then, off-handedly, even though I had my eye on you because, in today’s vernacular, you were “hot.”

I say yes, my heart racing the same way it did back then. I contact my office to say I won’t be in, and we set out through the neighborhood holding hands, still husband and wife. Here in New England, the trees form a canopy of orange and gold and we fall into a familiar, easy rhythm as rusty leaves and acorns crunch under our feet. We pass houses with pumpkins on the step and Indian corn on the front door. Children wait on street corners for the school bus.





Mother's Day

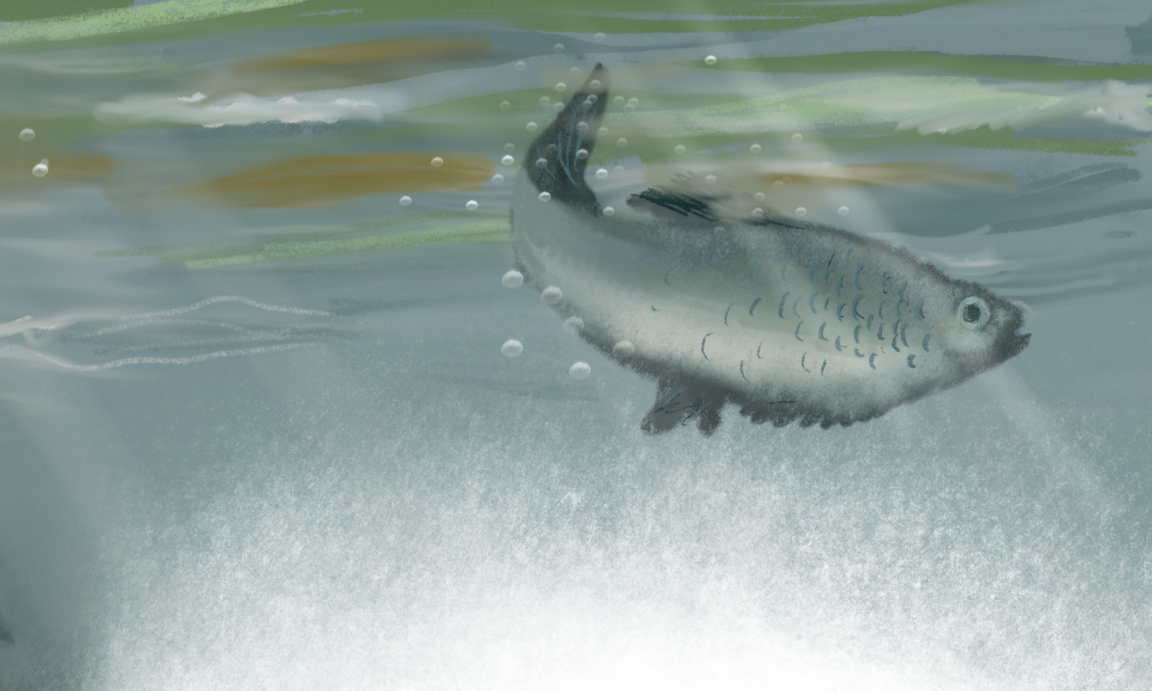
On your Facebook page is a photo of you in a Mexican forest surrounded by monarch butterflies. It's one of the glimpses I have from my home in Massachusetts, where Facebook and Skype give me sightings of your life in Mexico as a teacher. You are always in motion: mountain biking, climbing pyramids, and visiting the forests where monarch butterflies, the size of your hand, rest after their 2,500-mile journey from the milkweed plants of Canada.

Now you are the real thing as you greet me at the Mexico City airport in May, wearing a colorful sleeveless shirt and tightly fitted jeans. Your fair skin is darker, blond hair lighter, eyes bluer than I remembered, and your childish brightness has become a womanly radiance. Your embrace is like an infusion for me, as I feel your youth and strength flow into my aching muscles. It's my first time visiting you in Mexico.

"I'm so excited to see you, Mom!" you say, as you unveil, without pauses, your plans for my five-day stay. You've invited me for Mother's Day in a country where this day in May is practically a national holiday.

