

Life Drawing



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In the days leading up to my husband Owen's death, he visited Alison's house every afternoon. I would watch him trudge over the small, snowy hill between our two properties, half the time away from me, half the time toward me. And I would wonder what he thought about as he went. Wonder too if Alison watched him from a window of her own, and whether the expression she saw on his face as he approached was very different from the one I saw as he came home.

In the weeks that followed his death, I would stare out the same window, the one in our living room, nearest the fireplace, for as much as an hour at a time. Sometimes even longer than that. There was a huge blizzard on the day after his funeral. I watched as nearly three feet of snow fell to the ground, staying all through January, then much of February, picking up a few more inches now and then, drifting against anything in its way, flattening the landscape so the hill wasn't quite so distinct anymore and the trees all looked shorter, their trunks buried deep.

It was, I imagine, very beautiful. But imagining and remembering are not quite the same thing. I don't remember thinking it anything but eerie at the time.

Owen wasn't buried. I had known practically since the day we met that he wanted to be cremated. We'd had the sort of courtship—though the word would have seemed old-fashioned to us both—that included a lot of talk about the meaning of life, the prospect of death. We were young, very young, and undoubtedly neither of us believed, not really, that we would ever die, which made that sort of discussion, often late at night, often just after sex, exhilarating. There was a beauty to be found in the transitory nature of existence, we would say. There was liberation in the acceptance of mortality. Religion was for fools. Religion, along with marriage ceremonies, Thanksgiving dinners, station wagons, procreation, and so on. Burial was a perverse notion if you really thought about it, without the assumptions of the culture blinding you. All those dead bodies, taking up all that land. A peculiar, fetishistic custom.

We were to be a cremation couple. It was established early on. Except that we were never going to die.

I thought about so many things during those first snowy weeks, including the fact that I too was mortal, that I too would disappear one day, leaving behind such things as panes of glass through which other people could gaze, and cold that they could feel. Snow that had to be shoveled, not just contemplated. Practical issues for which I would no longer be a help or a hindrance. Relationships abandoned like unfinished thoughts.

It isn't that no one close to me had ever died before. I was forty-seven years old. Few reach that age unscathed and I hadn't made it past toddlerhood before a brain aneurism took my mother in a matter of hours; then my oldest sister, Charlotte, lost a filthy battle to cancer when she was forty-six; and my father was wandering his solitary, demented way toward a graceless, profoundly unjust kind of death.

But Owen was Owen. Owen was me. I was Owen. Anger and all. Betrayals and all. Owen would walk into a room and I might well want to kill him—so to speak—but at the same time, for much of my life, I couldn’t really have told you where I left off and he began. And then he died. Leaving me standing at a window, staring into a landscape as though, well, as though he might just reappear one day. Of course.

I was certain about cremation, but in fact a lot of our other opinions had softened over the years. That is what happens. There was a marriage ceremony, eventually. There were attempts to procreate, which led to discovering that Owen could not, so when we bought the minivan we had sworn we never would, it was for hauling my paintings, not children. We never did get religion, either of us, but we started to value the idea of ritual. Still, no celebration of Thanksgiving with its intimations of smallpox-infected blankets and European domination, but on the second Saturday of April we threw a big party, invited old friends out to the country, cooked an insane amount of food, drank too much, and talked appreciatively of pagan celebrations of spring. And back when we were city dwellers, we went through a phase of lighting candles every Wednesday night. “*Ain’t nobody’s Sabbath but our own,*” Owen sang the first time that we did, so we played Billie Holiday every Wednesday after that.

But *softened* isn’t really the right word. Our opinions didn’t soften. More accurately, we reacted to life. And we reacted, time and again, to threats. To us. To us being us. Why did we finally get married? Because I had broken the promise that we had never made. Owen forgave me, or anyway, we moved forward, but we did it with a vow this time. Why did we try to have children? Because there was a period in there when the possibility—absurd five years before!—that we needed more than just each other,

crept into our thoughts. Our fabric seemed to be wearing thin. And why this desire for ritual? To anchor us. *I will be here the second Saturday of every April. I will be here every Wednesday night.*

We never saw it that way, of course. I saw it that way later on. That's what happens when one of you dies. The clock stops. The story ends. You can make some sense of it all. Begin to see patterns. Begin to understand. Maybe you can only begin to understand. Maybe the patterns are only the ones that you impose. But the thing takes on a different shape. It takes on a shape.

