

WANDA - Burlington, VT, 11 a.m., June, 11, 2052

Maybe the Little Person will come back later. I'm Wanda, 95 years old, and laying in this hospital bed, behind the glass and screen porch of the white-bricked Great House. My eyes are closed, and I breath slowly.

A young woman in her 20s, with curly, long, light brown hair. She wears loose brown leggings and a long brown shirt. She confers at bedside with Dr. Sokol, who has his black stethoscope around his neck.

Dr. Sokol doesn't know, or doesn't care, that I can hear him.

Deliver her regular meals and help her to eat or drink if she wishes. She made her Goals of Care clear in her Advanced Directive; he says in his medical jargon.

I think she ate the toast this morning. I don't think she ate anything yesterday, the young woman says. But I have her lunch tray here, so maybe today will be better.

The doctor nods, makes a note. Odd about the toast, he murmurs to himself.

She's become more withdrawn and less communicative; the woman says as she leans down to smooth my hair from my brow.

The doctor makes another note.

Her last days will probably be spent in introspection, he explains. She may appear comatose and unresponsive, but she is still with us, at least mentally. If she does wake, she may speak in word-salad, metaphorical language, aggressive, or dreamy – in short, there's no telling. They're all possible when you're this close to death. I assume she can stay here for care, without being transferred to hospice? He asks.

She has been a resident here for fifteen years, meditating, and helping all of us, she replies. We will take care of her now. Last week, Wanda asked to be outside, so we moved her to the porch. It's so warm now, and we can close the windows at night and keep the heat on, if necessary.

The doctor doesn't acknowledge her or me.

I'm close to the brink of dying, and still near to the moon and stars that move across the sky outside my window at night. And in the daytime, clouds travel. I see their path as a rounding arc

across the globe's lens. Cardinals call from the highest pine branches. The sun is shining. Women pass, gossiping, laughing together. There is room for all this, and death too.

My richest parts gather inside, perceived only by me. As my body fails, only this knowing is strong. I could be in sadness at coming undone. Just as the world could be desolate, about to collide with devastation, and we just don't know it. Still, there is a deepness about us, completely unblocked.

The young woman takes my hand and speaks to the doctor.

She seems to recall some things in the morning, but then loses that lucidity throughout the day, she says.

Suddenly, my eyes open, wide with brightness. I'm surprised that my life has not ended.

My lunch. Is the tray here? Please help me sit up, I ask them.

They each lean in on a side and lift me to a reclining position.

Hi Wanda, says the doctor, are you comfortable? Can we help you eat some soup?

Not now, but please leave it, I say, thinking the Little Person would like it.

I'll be back to see you tomorrow, says Dr. Sokol.

I look through them, at the Little Person behind them, who is on the road towards the Great House Corner. She's back!

They follow my gaze, look over their shoulders, and see no one. I lay back against the lifted bed and close my eyes.

They leave, and now, I can speak to the Little Person. And I don't care if they don't think she is real.

I see you. You're by the road with your backpack, Little Person. You poke your head around the Great House corner. Come. I'm calling to you, as you are now.

Are you ready for lunch? I say to her. There's soup and a sandwich. Come in, come in. You can sit on the step with the tray. What's your name?

Ah ha. Evie. Where do you live, Evie?

Ah ha. Living in a vehicle. You know, I've done that when I was young. You make me think of things I'd forgotten, Evie. It's so nice to see you again.

What's that? Yes, you want to know what's wrong with me. I'm not sick, but I won't live much longer. That's why you are here. You have mighty energy and leaping legs. How you bounded and ran this morning. You're quiet now. I'll tell you about stillness.

I never would have imagined that I'd want to lay so still in a bed. My hands on my belly, next to my thighs, or under the pillow when I am on my sides. Lying on my back, I see pine boughs, huge pendulums in the wind, as they reach for a sky, which I cannot see for the porch ceiling and roof.

On my right, ribs pressed into the bed, knees pulled up toward my chest, I watch the garden grow bright green, new maple leaves. My world is small, so I see what others miss during their busy days that briskly move them place to place, person to person. They don't know how rain changes grey shrub bark into something dark and glistening, or how the sun blanches the branches.

Stillness, Evie, learn stillness.

