Good Fortune

My husband's sister gave us a picnic basket last year when she visited from Colorado. We look like people who'd enjoy one, like picnickers I mean, outdoorsy and reasonably carefree, but Richard and I have never actually used it. I stuck it on the top shelf of our pantry, next to the cast iron wok, a casualty from an ill-advised stir-fry phase, and forgot all about it.

It came to mind again when I was planning this trip, as it's a long drive to New York City, over four hours, and I was thinking about how we'd have to stop for lunch. I pictured a shady rest stop, maybe a scenic overlook beckoning from the side of the road. That's how it came to me. We could have a real little picnic, I thought. So I went to the pantry and retrieved the basket. I spent the next hour sponging off its faux wicker. Dust motes had settled in like blackheads all along the tiny crevices. I had to really scrub. This was yesterday afternoon.

Then I called Richard at work, mentioned the picnic idea and asked him to stop on his way home and pick up something special for the occasion.

"Your choice," I said. "Use your imagination."

This was my first mistake, considering he came home with American cheese, salami and a loaf of Wonder Bread. Still, it was sweet the way he said, *Provisions*! as he handed over the grocery bag. That's what I focused on later, Richard's periodic and lopsided sweetness, as I drove to *Whole Foods*. We've been married for nearly thirty-eight years, so that's what one has to do sometimes when faced with the stupid blunders of a long-time spouse, focus on some other aspect of who they are entirely.

At the store I bought gluten-free baguettes and roast beef, olives and brie, ridiculously expensive French pastry and two bottles of sparkling water from Wales. Then this morning I woke up early, prepared the sandwiches, lined the basket with cloth napkins and packed it all up. Satisfied, I left the kitchen and busied myself with the suitcases and other preparations. Though we'd only be gone a few days, I still needed to make some calls

and clean the house. Richard refers to this puttering about as my "Hazel" complex, after an old television show about a peppy and indispensable maid, which no one even remembers now and we ourselves only saw in reruns back when we were growing up.

I didn't think about that basket again until a little while ago, when we were almost to the turnpike, and I realized it was still sitting on the cooking island, forgotten at home. I don't know how this could have happened. I only know Richard and I had an operatic scene as a result, each of us hurling blame at the other like Molotov cocktails. We had been on the road nearly forty minutes and neither one of us could see the point of turning back for it.

So we press on in silence to New York City. We're going to visit our daughter Kate. It's something we do once every couple of years, usually in August. Katie comes to us at Christmas and often at Thanksgiving and occasionally at other times, but this is when we go to her. The drives, however, have never been particularly easy.

Normally, we lead quiet, and I'd like to think graceful lives in a pleasant community north of Boston, a place we often describe as *bucolic*. It's a leafy, peaceful suburb with well-tended lawns. Our quaint downtown area has the faux Tudor style and conjured old world charm reminiscent of an animated Disney film.

Richard is a hard working insurance executive who used to be a quasi-workaholic. He has gotten more relaxed over the years and now he's the kind of guy who is content to sit in a lawn chair on a Saturday afternoon, charting the course of a ladybug shimmying up his arm. He's not so tranquil on these trips to visit Kate though. This is when he morphs into a maniac on the road. Richard shouts and curses, drives too fast, flips off passing vehicles indiscriminately. From time to time he'll take his eyes off the road long enough to glare at me as if he's caught me flashing a truck driver.

I believe these silly outbursts, confined to these drives, are my husband's response to the life Kate has made for herself in the city. Hers is not exactly a tragic or shocking existence. Our daughter is not a meth dealer or a high-priced call girl. Kate is simply a struggling New York City actress. She has been one for nearly half her life.

This year the drama over forgetting the basket seems to have already exhausted Richard's energy for irrational tirades. He keeps his eyes fixed on the road and his mouth clamped shut—a welcome reprieve. It's not until we cross into Connecticut and leave the highway in search of fast food that Richard begins displaying unmistakable signs of life, a stagy cough and a sheepish, hangdog look in my direction. Finally, he apologizes for the basket business, for calling me compulsive and preoccupied. He even admits that he should have double-checked the kitchen himself.

"Ditto," I tell him.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"I'm not feeling particularly charitable at the moment, but I'm warming up to the idea. Keep talking."

"I don't know, Irene. Maybe dementia is creeping up on us simultaneously," Richard jokes. "I mean, that basket was right out there in plain sight. And we both missed it. We must have each walked past it a dozen times. I guess it's true what they say. Old age *is* a shipwreck."

