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Long Distance

Who shows a child as he really is? Who sets him in his constellation and puts the measuring rod of distance in his hand?
—Rainer Marie Rilke, Duino Elegies

A Saturday morning, and my father, younger than I am now, carries liquor boxes full of books to the car. My older brother stands at the door as dutifully as a hotel bellhop: he holds the door open for my father each time he steps out, then pulls it gently shut and stands at attention, back straight and eyes staring solemnly ahead as he waits for my father to return. Then he opens the door again, though this time it is unnecessary, for my father is empty-handed, can open the door himself.

From this distance of years, I imagine Stephen is trying to comfort my father somehow. The only son, perhaps he understands my father’s grief in ways which the rest of us cannot; perhaps, as he stands there in his fuzzy Speed Racer pajamas, he senses what it will take me nearly thirty years to apprehend: if my father stops—if he sets down the boxes to get some coffee or to toss the baseball for ten minutes, if he hesitates in the kitchen where Amy is eating Cheerio’s in her high chair and I am coloring and my mother stands knife-straight at the sink scrubbing dishes that are already clean—if my father pauses just long enough to open that door himself, he will not be able to do what he and my mother have agreed is best for everyone. He will not be able to leave.

Of course, it is an impossible wisdom I now grant my brother, for he was no more than five or six on that day. Most likely, his awareness was much more simple. My dad is moving out, he must have thought and couldn’t get beyond this fact, couldn’t cry or even comprehend what his father’s leaving would mean: that after this Saturday, his father would be coming here only on weekends; that after this Saturday his father would be a guest who must knock on his own door; and that
after this Saturday, there would be in my brother both a vast emptiness and an enormous rage which hadn’t been there previously.

After that Saturday, we would always meet my father in the entranceway of some building—our home in New Jersey or his apartment just across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania; in a restaurant in downtown Philadelphia or New York—one of us politely holding open the door for the other. At thirty years old, I try, for the first time in nearly three decades, to understand what this formality, this distance between my father and me, has meant in my life, but because I have no memories of him ever living with us—I was three on that Saturday—there is nothing concrete to define what it is that I lost. I only know that today, as I walked for hours around a nearby reservoir, single again after a decade of marriage, as I stared at the fathers in college sweatshirts and baseball caps, at the wives with long hair and bright laughter—and at the children, the little girls in pink leggings and purple sweaters dashing about in a confetti of leaves—I felt numb with sadness, with the realization that I had once been that little girl who was tugging on her father’s hand, that little girl who probably couldn’t imagine a time in her life when she would be this alone.

Above me, dark birds stitched the fading autumn sky into a long cursive “V” as they headed south. The pattern of flight. I knew it well.

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My father often traveled on business and would phone us while waiting for a connecting flight. Consequently, in grade school, when we learned the state capitals, I kept getting the names of cities confused with the names of airports: Washington Dulles, Chicago O’Hare, Dallas-Ft. Worth. Even now, when he phones, my father announces at the start of the conversation where he is. And so I know LAX is Los Angeles and Bradley Field is Hartford; I know Midway is the other airport in Chicago and Hartsfield is in Atlanta. These airports seem a fitting place for my father to have phoned, for they are no more than elaborate doorways, places of arrival and departure. They are places, too, of paradox: how passengers constantly glance at clocks and wrist-watches, how everything runs on a precise schedule, planes arriving or departing not at seven but at 7:03. And yet time means nothing here as hours are lost or gained like so many chips in a poker game.
The paradox of my relationship with my father is that he taught me, through all those calls from all those cities, that distance didn’t matter. His voice sounded the same whether he was three thousand miles away in Los Angeles or just across the Tacony Palmyra bridge in Philadelphia. Different weather, different time zones. My father convinced me of the arbitrariness of space. It is a concept over which metaphysicians long ago argued. They said that space or time did not exist in absolutes; they said that what is real cannot be restricted by such superficial boundaries. I think of stars, of how, no matter where you travel on earth—Uzbekistan or Guinea or Venezuela—names from the game Risk which I used to play with my brother—the constellations remain fixed. And so a woman who stands alone in an apartment on the other side of the world will see tonight the same Big Dipper, the same Orion the hunter, that I see from my apartment in Baltimore. The distance from me to her is negligible compared to the distance between the earth and the stars, the closest of which is 26 trillion miles away. So it was with my father. No matter how many cities he traveled to each week, no matter how many frequent flier miles he accumulated, the distance between us remained fixed: on Saturday morning he would again be standing on the other side of the front door in his Levi’s and jean jacket, ready to pick us up for the weekend.

