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Moveable Floors

This isn't a ghost story. It isn't a conspiracy story either. We saw the body. In the middle of the coldest January I can remember my father pulled me out of a seventh-grade spelling test so I could say good-bye about an hour after she'd stopped breathing. But the day before Hurricane Sandy hit New York City some years ago, something very strange happened, something so humbling I'll never forget it.

It was October and beautiful in all the ways New York City is when the heat moves out and the leaves change colors. I'd left work midday for a meeting with an ad agency in Manhattan. I took the subway to the Financial District from our office, an old warehouse on the East River in DUMBO, and by the time I had gotten off at the Wall Street stop, something had shifted. The sky was overcast; dark clouds moved quickly. The lunchtime pedestrians were pushing each other around—more than usual—to get somewhere, chasing after subways and taxis with a little more urgency. And because we'd already heard the warnings, I knew what this escaping was all about. The hurricane coming in was a rare thing for New York City. Usually when you think of hurricanes, they're hitting beaches with palm trees, not skyscrapers and cranes.

I had no plans to leave the city. But just then, as I was crossing Broadway, I saw a woman across the street who scared me to death. She was a thin woman with brown eyes and Persian complexion, waiting casually for the light at the corner. She looked much older than I would have expected, given her hairstyle—a short, spiky cut, and her clothes—a long, linen skirt and dark-purple clogs—but all the same, I *knew* her. I stopped abruptly in the crosswalk. I could not move. It wasn't rational, but it was that face or those shoes or something else entirely. Maybe it was the way she squinted, holding three fingers over her mouth like she was thinking something through. When the light changed, she started walking in the other direction, and as if I had no control over myself, my body lurched after her. And I think it went like this: for the next five blocks I chased

my mother, who had been dead for almost two decades, through Lower Manhattan.

I walked quickly, dodging people, strollers, shoulder bags, shopping bags, backpacks—we carry *so much* stuff—but I couldn't get to her; it was too crowded. I knew I'd be late for my meeting if I kept going but I couldn't stop. I just needed to catch up with her to get a closer look.

Just before my mother was sedated for the final time, we'd celebrated my older brother's seventeenth birthday with her at the hospital. She had just checked herself in, and although she was white-faced and emaciated under that nightgown, she was still enthusiastic and trying to make us laugh. When we walked into her room, she got up and pulled back the curtains dramatically like a magician, to show us her view of the parking lot. Then she demonstrated how to use the remote-controlled bed by lowering and raising my little sister in it.

In spite of her performance, I remember thinking she was already like a ghost, half-gone and floating around the room, pretending everything was normal, pretending not to see our awkward smiles under the hospital masks that protected her from our germs.

One month later—only three months after being diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia—she was gone. One Sunday she was at home stenciling the walls in the living room, and a few Sundays later she was sedated in the ICU and breathing through a tracheotomy tube. Then she died, and my sisters, brother, and I were left alone in that hospital room with her body. It was 10 a.m. when we arrived, and I remember feeling weighted to the floor, as if chains would bolt me there forever.

Maybe that's why I kept running down Broadway. I ran until one block turned into three, into four, into five. I just needed to see the woman's face, to see what my mother might have looked like, to see why I'd just been so hijacked. But at the next corner, she descended the stairs for the subway toward Brooklyn and disappeared.

I stopped suddenly on the sidewalk and looked for a place to sit. But the wind was gustier now, swirling remnants of trash around the gutter. Something was definitely coming. I made eye contact with a hot dog vendor smearing relish on a bun. He knew something was coming too; he anchored a stack of napkins with his free elbow. Then I remembered my meeting six blocks in the opposite direction and I ran.

No one at the agency seemed to notice I was late. The four people we were meeting were too distracted, watching their phones and whispering storm updates to each other. I was distracted too. I unpacked my laptop and passed out business cards while imagining my mother, much younger this time, standing in the doorway of the conference room with her hands on her hips, sassy and proud of herself for getting away.

After she died, a part of me stood there in that hospital room for years, staring at the body, at the half-open mouth of that stranger with a Band-Aid over the hole in her throat. *I was supposed to say good-bye to a stranger?* The other part of me left that room so quickly—and kept moving—it seemed entirely possible that I'd see her again. I've had very realistic dreams that she secretly survived. That, with that same rapid progression that took her down, she'd gotten well. And as the corpse of that stranger rode one elevator down to the morgue, my mother rode another to the lobby and checked herself out under a borrowed name.