Sitting upright, I can also see a tiny stretch of street in a city neighborhood without much traffic or noise. The biomass share cars make no sound. It's cheaper to hire a car these days than own one. I only occasionally hear an electric whine from an old Dodge truck from the 20s, a holdout Vermonter whose car noise interrupts the birdsongs.

Robins are mostly gone, well, at least fewer than I saw growing up. Finches call out sweet moments and insistent nuthatches get my attention. Drivers and passengers blur in motion. When the car windows are closed, the shapes are indistinct behind the glass glare. Each school child skips by, sing-songing about their day, parent in hand. Each dog pulls a leash. Each squirrel crosses a road. Each leaf skitters, rustling in the wind.

Max.

He and I found stillness when we lost ourselves at sea. We lived in a sailboat, around the world, for 15 years.

Oh God. MAX!

I couldn't hold his hand when he died, and I'm sorry for that. I wanted him with me for all my life. I tried to fill in empty spaces for both of us, but I often failed. I could never keep up with

him. In the last years of our life, I'd lie at night down in my boat bunk and rest. He'd be up late to finish cleaning the dishes from dinner, then he'd check the boat anchor, and last, he'd look at charts. And I couldn't do even one more thing for us.

Max was never an old goat. He was always a sailor of squalls, an entrepreneur who risked everything. He was the lover to transport me, with the help of Vitamin V. That's what he called Viagra, which became necessary in later years. He was my man: the listener to my circular musings and rants, only occasionally interrupting with "And the point is?", the wayfarer who delighted to watch me. I'd catch fall milk weed seed tufts wisping off the pod and blow them from my fingers into the air. He'd laugh.

I met Max at Middlebury College Summer French School. I went on grants and worked in the kitchen. It was like affirmative action, but for less advantaged kids. I filled a quota for them.

Evie, you could go to Middlebury. Make it happen.

I wanted to do something besides take care of myself, of Max. I had friends: a couple, a doctor and nurse practitioner. They volunteered at the same refugee camp. When we sailed those last 15 years, we'd meet this couple at different ports. Mostly, we helped African's fleeing desertification. The Syrians were mostly home by then. No, I won't tell you about refugees now. I will tell you about the last sail, me, and Max. You will want to know, so you won't be afraid when suffering overwhelms you. When there is no hope, you must feel and hear hope, be invisible and silent.

On deck, he roared.

I was below making peanut butter and jam sandwiches in on our Seward 32 foot sloop, headed to the Finnish Lake District only a few kilometers from Vyborg, a port city in Russia.

He was 81 years old then, so I must have been 77. This was decades after we left his international shipping conglomerate and my marketing work to live mostly on the sailboat. For years, I lived each week by weather and wind.

I felt the boat ramp tilt 80-degree leeward in a sudden gale. I wasn't scared now, as it was like any other that we'd weathered, though I knew the motor wouldn't work. We were headed to port to fix the fuel line.

I secured the food in a plastic bin so it wouldn't return to a mess. I learned after a peanut buttered bread, flung by a squalled wave, stuck on the bunk cushions and portholes.

When I popped out the hatch, I was met by a sheet of rain and wind flung from a black cloud over Max's shoulder. The sea was deep angry grey. White horses of wave crests galloped to catch us. Raindrops cut at us like needles. Sea swells, whipped to 20 feet in minutes, marched toward the Dufour stern like tall buildings about to fall on our heads. Instead, they lifted us to roll high atop the crest and pitched us down the other side. Fleeting, I wondered if the buoyancy principle had a limit as this storm was bigger than any I'd seen.

Pull in the jib. He was curt, anxious.

I clamored down to the low rail, loosened the jib sheet from the cleat, and went for the winch to pull in the furler.

The squall intensified, whipped the sea into arms that punched and pulled at us.

Secure the jib! Adjust the traveler! He yelled, but I barely heard him. Although the captain always gives the orders, a good crew anticipates them. I was already in a harness to keep me tethered on board and had re-cleated the jib, my hands under water as the boat was nearly vertical. I climbed up to mid-ship to move the traveler to the leeward side.

Max leaned at the wheel to accommodate the yaw; each foot braced on either boat edge to stay upright. I saw him chew on his tongue; a typical gesture for him when deep in concentration.

