

The SUN

ISSUE 450



Personal. Political. Provocative. Ad-free.

SELECTIONS FROM THE ARCHIVES SEPTEMBER 2002 | ISSUE 321

The Love Of My Life

by Cheryl Strayed



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ORDER THIS ISSUE

CHERYL STRAYED is the author of the novel *Torch* (Houghton Mifflin). Her work appeared in *Best New American Voices 2003* (Harvest Books) and *Best American Essays 2003* (Houghton Mifflin). She lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and two children.

www.cherylstrayed.com

THE FIRST TIME I cheated on my husband, my mother had been dead for exactly one week. I was in a cafe in Minneapolis watching a man. He watched me back. He was slightly pudgy, with jet-black hair and skin so white it looked as if he'd powdered it. He stood and walked to my table and sat down without asking. He wanted to know if I had a cat. I folded my hands on the table, steadying myself; I was shaking, nervous at what I would do. I was raw, fragile, vicious with grief. I would do anything.

"Yes," I said.

"I thought so," he said slowly. He didn't take his eyes off me. I rolled the rings around on my fingers. I was wearing two wedding bands, my own and my mother's. I'd taken hers off her hand after she died. It was nothing fancy: sterling silver, thick and braided.

<http://thesunmagazine.org/archives/2192?print=all>

6/17/2013

“You look like the kind of girl who has a cat.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. He just kept looking at me steadily, as if he knew everything about me, as if he owned me. I felt distinctly that he might be a murderer.

“Are you mature?” he asked intently.

I didn’t know what he meant. I still don’t. I told him that I was.

“Well then prove it and walk down the street with me.”

We left the cafe, his hand on my arm. I had monstrous bruises on my knees from how I’d fallen on them after I walked into my mother’s hospital room and first saw her dead. He liked these. He said he’d been admiring them from across the room. They were what had drawn him to me. Also, he liked my boots. He thought I looked intriguing. He thought I looked mature. I was twenty-two. He was older, possibly thirty. I didn’t ask his name; he didn’t ask mine. I walked with him to a parking lot behind a building. He stopped and pressed me against a brick wall and kissed me, but then he wasn’t kissing me. He was biting me. He bit my lips so hard I screamed.

“You lying cunt,” he whispered into my ear. “You’re not mature.” He flung me away from him and left.

I stood, unmoving, stunned. The inside of my mouth began to bleed softly. Tears filled my eyes. *I want my mother*, I thought. *My mother is dead*. I thought this every hour of every day for a very long time: *I want my mother. My mother is dead*.

It was only a kiss, and barely that, but it was, anyway, a crossing. When I was a child I witnessed a leaf unfurl in a single motion. One second it was a fist, the next an open hand. I never forgot it, seeing so much happen so fast. And this was like that — the end of one thing, the beginning of another: my life as a slut.

WHEN MY MOTHER was diagnosed with cancer, my husband Mark and I took an unspoken sexual hiatus. When she died seven weeks later, I couldn’t bear for Mark to touch me. His hands on my body made me weep. He went down on me in the gentlest of ways. He didn’t expect anything in return. He didn’t make me feel that I had to come. I would soak in a hot bath, and he would lean into it to touch me. He wanted to make me feel good, better. He loved me, and he had loved my mother. Mark and I were an insanely young, insanely happy, insanely in-love married couple. He wanted to help. *No, no, no*, I said, but then sometimes I relented. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. I breathed deep and attempted to fake it. I rolled over on my stomach so I wouldn’t have to look at him. He fucked me and I sobbed uncontrollably.

“Keep going,” I said to him. “Just finish.” But he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. He loved me. Which was mysteriously, unfortunately, precisely the problem.

I wanted my mother.

We aren’t supposed to want our mothers that way, with the pining intensity of sexual love, but I did, and if I couldn’t have her, I couldn’t have anything. Most of all I couldn’t have pleasure, not even for a moment. I was bereft, in agony, destroyed over her death. To experience sexual joy, it seemed, would have been to negate that reality. And more, it would have been to betray my mother, to be disloyal to the person she had been to me: my hero, a single mother after she bravely left an unhealthy relationship with my father when I was five. She remarried when I was eleven. My stepfather had loved her and been a good husband to her for ten years, but shortly after she died, he’d fallen in love with someone else. His new girlfriend and her two daughters moved into my mother’s house, took her photos off the walls, erased her. I needed my stepfather to be the kind of man who would suffer for my mother, unable to go on, who would carry a torch. And if he wouldn’t do it, I would.

