down the sewer.  
I float above the drain.  

Hey Dad,  
Forgive them,  
but teach them what they do.  

---Craig Schechtman
“Morning Luc,” she says. I do not ask why she is at the gym at eight o’clock on a Saturday morning, let alone as the snow piles. Her gym is an all-women’s, tri-level high-rise of state-of-the-art exercise equipment. Gwen’s body is artificially tight and toned by years of firming, strengthening, smoothing, by brutal regimes of metal clanking against weights, body pressed against plastic mat.

I once went with Gwen to the gym on the one Tuesday a month members are invited to bring an exercise companion free of charge with the hopes this lucky individual will enroll. Hours after encounters with “The Iron Maiden,” and my personal favorite, “The Inquisition,” I considered burning all the lycra I owned, my running shoes, any and all connections to the fitness movement so I could disengage then and there.

Gwen loves to make calls from the gym on the cellular she keeps in the pocket of her work-out clothes. She mustn’t waste a minute of her day, just as she wouldn’t neglect one muscle system.

I remember Gwen’s trainer barking at us during that Tuesday visit. “Equal time Gwen, even to the places no one can see when you wear jeans.” For effect she slapped the sides of her hips with veined hands, presumably addressing me as much as my sister.

I touch my hips gently now, apologetic to their roundness. “Good morning to you. I got your message.” Either from exhaustion or indifference, Gwen ignores me and barrels ahead. Her agenda of the moment does not include Mother.

“Alexander had a brainstorm. An invitation, really,” she manages to get out. Her breathing is labored, wheezy. Once maniacally fit, now she’s just maniacal.

“Do you want to call me back when you’re done?” This was not a question but a request.

“Either from exhaustion or indifference, Gwen ignores me and barrels ahead. Her agenda of the moment does not include Mother.

Against the background noise of feet pounding along the lapping belt of a treadmill, we make plans to meet tonight at her apartment in Boston.

“Can I have directions?” I chide her, not joking as much as she might think. I can’t recall the last time I visited Gwen and Alexander’s home.

“Funny,” she says dismissively between pants. “See you tonight.”

“Gwen, what’s going on?”

“It’s been three months, you know.”

I no longer hear the treadmill. Gwen has settled into a cool-down. Thinking of Mother, she probably touches her finger to her wrist to assess the life within herself, judging for target heart rate, for consciousness. Mother died in August and I do the simple math. “I guess it has been.”

“Like I said, Lucy, the snow jogged my thinking. I can’t imagine her beneath it all where she is. We can talk more tonight.”

We say goodbye and I spend the rest of my morning licking stamps and addressing checks that will probably bounce. Accompanied by coffee and calculations, I consider Gwen across town, climbing a stainless staircase, riding a terrainless bike path. My sister is good at this: removing all unnecessary details, distilling life. An arm without the ripple of flesh on its underside, an upper lip as hairless as chemotherapy’s latest sufferer. But once a person starts deciding what to retain and what to eliminate, it’s hard to know where to stop, which details are, in fact, irrelevant. For Gwen, such details have sadly come to include a bike capable of actual movement, the scenery at both top and bottom of real stairs, a jog along a sidewalk. Gwen is only concerned with the repetitive, predictable rhythms of in-between, the only person I know who can go nowhere at all and make it seem she has been to everywhere and back.

After speaking with Gwen I call my friend Keryn. She notices an edge in my voice and invites me over for pie. Her boyfriend has been baking all morning to practice for the Thanksgiving dinner he offered to host in their new Back Bay apartment. Despite chronic and often debilitating asthma, Keryn plays the oboe for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She hasn’t gone to work the past few days because of the cold’s tightening effect on her lungs, and with concerts approaching she can hardly afford a trip to the emergency room for snow-induced respiratory distress.

When I mention the grave-moving over shards of unbaked pie crust and coffee, Keryn doesn’t conceal her shock.

“Gwen’s lost it. One too many health shakes,” she begins.

“Keryn,” I weakly protest.

“She must have gotten one of her shrinks to write her a prescription for Phell-Fen. That stuff wreaks cognitive hara-kiri.”
In the way we respond when a non-relative lambastes a family member, I am suddenly protective of Gwen. "She loved Mother."

"You loved your mom, I loved your mom. Though it is debatable, I for one am fairly convinced your father loved your mother. This has nothing to do with your mother, Lucy. This is Gwen's show."

"You need to talk. Talk," she says this like an invitation, a command, an expectation.

"I don't. I just need to resolve this grave business with Gwen."

"Are you really thinking about Gwen right now?"

