

REUNION

I went to a Catholic all-girl high school and I'm not sure what this has meant—what it offered then in terms of a foundation for who I am now. The exigencies of religion and its doctrine were lost on me. I look to the skies at night and to the renewal of the trees in spring as my religious philosophy, and maybe the closest I've come to feeling connected to some larger gestalt is when I'm out walking the dog in the nearby state park, and a bend in the river that I know is coming up, comes up again—the oxbow emerging from the wetlands—and amazes me all over again, crystal waters sluicing quietly past reedy banks.

Perhaps I am different from them, my classmates, who have volunteered for Catholic Charities, prayed for me, especially since I've had cancer, and who make their monthly visits to the elderly nuns who once lectured us.

As a class we have stuck together more than most. It happens that we don't have a reunion every ten years, but *every* year. I'm not sure what spurs this on. Perhaps there is only the circumstance of convenience, but it could be purposeful, as many classmates seek out the ritual of gathering together more than I do. Most of us still live in the city, and the president of our class had a reunion one year after high school, and then one year after that, and one year after that, and we all kept going until we were this group whose pledge it was to get together next time.

The president's house is a large bungalow done in a Frank Lloyd Wright prairie style appropriate for Chicago. She still lives within the boundaries of the city because her husband is a fireman. There's a sense of home when we get there because she's had these reunions for twenty years, and we know the routine by now. There is a grand piano and an addition in the back with a kitchen island and family room. The forty of us who gather can settle in the family room, but sometimes we migrate to the living room where the piano is, and we gather round it to sing the school song.

I don't ever remember what they remember, my friends from high school. If they are talking about a car, and they say that I was in it, I believe them. They say, *remember, you were in the car*. And I say I do. One friend remembers an evening when she deeply gashed her hand as she tried to retrieve a joint that fell beneath the bucket seats of her car. I was with her, and we were racing away that night, apparently, to evade her father. She had stolen his car, which I barely remember was an Impala, and he was following us, driving *hers*, Nancy exclaims to the classmates gathered around the kitchen island listening, meaning her mother's car, *and he was going to beat the living shit out of me when I got home, remember?* she asks looking at me. I never challenge the story. There were numerous dark nights and circlings of empty city streets and meeting up with other classmates who had also borrowed, or stolen, their parents' cars. I never ask if she was

scolded or punished that evening by the father whom I vaguely remember as stern. The story always ends in triumph. We pulled over, we dimmed the lights, we lost him. I don't remember the evening's end any more than the beginning. *We met up with McMurphy who always had the best weed*, is how Nancy ends the story, and I am content to listen and to make a toast with her at the president's house. And of course I wonder how long I can keep up, keep going back with them before nothing is the same anymore—nothing is as I remember it, but I have not reached that threshold.

We have ghosted our past, sketched in the places where we lived, what buses we took to school, whose houses we stopped at on the way home. I have stood at the kitchen island, and late in the evening, sat on folding chairs with the few stragglers who are left sitting in the yard of the president's house. I have remembered or said I remembered the motels we stayed at as part of the Christian mentoring weekends hosted for us by the women alumnae of Notre Dame. The story ends when we all get drunk at the motel, and there's an epilogue—we're hung-over in chapel at Notre Dame with our "big sisters" at our sides. Someone mentions how Susan wasn't there that morning at chapel—and I assume here that I was at chapel—how the nuns forgot the head count, how Susan's absence wasn't noticed.

I remember Susan.

I remember she had thick, curly blond hair that she used to comb and fix by pulling her hands through it. She wore dark eyeliner, part of an early goth look. She was thin and wiry and smoked with hands flicking ash to the air. Her uniform, the brown plaid pleated skirt and matching vest we all wore, was a drape on her, and when she moved, it was mysterious, like something captured, a stuttering. I am not sure, but I think I remember her running through the school hallways, limbs waving and avoiding capture, running away from the voices, the nuns who called after her demanding that she come back to class.

By the time we were sophomores she was no longer living at home, the large condo on Lake Shore Drive. It had four bedrooms, one for each child and a master suite for the parents. There was a wall of glass that faced the lake. I remember picking up Susan and standing in the centre of clouds while waiting in a room of white carpet and couches. Her parents never spoke to me or to any of us. The details have been brought up at reunions now and then, how her parents were very religious, very strict. She kept running away from home, stayed with other classmates and their parents, in other condos. Technically, she was homeless. She sat at the corner café down the street from school and waited for us. It was called Irving's; it was on Irving Park and had a bubblegum pink sign with blinking Hollywood lights that spelled out I*R*V*I*N*G*S. She chain smoked there and poured brandy from a flask into her coffee cup and waited for us to come by after school.