Or, as one of my teachers used to say, you cannot see a landscape you are in.

But you do begin to see it when you step away.

This is me, just before my first glimpse of Alison: I am standing, hands on hips, staring at a patch of basil that has gone to seed, peeved at myself for having once again planted so much and once again failed to harvest it at the right time. It is one of those obscenely hot late July days when you walk outside and think there's been some kind of terrible mistake, because weather can't really be meant to be this oppressive. My hair, long and still close to entirely black, is tightly braided, pulled off my neck, clipped straight on the back of my head, so if the sun weren't too high for shadows, mine would look like I had feathers sticking up. I am wearing just a bra and shorts. My body, at forty-seven, is tan from gardening, mowing, walking. And I am strong, stronger than I ever was before I became a country dweller. My face? My face is broad, my Russian forebears lending me their wide, prominent cheekbones, their heavy square jaws. And my eyes, which are dark blue, are bluer still under thick black brows. If I am beautiful, I am not classically so; but at forty-seven I think I am beautiful. More than I ever did at twenty, at thirty. By this time I mind mirrors less. If I am honest, I will say I sometimes seek them out. I

look at my face, at my body, with a kind of clinical detachment into which a strand of admiration inserts itself. I always wanted to be powerful. In this decade, finally, I look powerful. I feel powerful.

And I feel alone. Standing there in front of the house, knowing the mail has already arrived so there won't be anyone close again for another twenty-four hours, I am alone in a way that is familiar to me by this day, but that I never experienced until nearly three years before, when we moved to this otherworldly place. It is a kind of solitude that continues even when Owen is standing beside me. It is a solitude that includes him. We are apart from the rest of the world. We are invisible to it. We have become by this time a single being, a being that argues with itself from time to time—as a knee may ache, as a tired back might refuse to cooperate, so you say, *Oh for God's sake, could you stop being so difficult*; but you are saying it to a part of yourself.

While I am peering down at herbs, Owen is in the barn, writing—or trying to. For months now, he has been that weary back that won't cooperate. He imagines that his prose has wandered to a distant acre of our universe, curled up and died. He still spends days inside the barn but he comes out looking grieved. I feel this ache all the time, though my own work is going well, and it is probably this that has made me wander out into the garden, into the day, so horribly hot. I am restless for him. I am restless as part of him.

The basil I am eyeing with such irritation is rampant. The air smells of it and of lavender. Owen and I are enthusiastic, ignorant gardeners. We are inadequately attentive. We are perpetually amazed. We are innocents to nature, stupefied by its every trick. Even as I am annoyed with myself for letting the basil go to seed, I am also in awe of it. Magic! These beings that continue to grow, that know what to do next, and next, and next.

"Halooooo . . ."

I am not alone.

First, a British voice. Then a small woman in a violet sundress. With a mop of gray curls. “Alison Hemmings,” she says, her hand outstretched long before I might reach it. “I’ve just rented the house across the way. I’m so sorry if I’m here at a bad time . . .” A smiling face. Round cheeks. A firm grip. Startling light gray eyes, almost silver to match her hair.

No one during our time has lived in the house next door, the only building within sight of our home. I have stopped thinking of it as having an interior. It has become solely a shabbily beautiful façade.

“Gus Edelman,” I say. “Augusta, really, but Gus. Welcome.”

My voice is riddled with question marks; and then I remember that I am only in a bra. Folded in among the thoughts of a neighbor is the thought that the bra, which is purple, may pass for a bathing suit; then the thought that it serves her right, barging in—though she hasn’t really barged in. Then the thought that it’s too late to say anything about my bra. We have absorbed the fact of it already. We have moved on.

“It’s so lovely here, isn’t it?” she says.

“Yes, it is,” I say. “Can I help you out in some way?” It isn’t quite right, I know. I sound like a salesperson at the end of the day hurrying to close the store.

