

A SMALL NEW LIFE

When I tell my friend, Anne, about the divorce, she invites me to come visit her in Boulder, Montana. I can stay at Boulder Hot Springs, the 100- year-old hotel she's remodeling and turning into a Bed and Breakfast, soak in the mineral waters, take time in nature, paint, wait for my divorce to be final and figure out what to do next. She tells me Montana is like the Wild West, a great place to start over. Boulder is a tiny town, home of a tavern called "The Lounge," where in 1986 two drugged-up teenage boys shot and killed the parents of actor Patrick Duffy.

I've never been to Montana and from Anne's description, except for soaking in the mineral waters, have no desire to go. But I don't have any other invitations and I have to get out of Laguna Beach. I worry about my health; I have heart palpitations, pain and nausea in my stomach, all of which escalates when I hear about the sightings of my husband around town with his girlfriend: at the Zinc Café, Fahrenheit 451 bookstore, where five of my paintings hang (did he point them out to her?), the Volvo dealership looking at new cars, walking the boardwalk at the beach and Nordstrom, where my friends Julie and Vince saw them trying to hide behind the Lancôme perfume counter. Before me, my husband knew nothing about perfume.

When I tell him I know about his girlfriend he says, "I don't know what I'm doing," as if he's talking to himself. He doesn't look at me. He sits at the dining table, leans way back on the chair legs with a guilty look, half smiling. I want him to fall backwards.

I'm not sure if he was already fucking Bettina when he told me he wanted a divorce. It might have been after because that's when he started jogging again, which he hasn't done in ten

years, and sunning himself from a lounge chair on the front deck of the house we just remodeled, wearing a faded black Speedo bathing suit. His skin is too sensitive for sunbathing. He sweats easily like pale skinned people from the north who have rarely been tan. But now it's important to force some color into his skin, especially the white mark on his left ring finger.

I decide to give up the house. My attorney told me not to leave until I knew whether or not I wanted to keep it. Squatter's rights or something. We've been living in separate bedrooms for six months. I stay in my room until he leaves for work in the morning, if he comes home at all.

At night, I shove a beach towel in the space between the floor and the door; sleep with a box fan blowing on high, locked inside what used to be our bedroom. The towel and the noisy fan blot out sounds so I won't stay awake all night waiting and listening for him to come home. I don't know until morning whether he's spent the night with Bettina.

If he does come home, I wait in my room with the door locked until he leaves for work. He's raged before, never hit me but I've started to feel afraid of him. I can sense his whole body wanting to be rid of me. If he gets close enough, he might strike out with his hands, as unbendable as wooden shoes, dense from years of Rolfing people. The night he told me he wanted a divorce, he said if he'd paid attention to his intuition he never would have married me.

One morning, missing him, I tiptoe down the hall, watch him get dressed through a crack in the door. His strong stocky legs stand out from beneath his shirt. His black bikini underwear peeks out from the bottom of his shirttail. He looks toward the door and calls out, "Is that you? What are you doing?"

I hurry back down the hallway. When I think he's left the house, I go out to the living room. He startles me, says, "Hi, honey," just like he's said every morning since we've been

together. He's forgotten what's happening. "Oh, sorry." He grabs his briefcase and walks out the front door.

I pack what I can fit in the Toyota, the newer car, which will be mine when the divorce is final. The burgundy interior still has that new smell. He had it hand washed every week and waxed every two months.

The night before I leave, we say good-bye standing behind the chairs at the Mexican pine dining table we just bought. He hands me receipts for some of the jewelry he gave me: the gold charms, the marcasite watch, the Navajo earrings, the aquamarine and diamond heart shaped ring and the wedding band from Tiffany's. He says he has fifteen minutes before he has to leave for a basketball game. He wishes me the best of everything, tells me he loves me "in a way," and wants to hug me. I shake my head; feel my collarbone sink into my chest. He puts his right hand out as if he's completing a business deal.

November is a terrible time of year for someone like me to move to a place like Montana, where I will learn that car engines crack if you don't heat them up, cats can freeze to death in front of your eyes and no matter how many layers you wear or how much you turn up the heat, most nights you have to take a hot bath to get your bones warm enough to go to sleep. I am unfamiliar with snow that doesn't stop at picturesque, below-zero temperatures and ice that doesn't melt for weeks at a time. I've never even snow skied.