WE ARE NOT allowed this. We are allowed to be deeply into basketball, or Buddhism, or *Star Trek*, or jazz, but we are not allowed to be deeply sad. Grief is a thing that we are encouraged to “let go of,” to “move on from,” and we are told specifically how this should be done. Countless well-intentioned friends, distant family members, hospital workers, and strangers I met at parties recited the famous five stages of grief to me: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I was alarmed by how many people knew them, how deeply this single definition of the

grieving process had permeated our cultural consciousness. Not only was I supposed to feel these five things, I was meant to feel them in that order and for a prescribed amount of time.

I did not deny. I did not get angry. I didn't bargain, become depressed, or accept. I fucked. I sucked. Not my husband, but people I hardly knew, and in that I found a glimmer of relief. The people I messed around with did not have names; they had titles: the Prematurely Graying Wilderness Guide, the Technically Still a Virgin Mexican Teenager, the Formerly Gay Organic Farmer, the Quietly Perverse Poet, the Failing but Still Trying Massage Therapist, the Terribly Large Texas Bull Rider, the Recently Unemployed Graduate of Juilliard, the Actually Pretty Famous Drummer Guy. Most of these people were men; some were women. With them, I was not in mourning; I wasn't even me. I was happy and sexy and impetuous and fun. I was wild and enigmatic and terrifically good in bed. I didn't care about them or have orgasms. We didn't have heart-to-heart talks. I asked them questions about their lives, and they told me everything and asked few questions in return; they knew nothing about me. Because of this, most of them believed they were falling instantly, madly in love with me.

I did what I did with these people, and then I returned home to Mark, weak-kneed and wet, bleary-eyed and elated. *I'm alive*, I thought in that giddy, post-sex daze. *My mother's death has taught me to live each day as if it were my last*, I said to myself, latching onto the nearest cliché, and the one least true. I didn't stop to think: What if it *had* been my last day? Did I wish to be sucking the cock of an Actually Pretty Famous Drummer Guy? I didn't think to ask that because I didn't want to think. When I did think, I thought, *I cannot continue to live without my mother*.

I lied — sometimes to the people I messed around with (some of them, if they'd known I was married, would not have wanted to mess around with me), but mostly to Mark. I was not proud of myself. I was in love with him and wanted to be faithful to him and wanted to want to have sex with him, but something in me wouldn't let me do it. We got into the habit of fucking in the middle of the night, both of us waking from a sound sleep to the reality of our bodies wet and hard and in the act. The sex lasted about thirty seconds, and we would almost always both come. It was intensely hot and strange and surreal and darkly funny and ultimately depressing. We never knew who started it. Neither of us recalled waking, reaching for each other. It was a shard of passion, and we held on to it. For a while it got us through.

WE LIKE TO say how things are, perhaps because we hope that's how they might actually be. We attempt to name, identify, and define the most mysterious of matters: sex, love, marriage, monogamy, infidelity, death, loss, grief. We want these things to have an order, an internal logic, and we also want them to be connected to one another. We want it to be true that if we cheat on our spouse, it means we no longer want to be married to him or her. We want it to be true that if someone we love dies, we simply have to pass through a series of phases, like an emotional obstacle course from which we will emerge happy and content, unharmed and unchanged.

After my mother died, everyone I knew wanted to tell me either about the worst breakup they'd had or all the people they'd known who'd died. I listened to a long, traumatic story about a girlfriend who suddenly moved to Ohio, and to stories of grandfathers and old friends and people who lived down the block who were no longer among us. Rarely was this helpful.

Occasionally I came across people who'd had the experience of losing someone whose death made them think, *I cannot continue to live*. I recognized these people: their postures, where they rested their eyes as they spoke, the expressions they let onto their faces and the ones they kept off. These people consoled me beyond measure. I felt profoundly connected to them, as if we were a tribe.

It's surprising how relatively few of them there were. People don't die anymore, not the way they used to. Children survive childhood; women, the labors of birth; men, their work. We survive influenza and infection, cancer and heart attacks. We keep living on and on: 80, 90, 103. We live younger, too; frightfully premature babies are cloistered and coddled and shepherded through. My mother lived to the age of forty-five and never lost anyone who was truly beloved to her. Of course, she knew many people who died, but none who made her wake to the thought: *I cannot continue to live*.