I recall this as I pace alone in the apartment I have shared these past four years with my second husband. The closet in the bedroom is half-empty as are the bookshelves. He took his computer and the CD player, the huge seasoned pan in which we baked pizza every Friday night, a comfortable chair, the 1930’s reading lamp we bought at a flea market. A month ago, he sublet a furnished apartment from a young woman who is taking the semester off from college; a week ago he moved out. I had told him I needed my space. Now I am surrounded by it.

Idly, I trace my index finger in the circle of dust along the window-sill where a few days ago there had been plants, and I remember how, when my brother and sister and I were younger and spent Christmas Eve at my father’s, Stephen used to turn off the lights in my father’s living room so that all we could see was the enormous lit-up globe of the world which my father had ordered from National Geographic; I remember how my brother would spin it slowly, whole continents gliding by in pale colors as he traced with his index finger Santa’s route
from the North Pole; and I remember how it never once occurred to me that this distance was impossible.

Perhaps this is why when, twenty-some years later, my second husband glanced at me across the table where we were eating dinner and confessed that for him, our marriage was over, that I was incapable of intimacy, that I didn't know how to let anyone get close, I would recall in that moment the blur of continents beneath my brother’s fingers on Christmas Eve night and I would realize that maybe my husband was right: perhaps I didn’t truly understand what closeness was because I had never had to comprehend distance. The gift my father gave to me. And the curse.

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I have been in every state with the exception of Alaska and Hawaii with my father, have driven through the lower half of eastern Canada. I still have the photographs he took as we posed, my brother, sister and I, before the “Welcome to South Dakota” or the “Bienvenue en Ontario” signs. Flat interstate in the background, gravel to the side of the road, undefined pale skies. We spent a month every summer with him, traveling different regions of the U.S., but other than a handful of blurred images—a snowball fight in Glacier Park, the cowboy hats and colored bandannas he bought us in Cheyenne, the enormous white sand dune somewhere in Oregon that we climbed and raced down and climbed again—what I recall is the interstate stretched before us like an airport runway. My father was proud of the distance we traveled, kept track on the odometer, seemed happiest on those days when we stumbled from the Best Western before light and “made tracks,” as he said, driving until nightfall, until all we could see was the slow glide of oncoming headlights, like phosphorescent fish in black water, and the intermittent green highway signs announcing where we were and how far we had yet to go. Twelve hours, fourteen hours. He still boasts of the time we drove from Maine to Michigan in a day.

This is not to say that my father didn’t love the lazy afternoons lounging in lawn chairs at a campsite and reading for hours, that he didn’t enjoy the day we floated in innertubes along the Snake River in Idaho or the early morning nature walks and leisurely campfire break-
fasts—instant coffee or hot chocolate, scrambled eggs and Hostess doughnuts. But covering miles, “making tracks,” crossing distances, mattered to my father. Even now, he flies into town on the spur of the moment or drives an ungodly number of hours in a single day—from Florida to Baltimore twice one summer so that he could take my husband and me out to dinner: once to a restaurant in an eighteenth-century brownstone with high ceilings and elaborate chandeliers, another time to a nearby pizza shop where we ordered three extra-larges with exotic toppings—calamari, fontina cheese, yellow peppers and artichokes. Lots of beer.

