

LOTTIE - OLD SAYBROOK, CT

SHORTER, CLARITY

My hands, gnarled and brown-spotted, rest in my lap. My legs drop over the edge of my bed. I'm locked in place. Early morning sun slants to show my window reflection. Oh, to feel the breeze and hear the leaves rustle. I bow under age's weight. I'm not looking or listening now. If I were, my husband Max would be in the steam from my teacup on the breakfast tray.

I pant slightly. My stretchy half-bra clings to me with sweat as my bosom drops onto my ribs, which give way to a roll around my navel and then a pooch. I used to be flat all over. In the chest, the stomach, with skin pulled tight over sharp hip points. It was inevitable that the droops and sags appeared from my face down to my ankles.

I'm in respite now. No, I graduated to hospice yesterday. But I won't wear blue johnny that opens in the back. I'm wearing moss green relax pants and a matching slouchy sweater; the nurse calls them pajamas. Glancing again, my window reflections go back in time. A funhouse mirror bordered by the lawn and trees outside. Beyond the window frame to the north and south, east and west, the world proceeds where I no longer go.

The tree leaves flutter outside, whisper in the breeze. Further away, out of sight below rolling hills and rock ledges, is the shore. I know because I remember it. The waves loose themselves, spread on the sand, then pull away, again and again. Like Max did. A thrill grabs my middle. As if I'm rocking in his arms or in the waves. My day dress puckers under my trembling hand. My gaze focuses again on the window until my hand becomes still.

My few clothes hang in the closet. There's a sofa with brocade arm covers for visitors. There's a table Max made from a maple slab. There's a box of letters and a pile of photos on the table. Yesterday, a nurse went through some of them with me.

The nurse is in her 30s, with curly long, light brown hair, and wears loose blue leggings and a blue shirt. She wipes the perspiration from my forehead, speaks with me, comes hourly to my room, and confers with Dr. Sokol once a day when he arrives with a stethoscope around his neck.

They don't seem to know or care that I hear them sometimes.

"Deliver her regular meals and help her to eat or drink, only if she wishes," he said this morning. "She's called for no interventions in her Living Will."

"The toast and tea were gone this morning," said the young nurse. "I didn't see her eat anything though. I have today's breakfast tray here."

The doctor nodded, made a note. "Odd about the toast and tea," he murmured.

"She's become more withdrawn, less communicative in the last few days," the nurse said, "but is lucid and chats with me at times." She leaned down to smooth my hair from my brow.

The doctor made another note. "That's normal," he said. "She'll be active mentally, alternating with a dream-like state," speaking to himself as if dying is rote.

"Why did she change rooms?" he asked.

"Lottie asked to be outside in the fresh air, so we moved her to this glassed-in room. It's so warm this fall, the windows can be open all day," explained the nurse.

"I've been on the Connecticut Shore for forty years. September used to be sweater weather," he shook his head, snapped his computer notebook shut. I heard his steps toward the door.

Muriel's smiling face had been on top in the photo box. She is my best friend since sixth grade. Now, she's near Flagstaff, in a senior housing complex. Her son, Dex, lives nearby. Like me, she's chucked out everything except reminiscences. For so long, she wasn't satisfied with

her life. By the time we were 40, she didn't want to hear about my travels and adventures anymore. I tried to moderate myself so she could listen. But I'd forget and reappear with a story of mule paths in Spain or the 14th Arrondissement or the refugee women in Nigeria gleefully pawing through boxes of bras I had shipped in from collections in the States. Muriel's eyes would glaze over. She'd drop away from me like a leaf from a tree. The leaf blew across the ground, into a river and drifted out to sea. We didn't speak for ten years.

I lived my big picture life in a 10,000 square foot contemporary with cathedral ceilings and sunken living room. I was often in Egypt or Paris and marveled at her contained life. I sometimes envied her. She lived in small details, partial sketches of days, raising a son with her husband in a split-level house. The wood paneling and shag carpet had been removed. Beyond the rec room windows, the Colorado mountains, open sky and grazing land stretched wide.

Later in life, she came to appreciate herself when her son succeeded, despite his disabilities. Muriel will be buried in a city cemetery, near her husband's ashes and those of other family members. I have no idea where Max's and mine will be. I have no family that I'm in touch with for internment company. It's not exactly something you do with friends.