I was, in fact. It is not Mother's voice I hear in my head but Gwen's. Contrary to what some may believe, the absence of something is not silent or invisible. A lack of something can be felt and heard. Absence, missing someone, has its own weight, a volume that is very real and very oppressive, and a sound whose pitch resonates at unpredictable moments and spans long stretches of time. But for me Mother is enmeshed with Gwen, their two figures overlapping like an eclipse. When someone dies, others urge you to accept the loss and deal with it head-on. They guide you toward it like a car-wreck, begging that you just look and resolve the matter once and for all. As if you can't afford to take your time, as if by extension, you too are steps closer to death.

Mother used to slip her arm around Gwen's waist and pull it toward her, Mother's soft body colliding against the bones of her oldest daughter. If there was only one Mother to share between two bodies, Gwen's required more time and concern, which left the other in Mother's life untouched and wanting.

"You can talk to me," Keryn says.

"Not now." I stand to go.

"Fine, fine. I'll be nice; I won't push. Just stay. I have no plans today except bingeing on my husband's pies. I just can imagine myself putting on my fingerless mittens and sitting in the gesture I've seen a hundred times before, I momentarily understand how Keryn can say the things she does, and push others like only she can. For her, comfort is attained as easily as the spray of medicine or the import of oxygen through tubing. Her experience of relief is one of immediacy and unquestionable availability. To her, there will always be something to help her breathe.

Before I leave for Gwen's apartment from Keryn's, she loans me a scarf to embellish my plain clothes. Before I go, I practice saying "this old thing?" in front of her mirror, my first formal lesson in deflecting compliments.

In Gwen's building, I take the elevator to her seventh floor apartment which is guarded by a stone Buddha and a disparity of icons. Raised in a household of hodgepodge religion, Gwen's husband Alexander lacks allegiance to any one spiritual group and vacillates between beliefs like many college students, haphazardly combining leftover chicken and frozen string beans to create something edible. With a Jewish mother who would arbitrarily designate one Friday night a month their official Shabbat dinner, and a father legended to have achieved levitation during one of his many hours spent in the Colorado Springs Zen Center, you can hardly expect anything more from Alexander than spiritual schizophrenia.

More fit for a garden than a doorway, the cherubic stone Buddha stands beneath a mezuzah affixed to their door. Gwen and Alexander bought the Buddha in the motherland itself during their trip to Tibet three years ago. They were visiting friends from college who live there and manage—backed by infallible Ivy League expertise—some kind of clinic, or kiosk, or shrine, perhaps all three.

On the other side of the apartment door, however, things change. This Buddha stands alone. If the careful distribution of crucifixes, Mass cards, and framed Scripture quotations could designate an apartment's religious affiliation, Gwen had decidedly adorned their apartment's insides as Catholic. This affiliation has progressively exaggerated since the afternoon at Keryn's for a mindless afternoon of baking, hours spent imprinting our fingers onto the crusts of pie after pie. Face flushed by the oven's breath and sticky fingers powdered white, Keryn alternates deep laughing fits with inhalations from her pocket-sized lung. In the gesture I'd seen a hundred times before, I momentarily understand how Keryn can say the things she does, and push others like only she can. For her, comfort is attained as easily as the spray of medicine or the import of oxygen through tubing. Her experience of relief is one of immediacy and unquestionable availability. To her, there will always be something to help her breathe.

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Mother's death. Gwen wore an oversized gold crucifix around her neck at the funeral and distributed rosary beads to all who attended the reception afterward; I wondered if by now she had taken to wearing a habit, that perhaps I would be the one over-dressed tonight.

As I sense my arrival by peering through the eyes of the stone Buddha itself, Gwen opens the door before I even knock. Her hair seems electrified, a trip to the salon imprinted in the tightness of each curl. The excited ringlets—which seem a shade of brown decidedly darker than their usual color—make the rest of her seem painfully small. This was always her strategy, to surround herself with largeness, overstatement and excess to render herself more helpless. The pleasures of being dependent without the shame of having to say so.

“Lucy,” she says. We hug mechanically, a mist of freesia leaves itself in my hair. Her nose tickles against Keryn’s scarf. I feel silly, superficially primed for an atypical evening out with my sophisticated sister and her nouveau husband. Like a child invited by the Fresh-Air Fund to a suburban family’s country mansion for the summer, upon entering Gwen’s apartment I always feel the air constrict. My surroundings make breathing a conscious effort, an effect which may be similar to the urban child seeing his first Volvo. This is what I imagine Keryn felt during her years spent beneath an oxygen tent: this depleted, this disadvantaged.

“Alexander, Lucy’s here,” Gwen says in a level voice. No one screams in their apartment but miraculously, they are able to hear each other between the many rooms, each one more high-ceilinged than the next.