He talked expansively that night in the pizza shop about his consulting work and the books he was reading, about Mahler’s symphonies which he’d come to love, and about the drive—what time he’d left his home in Jacksonville, where he’d stopped for lunch, the mileage he’d gotten, how he’d avoided the D.C. rush hour—and as I watched his tanned face in the dimly-lit room, a candle flickering from a red globe on the table, I understood that my father’s gift wasn’t taking my husband and me out to dinner: it was his driving, his fourteen hours in the car, his fatigue.

The irony, of course, is that he, who could drive all those hours, who could reach my brother or sister or me from anywhere in the country, who still reaches into our lives via the telephone from cities we’ve never been, who on my ninth birthday sent me a telegram from Iran—the other side of the world!—he could never cross the unmeasurable distance that sprung between us after he moved out. He could not be a regular dad, mowing the lawn out back while we blasted Led Zeppelin in our bedrooms and did algebra homework, or glancing up from the novel he was reading as Amy or I modeled a prom dress. He never saw my sister or me on Prom night, wasn’t there when we got ready for dates or agonized by the phone beforehand, eating ice-cream straight from the container and praying for some boy—whose names we’ve long since forgotten—to call.

Perhaps this is why the trips and the extravagant gifts my father always sent blend in memory into a single abstract watercolor—a Georgia O’Keefe, beautiful but indistinct—and why it is the ordinary moments which now remain vivid: my father in the kitchen making Hamburger Helper for dinner while I work on a science report about Copernicus;
a drizzling Sunday morning and my father teaching me to drive stick-shift in an empty high school parking lot.

He ironed a pair of pants for me once, cotton-khaki, so hopelessly wrinkled that my mother flat-out refused the minute she pulled them from the dryer. It took him over an hour. Now and then he’d take them from the ironing board and hold them at arms length to see how they looked, then tell me, “Just a few more wrinkles, Bethie, let’s do this right.” It was autumn, mid-afternoon. Outside the colors were primary—blue sky, red leaves, yellow sun. My brother and sister were reading library books on the couch, the lamps on either end lighted against the unnatural darkness of my father’s apartment. Periodically the iron hissed, and I would smell the steamed cotton. I felt restless and empty inside, and kept turning away because I didn’t want my father to see this. Beyond the window were rows of brick apartments exactly like his and beyond that the Delaware River. Saturdays the place was full of kids. I’d see them pulling their overnight bags and knapsacks from the trunks of their father’s cars, see them repacking those same bags on Sunday afternoon. The younger ones sometimes cried; the older ones, wearing Walkmans and staring dully from the passenger windows, looked resentful and bored. The fathers seemed uniformly exhausted.

When my father finally handed me the khakis, as beautifully pressed as if they’d been taken to a dry cleaners, I glanced at his face to thank him and was startled to see that he was happy. Quiet-happy, contented-happy, happy in a way I’d never noticed—not even when he was clowning around with his brothers and sisters at my Uncle Pete’s A-frame on Lake Michigan, not even when he was speeding down Rt. 73 to Long Beach Island with us on a summer night, rolling down his window to shout at the top of his lungs “Shore time!” My father is happy. The realization was so strong that I heard it as words, as a voice, something concrete and irrefutable. My father is happy. His face looked boyish in a way that had nothing to do with age, in a way I wouldn’t see again until years later when, in his fifties, he would adopt a baby and I would watch him in a similar late afternoon light as he tucked his son into bed for a nap, quietly wound the musical mobile over Matthew’s crib, then tiptoed into the darkened hallway where I stood waiting, goosebumps on my arms as I watched my father become what he’d always wanted to be.
After he moved out, my father stopped being ordinary: he became Superman and the Wizard of Oz and Bill Cosby; he became Mary Poppins, arriving each Saturday morning with a wide smile and his carpetbag of surprises—lunch at Roy Rogers, miniature golf, trips to Peaches record store, each of us allowed one album. Later in the day there would be "cocktail hour" with boxes of Entemann’s chocolate chip cookies, Captain Crunch cereal by the handful, milkshakes made with real ice cream, my father proud as the blender stuttered and coughed, the shakes so thick we could eat them with forks. Pancake eating contests at dinner and wrestling on the living room floor, the goal to pull off each other’s socks. My little sister called him "your majesty," for some reason, and I still see her, white-blond hair flying about her eyes as she giggles and squirms from his grasp, screaming, "But your majesty, I’m helping you!"