I do have old friends, like Muriel and we go back to elementary school. I was new in fourth grade at Miller Hill, in Upstate New York. Scared stiff, I sat ramrod straight in my small wooden chair, not letting on. Muriel was across the aisle, and 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 flood pants, too short. She had on a tight yellow turtleneck. When the teacher gave us a sketchbook to color, I furiously scribbled to finish all the pages by recess. Sweating, I scrawled on the last drawing before the bell rang. I looked over at Muriel. Meticulously, she was still on

the first page, every color within the lines. Right then, I felt different and started to bury parts of myself.

She became a kooky therapist! The crystal pendulums, chanting, feathers, and whatever else she used to make clients “feel.” She said, “They have to feel.”

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

She treated a child whose mother pushed him through the door and slammed a stack of books on the table. He wouldn’t learn to read. Scowling, the boy sat on Muriel’s office sofa for ten minutes without a word. She icked up the top book on the stack, opened it, 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 tore apart. That first session, they tore up books, for which she had to reimburse the mom, but he was reading three weeks later.

When we were both 50, she called me, and I went to her, after we hadn’t talked for so long. I had to visit her at Freedom Center. When I looked them up online, they claimed, “This is Comfortable and Serene Detox & Rehab Center with a Friendly & Expert Staff.”

She sat on a twin bed with the sheets and a blanket neatly made on the metal frame. It was 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, “but no one would call me beautiful.”

“They’d get to know you and think you are beautiful,” I had always replied.

I waited for her to speak.

“You make people laugh, ” I said since she was still silent. “I was driving once and told you I would stop for gas at the next CITGO. You said, ‘Good, because I gotta sit and I gotta go.’”

Muriel cracked a smile, then ran her fingers over the institutional bedspread.

“I gotta stop drinking,” she said, quietly.

“Agreed.”

She glowered at me.

Muriel had one rift in her foundation. She drank three glasses of wine every night.

“I never thought it would get out of hand,” she said.

“How did it get out of hand?” I asked.

She shrugged. "Marriage, I guess? For months, maybe years, maybe always I've been thinking I stayed with the wrong guy. I read my poem to my writing group but didn't tell them it was about my husband," she said.

She sagged as if under a heavy weight.

“They said I wrote a good portrait of a dud. I hoped it was a portrait of a hero. Their opinions grew in my mind, someplace where I had never looked. It seemed I'd made a huge mistake and no way to take back time so something, somebody else could happen. Then I started to question everything. Why did I adopt Dex? Every month, I drank another bottle of wine a day. After three months, he found me on the kitchen floor, and I came here.” She was matter of fact.

Her husband was a very nice, steady man. A tall, skinny wildlife biologist. His specialty was the ornate box turtle. This little guy was endangered on the Rockies Eastern Plains due to loss of habitat and pet collectors. Her husband spent his work hours standing, seated, waiting for turtles to appear in the dry grasses. He watched them during mating season, raising young, foraging. He analyzed the data and wrote reports. They are food for coyotes, crows, and

bullfrogs and spread the wild grape, cherry, and geranium seeds. He got great satisfaction from their defecation, as if it was a way for him to shed his own detritus and carry on. His turtle talk was an evening rite; I'd heard it many times. In winter, the turtles dig chambers under soft soil and leaves, slow their metabolisms, become torpid. That's what happened to our friendship until it came above ground again with her call for help.

All that time became an instant as I held her round shoulders on the psych ward. Her eyes were empty.

"Think about this," I said to her, "The time we camped in Yellowstone during elk rutting season. We celebrated our 30th birthday year with that road trip, around 1990. A bull elk came up next to our tent in the night, bugled a loud sound. We had seen warning signs about elk," I started the story.

"Warnings never stopped you much," she said.

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

"It was black with yellow stripes, like a bumblebee," Muriel said.

"If he can ram a car, what do you think this elk would do to a tent flap?" I had asked you.

"Yeah, but if he sees our butts running for the car, he will mistake yours for an elk cow ass," Muriel added the next part with a shadow smile.

We laughed. We laughed for a long time. The mirth shook our bodies, made a wind that blew the pain from Muriel's room.

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

“We stayed put, and he went away,” Muriel said. She was always insistent about the times she was right.

“Go back home and look at what’s going on with you two. And Dex is coming around,” I spoke. “I know a great therapist in your town. She does stuff with crystals, feathers that will solve all your problems.”

“Very funny. You’re joking about my work,” she corrected me like a teacher.

She sighed.

“I send him to the store to get zucchini, and he brings home a cucumber.”