"I don't think de Gaulle was referring to picnic baskets. At least I think that's his quote. But whoever said it, you can shove the old age label."

I just turned 60 and Richard is a youthful 62. We are still fit and relatively attractive—hardly geriatric. I'm told I have *good bones* and Richard could be a hunky grandfather in a Macy's sales circular.

"All I'm saying," he tells me, "is when the time comes, and it may be sooner than later, if you wipe up my drool, I'll wipe up yours."

"Lovely," I say. "Gallows humor to drive by."

I adjust his collar and give his ear a flick. He rests his hand on my knee, plays with the hem of my skirt. He laughs out loud, a warm hoot of a sound. This is better, the man I know.

We stop at a Burger King for cheeseburgers and milk shakes, no doubt tastier than those forgotten gluten-free baguettes. After lunch we're back on the road, passing miles of parched Connecticut countryside. If we had remembered the picnic basket, I'm not sure where that scenic spot would have materialized. New England has been experiencing a drought and everything looks faded and dried up, like tracts of steel wool unfurling alongside us. Yesterday the *Globe* reported on mandatory water rationing. I'm thinking of our garden at home, our cucumbers and zucchini, the

crooked border of tiger lilies. They will be drooping like assault victims by the time we return home.

We take this trip in early August when it's easier for Richard to get away, when his office resembles a ghost town. He manages expense analysis for his insurance company and I teach 5th grade at the Thomas Jefferson Elementary school in our town. I taught briefly after graduating from college, but gave it up when I got pregnant with Kate and didn't go back to it until years later when our son Michael left for college. I like fifth grade. It's before those first clamoring jolts of adolescence. I guess I'm what you'd consider an old-fashioned teacher. I once even overheard a young colleague of mine describe me as *Fucking Retro*. Richard threatened to have a T-shirt printed up.

My favorite time of day is story hour, which is actually a twenty-minute period right after lunch, when I invite my kids to calm down, even put their heads on their desks, while I read to them from Lois Lowry or C.S. Lewis. Even my ADHD kids look forward to these literary respites, and such moments, when we are all at peace in the classroom, are probably as close as I'll ever come to a state of grace.

We drive some more without a word and then Richard turns to me and asks if I know our agenda once we reach the city.

"What's exactly on the docket for us this time?" is how he puts it.

Every other August, Kate treats us like first-time tourists, and she usually has our entire stay booked with visits to assorted ethnic restaurants, art exhibitions and free cultural events.

"She didn't really say," I tell him. This is a lie. Kate texted something yesterday about a friend's sculpture exhibit in Soho and chamber music in Brooklyn, but I don't tell Richard. I refuse to take chances with his improving disposition. We still have almost two hours ahead of us on the road. Richard is particularly wary of Soho. Being surrounded by so many self-possessed hipsters makes him feel like a walking dinosaur display. And Brooklyn might mean a trip on the subway and his hovering, *Great Protector* routine. Not a pretty picture for any of us.

"Well, is she in a show?" Richard asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

"She didn't mention one," I tell him. And this part is the truth.

On a number of occasions, on our visits to New York, we have watched our daughter perform.

"What do you think that means?" Richard asks me. We're outside Hartford now, passing an enormous sign for the Pequot Indian Casino depicting merry, white gamblers.

"What?" I ask.

"That our daughter doesn't have a show."

"Oh, that. I don't know. Between engagements, I suppose."

"Do you think perhaps she's planning to give it up?" Richard asks me this in his careful, practiced way. It is the one question regarding our daughter he has asked more than any other. He still likes to think Kate is only being stubborn about her career, as if she's three years old and refusing to leave a tub after the water turns cold.

"I wouldn't bet on it, sweetie," I tell him. "And neither should you."

Michael was a decent athlete in school. Soccer and lacrosse gave him confidence to get along with others, and as a result he challenged himself in a number of other areas. Sports were an important part of his life, though they were only one facet of who he actually was. But when Kate discovered theater, it was simply everything, the rhythm of her heart. We grew used to seeing her nose buried in all sorts of theatrical books, blocking imaginary scenes with salt and pepper shakers, running lines at the dinner table, offering an endless commentary on the careers of every theater professional from Jean Cocteau to Helen Hayes.

Of course, we went to all of Michael's games and Katie's performances. As suburban parents you are required to do so; it's in the job description. Most of Katie's high school plays were pretty tiresome. I remember Richard had to be physically restrained during a particularly grating performance of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*.