And there is a difference. Dying is not your girlfriend moving to Ohio. Grief is not the day after your neighbor's funeral, when you felt extremely blue. It is impolite to make this distinction. We act as if all losses are equal. It is un-American to behave otherwise: we live in a democracy of sorrow. Every emotion felt is validated and judged to be as true as any other.

But what does this do to us: this refusal to quantify love, loss, grief? Jewish tradition states that one is considered a mourner when one of eight people dies: father, mother, sister, brother, husband, wife, son, or daughter. This

definition doesn't fulfill the needs of today's diverse and far-flung affections; indeed, it probably never did. It leaves out the step-relations, the long-term lovers, the chosen family of a tight circle of friends; and it includes the blood relations we perhaps never honestly loved. But its intentions are true. And, undeniably, for most of us that list of eight does come awfully close. We love and care for oodles of people, but only a few of them, if they died, would make us believe we could not continue to live. Imagine if there were a boat upon which you could put only four people, and everyone else known and beloved to you would then cease to exist. Who would you put on that boat? It would be painful, but how quickly you would decide: *You and you and you and you, get in. The rest of you, goodbye.*

For years, I was haunted by the idea of this imaginary boat of life; by the desire to exchange my mother's fate for one of the many living people I knew. I would be sitting across the table from a dear friend. I loved her, him, each one of these people. Some I said I loved like family. But I would look at them and think, *Why couldn't it have been you who died instead? You, goodbye.*

I DIDN'T OFTEN sleep with Mark, but I slept beside him, or tried to. I dreamed incessantly about my mother. There was a theme. Two or three times a week she made me kill her. She commanded me to do it, and I sobbed and got down on my knees, begging her not to make me, but she would not relent. In each dream, like a good daughter, I ultimately complied. I tied her to a tree in our front yard, poured gasoline over her head, and lit her on fire. I made her run down the dirt road that passed by the house where I'd grown up, and I ran her over with my truck; I dragged her body, caught on a jagged piece of metal underneath, until it came loose, and then I put my truck in reverse and ran her over again. I took a miniature baseball bat and beat her to death with it. I forced her into a hole I'd dug and kicked dirt and stones on top of her and buried her alive. These dreams were not surreal. They took place in the plain light of day. They were the documentary films of my subconscious and felt as real to me as life. My truck was really my truck; our front yard was our actual front yard; the miniature baseball bat sat in our closet among the umbrellas. I didn't wake from these dreams crying; I woke shrieking. Mark grabbed me and held me. He wetted a washcloth with cool water and put it over my face. These dreams went on for months, years, and I couldn't shake them. I also couldn't shake my infidelities. I couldn't shake my grief.

What was there to do with me? What did those around me do? They did what I would have done — what we all do when faced with the prospect of someone else's sorrow: they tried to talk me out of it, neutralize it, tamp it down, make it relative and therefore not so bad. We narrate our own lesser stories of loss in an attempt to demonstrate that the sufferer is not really so alone. We make grossly inexact comparisons and hope that they will do. In short, we insist on ignoring the precise nature of deep loss because there is nothing we can do to change it, and by doing so we strip it of its meaning, its weight, its own fiercely original power.

THE FIRST PERSON I knew who died was a casual friend of my mother's named Barb. Barb was in her early thirties, and I was ten. Her hair was brown and shoulder length, her skin clear and smooth as a bar of soap. She had the kind of tall body that made you acutely aware of the presence of its bones: a long, knobby nose; wide, thin hips; a jaw too pointed to be considered beautiful. Barb got into her car and started the engine. Her car was parked in a garage and all the doors were closed and she had stuffed a Minnesota Vikings cap into the exhaust pipe. My mother explained this to me in detail: the Vikings hat, the sitting in the car with the garage door closed on purpose. I was more curious than sad. But in the months that followed, I thought of Barb often. I came to care for her. I nurtured an inflated sense of my connection to her.

Recently, another acquaintance of mine died. He was beautiful and young and free-spirited and one hell of a painter. He went hiking one day on the Oregon coast and was never seen again. Over the course of my life, I have known other people who've died. Some of them have died the way we hoped they would — old, content, at their time; others, the way we hoped they wouldn't — by murder or suicide, in accidents, or too young of illnesses. The deaths of those people made me sad, afraid, and angry; they made me question the fairness of the world, the existence of God, and the nature of my own existence. But they did not make me suffer. They did not make me think, *I cannot continue to live*. In fact, in their deaths I felt more deeply connected to them, not because I grieved them, but because I wanted to attach myself to what is interesting. It is interesting to be in a Chinese restaurant and see a poster of the smiling face of an acquaintance, who is one hell of a painter, plastered on the front door. It is interesting to be able to say, *I know him*, to feel a part of something important and awful and big. The more connections like this we have, the more interesting we are.