I opened the PowerPoint presentation to the first page where two sentences, written in a 36-point font, had been lifted from one of our website's most popular advice listicles. It was originally my idea—a clever introduction for pitching new advertisers. But when I read it again just before the presentation, I felt, for the first time, a sinking and guilty sensation: *LET GO of cheating on your future with your past. It's time to tell a new story.*

I'd moved to New York from San Francisco only a few years earlier to work for a self-help startup, a user-generated, blog-style website with a mission to change people's lives. We accepted unpaid articles from the public, usually first-person essays that were dense with advice for other people. We were experts at creating lists. Some say we invented the "listicle" blog format, and if we didn't invent it, we certainly helped finesse it to its click-bait perfection. We had what people wanted—crowd-sourced "wellness"—and we were growing like crazy.

When we reached five million readers, we hired more people. When we reached fifteen million readers, we landed our first round of funding and hired even more. In less than two years, forty-five million people were reading our site every month—forty-five million people who had most likely found us because they were dealing with something hard—illnesses, breakups, traumas, death, loss, always loss—and they were dying to feel

good. I'd edited so many listicles during those years, I sometimes caught myself mumbling the one-liner clichés in the shower or wanting to whisper them to unhappy-looking strangers on the subway: *What feels like the end is often a new beginning.* Or *Let go; it's more painful to hold on.*

As much as my co-workers and I hated to admit it, we knew *exactly* how to grow our audience. We knew the most popular articles we published were those that affirmed the things people were already proud to have discovered; readers only shared the articles that confirmed what they *already* knew.

So that's what we did, again and again. We addicted you to validation.

I couldn't get that old woman out of my mind. I kept seeing her face. I found myself entertaining childish fantasies, imagining the first thing I'd say if, by some miracle of conspiracy, she'd happened to be my mother. I'd take her by the shoulders and ask, as fearlessly as I could muster, *Do you recognize me?*

Her face kept me awake for most of the night, and early the next morning I lay in bed staring at the window. I waited. The weather reports had said the winds would reach the city at any moment, but for now everything was still. All New York City businesses had been shut down; our office was closed. I imagined everyone in the city hiding indoors, waiting by a window—eight million people inhaling at the same time, anticipating the blow. I reached over to pull back the curtain and noticed a few stragglers scurrying nervously to the subway with suitcases. *Hurry, hurry,* I thought, watching them run. *It's coming.*

Suddenly I was nervous. I wanted out too, so I called my aunt in the suburbs, where it seemed safer, more spacious, less destructive. She said I was too late. All the Metro-North trains out of the city had already shut down. I had no choice but to wait it out in Brooklyn, *as safe a place as any*, my aunt had said on the phone. *We'd love to see you, but you're not any safer out here, honey.*

The weather reporters had gotten it exactly right. At the precise moment they had predicted, the winds of the hurricane began to build until they progressed to a phenomenal speed and strength. The double-paned windows in my apartment rattled violently as wind whistled through their slits and crevasses. The trees in the courtyard behind my building bent into

unimaginable curves. I could hear the reverberation of a stop sign outside my window. I tried to work on my computer, to keep myself occupied, but there was a momentum to the storm that made it nearly impossible to focus. Then a tree cracked outside, and one of its branches scraped hard against the wood paneling of my building on its way to the ground. I screamed and shot upright just a second or two before the storm knocked my apartment into the most unapologetic darkness.

I called my friend and co-worker Sam, who lived in the Financial District.

"Did you just lose power?"

"Sure did. Are you alone?" he said, mocking a creepy voice.

"I'm coming over."

"You can't, darlin. The subways are closed."

"Right," I said, looking in the kitchen drawers for a candle. On the counter was the new lease I'd forgotten to sign and return weeks ago. I struck a match, lit the candle and considered dropping the flame onto the lease. "Talk to me until the power comes back."

"I can't, darling," Sam said. "My battery is low. You should save yours too. For an emergency."