Oh God. MAX! We were at the edge of survival and sanity once again. I'd gotten used to that in our 58 years together. He made a portrait that day: face taunt with focus, blue eyes worried, his Irishness, pink and handsome, hair that was once brown and silky, now gone on top with shaven grey stubbles at the sides.

Oh God. MAX! That day of the squall, or ever, I never doubted him. I wanted a wild, fast ride. He gave me that, so life complications became white intermittent passing lanes from a speeding car. Love was quick and hard, a peak to quiver the body and set us to soaring.

I clung to my boat high rail lines, a spider in a flying web while the cleated jib sheet held. He turned the boat a millimeter this side and that. Sails kept us just off the wind for steerage but a hair's breadth from blow down.

SNAP! The boom flew across the deck, mainsail flapped wildly. I saw a severed bolt skitter across the deck and go overboard, into sea foam. A bolt that he had put in, rebuilding our boat in years past. Max lost steerage and we tossed, plunged into each wave trough, only wave momentum to pull us careening, up and down.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! Max yelled coordinates into the VHF Marine Radio, the software translated to Russian, a technology available since 2025 or so.

A tow boat was on the way.

Secure the sail! He bellowed and gestured me to windward. As he took the lee side, both hooked in, we grabbed at the lashing sail cloth. Each managed to tuck it into folds and wrap half-hitch knots in the sail ties. We worked side by side, moving toward the bow, which bobbed in and out of view, obliterated by crashing waves. My stomach heaved with the seas, from motion and fear on this carnival ride for our lives, tossed and upended. Our feet would leave the deck. Only the harness prevented a headlong pitch into the sea. I saw the tugboat ahead, ready to toss a tow line to the bow.

Go below! And stay there! He yelled, I'll secure the tow.

I saw figures on the bow of the tug, ready to throw us a line.

I don't want to leave you, my voice drowned in the wind.

A wave crashed over the stern to leave me thigh deep and wet. I knew I had to obey his order, so I crouched below the hatch, into the cabin. I was thrown from side to side and soon would break a bone, so I strapped into a bunk. An adrenaline dump left me weak and nauseous.

Oh God. MAX! I whimpered to the darkness.

It seemed forever until I heard the rescue tug's engine whine to keep pace with the seas. Voices I didn't recognize were yelling. The metal tow line ground its way from the winch. One huge flurry of desperate yelling set my skin crawling, then I felt us pulled through the sea. Not knowing what was happening to Max was agony.

I curled into the fetal position in my straps.

Oh God MAX! I didn't see you go over. I only heard them yell. There was nothing they could do for you, and they had to save me.

They told me when we got to dock. Lost at sea. Lost at sea. That's how he wanted to go. To be old, immobile like I am now, was his worst nightmare. If he was here, I'd tell him it's not so bad. It's life, still; there's richness in it too. The birds, the trees, the body at rest.

Such sorrow to lose him. But I had always had some sorrow in my life. A lingering anguish, that intensified without Max. Ripped away was the calmness of the water swoosh around the boat, the wind whistle to sooth my brain. How was I to know the same was available in silence in a place like ASH retreat center.

Keep a small corner of your soul untainted, Evie.

They took me to the hospital in Vyborg. After a few days, they set me on a plane to be with my friend Muriel in Amsterdam, New York.

I was wrapped in grief's black velvet where it was hard to drag the breath in and out. Each night, I tossed on heavy sweated sheets. I felt the waves and relived the storm, imagined Max's last moments from what they told me.

In the violent roll, the pitch rose and fell with the waves, towering over the suddenly tiny boat. He threw the line from the bow to the tow boat. It missed the target three times, and he re-tossed it each time. Wind lifted him off the deck; with each wave crest, he gripped the mast. One more time, for the last toss, the one that made it to the rescue crew, he stepped far into the bow pulpit. A rogue wave, twice the size of the others, was under him.

He heaved with all his might just as the rogue crested and pitched him down. Thrown off the boat, in a twist, he hung upside down by the harness. With the next wave, he would be pummeled into the boat. The safety release was tangled.

He always said to me, keep your knife on you. Be prepared to use it upside, in the dark, in a storm.

He cut that line, freed himself from one certain death to face another: the foaming sea beneath, where he washed away immediately, beyond view, beyond help.