“Not earth-shattering.”

“But thousands and thousands of missteps, mistakes, miscommunications from both of us over millennia and life feels, feels....misfitting,” she moaned.

“OK. OK.”

“Can you get out of here on a pass?” I asked, “Let’s take a walk and get lunch. Stay away from complicated topics. We’ll talk about tampons and lipstick.”

She hiccupped. Her blotchy, wet face lay on my shoulder.

“Fish tacos are on me,” I said.

I took her hand and led her over to the sink.

“Hey, splash your face with cold water,” I said.

“Always the boss,” she said.

“Not always. You were the one who figured out what to do when we were at that camping place, and it started pouring in Germany. I wanted to put up the tent and get in it to stay dry. You said it was perfectly dry in the check in community center. YOU weren’t going outside to get soaked.”

“That was common sense.”

“And it pissed me off to get caught up short.”

“And who is bringing up complicated subjects?” she lifted her eyebrows.

I turn from looking at the photo box to the teacup on my breakfast tray. I hope for a rainstorms that last for four years, the mysterious old man who departs on wings, the scent of bitter almonds that never dissipates.

And Max rises out of the curls of steam. Hello, my darling. I am with you, leaning into your arms.

Max, you're so handsome. Clear blue eyes, shiny brown hair that falls over your brow. You flip it away with your fingers. I've always loved your chest, strong and fragrant where I rested my head in the hairs that curled under my neck. Your thigh muscles, steel bands, sometimes hurt as they pressed into mine.

In the teacup steam, you pull away, kiss my lips and take my hand. We step away from away from the teacup, out of the nursing home. We are in the five-room apartment in the Bronx with eight roommates. We light candles when we are in the mood, and the light makes shadows of skittering cockroaches that crawl across the walls.

On our days off from *Windows*, the restaurant where we wait tables in our 20s, we take the train to Croton Point to be near the waves. You gaze out to sea; further and further the waves roll over earth curves. You long to travel with them. Two customers at *Windows* told us about windsurfing in Europe. They said the board and sail join your body with the ocean. Sailors have always told lies. They make the sea into their lovers. The wind blows, the waves climax.

From a classified ad, you manage to barter your Nikon F2 camera for two rigs - F2 Stratos with 5.0 sails. The kid said the boards and sails were good for waves and flat. The first early morning we go, our rigs are in bags stashed in the vestibule, we get a frown from the conductor and ignore it. You carry a pack with two steaks, a small wire grill cover, and a bottle of red plonk.

I watch rain stream on the train car window. Outlines of blurred buildings and scrubby brush alongside the tracks leave me feeling like I am dreaming about a stranger. Lulled by sliding drops, I finger the *Beginner's Guide to Windsurfing* book under my arm. The skies clear into grey and blue streaks by the time we step onto the long, sandy beach.

I stay on the wet sand with the book while you wade into flat water with the board.

“Set the sail in the water, perpendicular to the board,” I yell out the instructions. You do that.

“Get both feet on the board, squat down, and grab the up haul,” more yelling. Done.

“Pull the up haul as the sail comes out of the water, hold the mast with your right hand, then pull it toward you slightly as you grasp the wishbone boom with your left.” Okay so far.

“Be sure your back is to the wind,” I call this important instruction.

“What wind!” you yell back, standing on the board, correctly holding the boom and not moving anywhere on glass smooth water.

We hadn't figured the wind wouldn't blow. We give up until a next time. We start a campfire in the sand that sent flames over our steaks while we sipped the red.

Uptown by train, we arrive at 4 p.m. to wait tables at *Windows*. In the utility room sink, I splash my face and underarms while you shave. I pull my fresh silk blouse from the dry cleaner's sleeve on a hanger off the water pipe and over my lace bra. I step into a black linen pencil skirt,

slit to the thighs. You hurry into your tux. At *Windows on the World* in Manhattan, the elevator lifts guests into a lavish world, invulnerable to cares. Red plush carpet, chair backs, and patterned wall coverings; white columns, tablecloths, and server's jackets; gold light fixtures, plate motifs, and menu lettering. Unlike other places I've worked, there are no desserts dumped in the corner and roaches on the pans. At *Windows*, I don't sponge the previous night's soup from polyester pants.

Business execs bring in customers. I present Burgundy bottles, reds and one white, a rare Nuit St. Georges brought in by Henri Gouges Importer, after which I drop plates of shrimp quenelles. I serve Henry Kissinger his favorite, a Bordeaux Pavillon Blanc.