I drive into the vast, sparsely populated, forbidding land with its big sky of droopy, tired looking clouds and highway sign directions for gun and quilt shows, and the "Merry Widow," "Free Enterprise" and "Lone Tree" health mines claiming that sitting eighty-five feet under

ground breathing radon gas will cure ailments ranging from tennis elbow to lupus. The idea of gassing one's self on purpose reminds me of the occasional, and since the break up of my marriage more frequent, image I have of putting my head in an oven a la Sylvia Plath. I wonder if coming to Montana is a mistake.

Boulder Hot Springs looks like an abandoned convent where ghosts and vampires might hang out. In the 1800's it housed a group of prostitutes who serviced Teddy Roosevelt and other politicians of the day. They came to Boulder to hunt, drink and soak in the mineral waters. A dilapidated bar still has liquor bottles from that time lined up on shelves in front of a cracked gold leaf mirror.

Business is better than Anne expected so I have to stay on the second floor of the unrenovated west wing, which has no heat and no working bathroom. She puts thick quilts on the walls to make the room warmer. I sleep in long underwear, two pairs of flannel pajamas, wool socks, gloves and a knit cap pulled over my ears. Sometimes the temperature drops to 30 below. The closest bathroom is down two flights of stairs and a long hallway. Anne provides a large mouth thermos in case I have to pee in the middle of the night.

Because of a wiring fluke, the lights in the hallway of the west wing work and stay on all the time. A bright rectangle of yellow shines around my bedroom door and reflects itself in the black sky outside my window. I keep thinking if that door in the sky would open, I'd find an image of my future.

Anne, a former therapist, has created an alternative to traditional psychotherapy. She doesn't believe in anti-depressants or in the interpretations made by therapists about what their client's experience. She calls her system Living in Process and it involves peer support, allowing feelings to come up and processing them through the body.

One day I hear sobbing, wailing and screaming. I go downstairs to the “process room,” an old ballroom filled with mattresses on the floor and anchored to the walls. About fifteen people are on the mats, “having their feelings,” as Anne says. She tells me they are her trainees. They’ve just arrived for two weeks of instruction, learning her unconventional method of how to deal with their emotional pain. “Abstinence from all addictions is a prerequisite,” she says. It looks and sounds something like what I imagine Primal Therapy to be.

“What about the bed and breakfast guests?” I say.

“The place is big enough that they never hear a thing. I bought it as a B&B and a training center. Do you want to try the deep process work?”

I realize this is the real reason Anne invited me here. I’ve wanted to let myself fall apart for as long as I can remember, but until now haven’t been in the right environment. With the break up of my ten-year marriage, I feel triggered all the time, constantly trying to choke down hundreds of memories. So I say yes. Everyday, from then on, I collapse on a mat while someone sits with me. I sob so deeply I can hear my bones creak. I make loud growling sounds, pound on stacked up pillows until my knuckles bleed. Invariably, I start out screaming about my husband’s betrayal and in a few minutes my mother’s abandonment shoots through me. Day by day, I process my childhood trauma, my marriage, divorce and everything in between.

I grieve, too much I think, but I’m on a roll, for the clapboard Laguna beach house with ocean views that I remodeled from a trashed half way house for drug addicts; the new kitchen I designed on a computer at Home Depot; the three different ceramic knobs I obsessed about and the one I finally chose for the new glass and blond wood cabinets; the week-long fight I’d won,

that now seems so futile, about spending money for Berber carpeting, plantation blinds and Malibu lights for the walkway.

We argued about money from the beginning. We sat in the car outside in the parking lot of a grocery store, sometimes for hours, before we went in to shop, fighting about how much money to spend. I tried to tell myself we were balancing each other out, coming to some kind of middle ground, so we could stay together. I had to convince him to throw out the salmon colored suit he wore to his cousin's wedding twenty years ago; and I told him if he wanted to be successful in Orange County he had to stop Rolfing people from the back bedroom, dressed in yoga pants and old t-shirts, rent an office and wear more conservative clothes. I was right about that.

Eventually, outside the market, we'd come to an agreement somewhere between filet mignon and a can of black beans.