We'd meet her there after class. The rest of us, we who waited for the bell, waited for dismissal, and went to lockers, and made phone calls, and walked up the street to Irving's where we could see her waiting in the booth, her face obscured in the shadow and shine of the glazed windows. We'd tell her of our day, our history lesson, the talk in theology, the poems we recited in creative arts,

led by Sister Timothy who we heard had long ago published a book of poems. We'd sit down, the four or six or eight of us, and shove each other into the booth, and Susan would push back, *fuck you, no fuck you*. She would confirm how *insane* it was that we were stuck in high school this last year, taking electives, learning nothing. She wasn't going back, she pronounced. And we would confirm how she was better off sitting at the café.

It went like that. And then coffee and more cigarettes, and Susan talking about how no one had learned *any* Spanish that year, and fuck it, she was going to France after high school anyway. And she had done acid last week—again with Rodger, the man who seemed to supply drugs as a favour, a genuine favour to us, with no sex due as payment, just a sort of camaraderie. We all had some form of low-toned conversation—how nice Rodger was. He was Schaffer's cousin. He just gave drugs away. That was amazing, Rodger was amazing, his drugs were amazing.

And the restaurant becoming whiter as darkness came on, the pedestrians who passed all wore dark wool coats that spring, and the table wet with prints of water glasses, and everything unhinged, every pause in conversation led to laughter, then nothing, then everything again, every word or reprimand from some teacher repeatable. *Did she really say hustler? A hustler? As in whore, or as in pimp? Did you ask her to explain that? She said hustler, just hustler!* Everything caught, shifting, imitable in variations. We all thought we would unleash ourselves upon the world with a scream and an indelible smear that would prove we were somewhere. Someone at the reunion always remembers the booth at Irving's—how we managed to pen our names on the Formica table despite how difficult it was, and we reasoned that management overlooked it because every table was like that.

I remember the coolness of the evening when we walked out the door. I think I remember running out the door sometimes to catch the bus at the stop across the street, and the fluorescence of the bus, and the quiet of thinking I was soon to arrive home.

I knew about appliances, that there was a dishwasher at home, that I was expected to empty it, that dinner was in the fridge, that my brother was home watching reruns of M*A*S*H, waiting for me, that my parents were out at a restaurant similar to the one I had just sat in with Susan, except it had a bar with spigots and cocktail shakers, and a waitress who knew them, and who served them martinis and the evening's strip steak—they had worked hard that day, and then they too slinked themselves into booths.

At one reunion in an informal speech our president remarked how she was thankful our school was run by the order of BVM's—how modern they were. The president made a toast to the Blessed Virgin Mary nuns, saying it didn't matter if we were pregnant or addicted to whatever; we graduated, we got to college.

I don't recall who was pregnant or addicted. I know that Susan graduated and went to New York to study acting at NYU, and then travelled to France, then lived in London where she studied a particular acting technique—not really a technique, she would explain at later reunions, but a method of learning,

not learning, but of knowing yourself, so that your body placement, your words, become mindful. *The technique helps to centre you in acting, and in life*, she added to her webpage.

At later reunions it was clear that Susan had become known for the mastery of this acting technique, but this was before she was killed, but not really killed—before she was disabled, but not that either—perhaps I am trying too hard to give this memory its proper placement—before she died, simply died from breast cancer.

Every year there was wine, the president liked reds, the Barolos from Italy, and cucumber sandwiches, and a mystery guest—someone who was last seen in high school or shortly after that. And there was a strangeness, not with others but with me, as I tried to remember the classmates who had moved from the city. Maybe the ones who had moved away were more like me: living in a more isolated manner on a country acre outside the city. Maybe they also didn't have a clue as to who they were in high school.

In high school I led a life of austerity, which I thought lent me style—my long hair, my books, my T-shirts, my jeans. I was always with one or two people in the corner of a room and never with a crowd. I played guitar. I wrote poems and stories.

At various times they, my classmates at the reunion, have asked me how I'm doing. *What are you doing now?* I tell them that I am a writer, a professor of creative writing. I live with a partner, outside the city. They were settling down while I was coming out, I tell them, to make my story succinct. I travelled, I went to graduate school, I met my partner who taught at the same college as I did. We had a foster child who is older now, we've raised dogs, first one golden retriever, then another, I say again for brevity, a cat, a chicken. A chicken? Someone always asks. I tell them about the chicken. I tell them the raccoon and chicken story. How I ran down in the night to the hen house. The cries had awakened me; there was the raccoon with my hen in its mouth. I end the story by telling of the vet who rehabbed the chicken, and the thousand dollars I spent on this, and everyone thinks it's a good story—and I guess it is. It's a story of vulnerability and of the quiet of 2 a.m., it is the story of a near vanishing, of what could easily be overlooked had it not been saved.