She tells me she is leasing the place. “At least through September,” she says. “Maybe beyond. Depending on how things go.”

“I hadn’t realized they were renting it out.”

The owners, a young couple who inherited the property from distant family, have only ever visited once, maybe eighteen months before. They walked the land, several acres, had seemed to be arguing and then had driven off, never to return.

“You haven’t seen the advert?” she asks. “Because you’re in it. You and . . . is it your husband?”

I shake my head, frowning. “I had no idea . . .”

"On one of those rental sites. One of the features is the couple who lives next door. The writer. The painter."

"Oh. How strange. They never mentioned . . ."

She smiles. "I promise not to be a pest, but it did make the setting more appealing. I'm actually a painter too. And somehow the notion of a creative enclave . . . plus I figured if the ad mentioned you, you probably weren't axe murderers."

"Not recently," I say. "Not me, anyway." As we speak, I decide she's only a few years older than I, despite the gray hair. Early fifties. We look at one another a bit more, awkward, until she says she should be getting back to her unpacking. I tell her please to let us know if we can help her settle in, but I don't say it with much enthusiasm and as she steps away I lean down to pick some of the leggy basil, as though she has caught me in the middle of an important, pressing task.

"Many thanks," she calls back. "So good to meet!"

When I'm sure she's gone, I straighten up, my hands full of basil stems. I look toward the barn, and think of going there. A new neighbor is big news. But then I decide it can wait. Owen needs to be left alone to push the rock back up the hill. And I too need to get back to work, so instead of turning left, I turn right and go inside.

We'd moved into the farmhouse nearly three years before, after Owen's Aunt Marion died, surprising us by leaving a small fortune. Very small. But still, a fortune to us. It was enough money that we could think hard about what changes we wanted to make in our lives, enough money that we could afford to make changes without thinking too hard. For the first time in forever we had a safety net. We'd always talked about living the country life in a maybe-one-day kind of way, but once it was possible, we started to get serious, checking real estate online, driving beyond the

suburbs to explore houses that we knew within seconds we would never want to own. Too new. Too obviously designed for families of four. Too close to other human beings.

But then we found the farmhouse, and as buyers we were sold right away. Built in 1918, it was exactly the kind of lovely we'd been looking for. We saw it first on a breezy day in May when the land shimmered with every leaf imaginable, from ground to sky. I thought we'd stumbled onto the hidden spot in which the universe tested out its most exquisite shades of green. The pond, perfectly round, had a fairy-tale look, frog princes poised to set themselves on its edge. I have fallen in love very few times in my life, and once was with those seven acres, our home, on that day.

I wanted to live there. I wanted to paint every vista.

Owen could write in the stone bank barn once we ran electricity, and I could set up a studio in the enclosed porch, with its windows on three sides. There was work to do, of course. The kitchen, set back in the house, was a horror show, its only saving graces a beautiful worn terra-cotta-tiled floor and the old glass-paned door out to what would become our garden. The roof was a joke—like the old dribble glasses, designed to leak. But the house itself was dirt cheap and we had more than enough money to fix it up.

Our friends back in Philadelphia, incurably urban, thought we were mad, and we both rather enjoyed that part. In our crowd it was hard to latch onto any eccentricity no one else had yet claimed. Overnight we became oddballs, objects of affectionate eye rolling and shaking heads. *They'll be back in a week.* We had set ourselves apart from the crowd. And in some other sense, some entirely literal sense, that was exactly what we needed to do.

Neither of us acknowledged that our move had anything to do with my infidelity two years before. It had been some months since our City Hall ceremony, the ritual that was to have been the punctuation-mark ending to the whole episode. But that didn't

mean the betrayal wasn't a lingering presence in our lives, a taunting little goblin in the shadows, daring us to call him out.

For Owen, I knew, there were reminders everywhere. When I'd confessed to him, I had confessed fully—with all the misguided passion of one who believes that she is cleansing herself and forgets that she may be staining the listener. Owen became the man who knew too much. He carried in his head a map of meeting places, of locations where we might run into Bill. He could envision us slipping into this dim café, slipping out, a few minutes apart, from this hotel. He knew how to drive from our home to Bill's. He knew where Bill's law office was.