Kate, however, was a charming performer and we were quite proud of her. Her strong interest in the theatrical world posed no problem at all until early in her senior year when she informed us that she had no intention of applying to colleges. She planned instead to move to New York City immediately upon high school graduation and pursue a life on the stage. It was Kate's suggestion we pay for classes at an acting school in midtown Manhattan while she went out on auditions. The school was a

place that boasted certain stage luminaries as alumni. (Kate rattled off a list of these folks in an optimistic and memorized fashion.) She wanted us to support her for a year until she could get on her feet. It was *a bargain*, she said, when compared to forking over tuition for a useless four-year degree. Such an idea had never occurred to Richard or to me. Kate would be attending a well-regarded university, where she would take up a sensible major. Michael, in two years, would do the same. This had always been the plan. Kate couldn't have shocked us more if she'd revealed a desire to join the circus and swallow fire. This clichéd and silly discussion about the merits of a college education, the sitcom premise of an artistic daughter at odds with conventional parents, would somehow, incredibly, become the defining moment for us. There are moments in life when your world changes, so that everything else is then defined as coming before or after that particular event.

When Kate told us what she wanted, Richard simply laughed in her face. It was a sneering laugh too, probably the worst kind. The words he used weren't especially cruel. He just explained, in a superior, patronizing tone, the error of her thinking, the futility of her argument.

"This is not even worth talking about," is what he said. "It's non-negotiable."

I didn't defend our daughter. On the contrary, I stood quietly to the side, nodding assent, as Richard dismissed our eldest child in a bored and fussy way. When he finished, Kate didn't say a word, she only stared at us both, first at her father and then at me. It wasn't a particularly ominous look; only a stern glance as she left the kitchen. Gone to pout, I figured. She was entitled. Richard and I shrugged at each other. This confrontation must have seemed so benign to us. I don't think we gave it another thought. Later, of course, I would wonder why we hadn't tried to compromise with her; to have Kate look into theater programs at certain universities or try it our way for a year.

But we didn't do that.

It was a Saturday morning in September. I don't know what I did next. I must have sipped my coffee and tidied up, made a list of chores for the day. I made a lot of lists back then. I'm sure I felt complacent about the outcome. After all, I had agreed with almost everything Richard had said, and so would our daughter after she had a chance to think about it.

That's what I told myself she'd do. But what she actually did was pack a bag and vanish. In the one hundred and twenty-five days Kate was missing, I believed, as strongly as I have ever believed anything in my life, that I would never see her again. After the first two weeks I completely lost hope and couldn't retrieve it, as if it was something I'd squandered somewhere else, as if it was the last drop from a water bottle. When I was able to sleep, I'd dream that Kate had been murdered or had committed suicide or been killed in an accident. I had these thoughts a thousand times during the day. I pictured her funeral, all of us crying over her casket, a minister's words, dirt being scattered. I saw it so clearly, as if it was a vivid memory, something that had already transpired. I'd have to shake my head like a wet dog to remember the day of the week, the actual year we were in. We tacked up scores of leaflets around our town and surrounding towns and in Boston too. We grilled Michael and interrogated all of Kate's friends. No one knew anything, or so they said. The police, for their part, never found a trace of her, which in my opinion didn't seem to bother them much—another 17-year-old runaway with clueless parents. We met once a week with the local police. We flew to New York, figuring that's where she must have been headed. We visited the acting school she had wanted to attend and went to several police precincts there too. They didn't like to speak to me, the authorities. They all dealt with Richard; they all avoided my eyes. Perhaps they knew I wanted to claw their hairy necks, rip into the soft, ugly flesh and feel it under my nails. The anger felt good. I remember how it swelled in me like music, how I considered it a gift.

We hired our own investigator, someone we found in a telephone book, an oddly cheerful man named Frank Bogardus. He was wiry and bug-eyed, with yellowish skin, the color of newspaper left out in the sun. He provided us with mild optimism and detailed invoices, but he didn't find her either.

It was strange, but right before Kate's disappearance, I'd read an article in a magazine about a missing persons case. It was written by a woman whose teenaged brother had disappeared decades before. The mother of the missing boy, after two or three years of police investigation as well as her own frantic search, had simply forbidden the child ever to be spoken of again, as if he had never existed. Even on the mother's death bed, when the daughter, now middle-aged, the author of the article, wanted to discuss her

missing brother, the old woman had turned away from her and not allowed her to even utter his name.