When you take my suitcase and lead the way, your gesture reminds me of your father. Already, at age 24, you are taking care of

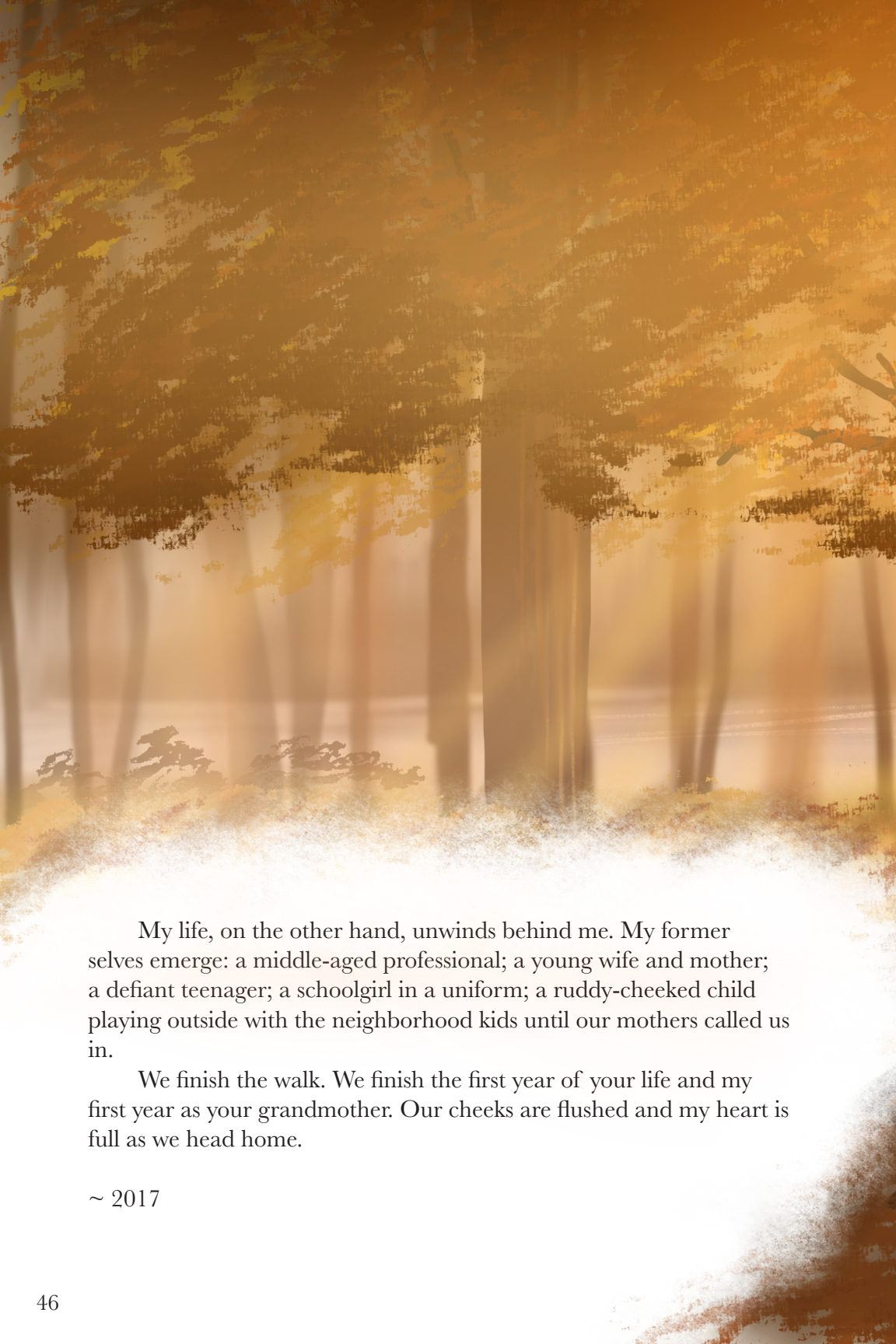




The Sweet Tension of Remembering and Letting Go

Here at Damariscotta Mills in mid-coast Maine, where I have come for an early morning swim, the lake and river and Great Salt Bay flow together and serve as a home for oysters, ospreys, sailors, swimmers, anglers, and an abundance of small, silvery alewives. “Damariscotta” is a Native American word for these little fish that swim each year from the sea to the lake, where they spawn, like salmon.

I have been visiting this spot at the junction of Nobleboro and Newcastle for 25 years. My husband and I once sat at the edge of the lake while our young daughters jumped off a small bridge into the deep water, shouting, “Mommy, watch! Daddy, watch!” My husband



My life, on the other hand, unwinds behind me. My former selves emerge: a middle-aged professional; a young wife and mother; a defiant teenager; a schoolgirl in a uniform; a ruddy-cheeked child playing outside with the neighborhood kids until our mothers called us in.

We finish the walk. We finish the first year of your life and my first year as your grandmother. Our cheeks are flushed and my heart is full as we head home.

~ 2017