*Your majesty.* I never questioned why she called him this. Even in our twenties, though, grown women with husbands and children, that old name would resonate in the new one we gave him, sometimes referring to our father as the “White Charger” because it seemed that when we most needed him, he would charge into our lives, Prince Charming-like on an imaginary white horse, and take care of whatever was wrong—even if it was as simple as test-driving my car to make sure the clutch wasn’t giving out, even if it was as simple as babysitting my sister’s kids so she and her husband could go to dinner or stocking her freezer with Ben and Jerry’s ice cream when she was pregnant with Zachary and couldn’t gain weight. *Your majesty.* We worshipped him.

I imagine it was because of this that years after the divorce, when I am an adult, my mother will confess that Sunday nights after my father brought us home were the worst. He had all the fun, while she had homework and laundry and school lunches to make. But then she will shake her head. “No,” she will say bitterly. “No, it wasn’t Sundays, I’m wrong. It was holidays, your birthdays, graduation.” And I will remember how he always gave the best gifts—stereos and shopping sprees, new cars, trips to Florida for spring break or Europe for a summer. The gifts were always preceded by an elaborate conversation that was actually a treasure hunt, my father like Robin Goodfellow in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* teasing and taunting, leading us through a maze of words,
spinning us in circles, darting this way and that until we, giddy with anticipation, would beg him to stop. Then, casually, he'd dangle a car key from one finger as he nonchalantly took a sip of coffee, or he'd hand over the white envelope as if this were Oscar night and I could almost hear the drums roll as we held our breath and tore it open. How we shouted and laughed, waving our airline tickets high overhead, how we pounded a car horn in a staccato of celebration—and how my mother and stepfather stood to the side of this scene, upright characters in a Grant Wood painting, their stoical smiles painted on as an afterthought.

Was I aware then of how my mother felt? I don't know. We grew up treating our feelings like gag-gifts, boxes within boxes, emptiness wrapped in bright ribbon and shiny paper. Stephen wrapped his grief in rage; I hid my insecurity beneath tissue-paper-thin accomplishments; my mother masked her bitterness with sacrifice, waking before dawn to cook and clean for each birthday celebration or holiday, her smile too large and too bright, like a gaudy bow on a plainly wrapped package.

I can only imagine how my mother must have felt as she watched us race down the stairs to greet my dad on Saturday mornings, then climb sluggishly up the porch steps on Sunday nights, tired and cranky and drowsy with sugar. I can only imagine how she felt at our birthday dinners—wearily she moved about the lighted kitchen, icing our cake or setting the table with good plates and long candles—but it was *his* car we watched for in Stephen's window, faces pressed to the dark glass, laughing and making bets with each other about what he'd bought for us.

It would have been easier for my mother had she been able to dismiss my father's extravagance as materialistic. But three years ago when I was undergoing a biopsy, he woke in a city hundreds of miles north and raced at seventy-five miles an hour through the darkness so that he could see me in pre-op, then keep my husband company through the hours-long wait. When I woke in my hospital room half a day later, he was gone, the *People* and *Mirabella* magazines he'd bought me sitting on the night table.

A few years before this, he had driven twelve hours in an unairconditioned U-haul full of furniture, from Vermont to Virginia, after my first marriage ended and I was moving into a new apartment.
He did the same when my brother left the east coast to attend graduate school in the midwest, did it again when my brother moved back. He flew halfway across the country to accompany my sister and her husband to a doctor’s office when their son was being tested for a fatal illness, he met with the hospital board when the doctors seemed negligent, stayed up all night writing a damning letter to these same board members, then read paragraphs to me over the phone at dawn, his voice frayed with weariness and worry and grief.