There are days of emotional calm when I don't feel triggered and I can see that the marriage was doomed from the start. I'd insisted on it, afraid that at thirty-seven I was getting too old to continue just living with someone. We got married at the Orange County courthouse and didn't tell our families. Neither of us could imagine his holocaust survivor relatives who spoke Yiddish with suspicious looks when I was around, and my much-divorced highly critical wasp mother who drank too much, in the same room together. So, we lifted our faces up to the thin gray haired court clerk dressed in a lime green pantsuit and said our vows, holding hands on top of the beige Formica countertop while my married friends Nicole and Don looked on. Afterwards, we had a champagne brunch at an Italian restaurant in Newport Beach that I can't remember the name of. We had no money for a honeymoon. He went back to work the next day.

Then I break down again remembering our first date at Zeno's pizza parlor where I felt attracted but embarrassed to be seen with him, three inches shorter than I. So shallow of me, I thought. As time went on, I got over it. I decided his stocky build made him seem taller. He called me every day from work to tell me he loved me. He cared whether or not I had an orgasm. (Would I ever have sex again?) My body felt safe under his touch. He stopped smoking when I did to make it easier for me. He knew everything about California wine and he made Zabaglione and Apple Tarte Tatin from scratch. And even though he never had a Christmas tree until he met me, he strung the lights more aesthetically than any Christian I ever knew. No one before him had called me sweetie and honey, except my grandmother. He taught me how to read maps, buy electronics and suck the meat out of chicken bones. On my birthdays he'd give me a gift and then secretly hide another somewhere in the house. I'd discover it later and be taken by surprise, like a child finding unsuspected evidence of love. I wonder if he does the same with Bettina now.

One day, after six months at the Hot Springs for six months, the processing stops. The well of unresolved feelings is empty. Anne said that would happen. I feel unburdened. I look ten years younger and I no longer want him back.

I know I'll leave Montana, but I don't know where to go. Until I decide, I need a place to live.

I move to a sprawling split-level, three-bedroom house on Jerome Place in Helena. The western artist who lived and died here painted downstairs in the red brick basement. The neighbor in back, whom I meet one morning taking out the trash, tells me Mr. Dickenson was a hell of an artist, but never thanked anyone for anything. Then he recounts all the things he and

the other neighbors did for him over the years. He seems especially resentful about the meals he and his wife cooked and delivered to the grieving widower after Mrs. Dickenson passed away.

The couple I rent the house from bought it after Mr. Dickenson died. Dave is a journalist for the *Independent Record*, the local newspaper, and Crystal runs an antique store. She asks if I have anything antique or vintage from my divorce to put on consignment.

I set up a studio in Mr. Dickenson's windowless basement and start to work on a painting about my divorce, the final piece for a triptych, which will depict three stages of my relationship. I finished two of them at the Hot Springs. The first one, called "Dollin," is a collage made from Krazy Kat comics in the shape of a man and woman embracing. Before we were married, my husband read Krazy Kat comics to me. He patted the shabby futon in his studio apartment signaling me to sit next to him. Then he read while running his sturdy thick finger along the strips. Some were drawn in black and white; others were painted in George Harriman's desert palette of yellow ochre, red oxide, sandy pink and turquoise, where Krazy, Ignatz Mouse and Offissa Pupp acted out their love triangle in the Desierto Pintada of Coconino County, Arizona. Every once in a while he looked up and said, "Amazing!" and kissed me on the cheek.

The second piece I titled "La Boda de la Guera y el Judio." (The Wedding of the Blonde and the Jew) It sounded better in Spanish. I cut down our actual wedding clothes: his shirt, which had become a pajama top for me, and part of my dress. I glued them onto wood in the shape of bodies, and made white masks for heads, painted their faces, covered one with a white veil. I finished this piece in just a few hours and didn't stand back to look at it until the end. It turned out to be more disturbing than I imagined. The man had taken on a look of terror and the woman, underneath the lace, a sad smile of resignation.

I work on the third piece for two weeks, but end up painting over murky colors and nebulous images over and over again. I thought Mr. Dickenson's vibes, minus the Western art aesthetic, would help. Maybe I don't have enough distance yet.

I like the yard, but it's too big for me to take care of. There are lilac bushes, a spruce and a pine tree in front and beautiful pear and apple trees in back. I assumed Dave and Crystal would pay for a gardener but they didn't want to spend the money. I hire a teenage boy to mow but I have to water the front and back two or three times a week. It takes hours to move the sprinkler around so it hits all sections of the grass evenly. There are still brown spots. It's a thankless job. My yard is the worst on the block. I can't keep up with the neighbors who all look to be around seventy. They must be retired government workers because those are the only decent jobs in Helena. They live for their lawns. They mow, water, trim, plant flowers and pull weeds almost every day. Most native Montanans are from Norwegian stock and they love hard work. It seems the harder something is, the more alive they feel. I do not relate.