You invent flaming coffees and teach me how to ignite Courvoisier, tossed in an arc from snifter in one hand to snifter in the other. Then pour it, warmed, into steaming coffee cups. The execs love that, pull out \$50 bills from fancy sport jacket pockets for tips. We bet each other - I'll get \$50 off this deuce, or \$100 from the four-top.

I have nothing against trust funds; some of them have them. These have an urbane manner; nothing is special to them. If they are happy or sad, I can't tell. The men dress in beautifully tailored slacks and jackets in dark colors. The women wear the short list black dress with chignon hair. All have pristine shoes, Italian made. Not in for gobs of jewelry, they wear a tasteful bracelet, ring, or watch. They choose their words and enunciate. Both men and women have long white fingers and slender hands. They measure their drinks over the course of the evening. They ask the Maître D ahead of time to calculate and handle their tips.

These we watch. What we lack, and they have, might rub off on us. I see the women in the mirrors, hoping to steal their impressions. The conductor-like hand gesture, the lightly tremored laugh, the tilted turn of the head. You want their business savoir-faire. You, a peddler

since age 12 when you sold more *Washington Posts* than any paperboy in the district. They gave you a red wagon as a prize. To go through college, you sold guitars and pianos, Nikon and Leica cameras on commission. At *Windows*, you like the shipping execs who talk of deals in Europe, New Zealand, or South Africa.

“Too bad apartheid keeps the South African Walker Bay in the country, but this Burgundy may suffice,” you tell a group.

“A pity New Zealand and Australia aren't largely imported yet. Try this California Fetzer.”

You are angling.

Others have earned their place at the *Windows on the Seasons* table. With luck or skill, they have acquired belly girth with their money; both create heft at the office or club. They might be windblown or damp, rushed in from a world of broken lines. Their voices are loud and their manner is ostentatious, from hair cut to jewelry. Their shoes are expensive but utilitarian, for walking in rainstorms. Since life has treated them kindly and they might have waited tables, they pile more \$50 bills in tips on the table than necessary. They laugh a lot, smile at each other and at staff. They drink like the trust fund type, but less expensive wines and liqueurs.

Others have a slightly perspired, overtired air. They have fat bellies, red faces, and shoes to match their demeanor. They also work hard. But with less luck and skill, they mount up debts to maintain this lifestyle and keep pace with the social and business competition. They laugh less, gave puny tips, and drink heavily.

Of course, everyone at *Windows* is white, privileged. It is the 1970s, and the U.S. caste system prevails.

I want to be one of the rich, to purchase poetry of character and mysterious splendor. It will be disappointing to find, decades later, money doesn't buy those things.

I have a terrible group of the losers one night. Ten or more of them. Loud, drunk, and lewd. At *Windows*, we ask diners if they want light or dark meat chicken in Cordon Bleu or other dishes.

“Oh, you mean breast or leg? I’ll take either of yours,” one leers at me. Loud laughter calls attention to us in the dining room.

I ignore him, coolly. The Maître D eyes me, with a finger to his lips. I scribble a note on the pad for a steak poivre, well done. It takes ages to get around the table for orders.

I come to the last diner, the only one who ordered the salad.

“For dressing, would you like Mustard Vinaigrette or Pepper Parmesan?”

“What about Italian or Russian? What nationality are you, sweetheart?” spittle escapes his mouth.

“I’m English and German, and I don’t come on your salad,” I level.

The pursed lips of the Maître D over the howls are worth it: my best line as a waitress. Ever.

We persist with windsurfing adventures in scattered rustlings of other days. We graduate from the book pages until we flip off waves like one removed dark glasses. We dip and bow into the water, on the boards for hours, the Bay attached to our feet. A harness attaches from the boom to the chest hook on a vest held us in place or we will fly like birds off the boards. On high wind days, gulls flap their wings, just to hold in place. We tell our own lies about the intimacy; the giant wind, and waves.

It is Red Dress Day. Every first week of September, hurricane season, we drive our Datsun pickup truck to Cape Hatteras. You had painted the orange truck blue, screwed metal plates over the rust spots, and put on a cap so we could sleep in the back. Storms come off Africa

across the Atlantic and barrel toward land at 35 miles per hour. The wind whips grey waves like walls out of the ocean and pulls at the dune marsh grasses. Driving drops bullet the water surface and our faces. My board under my arm, I walk to the water, and the wind blows so hard that sand stings my bare legs and chinks the board which the gusts wrangle the out of my hands. I set it down and go back for the sail. You are already riding waves.

