

Leaving and Letting Go

by Geri Lipschultz

The mind of the living carries its own graveyard, a file cabinet of lives and moments that rise like jumping fish. Moments where the body was violated, the heart bruised by a single word, a ridge hardened in the brain somewhere, making an elbow of something that was once soft, once bubbling. The moments are soundless and precise as a fly rubbings its legs—before what? Flight? A meal? Is it merely punctuation? Time eats away at a mind. A hungry thing time is. This is what I wonder about. Memory. Does it carry itself only in the minds of those who hold it. Does it sew its threads into a soul? I know it can't vanish. There is a law, isn't there? Unseen, it must live somewhere, enfolded among the rings in the trunk of a neighboring tree. Trees are witnesses, as the earth is a witness. The flowers and stones, all here before us, all of it here when we depart. The memory. I believe it lingers. I believe it has a life. Does it escape when the tree is blasted, cut down, dying, losing its water, its life, its vessel for sunlight to regenerate its leaves, its branches. Does the memory fly off like its leaves and settle in the ground. Does it smolder there? Does it stay in the house where people sob, in whose dreams the tragedy is remembered, replenished, rewoven into a blanket that hides light from the soul of that person. Does the memory flit about? Does it land in between the letters of a word some crazy-obsessed writer who is typing right now, as I sit here desperately trying to let it in, give it a home among the speed of lights flickering in my brain. Does it sit in a fold of her brain? Can someone spot it?

She wasn't my best friend but my sister's, and some man killed her and carried her, her body that was—and I'm sure she was looking on, somewhere, the violation. She was in her twenties, but I knew her when she was a flower, when she was a bud. She was my sister's friend. They say someone close to her did it, and they couldn't prove it, so whoever did it ran free. And we were all haunted. The family, imprisoned—well, I didn't know. I was sure they did what they could, what they must. They buried their daughter, but her killer walked. They were good people. Citizens. I remember when they

moved to our town. I wanted to make a new best friend out of her older sister. My sister succeeded with the middle sister, the girl whose life would be taken. We palled around, the eldest sister and I. Both of us families with three girls, but I always thought of them as a touch more civilized than we. They kept their garage neat and orderly. Their tools on hooks with plenty of room for a car. Their house let you breathe with civility. Their gardens were spare but symmetrical. Ours were overgrown shrubs, more green and brown, but once we had tulips. Our house was cluttered, heated with the talk, the dialogues, the antiques, the dog, the endlessness of friends and relatives. I didn't know them well, not as well as I knew their next-door neighbors, as that group had come with us from the apartments. That group was like us in their clutter, but like them in their profound ability to order things. This group, the family with the three girls, who'd moved in later, was an understated bunch. I thought they might still live there, in that house up the street. They were not of the original group of settlers. For all I knew, they might have held the record of longevity, as we had left the block well over thirty-five years ago.

I remember that house before they moved into it. It was a pale pink, and a family of three lived in it originally. The first family in that house. They had a fence, just one of those fences that's there for show. They kept to themselves. One child, a girl—she did not participate in our group. Our group that played all manner of games together, from House to War to Clubs—nature clubs, movie clubs, baseball card clubs, scrapbook clubs—our scrapbooks of classic film stars, like Maureen O'Hara and Cyd Charisse. We had a radius of a mile. The town itself was a little over a mile away, but mainly we were drawn into the woods just steps away from our houses rather than parading about the town. We designed the space, brought back souvenirs, like violets, like whips from willow trees, fossils, frogs and snakes and bones. A lot depended upon whom you played with. There was that range, from

four to eight years old. Except she didn't play with us, the girl whose mother was like Old Mother Hubbard. For a while they were our villains, as we were not permitted to walk on their grass. That alone was sufficient to color fear onto that house. Yet the fear didn't materialize, didn't blossom into murder until much later, decades later. Later it would be that new family in that house, and the girl in that family, and she wouldn't even be living there. Still, fear would come to that house. It would come in its worst wrapping.

Streamville. This is the name I gave—in a piece of fiction—to a town that haunted me, the one I had to leave when I most wanted to stay. But your home town is the opposite of cake. You can't have it and leave it. Once I left, I couldn't come back.

We were the third family on the block to settle in. Sometimes the urge to be a kind of historian overcomes me, but it's for the reason of love, rather than a record. I came with love, came into this world with it. With love and terror. Maybe everybody does. Maybe this is common. I want some kind of closure that has eluded me for almost forty years. It's been such a part of my undertow, my interior life, my musings—this perfect childhood with its flame of demons.

It's in fiction that I tried first to put it to rest. I created characters that sprang from a chemical solution. It was not just a mixture of their real life counterparts. There was a triggering change, a chemical change. I took several realities and I tried to come to terms. There were a number of houses struck by tragedy, and in a way, every house is, or will be such a vessel, will be such a witness, will have its innocence taken. But there's something personal,



almost intimate about the houses of one's childhood town—especially when one has watched them rise up from the ground, watched them being built, when one's memory holds a picture of land without ownership, or shall I say without obvious ownership. I tried hard in that novel to protect the privacies of the people I cared for. But I did not try to disguise my passion for the town, my dedication to its physicality. I loved the town like a body, the way a child loves, unconditionally, with some sense it would always be there for you. I loved the people of the town that way, too.