In May, tiny pink blossoms scatter through the apple trees. Most days it's sunny, but not that warm. In the beginning of the month it snowed, which saved me two weeks of watering. It's never hot enough to sunbathe. I miss that.

Occasionally, in the early morning, two or more deer come to the front yard. They lie down under the pine tree like dogs and sometimes come right up to the window and look me straight in the eye. The neighbors are curious about me too: a woman in her forties living alone in a three-bedroom house on a street with retired couples. The neighborhood streets are hilly. It is springtime and I walk an hour up and down them every day. I can feel eyes at the windows watching me.

A woman from across the street comes to the front door one day. Standing as tall as my breasts, she hands me a plate of little yellow cupcakes to welcome me to the neighborhood. “To match the color of your house. They’re made from scratch,” she says. I know I should invite her in, tell her all about myself, but I don’t. I say thank you, take the cupcakes and close the door. Later I notice the plate isn’t paper. I have to return it and face another opportunity to reveal myself.

I couldn’t tell the woman my plans because I don’t have any. I sign up for a computer class, thinking I ought to focus on learning marketable skills instead of painting. I can’t concentrate. The class is filled with homeless people and women, shaky from recent withdrawal, who live at a half way house hoping to get a job and a place of their own. I don’t go back.

Allowing my husband to support me financially, so I could do art, was a mistake. I felt increasingly obliged to pay up, be cheerful when I wasn’t and have sex when I didn’t want to. And though I sold many art pieces over the years, my income was not consistent.

Now, I work on my divorce painting and wait for a sign of where to go next. I can’t take another winter here. Snow is not beautiful to me. When stark whiteness covers the ground it means ice. I am claustrophobic. Being cooped up for days on end waiting for it to melt makes me anxious. The men here like to drive their trucks on ice. I see pairs of them in the front seat laughing as they swerve and slip on the roads. There are usually one or two large dogs sitting behind them, as if they are wives, and a bleeding wide-eyed deer, dead or dying in the flatbed.

For years, I wanted to live in LA, a better place for an artist, but my husband wouldn’t move. Now, I’m forty-eight. I feel too old to start over in a big city. Laguna Beach is the least

conservative place in Orange County. There are gay people and a few Democrats, but when I think of the Sawdust Festival of bad art, three million tourists a year, countless galleries chock full of seascapes and blown glass ocean animals and the potential to be triggered again by memories of my husband, I can't imagine moving back there.

But I have to go one more time to retrieve what I left behind, my artwork and half the household goods. My attorney talks to my husband but he won't send my things. She says to pick a day to move and she'll arrange it so he isn't at the house.

Laura is the only woman of the seven lawyers I interviewed. I dressed up for every appointment, high on too much coffee, stopped for doughnuts, ate several while I found the offices and parked the car. I wondered if I still had the knack to attract a man so I tried flirting with the attorneys. I got no response except from the Alcoholics Anonymous guy with big, blown dry, sprayed hair that stuck up several inches from his head, dressed in a slippery looking paisley gray printed shirt, pants riding high on his waist and ending above his ankles. I chose Laura and wondered if I'd ever have another relationship.

The jasmine bush and the six-foot tall stalks of sunflowers my sculptor friend, Gerard, and I planted during the remodel have shriveled. We carefully wrapped the almost dead jasmine bush around the gray wooden fence hoping it would revive itself if it had room to spread out. Gerard planted Mexican Sage, ice plants for ground cover and to help with erosion. The car noise on Bluebird Canyon Drive has increased. When we first moved in, I remember thinking there was too much traffic to attract many birds. Sometimes they came early in the morning, but in the year I lived here I never saw one single bluebird.

My paintings are stacked in groups against the walls in the living room. Maps of Orange County, secured with pushpins, now hang in place of my art. There's champagne in the refrigerator, jars of instant coffee with vanilla flavoring on the kitchen counter along with a row of knives neatly laid out: evidently what he considers my half. Mold in the back closet has grown and eaten my grandmother's vintage mink hat and there's a smell of cheap body lotion in the bedroom.