I am not skilled enough to jibe in extreme winds, nor can I water start the sailboard. So, I can't get the sail up out of the water when I fall. I skim a long tack across a 1/4-mile expanse to a shallow jut of sandbar.

I purposely fall, sometimes catapulting out of my harness. The water punches at me. I swallow gulps of the Bay, crawl back onto the board. I manage to turn it around and fly the sail just above my head. Then step on and take off, back to the stretch of beach where our little Toyota 4X4 pick up is parked.

The perfect tack of grace-filled timeless moments sets me free from gravity, in balance, flying, ecstaticly entwined with air and water. All too fast, I reach the opposite sandbar to fall, turn around, and sail the tack again. Each tack is a peak; each fall is a drag. The sum is worth it.

I do this for three hours, but you have stamina for six or eight because you don't fall but flip a smooth jibe. One day, I finish and sit in the truck, reading and pulling on a Labatt's Blue. I see you coming over the dune again, water from the rain and the bay streaming down your hair, over your face, into your neck, and down the wetsuit.

You pull open the truck door, sit heavily beside me in the driver's seat. From the cooler on the floor, you pull out a beer, unscrew the cap. "Wow, this is great. Primo conditions. One of the best ten days of the season," with a sip from the bottle.

In a few minutes, you finish the beer and reach for the truck door handle.

This time, I ask, "Where are you going?"

"Back out."

"I've been sitting here for three hours. I'm cold, tired, and hungry. It'll be dark soon."

"I'm going back out."

"Where is your credit card?"

"What do you need that for?"

"I'm taking the truck and your credit card. I'll buy myself a red dress, find a nice restaurant. I'll sit at the bar until someone offers to buy me dinner." I held out my hand for the card.

You turn to face me with salt brine residue visible on a day's beard growth. Your blue eyes flash from a wind beaten face.

"I'll take you to dinner."

I love you. But I tell you that night I won't marry a 30-year-old waiter and sleep in a truck anymore.

"Who said anything about marriage?" you asked.

"I did."

Everything changed. A *Windows* diner, repeat customer, a manager from the Mediterranean Shipping Company takes you aside. He needs an assistant. You offer to stop at his hotel room the next morning. You leave for a new job based in Switzerland three days later.

After ten years, you manage millions in your own shipping containers and cash. And I am a woman with a chignon and black dress. I am a woman who talks you into marriage and to buy a New Jersey house, neither of which you want. But you want me, and that's what I want, so you cave. Life becomes luxury instead of old trucks and blowing sand.

Maroon velvet drapes with gold ropes to close out the late setting sun at the Chateaux de Boursault, France. The alabaster plastered room has gold-leaf wallpaper and a marble-floored salle de bain, with a tub that fits two. A Veuve Clicquot yellow label is in the wine bucket at bedside, and another cooling in the fridge. It is all paid for by your clients in Cartagena.

After you toss my black lace panties and brassiere on the floor, my body settles on yours. I sigh into your mouth. With one hand you cup my face, used the other to pull my knee up. Our foreheads press together, then I rise on my elbows, my right breast against your mouth. Up on one hand and a straight arm, I leverage myself. Until my body quivers, collapses and I turn my face to bury it into your neck. Your fingers trace my back, gentle like the grass tickling beach sand. I can feel you waiting. After a few breaths I roll over, your weight a ballast, our sweat mingling, your hard beat against my abdomen from the inside. You cry out, roll off. We lie side by side, stunned to be separate beings.

We do it again.

The Chateaux maid knocks, calls to us, “On vous commande un taxi a sortir?”

“On ne sort pas,” I called out, barely able to gasp.

“Ne sort pas?”

“Ne sort pas,” Max insisted.

The next morning, we must catch a flight to Marseille for your client meeting. Slow moving, I join you in the coffee room with barely enough time to pour from silver service into my cup. My hands shake. The shaking becomes a flickering of light waves.

When the flickering clears, I am again, back in my room. Max is gone. The unexplained rain has stopped, the old man with wings has fallen to earth, and the scent of almonds has gone.

And now? I am in the pajamas, sniffing bleach from that fabric and cleaning disinfectant from the floor. The teacup is gone cold. No upward drafts of steam, no presence tangling with mine. I look out the window to see and hear only the leaves.