Where is the loss? my mother will ask. “You didn’t lose anything when he moved out—I did.” She will take a sip of coffee, casually turn the page of the Bon Appetit she reads, but her shoulders and the sharp line of her jaw will betray her. “You know, I wanted to be there too,” she will say quietly. “I would have come, but you said you didn’t want anyone . . .” The biopsy. She felt he had upstaged her, made the grand entrance, then disappeared. But don’t you understand? I will protest silently, this was all he had, the entrances and the exits. In our family drama, he was the actor with the fewest lines. So, yes, he wanted to make an impression and, yes, he practiced and, yes, he honed the element of surprise. And yes, it hurt you. But doesn’t it make sense? My mother will move from the table before I can speak, however. Angrily she will set her mug in the sink, then turn on the faucet too hard. “He always got to be the hero,” she will say. “He was always the good guy.”

I want to remind her that too often the good guy is a flat character; the hero is a myth. I think of the opening lines of The Odyssey— “This is the story of a man, one who was never at a loss. He had traveled far in the world . . .” and I think of my father wanting to be ordinary and not knowing how; I think of how much at a loss he must have been all those years and how we never knew it; and I think of that Saturday when I was three, that Saturday, which I recall only as a chiaroscuro of whites and black—the white sunlight and how it transformed the leaves of the maple to black patent leather, the white of my father’s undershirt, of the liquor boxes, of Stephen’s blond hair. I suspect my brother was not deceived, as I was, by all that brightness, because two decades later when his own marriage was unraveling, Stephen would howl at my mother in rage and grief, “You stole my father from me!” and it wasn’t the cry of the twenty-five-year-old man he was, but the cry of the five-year-old boy he had been.
I never blamed either parent for the divorce: they were impossibly young, I imagine they tried and, as I struggle now with my own failed marriages, I know that it is rarely the fault of one person. Still, I was shaken by my brother’s accusation. I sensed that he was right, that my father had disappeared into the brightness that day, that he had been stolen from us in ways I am only now beginning to understand.

It was that he had to knock, that he had to stand on the porch and wait to be let inside. Even in memory I often regard my father through a screen, a pane of glass; something must be shattered, it seems, before I can reach him. It was also the neat schedule into which we accommodated my father; it was how important time became once we had lost it. If he was running late, he phoned; if he came early, he phoned. Otherwise, we might not be ready; otherwise, he might interrupt. We went on being a family without him, after all, my mother and stepfather, our new baby brother.

Did we transform our father into a hero as a way to compensate? Did he transform himself? Or was it simply that none of us could bear the alternative—that he had failed? He hadn’t been able to make our mother happy—our beautiful mother who could twirl complicated patterns on the ice at Strawbridge Lake, who once sat with us on the porch and ate a whole batch of brownies right from the pan, who played the piano so well that listeners held their breath when they watched her. He hadn’t been able to make her happy, and she had found someone else.

“You’re rewriting history,” my mother will scoff. “Your father and I were good friends. And he was always welcome, Maribeth, you know that. How many dinners was he invited to? How many times did you come into the kitchen to find us talking and laughing about things that had nothing to do with you kids? Stop making him into a victim. He wasn’t one.” And she is right. He handed out the presents on Christmas morning, he made the toasts at graduations, he walked my sister and me down the aisle when we got married. I never missed my father, I’ve often said, and I meant this as a compliment—to him for always being there, to my mother and stepfather who included him. I was never torn on some holiday because I had to choose which parent to spend it with; I never felt guilty for loving my stepfather; my father loved him too.
Is this why we didn’t grieve, I wonder now. Is this why Stephen and I didn’t talk about our parents’ divorce—not once in all the years of growing up together? Was it that we really didn’t miss him? Or was it because we sensed, even at three and five years old, how desperately they needed for this to be okay: my father, the oldest son of eleven children, the role model in an Irish Catholic family from the Midwest, and my mother, the perfect daughter, a local beauty queen, a successful concert pianist, the sum of her parents’ hopes. Or did we—did I—insist all these years that our father’s leaving never mattered because to acknowledge that it did would have been to admit that something was wrong with us? As early as seventeen, after I broke up with a boy who loved me and whom I might or might not have loved—I’m not sure I knew what love was, am not sure I know what it is now—my mother told me, “You’ve got to stop running every time someone gets close to you, Maribeth, or you’re going to end up alone, just like your father.” But I insisted that it didn’t matter and that she was wrong, though in the years since, I have wondered about that boy because he did matter and he never knew it—and neither did I, until it was too late, and he was gone from my life.