Throughout most of my childhood, my parents hosted weekly political gatherings and candlelit vigils in our living room. My father was chairman of a group, a peace and equality commission, with a mission I never fully understood. It wasn't a Communist movement but might have been mistaken for one. It focused on broad economic issues, like fairness for the poor and the marginalized. It focused on ending the atrocities of genocide happening always and everywhere. If there was a story about a horrible injustice happening somewhere in the world, it was being retold in our house. My father was the organizer, but my mother was the force behind the gatherings, always the one who said *injustice* with the most bravado and windy hiss. Like, oh, the *in-JUST-us*. She was a boisterous entertainer in long necklaces, flowing skirts and clogs. She was quick and unpredictable too—like a bird—answering the door, taking coats, pouring drinks. As soon as the first guest arrived, especially on those political nights, she transformed into someone my siblings and I didn't recognize. We'd watch her from the doorway to the den as she focused intently on the conversation, often nodding and

squinting lasers at the speaker in a way that told us we'd never stand a chance of interrupting. If we ever did need something from her, we'd tiptoe to her side and wait patiently for a pause in the conversation before whispering in her ear. And even still she'd remain focused on the conversation, eventually responding to us as though we were part of the group: *Yes, you still have to be in bed at 8. I wish someone gave me a bedtime!*

Mostly, during these meetings, I'd escape to our neighbor Ramie's house. But one afternoon just before heading over to Ramie's, my mother introduced me to a young Nicaraguan refugee woman who had just arrived for the meeting. And with great enthusiasm, masked only by her low tone of voice, my mother said the woman had just escaped the Revolution and the Contra War in her country. I nodded and shook the woman's hand as the group sang to an acoustic guitar. The woman had arrived with nothing—not even a purse—and I wondered about her luggage, her furniture, her family. Later I discovered that she had left Nicaragua under a fake name with fake papers because she was fleeing death, and my parents were trying to help her do this successfully. I watched my mother carefully as she proudly guided the woman by the shoulders, holding her so closely their hips embraced. My mother looked so thin next to this little woman, much more frail than usual, as she led her into the group and into their song.

I raced to Ramie's that day. Although I didn't always enjoy being with Ramie—she was still playing with dolls—I liked being at her house. Ramie's mother, who was heavyset and gentle with a soft voice, always let us sit on the kitchen counter and eat ice cream from the container. And I was intrigued by Ramie's mother, by all the ways she was ordinary and predictable in her house slippers, dirty white slip-ons, tattered at the toe. She often wore them with athletic socks, which always made them sadder. I'd never seen a grown woman who looked so unapologetically comfortable, so settled. And in that way those ugly slippers were comforting too. For when she wore them, we knew she wasn't planning to leave.

Later that night, when my mother came into my bedroom to say goodnight, she was herself again. She smelled of cigarettes and perfume and pressed her warm cheek to my lips. Then she whispered into my ear about the Nicaraguan woman, "That's the bravest woman in the world. She had to leave everything behind to save herself."

"Even her children?" I asked.

"Don't be silly. She doesn't have any."

Everything fell silent. Nothing moved. I stood in front of the window and looked out, trying to decipher the meaning of the storm's stillness: fatigued, yes, but still unfinished. I'd later learn that this hurricane was a beast no one would ever forget, measuring a diameter of something like 1,100 nautical miles. And knowing this—her enormity—meant there was something even more intriguing about her stillness that made my dark apartment feel so small, seemed to withdraw into itself as the night got darker. I couldn't see the walls, but they felt so much closer than I'd remembered, and I started to feel trapped. Seduced by the allure of devastation and the unbelievable power of that kind of inertia, I went outside.

Looking back, you might have said that *this*, the eye of the storm—the last two days of my mother's life and the first two days of her death—was the time of the most significance. Not because we didn't know what to expect, but because we *did*, and we knew that everything coming was uncertain. Until then, all was silent and still. There were no updates, no options to consider; questions of survival hadn't been formulated. She went from fighting to surrender and then she left, and we just waited. No one tells you about this part. No one tells you that here, at the cliff of real *letting go*, you can actually split into two and leave a part of yourself behind.

Outside on my street an enormous oak tree had fallen and smashed a few parked cars, blocking the intersection on all sides. Loose branches hung from the only set of working stoplights, which flashed a blurry orange into the air. I heard sirens, but there wasn't another person in sight. The air was so still, it felt impossible and dangerous, but I couldn't go back inside; I just kept walking, block after block, through branches and debris on the sidewalks. I crossed the promenade overlooking the construction of Brooklyn Bridge Park and noticed a few other residents had also ventured out to see the damage. The destruction seemed to evoke something desolate yet exhilarating in their expressions; the simple pleasure in such upheaval couldn't be hidden. The view of lower Manhattan was remarkable. The power was out across the river too, and for miles you couldn't see anything but dark buildings towering against even darker sky. The East River had

already flooded into the park below the promenade; yellow bulldozers and dump trucks looked like giant toys in a baby pool. From where I stood I could see that the current of the river was still rising and starting to surge into the city's lowest areas. The damage had only just begun.

