

## 01 Mount Joy 2022

We are *Guests of the Day* at the Best Western in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, our names displayed on the welcome sign in the lobby. The assistant manager awards us free bottled water and a choice of Frito Lay Corn Chips or Milky Way bars. This is where my husband and I sleep each weekend almost four hours from home.

Mornings, we drive the six miles on Mount Joy's main street into the next town where my mother-in-law lies in that uneasy truce between living and dying. Evenings, we head back to the hotel. Coming and going, I gaze out the car window at church steeples, diners with *Come On In!* signs, freshly scrubbed community parks, and I conjure a different life, a life swathed in the ordinary, a life a few sizes smaller than my own, a gentle life with a slower pulse, and clear, finite borders.

In this life, I would devote my days to cheerful service at soup kitchens. I would crochet scarves for the indigent elderly. Cloaked in an aura of easy piety, I would become a regular at Sunday church, greeting all who crossed my path. In this life, I would accept loss as part of a greater plan, and *you are in my prayers* might actually provide comfort.

I would not ask so many questions or demand so many answers. A solemn walk through the churchyard labyrinth would calm my lingering unease, heal those old, stubborn wounds that bleed into the same tired poems. It would be enough.

This is what consumes me as we come and go, come and go, tucked away in this bucolic hamlet as my mother-in-law's life falters to a close, as her labored breath slows, as time blurs and stretches between breakfasts among strangers and troubled sleep in our third floor room that overlooks the parking lot. We are *Guests of the Day* and I want to be the person who accepts this small and earnest tribute with gratitude.

## 02 After Rosalie's Death in Memory Care, This is What I Took - 2022

From the floor of Aunt Rosalie's closet: in a plastic trash bag, the new slacks and matching shirts, still with tags, from Wal-Mart she refused to wear. No gifts, she had said, and besides, *I don't like your taste*.

From the shelf: a cosmetic case with a hairnet, curlers, bobbipins and three shades of red lipstick from Revlon (Wine With Everything, Spicy Cinnamon and Softsilver Rose). A plastic bag with a gold-plated crucifix, Mass cards from her sisters' funerals, a Rosary with missing beads. A white knit cap with a pompom that concealed Rosalie's self-inflicted buzz cut. *The wait for the beauty parlor was too damned long*.

From hangers: slacks and shirts in shades of green, from chartreuse to shamrock, pea to pine. A white nylon carcoat with a broken zipper and blood stains from last year's fall at the Stop'n Shop. An assortment of floral cotton housedresses worn in the old days when she cooked red sauce for hours and hours, long, *so much better than that crap you find in jars*.

From a hook behind the door: one powder blue chenille robe for the times she reclined in her naugahyde easy chair watching *One Life To Live*. She still knew her name, address and the quickest route to Vinnie's coffee shop where she told stories about how she and Dottie and Bernice boarded a tour bus bound for The Catskills where they flirted with tanned, ebony-haired men with pinkie rings, then waltzed and fox-trotted in chiffon and slinky heels. I remember the sly smile, her eyes somewhere else: *Those were the days*, she said.

Before leaving Rosalie's room, I slip on the robe to feel the squish of chenille. I recall how plump 4'10 Aunt Rosalie, the last of Mom's sisters to die, crushed me to her bulbous

breasts, marveled at how tall I had grown, called me *skin and bones*, then squeezed my cheek with her thumb and forefinger until it bruised.

### **03      The Greatest Unease      2021**

Flying over deep water in the inscrutable dark. We are doomed. I hear the pilot slur his words. My neck is stiff. I feel a headache coming on. My legs begin to cramp. The anxiety pills make me nauseous. The line for the loo snakes down the aisle. The plane begins to jerk.

It gets worse. I grip the arm rests, chew my lips, take stock of my life, fears, anxieties. I try to believe in a supreme being, a higher power, whatever. I pray hard. My prayers are futile. We are going down.