Still, when it comes to my childhood, I want to insist: of course Stephen and I felt sadness when we were growing up. I want to frame my emotions like a photograph, as if what we felt all those years could be captured on film as easily as the gypsy Halloween costume I wore in the eighth grade or the Schwinn ten-speed I got one Christmas. I want proof; evidence. Something substantial, something I can trust. Of course, we missed him. But always there is a thumb-print across the image, and the picture is blurred. Didn’t we?

You see, I am unsure. We were like those patients that Oliver Sacks writes about in _An Anthropologist on Mars_, those patients who suffer trauma to the brain and are physically blind but don’t know it because the mind never registers this fact. It seems impossible; incomprehensible. How can they possibly not know they are blind? How do they function? But then I think of all those years when Stephen and I never knew we were mourning, never knew we had a reason to mourn. “Who was it who twisted us around like this?” asks Rilke in _The Duino Elegies_, “so that/ no matter what we do, we are in the posture of someone going away.”
Twenty-seven years after my father left, and with three broken marriages in our wake, I understand finally that my brother and I should have felt the impact of our father’s leaving much more than we did. Had we acknowledged the loss we felt when we said goodbye to him each Sunday night, had we admitted that sometimes we felt awkward talking to him on the phone, that as we got older it wasn’t as much fun to go to his apartment on weekends and be away from our friends, and that despite everything he did, the distance did matter—had we acknowledged this much, perhaps Stephen and I could have also acknowledged that the other losses in our lives—our failed marriages and our own failed friendship, years passing without us speaking or writing to each other—these distances have cost us too: we are good at shutting others out, my brother and I, we are good at closing doors.

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My father ran ultra-marathons when I was in high school. Again that conquest of miles. A twenty-four-hour race in Florida, a hundred-mile race somewhere in Arizona, sixty miles along a barren stretch of the Black Horse Pike in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. The race started in downtown Philadelphia and ended on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. I was with him, driving the car, stopping initially at every two miles to give him water or Gatorade, then at every one mile to give him a cool sponge to hold, a fresh pair of socks, a few sips of orange juice or a bite of chocolate. There were only twenty or thirty runners, and each ran alone, spread out along this shadeless two-lane road which had once been the main thoroughfare to the Jersey beaches.

I don’t remember much of the day, though it must have taken him eight or nine hours to complete the race. Even this I am unsure of. Perhaps it took longer, for the street lamps at the boardwalk’s edge were already lighted when he finished. Enormous lit-up ferris wheels whirled against the dark sky; the roar of the roller coaster drowned out the meager applause of the family members who stood wearily, patiently, at the finish line waiting for the runners. My father half-ran, half-limped, his thighs chafed and bloody, his eyes unfocused and blank. I heard a woman ask, “Why? Why would anyone do this?” Beyond us, the ocean was black, something we could hear rather than see.
I no longer recall the season or what the weather was like although it must have been hot because he became so dehydrated. What I do recall is how somewhere around forty miles or so, he screamed at me because I'd pulled over at 1.2 miles instead of 1.0. Crazy with rage and exhaustion—what the hell was I trying to do to him, God damn it, he needed water, he needed to count on me—he lay his elbows on the hood of the car and continued to rant, his voice dry and uncontrolled. I think of 12th century German lieder, of Irish women keening at a wake, of my brother howling in pain five years earlier, “You stole my father—” Ancient arias of sorrow, as if what goes unsaid in speech eventually dissolves either into song or crying, words like smashed bottles, the contents pouring into a single puddle of sound.