Then a gust of wind hit with a momentum that surprised us. The storm was coming back, quickly. Everyone dispersed. And that's when something unbelievable happened. I saw her again. It was *her*, the same woman I'd chased the previous day, and she was standing about a hundred yards away from me. She wore another long, ballooning skirt, and she was leaning over the railing above the river. She held out her hands, shielding her face from the wind. She appeared to be looking for something.

For a second I lost all sense of rationality; I actually turned to the wind, to the storm, as if accusing her of something supernatural. What else could it be?

I headed toward the woman anyway. I wasn't going to miss *this* opportunity. I shielded my eyes from the wind so I could keep them focused on her but she didn't move. *She isn't real*, I thought. As I got closer a new gust shoved through the promenade, knocking over a metal trashcan nearby and sending paper and trash into swirls around me. I heard myself squeal or gasp from the blow and almost turned to run for shelter, but the woman heard me and looked up. For a moment we watched each other, the only two people crazy enough…then her face opened as if she recognized me, and she came toward me. I froze, nearly faint with a feeling I couldn't name; not then, not now. We stood still, just a few feet apart, before she moved in further and reached for my wrist. Her forehead crumpled into deep lines of concern, and she spoke in an accent I couldn't place.

"Have you seen a dog? A white Pomeranian?" She had to yell into the wind, and she yanked my arm to stress each word. "My dog. I lost my dog out here. I think he's gone."

I looked down at that strange and crazy hand clinching my wrist and pulled away from her.

"I'm sorry, I don't know…" I said, walking backward and leaving her alone on the promenade.

The next morning I awoke to distant sirens. My apartment was cold and shadowy. I checked my phone again for updates on the storm and saw a text message from my boss. It said, *Please remove the newest post from the site. Immediately.* And I tried. I tried to turn on my computer to do as he'd

said, to remove the post titled "10 Ways *Letting Go* Will Save Your Life," but my computer was dead.

Instead I followed the sounds of chaos and went outside, where subtle uproars of unrest were already starting. A waterlogged mattress blocked traffic on my street; a few cars honked at it in rage. I watched someone spray-paint the boarded wall of a building: *You loot, we shoot.* People walked through the debris, puzzled and disoriented. I followed a few of them across the Brooklyn Bridge and, from there, I watched the entire structure of Jane's Carousel float away from the park. The heads of the colorful horses with their painted faces bobbed in the water like they'd come alive.

Because I didn't know what else to do, I walked toward Manhattan until I found myself looking down into the flooded stairwell entrance to a subway; the same subway the old woman had disappeared into just days earlier now filled with water. I imagined what it would be like to descend those stairs like she had, to swim beneath the surface of the A train tunnels, dodging floating trash and a million bloated rats.

Later that evening in Midtown, where the city still had power, Sam and I sat with a few friends in a crowded booth at a crowded sports bar and drank more beer than we had in years. It was so loud we had trouble hearing each other but it didn't matter. No one had anything to say, not really. So much was gone; that's all there was to it. We stayed there for hours, thinking of the lives likely lost, the cars smashed under trees, the flooded buildings and homes just blocks away.

When it seemed reasonable to leave the bar, we moved on to a club up the street. Once inside we were pulled toward the DJ. We separated and danced. Once we started dancing, we couldn't stop. Sometimes Sam and I would make eye contact from across the room and laugh at ourselves, but mostly we were serious and alone in it—the euphoria was too intimate to admit.

At some point I moved to the center, to the heart of the club, where the music pounded like it was alive. That's where it was the most real, where everyone seemed to be dancing with necessity, to let go of the heaviness of the storm. But not me. That's not why I danced. I'd never felt so unchained and weightless. I could have been floating above that floor as it moved, above the thudding of the bass and hundreds of pounding feet.

I danced all night because—I don't have to tell you this, but—that old woman at the promenade, it wasn't her.