“Here,” I present my sister with a tin of green tea. Though she and Alexander shop for and eat one meal at a time to ensure each morsel’s optimum freshness, they stock tea like addicts hoard their poison. Her eyes widen, and I can’t tell whether it’s the excitement of having another box to add to her stash or because I thought to buy her anything.

“Great tin,” she says, opening the lid and smelling its contents like the metallic puff of Keryn’s inhaler.

Alexander comes in then, at once casual but powerfully handsome in tailored pants and a simple black shirt.

“Look,” Gwen shows him the tin. He eases toward me and I can’t tell whether he will shake my hand, kiss my cheek, or what seems most likely, place his hands firmly atop my head in some initiation rite. He embraces me without any of the awkwardness I feel, this man who would probably embrace a leper because he honestly didn’t notice the person happened to be missing a nose, skin peeling off as easily as that of his organic cantaloupes.

Alexander always maintains unwavering eye contact, and doesn’t seem to notice any other physical features let alone abnormalities. This is probably why he can live with Gwen without terrible concern, her weight fluctuating like a barometer. This may be why she loves him, he asks no questions, makes no demands.

“It’s so nice to see you again,” he says without a trace of superficiality. He nods toward the tin in thanks.

“Lucy, let’s sit for a bit. Finish your phone calls, love,” Gwen tells her husband, fingers drumming the tea tin. “Luc and I will have drinks, you’ll join us, we’ll go.”

Alexander’s eyebrows rise and fall and he grins. Pivoting back toward whatever room he came from, Gwen leads me toward the living room. Whenever I drive near or directly past Gwen’s apartment, I momentarily consider stopping by. Surprises to Gwen, even from family or perhaps especially so, are intolerable. All visits must be scheduled days in advance, and on the one occasion I did arrive unannounced she sent me away, quite literally. She and Alexander had just moved in, and in her empty doorway which was not yet cluttered by the opposition of East and West, she insisted things were too disorderly for company. Things, she said. Were there boxes not yet unpacked? In the chaos of the move, had they not found their tea supply? Was she trying to conceal a mass yoga conference happening inside, lest I interpret it as some betrayal of her Catholicism?

This incident wedged another several-month lapse in communication between us. Still, as cold as she could be, I often imagine visiting without announcement, or preferably, breaking in. I’ve wished many times they would keep an extra key underneath the Buddha so I could slip in and out as I pleased. I imagine sinking deeply into her bowl-shaped living room chairs, arranged just so beneath winding philodendron, desiring to be close to Gwen’s aesthetic sense as substitute for Gwen herself. Having jimmed the lock by virtue of the Buddha itself, I could sit peacefully, forgiven. Stealing is never the point in these burglar-
fantasies, it is the simple act of sitting alone where Gwen usually does, inhabiting the skin cells she's carelessly sloughed off, the trying-on of my sister like all her hand-me-downs I wore growing up.

There is no sign of the bowl-shaped chairs in the living room and though I wonder about them, I do not ask. From my place of the brown leather sofa I can see Gwen move about in her orderly kitchen. Doodless cupboards display neat stacks of ceramic bowls like the ornate crowns of ancient royalty encased at the MFA. Dishes to be seen, not used. A bouquet of dried flowers hangs upside down over the sink, and beneath it, Gwen throws the remainder of a lime, of which she has only used two slices, down the garbage disposal. Keeping leftovers, even three quarters of a lime, makes her anxious. I was instructed to wait in the living room as she made drinks, perhaps she fears I might ask why there is only mustard and an over-ripened mango in the refrigerator. This is how she subsisted during the famine years when she lived alone, before Alexander, and I doubt much has changed.

She brings two glasses of sparkling water with lime on a tray, never asking what I wanted. With my sister, even vague hospitality is suspicious and I sip slowly at first, sniffing first to avert a home-grown homicide. With all her organic innovations, she would probably have opted for something traceless, but feeling uncharacteristically fearless or else moderately self-destructive, I sip the water down fast. She looks diabolical as she crosses her legs, one spindly leg around the other, her finger poking at the bobbing lime.

"Alexander is profoundly reasonable and level-headed." She gestures to the apartment as if its expansive piquet floors and fashionably worn wooden fixtures were proof enough. I nod, encouraging her to continue. The phone rings which she leaves to Alexander. She lowers her voice. "It's just these functions, like tonight. I feel like such an outsider during them. If you come, we can skip out and chat."

I am moved by the air of collusion forming between us. I lean in closer, as if encouraging her to speak lower, to whisper even, to whisper more about Alexander, about herself, about anything. Seduced, I would listen.