He cried that day because he was tired and he didn’t think he could run that distance and he understood, finally, that even if he did, even if he ran those sixty miles, nothing significant would change.

* 

There was a time not so long ago when people believed that the earth was flat and to travel too great a distance was to fall off the edge of the world. There was a time when “planes were called ships,” and “there was a reverence for flight because it was so dangerous. People lost themselves,” says the narrator in the novel, I am Amelia Earhart; “there was no safety.” Now, however, with the exception of some devastating catastrophe—an act of terrorism or some human error so great it seems unbelievable—as if it were our mistakes which have become incomprehensible rather than these miracles of flight—we do not revere travel. We take it for granted that planes fly at an average of 600 miles per hour, that we can travel from one end of the country to the other in less than half a day. We gain time, hours pulled out of the air like rabbits from a magician’s hat—or we lose it, minutes, hours, even days gone in a poof of smoke and an abracadabra!—but either way, we have come to believe, as Dorothy did in The Wizard of Oz, that we can go anywhere we want, and that getting there is no more complicated than clicking our heels together, closing our eyes, and saying three times, “There’s no place like home.”
This, of course, is the greatest irony, the greatest lie, of airports and of modern technology in general—e-mail modems, satellite education, the Internet: for a while, these things allow us to forget that distance is more than the space between two objects, distance is more than a calculation of miles. Distance is the measurement of loss.

\[\star\]

This week my father is in Peru. He does not know that my husband left, does not know that tomorrow I will sign a lease for a new apartment. Soon I will move, packing my books in liquor boxes. I'll still be nearby, I promise myself. I will be only a few miles from the home where my husband lives, I will phone him still, he will make me pizza, I will bake him the sugar-free pies he favors and, for a while, we will deceive ourselves: living in the same city, we will forget that it is a continent stretching between us.

In my father's family, there have been seven divorces. My mother is on her third marriage, as is my stepfather and, one day, if I want to take the risk again, it will be my third marriage too. Three. Such a tiny number and yet it towers over my life; it changes who I am. It matters.

In the bookstore last night, there were rows and rows of books about divorce and I stood next to a woman with dark hair and we paged through them and made a point of not looking at each other, though our arms brushed once as we reached for the same book. There was a handbook about divorce and a child's coloring book about divorce; the fourteen stages of divorce; how to find a good divorce lawyer; even The Creative Divorce.

In the cafe downstairs, a solo violinist played and people were laughing and talking, drinking espresso and eating raspberry scones. It was a Saturday night. I had forced myself to get dressed, to come to this store alone. I was glad for the woman next to me, glad too that we didn't talk, that we didn't exchange pleasantries or comment wryly on "what a bitch" divorce was, glad that we didn't trivialize—as so many of those book titles seemed to—what is, for me, the loss not only of a marriage but of a way of life and of a best friend, this husband of five years whom I greet formally at the door now, who shook my hand the
last time we parted because he didn’t know how to say goodbye—and he didn’t know how to not say it. In that moment when he took my hand, I understood better than the day he moved out how truly apart we were.

In *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Sacks says that distance is a perception that must be learned, and he talks of those who have lived in a rain forest or a jungle all their lives, how if they go to open land, see mountains in the distance, they may reach out to touch those mountains and feel surprise to grasp only air. This year, I will become that rain-forest inhabitant alone in open surroundings, and I will learn in my heart what I am only now apprehending in my head—that distance is not always conquerable. This, of course, is the lesson my father worked so hard to protect us from all those years as he flew back and forth across our childhoods, his plane a silver needle trying singlehandedly to stitch together the enormous hole in our lives.