When I wasn't envisioning Kate dead, this was how I imagined our future, Richard's and Michael's and mine. No mention of what had happened, no mention of what we'd lost. Before her disappearance, it seemed we'd led an ordinary existence and had done all the *right* things, as parents, as a family—which is a foolish, prideful notion. As if there is a record you can compile ensuring your children's safety in the world.

Kate called us from Rhode Island one night, late in January, during a particularly miserable winter. There were several more calls over the next few days and she negotiated her own return. It was, of course, a form of blackmail. She set the terms and we complied without hesitation. Our daughter told us she didn't want to answer any pointless questions, that she didn't want us to treat her like a criminal, or else she'd run off again. We were sick with relief to finally hear from her and would have agreed to anything to get her home.

She didn't return to us looking smug or self-satisfied. She was painfully thin, covered with ugly red blotches and so ill and exhausted she could barely lift her head. Her beautiful hair was now filthy and matted, infested with lice. She had to shave it off.

We never did get the whole story out of her. Richard, in particular, didn't have the stomach for it, and I was too grateful for her return to ever really push for answers. Kate did volunteer some information. She said she spent some time in New York. That was her original destination, after all, but then her savings ran out very quickly. She met a few people and traveled with them to Providence, for what reason I never knew. She moved into a large abandoned house with some other teenagers, but they all got thrown out as squatters and she ended up in a center for at-risk youth before she finally called us. There were holes in this story and I knew it was the abbreviated, sanitized, if not entirely fabricated, version. I asked Michael if she had told him anything and all he said was, "Ma, you don't really want to know."

And I didn't, even though it couldn't have been worse than what I had already imagined.

After Kate came back we went through a period of strained civility, as if we were refugees, speaking different languages, but forced to live together in the same house. Richard became so pliant, so agreeable; it was like he was translucent, fading way. His voice for a while was nothing more than a whisper. As for Michael, he became the perfect child, bringing home better and better grades and a cluster of extracurricular awards. Kate recovered her strength and finished out the school year, took some summer courses and finally received her diploma.

Family therapy was an option, but we never even explored it. Time would heal us. That's what we chose to believe. I took long drives during those first months Kate was back home, to the North Shore, up into New Hampshire. I'd walk along rocky beaches or sit in a quaint chowder house off the highway and drink tea or read a book. I wanted to do normal things, but I also had the urge to confront strangers and demand what they thought of me. One time I went to a fortune teller off Route 1 and asked her a dozen questions. I remember she couldn't read my future. I was cloudy, she said. Snickering, I told her I had always considered myself partly cloudy, and this was when she ordered me to leave.

In September (a full year after our last discussion on the topic) Kate approached us once more with her decision to pursue a theatrical life in New York. She watched us cautiously, like a store detective, and this time we didn't miss a beat before giving her the response she was after. We were all eager to move on, to breathe normally again, and in the end it was such a simple thing to provide—only what she truly ever wanted.

Nothing, of course, was ever quite the same. For years afterward everything around me felt terribly fragile, like a strong wind could blow it all down. I continued to dream about Kate's death. It took a long time for my life to take root again, for the bad thoughts to stop. Michael went away to school. I got my recertification and started teaching again and that helped me, as did Richard, who I initially blamed for everything, until I realized he was more lost than I was.

New York is where Kate has spent the last eighteen years. She has never been a successful actor by most standards, never been on Broadway or starred on television, if you don't count one bit part on *Law & Order* and

a few lines on a canceled Netflix series. The majority of plays in which she has performed have taken place in small, dimly lit spaces like church basements or dilapidated buildings. More than once over the years Richard and I have found ourselves sitting on uncomfortable folding chairs, the sole members of an audience. We have seen our daughter smear chocolate pudding on a man who was wearing nothing but a jock strap. We have heard her scream vile obscenities at the top of her lungs in incomprehensible plays while pursuing her *Art*. This is not to say everything Kate has done has been a waste of time. Our daughter might not be a successful actor in a conventional sense, but she is at least a smart and resourceful one and we have seen her give some fine, perceptive performances over the years, play a wide range of roles. You have to admire how she perseveres, how this life still means the world to her.

"Her life is so precarious," Richard has said to me on numerous occasions. This is what eats at him. And it is true. Her existence is certainly hand to mouth. She is a waitress, a bartender, a dog walker, a temp secretary, whatever is required to pay the rent. She hasn't (to her credit) taken money from us since her early twenties, but I doubt she has any savings. Kate is thirty-six now. She has lived in disgusting apartments with drug-addled roommates and has had countless unhappy romantic entanglements, which she refers to as her "Boy Drama."