I always half believed that Owen would have an affair one day himself to restore balance of a kind. In certain moods, dark moods, I even believed he was entitled, though the thought of it was hideous to me. Sexual jealousy. Emotional jealousy. I couldn't bear the prospect of going through what he had gone through. (What I had put him through.) But a part of me believed that it was only fair. A part of me thought maybe it would set us right again.

A couple of times, I almost convinced myself it had happened. There was a student of his whose name seemed to come up too often. Victoria Feldman. And a little later there was a young woman, a girl really, who worked at a nearby coffee shop. I thought I could catch a little atmospheric hum around each of them. I had my hunches. But then, for whatever reasons, I changed my mind. Maybe he said Victoria Feldman was *tedious*, a word I knew he wouldn't use about a woman he was taking to bed, not even to cover something up. Maybe I looked a little more closely at the coffee shop girl and realized he would be appalled by her age, closer to sixteen than I had thought. I don't remember the details of how my mind first entangled, then disentangled him from these nonexistent liaisons, but the point is that I was always on alert.

When I was a teenager, long before any of this, my sisters and

I used to play a game, just between ourselves, that consisted solely of muttering under our breath, *there's a nice little friend for you*, whenever we saw a boy—or in my sister Jan's case a girl. Most of the time it was said sarcastically: *there's a nice little friend for you*, just as the most appalling skinhead cousin of the kid hosting the party walks in. Every once in a while, though, it was said appreciatively. *There's a nice little friend for you. No, seriously. By the door.* We were always on the lookout. All teenagers are, I suppose. We were human periscopes, scanning, scanning. And the fact that there were three of us, close in age, meant that there was never a time when at least one pair of eyes wasn't engaged.

The period between my affair and our move to the country was a bit like that. Is this her? Is this possible? *There's a nice little friend for you.* I hope he doesn't think so. I hope he doesn't see her. I hope he does. I hope he never tells me. I hope he does. It was never far from my mind.

We could move out to the country now, you know.

As we always told the story, the idea came upon us both at once, as though we had acted on it without either of us having to speak the words aloud. But in fact I was the one who said it, sitting in a diner, dawdling over late night pie and coffee, trying to comprehend the degree to which our circumstances had changed with our newly copious bank account.

“We could move out to the country now, you know.”

This is Owen, on the day we moved in: He is pacing off the distance between the kitchen door of the house and the great doorway of the barn. Well over six feet tall, slender to the point of being skinny, as he places one heel to the front of the other foot's toes, and again, and again, he looks single-legged and as though he will blow over with just a mild gust of wind. It is autumn, mid-October, and the greens of our first encounter with this land

have dressed up in fancy costume, orange, scarlet, yellow, to welcome us. It is almost too much to take in, all the beauty. And this is why Owen is doing what he is doing, measuring this line—which there is no reason to measure. Because this is what Owen does when he is overwhelmed.

Watching from what is to be my studio, I know he doesn't really need or even want to know how many lengths of his own feet it is from one building to the other. Except that it is a start. In this hurricane of incomprehensible loveliness, he begins with the ground, with his own feet on that ground. He begins with a count. And standing at the window, I remember how he first loved me, physically. What those earliest sexual moments were like when he counted the freckles on my belly, when he stretched his hand across my breasts, nipple to nipple, measuring my body with his own, so earnest, so strangely in his own head yet defined by the act of knowing me, all at once. It felt like a form of devotion I had never imagined, as he committed my body to his memory and so committed himself to me.

I could never match it, I was sure.

When he reaches the barn, his form relaxes. He turns and walks briskly, loosely, back to the house. He is still boyish at forty-eight. He is that boy with the just-too-long hair that falls into his face, wearing the sweater he must have borrowed from his dad. His limbs still seem as though he'll grow into them, with time. As he nears, I see the earnestness on his face. He has solved a problem. He'll move on now to the next one. Testing the depth of the pond. Or counting the steps to the basement. This, for him, is moving in, as for me painting walls and hanging pictures is. He is all about acquiring knowledge. I am all about recasting a place into what I want it to be.

These are the sorts of things you see when you step away. It doesn't mean you're right. It just means it's what you see.