There are so many women around the kitchen island and I can peer through elbows to see marbled cheese there, and a pastry, a baked brie, and a tall silver chafing dish with meatballs and a smear of sauce hugging the corners. We've gathered here, this high school class, this wave of us around the kitchen island, this time we're here for Susan. Billy Joel is on the stereo, and some are dancing in the house, including the women who have brought their pep squad uniforms—to cheer her on, Susan, now with cancer.

Maybe they, like me, have run the numbers. We went to an all-girl Catholic high school. The chances of a woman having breast cancer in her lifetime is one in eight. If there are about forty of us at each reunion, five of us will have breast cancer. Two of us will die from it.

She is slight and bald from chemotherapy, and I find myself sitting alone with her there on the velvet couch. It is only a moment that she is there alone,

while everyone else is packed into the kitchen, but I spot her, and I sit down, and she takes my hand, and thanks me for coming. *I wasn't sure you'd remember me*, she says. *Of course I remember you*, I say. Maybe because everyone knows she has studied the acting technique, or maybe because everyone knows she has cancer, they move into the room and circle around us. They, like me, might be mesmerized by her, the way she sits, composed with her back upright, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes attentive to everyone she is thanking. She sits, and they come and take her hand. For some reason she keeps one hand on my knee. The other hand she presses to each who comes by. I remember her arms and hands flying about the café, knocking over water glasses, vibrating like winter branches. She is effortless and graceful now.

We all listened then, we listen now. She thanks us all again, and again. She thanks us for our little fundraiser. She thanks those who have come to walk with her, thanks those who have cooked for her, who have read to her, who have taken her to doctors' appointments. And now, at the president's house, we all want to help her more, and so a book is passed around where we can sign up, and a webpage is mentioned called *Caring Bridges*. We all sign up to help. She thanks us. She says she needs us. We make simple pledges.

It is late in the evening, and I'm still sitting on the couch with Susan. A woman approaches—whose hair is cut in a pageboy just below the ears, who we used to call Poppalowski, who used to wear large, round glasses that slipped down to the bottom of her nose, which I know only because it has been brought up at reunions, who is now a doctor of oncology specializing in breast cancer—and pulls up the ottoman and sits there and takes each of our hands. She tells Susan to hang in there, to call her, and to not allow them to take all her lymph nodes. *There is no study that shows that taking all the lymph nodes will make any difference in your overall survival rate*. If they test negative, leave them in. It's a quality of life issue. You'll get through this, the class doctor says, and now makes eye contact with me. Then she adds that she is a breast cancer survivor herself.

The class doctor leaves and Susan tells me about her studies in London. It's about living consciously, mindfulness. *All could be gathered*, she tells me, *every thought, every gesture, along with every breath, all could be gathered by simply letting it happen and becoming aware*. She explains how she worked with a chair for years, a simple wooden kitchen chair. She practiced sitting and then standing. For years, sitting, then standing, until she had it, effortless sitting and standing. This is what she says, Lydia who is Susan who now calls herself Lydia. I heard about this name change at the last reunion which I went to but Lydia missed. I thought *Lydia* curious. I deeply wanted Susan, the one I had remembered. Sitting across from her now, it makes sense. She seems softer, different.

Sitting there, I think Lydia knows me, knows that half the time I have second thoughts about my thoughts, that I am paralyzed with a thousand things I could say as I try to formulate that one statement that might mean something. Suddenly she turns to me and says, *You know what you have been in my life? So important, just everything. Thank you for coming*.

She gets up from the couch, leaves me with my hand in my lap. She is stunningly simple—a bald woman in T-shirt and jeans. She lifts her head up so

that her body seems to face me, and then she faces the room, her spine follows, then her legs; she seems gazelle-like, standing there in an animal pause, as if on the wavy ledge of the sierra range. She turns to the women gathered in a half-circle around her. She thanks everyone again.

Later, she came to visit me where I lived in the country with my partner. The weekend she sat in my bathroom, it was two weeks after her mastectomy. Her stitches needed to come off. Actually, her wound was taped shut, they had used topical adhesives, half-inch strips of tape to keep the wound closed. So I did that. We both sat in the bathroom, and I un-taped her breast. I took a washcloth and wet her breasts. I kept dipping it in warm water so that her stitches would come unglued. And she stared ahead, I think at the mirror. She was quiet as I peeled off her stitches. Then she thanked me.