With my friend, at Muriel's in Amsterdam, each day passed in a haze of waking, barely eating, for weeks, then months.

One day, I found a notice online about ASH. The home page was an invitation: "Address existential risk through meditation; address meditation through existential risk." I knew what they meant. I stowed my few belongings in my pack and took the bus to Burlington, VT, and walked up the hill to this Retreat Center.

Evie, are you curious how fast life can change?

Since then, I've risen from the retreat center dormitory room at 4 A.M. to sit in meditation with the other residents. Each day, we cook, eat, walk, work, sit, clean, rest, sit, work, cook, eat, clean, sit for 18 hours then sleep for 6, only to rise again for the same schedule.

I worked administration for a non-profit mindfulness education program. Soon, the group of buildings I worked at, with its few donors, residents, guests, and teachers became all I knew. At first, I struggled to find something I could hold onto amidst the nothingness that opened within. I then became content with nothingness and spareness, inside and out.

I'm changed here, my habits, my thoughts. Even the way I cut garlic is different. To carefully extract every garlic clove morsel, from the end nib, that I always had thrown away. Every molecule in anything fulfills a service, even a garlic nib to flavor soup. Every ant, fly and spider on windows that I dust, wants to live, and die in time. Soon, as with those creatures, so it is for me.

Muriel thought I'd gone around the bend when I called to tell her. She was cleaning her house.
I'm at ASH! I said.

She couldn't hear me.

I know the boat almost crashed, she said.

She was used to me going over the details again and again.

Turn off your vacuum, I yelled, trying to explain.

The first morning here, I told her, I sat in a silent circle. A young resident approached me and whispered, 'Do you want an interview?' That's a meeting with the head teacher. It started to rain, and loud drops fell.

I heard "Yes" so I looked over my shoulder, but no one was there. It was a voice from nowhere, come to help me. I sat on a cushion for an hour. Every ten minutes or so, a bell would ring and one of the residents would walk out a back door. When no one got up, the resident seated next to me nudged my ribs, nodded toward the door.

I rose, went through the door, and closed it behind me. I was in a small room where the teacher in a brown robe and pants sat on a meditation cushion. He gestured me to sit to face him. When I did, I was silent until he asked, How is your meditation?

That's when I burst into tears, the first time since Max died.

Get your stuff and walk back out of there, Muriel said when she heard me, Run!

I stayed. Momentum disabled; heart outdone; spirit dissipated like the incense smoke that floated across the meditation room. I sat. My plans, rehearsals, regrets, musings, celebrations, and cries dropped into my heart, throat, or belly and then – vanished. That's why I'm content, alone, and happy.

Evie, stand on two feet, in reality's soil.

Crazy times, as I lie dying. Pensions and elder housing – eliminated. Since algorithms predict death, medical care is illegal in the last year of life, except for comfort. The young don't want to pay for the old. Conception escapes most couples, so there are fewer children. Governments print XCurrent, a form of money, to pay the unemployed for any necessary job.

All is shared, collaborated, filtered, and remixed, from food to energy to living space to transportation. In a state of constant flux, everything is an app smarter than us, knows us better than we know ourselves, and updates hourly. Real time is streaming, and people filter information and experience. No one is satisfied, and only the few are richer.

As the oceans have hit 20 degrees Celsius, diasporas pour from flooded or desertified lands, especially in Africa. Max and I volunteered in the refugee camps in Europe. Even in Vermont, we pipe in desalinized water as Lake Champlain no longer supports its own life and people too. I stopped keeping up with the news a few months ago. I'm on a bed that raises and lowers because my body has quit my work.

Evie, make friends and love into what happens.

Muriel was my first friend. I was new to the Miller Hill Elementary School, fourth grade, scared stiff but ram rod straight in the back and not letting on. Muriel was across the aisle, in the chair where her feet didn't hit the floor under the desk. She admired my colored pencil collection. I didn't care that she was plump in purple polyester pants, too short for her, and a tight yellow turtleneck. When the teacher gave us a sketch book to color, I furiously scribbled to finish all the pages by recess. Sweating on the last drawing, I looked over at her. Meticulously, she was still on the first page, every color within the lines. I felt like an idiot.

She became a kooky therapist! The crystal pendulums, chanting, feathers and whatever else she used to make clients cry and laugh, and "feel." I loved her stories.