I have kept Richard ignorant of some of the more unfortunate events from Kate's life.

He is not aware of the struggle she had with bulimia, or her occasional bouts of depression or a brief dependency on painkillers. He doesn't know about the beating she received at the hands of a married man she once dated or the restraining order she took out on another one who stalked her for a year. Richard wouldn't even know how to process such information. Kate volunteered these unhappy facts, and others, to me several Christmases ago, late at night, after she'd had too much wine and was discussing her *journey*, which is how she refers to her life. I wasn't sure if this was her attempt at bringing us closer together or an easy way she thought she could wound me for some wrong I had committed. In any event we both cried and the next day we were somewhat shy around each other. Frankly, her mix of sorrow and stoicism overwhelmed me.

On the Cross Bronx Expressway we are surrounded by hazy urban sprawl as we inch toward Manhattan. Richard is devoting all his attention to the busy road. He looks handsome in his blue polo shirt and khakis, his thick white hair neatly cut, his face pleasantly tanned from our weekend gardening. In three years we will both retire. Richard will leave the insurance business and I will leave Jefferson and we will travel. Our night stands are already stacked with travel literature, books and maps. We are not fabulously wealthy people and our traveling will be on a shoe string or thereabouts.

Michael, who lives in Sacramento with his wife Mia, is our informal investment adviser. He is a vice-president of a software design company. When he discusses our comparatively meager nest egg it is with slight condescension. He has offered, on several occasions, to dig into his own pockets and supplement our savings. Each time he did this I thought I'd have to peel Richard off the ceiling. Michael comes East on business several times a year. He is breezy and affable when he visits, if a bit remote and too eager to leave. He rarely mentions his sister. They aren't close. What occurred all those years ago changed Michael's life as well. I think there was tremendous pressure on him not to disappoint us after what he saw us go through with Kate. And sometimes I wonder if that's why he lives so far away, a safe distance from our prying, anxious eyes.

If we are careful and are lucky enough to stay healthy, in a few years Richard and I will be able to spend much of our time on the move. Like aging bank robbers. It is a way of life we talked about while we were dating, before we married and had children and got settled sooner than we expected. Richard was at BU and I was at Simmons and we'd meet at the Swan Boats in Boston's Public Garden on Sunday afternoons, the world stretching out before us like an endless carpet.

"I don't believe this," Richard practically cheers as we turn on to Kate's block.

"Neither do I. We must live right," I say.

There is a parking space not ten yards from her brownstone. This is unprecedented luck. For the last several years Kate has lived on a beautiful street near Central Park in the West 90s. The apartment is the largest and nicest she's ever had, in addition to being rent controlled and shockingly

affordable. She said finding it was like winning the lottery. It's a one-bedroom, but there's a spacious alcove with a convertible sofa in it and that's where we'll sleep tonight. She won't let us go to a hotel. Kate likes playing the hostess. The flat will be clean and air-conditioned, but it's only a sublet, an illegal one at that, as she often reminds us, and at any moment the real tenant might return from Europe, where he tours with some opera company, and she'll be out on her ear.

After Richard expertly delivers us to the parking space we begin to gather ourselves. I pull the visor down and check myself out in the cosmetic mirror. I'm slightly windblown and I reach in my purse for a comb. A woman approaches on the sidewalk carrying a bouquet of wild flowers and a grocery bag. She is long-limbed, athletic looking. She wears a simple, white sleeveless dress and her lovely auburn hair comes down to her shoulders. She is walking fast and appears untroubled by the summer heat. There is the hint of a smile on her pretty face. This is our Kate.

She doesn't see us and I'm reminded of the many unguarded moments of her childhood, when I'd spy her coming up the walk on her way home from school or playing in the backyard. The happiest of little girls. I look over at Richard. He has spotted her too and like me wears a big, toothy grin. You make wishes for your children. I know I made them for my daughter. I still do. Perhaps they are granted in moments like this, in Katie's swinging arms, in the toss of her hair.

I used to believe certain things in life were written out for you, that good fortune was as easy as shaking off a beach towel and tossing it over your arm. It's a lot more random than that, a lot more complicated. Good fortune, I have learned, can be cloaked and difficult to recognize. You have to really look for it. In fact, I have become like a scavenger in this regard and right now, as Kate draws closer, I am nearly desperate with discovery.