Later my partner and Lydia and I went to the farmer's market. We bought an eggplant and Lydia cooked it for us as she had learned to at some restaurant in London. We went to a wine store and she picked the wine. We ended up at a stable because we had told Lydia about my niece's horse that was having a problem with some lameness. Recently, she had begun to use her centering technique on lame and wounded animals. Lydia had become an interpreter of horses. She told us this about horses: You wait for the horse to give eye contact, you hold a hand out before pressing it to the muzzle, then stroke the horse at the flat between the eyes. She seemed to know about putting a shoulder to the chest of the horse. *It makes them quiet*, she said.

I stood and watched her lean into our horse. I watched her roll her arm into that crevice between the horse's shoulder and barreled stomach. She softly announced that the horse's back pain was compensation for tendonitis in the left leg. It was November by then, the air was chilled, the steam poured from the horse's nostrils; you could smell the hay and the manure and it seemed right, or at least I could sense that the horse was at ease with Lydia's touch. I Googled her later and found pictures of Lydia with all kinds of equines. She had stable owners, and race tracks, and polo teams for clients.

It was probably about that time—that I was standing next to her in the stables, that a cancer was growing in my body, though I wouldn't have known it then. I think, ah, Lydia, you missed that one, the obvious one, but then again, maybe she had not. Maybe along the way, as she drafted herself from a wild being to being contained, maybe she had known those things—whatever it is that we gather but do not express.

I last saw her in the city, in her garden apartment. I brought her a cantaloupe that I put in the small fridge under the counter. She patted the bed and I sat down next to her and she put her head on my arm and was quiet for a while. I asked her how illness had changed her. I don't know where I found the tenacity to ask that, but I wanted to know. She said now she noticed smaller things like the difference in taste between yesterday's cantaloupe and today's, and noticed smaller kindnesses like people trying to make eye contact and nod to her on the street. *You thank people for visiting. You thank them for bringing soup. There is no stammering, no awkwardness. People ask how you how you're doing; you answer.*

You rarely lose your way anymore, she said, directing it all to me, and for whatever reason, I remember this.

A memorial service for Susan is held at the president's house, in the yard. There's a tiki hut bar along the fence and the president is pouring champagne. There are white folding chairs and flowers on the tables, and women get up now and then to remember Lydia. *Do you remember the pool party?* someone says and everyone seems to join in: *We were all naked, the clothes were floating in the pool, everyone was tripping. Everyone was tossing their empties into the pool, watching them sink without breaking. Remember? And then the parents walked in, their flight had been cancelled. They were supposed to be going to Venezuela, remember?*

And then someone else gets up and remembers taking the bus out to the stables the next day: *We were all hung-over. Probably twenty of us with headaches, trotting our horses down that path that edged the city and hitting the highway that bordered the woods. And breaking into a gallop on the highway, remember? The stable hand yelling goddamnit girls, slow down! Remember? The one stable hand? Can you believe they sent us out with one stable hand? Wasn't his name Rocco? someone asks. But he took us out again!* someone else remembers. *The riding club went there all the time with this guy. The Angry Stable Hand, isn't that what we called him?* someone shouts amid laughter, and I ask myself if I could have been a member of a riding club.

One of our classmates has a home on the river and the reunions have become twice yearly events—one in the city, one in the country, where inevitably there is a bonfire and someone remembers the pool party. The pool party has become more ritualized, to the point where it must be remembered. And I am beginning to think that I never attended. It is a couple years after Lydia passed away and a year since my own cancer diagnosis. I go to sit on a bluff overlooking the Illinois River and I bring wine and listen. We all feel somewhat celebratory because I have survived my cancer, or at least a PET scan shows I am clear. I called our class oncologist, Poppalowski, a few times for guidance, and classmates turned up at my door with pillows and soups, and I thanked them. We try to agree on the particulars of the pool party. *There was a pool party. Lydia hosted it, and someone else.* The next person adds that *Susan never hosted the pool party, she wasn't living at home then. It wasn't in Susan's building. It was the one across from hers.* We're never sure if she should be remembered as Susan or as Lydia. At this new reunion, the one on the bluff, we continue into the night and stare into the bonfire and try to remember the particulars. Whose party was it then? And I feel it again, the futility of the reunion. Others around the bonfire scramble to pin down whose party it was, whose parents were they, with faces frozen, standing at the edge of the pool tarmac. My mind wanders and I remember sitting on Susan's bed the last time I went to see her. Again, I felt I could ask her anything... *and why are you crying?* I asked. *The loss*, she said. *I wanted to keep it all. And I am crying for the loss.*