The plane crashes in the Atlantic. Divers find and collect the bodies. Family and friends begin to mourn. My death is announced in an obituary accompanied by a flattering photo (my hair at its loveliest). Cards, flowers and casseroles flood the house. A celebration of life goes on for hours with poignant readings and an inspired playlist. Hundreds show up. Many cry, share priceless memories. Some women, dressed to the nines, comfort my husband for an awfully long time. No matter.

I am now adrift in a vast consciousness floating in a huddle of raw energy. I suppose I am at peace – but oh, what I would give to return to my life, its uneasy turbulence, its precious, beautiful mess.

## 04 IF 2024

If, in the winter of 1978, I had not declared to the entire San Francisco bay area *I Want To Be In Love!* in my long-winded and literate classified ad, if I had not paid for a Post Office box at the Bay Guardian to collect more than 300 letters from potential lovers, if I had not pored over each, trashing bad spellers, shaky hands, screwed-up grammar, postmarks from prisons, rehab centers or psychiatric wards, if I had not narrowed my choice to three, dropped the blatant cheater and the creepy lech, if I had not settled on the third one, had not arranged to meet him for Merlot at Enrico's, had not agreed, after three put-on-your-best-face dinners, to marry him, quit my job, sell the condo and move East, and if I had bothered to scan a map to discover that Delaware was not in New England, I wonder, would I have changed course? Most likely not, as back then I craved a settled life beyond flings and fern bars. If I had not, after seven lonesome years, filed for divorce, if I had not remained in town so our little boy could see his Dad, and if, after years of Saturday nights with *The Golden Girls*, two shelter dogs, and sour cream chips washed down with diet Coke, I had not succumbed to a friend's plea that I drag myself to that singles dance, and if I had not met you there, and if after a few years of couple-hood, I was reluctant, wary about losing my independence (managing a mortgage, a pension and a pest control contract), and if I had not thrown a 16<sup>th</sup> birthday bash for my son, and if, after everyone had gone home, I had not found maggots stinking up the trash cans in the garage, and if I had not called you in a panic, and if you had not come back to rescue me, armed with rags, bags, broom, disinfectant and if I had not been overcome with tenderness, and if I had not married you the following year, we would not be together now, twenty-two years later, basking in the ordinary, dispensing blood pressure and reflux pills each morning, blurting out *Jeopardy* responses each evening and feeling so grateful that we found each other, found all that we wanted when we thought it was too late, and now we marvel that it all began with my plaintive and very public cry: *I Want To Be In Love*.

## 05     Four Lies and A Few Truths     2024

I. Concealed behind a velvet shroud, I recite my sins to the phantom priest: impure thoughts, cursing, mouthing back to Mom when she faulted me for reading comic books all day, a litany of the usual crap. For penance, I mumble 10 Hail Marys and one Our Father, then leave, desperate for sunlight. Truth is: I am not sorry.

II. I puff out my tummy, confess to Ronnie I am breaking up with him as I'm pregnant with Dominic's baby. I am 18 and that is a life. Truth is, I can no longer stand the sight of him. Six months later, Ronnie glares at my flat belly, points out that Dominic is gone – enlisted in the Army. I respond with downcast eyes, seek his sympathy. *Yes, I lost the baby. But, truly, I'll be OK.*

III. In my mid-twenties, I lie to Mom as she struggles to breathe through a maze of tubes. I tell her she will soon come home to crochet that quilt she was designing just before her lungs collapsed. Dad tells her they will fly to Jamaica, a second honeymoon. In our family, we are not allowed to say “cancer.” After Mom dies, I stare at the spot of empty soil where her begonias should have been blooming.

IV. My friend Joyce dies alone in a slate-grey metal bed on the B wing of a nursing home hours after I leave. When I compose her obituary, I write *she was surrounded by family*. Instead, she was surrounded by last week's lilies, her battalion of pills and the hiss of the white noise machine.

V. Writers lie all the time. We probe difficult truths, re-frame them in an elegant way so readers will fall in love with our words, allow us the illusion of immortality.