Alexander comes in then. "I see you're as much a drinker as our Gwen," he says, nodding toward our waters. Our Gwen. The sense of inclusiveness is jarring. I have to remind myself—as if anyone could forget such a thing—that Gwen and I are sisters, that if anyone was the outsider here it is Alexander, not myself.

"The self-medicating doesn't begin until we reach the party, love," Gwen says mockingly in a way that Alexander would never joke about Gwen's sacred: her spandex, her cellular, her teacup the size of a noodle bowl. Alexander only grins, the patience of a priest, a rabbi, guru, all religious progenitors combined.

"The phone, love. It was Jeffrey. They're canceling the benefit due to the snow. It seems people are less generous during blizzard-like conditions," he says in all seriousness.

"Oh," Gwen says, looking at me like a Christmas ornament unpacked several months too early.

"How about you and Lucy go out? To be honest I'm relieved. I'm drained from the week," Alexander says.

"It's late," Gwen says, harping on the obvious. "It's snowing." I stand to leave.

"The roads must be getting worse," I say.

"No, stay for awhile, Lucy. I'll make tea," Gwen suddenly says. Wanting nothing less than to watch Gwen ritualize the simple act of boiling water, I suggest an alternative.

"We could go out for tea," I suggest.

"A walk," Gwen announces more to herself than at all else and then turns to Alexander to reiterate. "We're going to take a walk."

"That sounds lovely," Alexander says.

As soon as she thinks of it, Gwen is flipping off her dress shoes for her Nikes at the door. Alexander's hands, two large bowls dimese themselves, his palms like two tanned miniature birdbaths, touch my back as he gently guides me toward the door. Gwen has lead, I follow, Alexander is behind. He touches my sister's arm before we leave as if assessing how she might endure a wintry mile, touching her with the same delicacy as Keryn's boyfriend surveyed his pies for symmetry.

I pretend not to notice as Gwen jiggles the handle to secure the locked apartment. She does not slip a key under the Buddha, and without explanation, bypasses the elevator for the tedious of stairs.
Gwen is a demanding walking partner. The streets are fairly empty and snow swirls beneath the lights. We enact contradiction as we walk, body-heat rising while we exhale in white puffs.

“Moving Mother is a bad idea,” I say.

“Oh, that.”

“Don’t you think we should discuss it?”

“What do you want to discuss? There is a plot waiting for her alongside mine and Alexander’s future graves in Concord. Mom loved that town.”

“She didn’t care where she was buried. You decided in August, and I don’t see the value in reneging now.”

“I’m not reneging on anything. I’m just noticing certain things, that’s all. Like the fact the Cape is too far for any of us, and is probably set to detach from the mainland in the next decade anyway. Plus there have been all those cancer clusters recently.”

“Mom’s dead. We could bury her beneath power lines and it wouldn’t change anything.”

“What about the rest of us,” she says and swings her arms wildly with each step, “subjecting ourselves to danger for the sake of putting down a couple of roses? That doesn’t make sense either. There’s nothing on the Cape besides Dad’s family. Mom thought the Cape was a sleazy tourist trap and frankly, so do I. There’s no reason for her to stay.”

“Relocation won’t bring her back,” I say.

“We are crossing a bridge over the Charles River and she slows her pace. She leans against the side of the bridge.

“What are you talking about, Lucy? She wouldn’t want to be back and alive any more than we would want her here.”

I look at her as if she were about to dive face-first into the polluted river. Her words make less sense than such a final, graceless leap. Why couldn’t I clearly think about Mother without first having to pass through Gwen? Even in death, my sister is Mother’s gate-keeper. As winter overtook fall with this week’s snow, Gwen usurped the space my consciousness ought to have reserved for Mother. Something in me rails against this colonization by sibling. Gwen’s egregious interference in my efforts to keep thoughts of Mother forefront. It is Mother I have lost; Gwen remains alive and defiant despite her best efforts to pare sensation and life itself to its skeleton. Tonight, she admits to relief at Mother’s death. Gwen, who has obscured Mother from me, turns on this distortion like taking back words, as if she had never meant to reduce and reduce, only to, paradoxically enough, occupy so much space.

“That’s unfair,” I say, the inadequacy of my retort substituting for my rage.

“It’s really not, Lucy. It’s really about learning to live with less. Mother is gone and we need to accommodate to this fact, and do whatever we can,” Gwen says. Her profile looks out onto the water, its surface deceptively white and still while it ripples and deepens out of view: Two sisters atop a bridge not speaking about the same subject. Though we mourn the same person, this is not the same thing. We can call her by name, Mother, we can insist it is she that has come between us, we can name death the culprit. Two sisters atop a bridge using the same language to elaborate on different themes, any illusion of connection between us absorbed with the cold. Surrounded with snow, we inhale cold like a cure.

—Abigail Judge