There's a photo of a woman on the dresser. I'm sure it's Bettina. She's standing in front of "Every Bloom' in Thing," her flower stand, set up in the courtyard of his office building. That explains why, toward the end, he suddenly started bringing home so many flowers. She looks ten years younger than I. She's definitely not in menopause, as am I. Her mouth is toothy and she has a horsy face. Her gums show in the smiling picture. Her head is cocked in a not smart way. I imagine the flower girl giving him as many blowjobs as he wants and sitting with him through bad movies. I find receipts from the Quail Ridge Resort in Sedona where he's taken her for a weekend---the same place we stayed for our anniversary two years before. I look through his closet at the suits and shoes I picked out, the cowboy hat from Santa Fe. I smell his pale blue lightly starched shirts.

I tell the movers what to pack. I find a box of photos I didn't have time to go through before I left. I make sure to leave him some particularly good ones of me. I make a pile that were taken at his father's eightieth birthday party. I wore a revealing jade green wool dress. My nails were painted with alternating pink and lime colored polish. I leave the ones he took of me in Idyllwild sitting under the pine trees outside Kathie's Café wearing bright red lipstick and big black sunglasses, looking like a celebrity. I'm sure he'll be sorry. I guess I have more to process when I get back to Montana. There's a picture of him at the same café, looking striking with his

strong square jaw in three quarter profile. There's an almost imperceptible look of resentment in his eyes that I hadn't noticed before.

I wonder what Bettina does about the snoring. I tried sound machines, noisy fans, waking him up every time he woke me up. He ended up sleeping all over the house; on the couch in the living room, on a foam pad in the hallway, on the thin mattress sofa bed in the den off the kitchen, listening to spinning refrigerator sounds, which reminded him of having to sleep on a cot in the kitchen as a child in Germany after the war.

I remember the first time his hand felt oppressive and controlling on my thigh as he drove in that aggressive annoying way. He'd been ignoring me, working sixteen hours a day, but pretending to be attentive. I moved his hand, said it was too hot. He tried again. I crossed my leg away from him. Eventually, he stopped reaching over.

He'll be coming home soon. He told Laura he'd stay away until eight. Before I go, I walk through each room trying to remember love, however fractured.

I look in the bathroom mirror and think of him bent over the sink, brushing his teeth after a shower, light reddish brown freckles dotting the tops of his hands. His cuticles are thick. He peels them sometimes. I remember how I put my arms around his naked waist, smelled the side of his neck just behind his ear, tugged the damp curls from the back of his scalp with my red painted nails and then touched him.

I took my wedding ring off before I left for Montana. Sometimes there's still a phantom gold band from Tiffany's, inscribed with "Sweetie," making an ache in my finger. I feel it now quivering with regret as I leave the keys on the kitchen counter.

That night I splurge, spend the night at the Surf and Sand resort, down the street. I stay awake all night with the windows open, smelling the ocean.

Back in Montana, I wait for my things to arrive. I still don't know where to go but in preparation, I have garage sales every weekend. I sell my jewelry, scarves and dresses, drawings and paintings, for too little money, and my record collection. Men ask me where the guns and ammo are. "Any knives?" "No," I say. "Tools?" I shake my head. "I guess your husband wouldn't let you bring those out."

I finish the third part of the triptych. It's a collage made of things from the marriage; shards of dishes, broken from the move, ten years worth of greeting cards, cut up sections of clothing and jewelry, mostly earrings. I paint over it in white acrylic, making a textured foundation for the barely visible markings, symbols, half letters and shapes that I draw on top in oil stick, messages from the future emerging from what has been.

I title the piece "Private Graffiti" and sell it to a couple that come to my final garage sale. They say they collect art and are on the board of directors at the Holter Museum.

I take this as a sign and, soon after, on a day when thunder cracks, lightening flashes across the sky, the neighbor's dog jumps three feet and snow is predicted for the first week of September, I know it's time to go.

The day I leave, a group of deer gathers in the yard. They watch me as I drive away, my car piled high with my small new life. I go south, stop in Las Vegas, and spend the night at the Sahara where the three surviving Platters are singing in the lounge. I eat a steak dinner for \$7.95. The next day, Tom Wait sings "Amazing Grace" on the radio as I hit LA from the 60 freeway.