As for me, I've been too sensitive, and I've been wayward, myself, and most of all, I've been lucky. I was so young when we moved there. We moved to Streamville—to this sea of mud—houses sprouting from the earth, it seemed (pieces of them erupting, emerging piece by piece, plasterboard chunks that we'd take into our little fists and use as chalk)—from apartment buildings. Families living in a spread of rooms together, separated by a door with a lock, and each compartment had its own smell. How did I know which door would open into the smell that was ours. Into brick caves, all attached. Large vessels of brick they were. Three stories up we lived. I remember climbing metal stairs. I remember wondering if I could get lost, venture into the wrong set of rooms, find a new mother, never come out. I did not like the steps, and I did not like the underground, the basement where they kept endless washing machines, endless dryers. I loved the outdoors, loved looking out over the vast world. Even then, I had a feeling for earth and sky. I would lie down—here I'm talking three years old—someone with a body memory of things, pairing them up, the images with

my thoughts and feelings. I remember lying down on that Teaneck soil, on a hill, full of cold, short, prickly grass, looking up at the sky. Seeing the tops of apartments against the wide blueness and thinking I was in a huge ship. We were sailing. My body trembled. I flew in my dreams, held a rope. I knew I could escape, knew that someday I could turn into a bird.

Such is sensibility, escalating from awe to terror in a matter of seconds. I'm told the terror would keep me, as an infant, on a washing machine, when my mother placed me there. She could pour in cups of detergent and refrain from worrying about her baby girl yards away from her. She could depend that her baby would not budge, for fear. Did this memory lodge itself in my toddler mind? Might this explain one fear? One doctor had claimed I required multiple testing, as I was too small, perhaps under-developed, something my mother later discovered was a ruse to keep her from changing doctors.

I hated them. Doctors and their syringes haunted my dreams for years. I ran when my turn came up in line. They had to catch me, pin me down. The word injection, the word shot, the word needle—those words themselves with electric currents. Other scenes—when, for example they had to strap wooden boards to my arms to keep me from ripping out stitches (which I had done after the stitching, when they went to give me a shot)—elude me. That scene, however, my attempt to escape, rises up from the miasma of others, like the smell of a new baby doll, like the sheep we would feed—the bunch of us, ranging from three to five years old, the long zig-zag of sidewalks at the bottom of which lived a boy who was a biter. In my bed I thought of him. In my bed, I was paralyzed. A man came to paint the inside of our apartment. A spot of green paint on a ceramic bear my grandmother gave me. I still have that bear, that paint drop. I remember he said he'd paint my face, that man, if I touched the wall. I remember being petrified of paint, the smell of paint. The smell of tar, too, petrified me.

Fear is a free-floating radical. It lodges itself in and wiggles around. It blooms wildly in dreams. In the dark of a many a night, I sprang up from my sleep and called in my father to chase away a stilled lion, a wolf suspended, a circle of strangers seated at my bedside, images that came into my dreams and lingered even after I opened my eyes.

We moved to Streamville, and everything was new. An echo in rooms where there wasn't any furniture. I remember that newness, the smell of lumber, the ragged look of earth recently carved. In those days, they did not level all of the trees. Not since that time have I lived in a new house. I remember the talk about the newness of the house, how "new" colored

something special, my new friends. Later, it would be the talk about a new school, the school they would tear down our woods to build.

And then we who lived grew up. Even the fear grew up. Like a beanstalk it grew. Like the Fortune 500s that took over another area with woods, the profound woods, the woods that we had our private names for ("the glen," "the bear's nest") where celebrities moved in and put up stone walls to keep the world and its children out.

But I would be remiss if I did not add something. I would be disingenuous, at the least. Streamville was where I found true love. It was where I left it, too, where I left that gift of love I was born with, the mate to fear.

It's like our house, now in some other person's hands.

Still, I'm lucky. What if terror, what if love, is born inside the soul. What if we carry it about, like a flag. What if we plant it down, build there, dedicate that soil.

Love grows, too. It feeds on memory and desire.

And beauty.

And truth.

Amen.

It's with this hope that I wrote a fiction, the lie to tell the truth.

My family left, and I did not say goodbye to Streamville. I did not show up on the day they emptied themselves into the moving van and the car and drove away. I'd moved to New York City, and I would make more moves, dozens of them. I would travel more than halfway around the world. It would be almost thirty years after this young woman's death that I finally said goodbye.

Not too long ago, I went back, put flowers on a sister's grave, with the woman I'd hoped would be my best friend. We'd made friends again, after many years of not keeping in touch. Somehow there was still a bond there, for which I am very grateful. She drove me past the house of the old lover, too. It was a house he built, well cared for. I was looking all around for closure.

You don't own a house, and you don't own land. You don't own your children, and you don't own your spouse. You don't own your own body. All of this becomes painfully obvious when it's too late.

And every memory has a life of its own.