There was the 68-year- old cardiac surgeon, so anxious that he hadn't slept for months. She put him in fetal pose on the office carpet, put a hand on his shoulder and told him to breath and melt into the floor. In a few minutes, he was asleep.

A child's whose mother brought him in with a stack of books because he couldn't learn to read. Scowling, he sat on Muriel's office sofa for ten minutes without a word. She opened one from the stack on her lap and ripped up the first page. By the time she was on page three, the kid asked, "Can I do that?" She handed him a book which he gleefully tore apart. That first session,

they tore up books, for which she had to reimburse the mom, but he was reading three weeks later.

Muriel, I had to visit her on the Brattleboro Retreat Psych unit when we were in our 50s. She sat on a twin bed. Sheets and blanket made up neatly on a metal frame in a small room taken over with one floor to ceiling window and anguish.

What happened? I came in, sat beside her.

She was short and round. Cute, she always had said of herself, no one would call me beautiful.

They'd get to know you and think you are beautiful, I'd reply.

I waited.

Muriel had always been odd, but never crazy and I wouldn't have thought she'd fall apart.

I don't know, she said, it's been months, maybe years, maybe always that I've been thinking I stayed with the wrong guy.

She cried.

I wrote a poem about my husband for my poetry group, she said. Not knowing it was true, they critiqued it as a compelling portrait of a jerk. I thought it was a portrait of a hero. I was so shocked. Their opinions grew in my mind, rattled me somewhere I had never looked. All at once, it seemed I'd made a huge mistake and no way to take back time so something, somebody else could happen. I wanted to die I was so scared.

She wailed. Her situation inhabited her hunched frame and took the characteristic brightness from her eyes.

Evie, it is harder to witness suffering of those close. But you will choose closeness.

Max and I had been together for twenty-eight years at that time. She'd been with her husband for twenty-five. Neither of us had children.

Her husband was a very nice, steady man. A tall, skinny wildlife biologist. His specialty was the spotted turtle. He spent much of his work hours, standing next to streams, seated on a log, waiting for turtles to appear in the shallow, slow flowing water with muddy, mucky bottoms. Then he analyzed the data and wrote reports. Not exciting or adventurous. A closed-up sort. Muriel was goofy, unpredictable, ready for the next new thing.

I held Muriel in her wardroom, with her sagging shoulders and mournful eyes.

Remember, I said to her, the time we camped in Yellowstone during elk rutting season. We celebrated our 40th birthday year with a road trip. It was 1990.

Muriel's shoulders shook a bit with laughter, in her sad state.

A bull elk came up next to our tent in the night, wailed the loud bugle sound. We had seen warning signs about elk in camping in that area.

Warnings never stopped us much, she mused. She liked my story.

I was dead set on running for the car. You said the souvenir store clerk told you the rutting elk ram their horns right through car doors. We had a tin can car, a 1980 Dodge Colt.

It was bumblebee black with yellow stripes, Muriel said.

What do you think this elk would do to a tent flap? I asked.

Yah, but he hadn't seen your cute little white butt, which he would surely mistake for an elk cow ass, Muriel added the next part.

I continued the tale for Muriel. We laughed so hard, hands clamped at our mouths, and you snorted in that tent, as if to let the elk know consensual sex was near.

Both of us laughed out loud, behind the locked psych unit doors.

Sometimes, you run for the car. Sometimes, you stay put, I said. We could have made the dash for the car.

It worked out OK in that tent, Muriel said. She was always insistent about the times she was right, as I mostly thought that I was.

Go back home and look at what's going on with you two, I said. I know a good therapist you can see. She does great stuff with crystals, feathers that will solve all your problems, I teased her about her work.

Very funny. I must have a few more problems than marriage to go loopy over this.

I had to agree.

I gotta stop drinking, she said.

Good idea. Chanting and bells cost \$50 extra – guaranteed to fix that, I teased her again.

Even funnier, she said.

Can you go out of here on a pass? I asked, let's take a walk and get lunch.

We sat head-to-head. She hiccupped.

Can I marry you? she asked.

We had tacos for lunch, a walk around a pond, a talk about marriage.

Evie, I'm tired. I have no control over stupor or waking. I must rest....