THERE WAS NOTHING interesting to me about my mother's death. I did not want to attach myself to it. It was her life that I clung to, her very, very interesting life. When she died, she was about to graduate from college, and so was I.

We had started together. Her college was in Duluth, mine in Minneapolis. After a lifetime of struggle and sacrifice, my mother was coming into her own. She wanted to major in six subjects, but the school wouldn't let her, so she settled on two.

My mother had become pregnant when she was nineteen and immediately married my father, a steelworker in western Pennsylvania when the steel plants were shutting down; a coal miner's son born about the time that the coal was running out. After three children and nine years of misery, my mother left him. My father had recently moved us to a small town near Minneapolis in pursuit of a job prospect. When they divorced, he went back to Pennsylvania, but my mother stayed. She worked as a waitress and in a factory that made small plastic containers that would eventually hold toxic liquids. We lived in apartment complexes full of single mothers whose children sat on the edges of grocery-store parking lots. We received free government cheese and powdered milk, food stamps and welfare checks.

After a few years, my mother met my stepfather, and when he fell off a roof on the job and hurt his back, they took the twelve-thousand-dollar settlement and spent every penny on forty acres of land in northern Minnesota. There was no house; no one had ever had a house on this land. My stepfather built a one-room tar-paper shack, and we lived in it while he and my mother built us a house from scrap wood and trees they cut down with the help of my brother, my sister, and me. We moved into the new house on Halloween night. We didn't have electricity or running water or a phone or an indoor toilet. Years passed, and my mother was happy — happier than she'd ever been — but still, she hungered for more.

Just before she died, she was thinking about becoming a costume designer, or a professor of history. She was profoundly interested in the American pioneers, the consciousness of animals, and the murders of women believed to be witches. She was looking into graduate school, though she feared that she was too old. She couldn't believe, really, that she was even getting a degree. I'd had to convince her to go to college. She'd always read books but thought that she was basically stupid. To prepare, she shadowed me during my senior year of high school, doing all the homework that I was assigned. She photocopied my assignment sheets, wrote the papers I had to write, read the books. I graded her work, using my teacher's marks as a guide. My mother was a shaky student at best.

She went to college and earned straight A's.

SHE DIED ON a Monday during spring break of our senior year. After her funeral, I immediately went back to school because she had begged me to do so. It was the beginning of a new quarter. In most of my classes, we were asked to introduce ourselves and say what we had done over the break. "My name is Cheryl," I said. "I went to Mexico."

I lied not to protect myself, but because it would have been rude not to. To express loss on that level is to cross a boundary, to violate personal space, to impose emotion in a nonemotional place.

We did not always treat grief this way. Nearly every culture has a history, and some still have a practice, of mourning rituals, many of which involve changes in the dress or appearance of those in grief. The wearing of black clothing or mourning jewelry, hair cutting, and body scarification or ritual tattooing all made the grief-stricken immediately visible to the people around them. Although it is true that these practices were sometimes ridiculously restrictive and not always in the best interest of the mourner, it is also true that they gave us something of value. They imposed evidence of loss on a community and forced that community to acknowledge it. If, as a culture, we don't bear witness to grief, the burden of loss is placed entirely upon the bereaved, while the rest of us avert our eyes and wait for those in mourning to stop being sad, to let go, to move on, to cheer up. And if they don't — if they have loved too deeply, if they do wake each morning thinking, *I cannot continue to live* — well, then we pathologize their pain; we call their suffering a disease.

We do not help them: we tell them that they need to get help.

NOBODY KNEW ABOUT my sexual escapades. I kept waiting for them to cure me, or for something to cure me of them. Two years had passed since my mother's death, and I still couldn't live without her, but I also couldn't live with myself. I decided to tell Mark the truth. The list was long. I practiced what I would say, trying to say it in the least painful way. It was impossible. It was time.

Mark sat in the living room playing his guitar. He was working as an organizer for a nonprofit environmental agency, but his real ambition was to be a musician. He had just formed his first band and was writing a new song, finding it as

he went along. I told him that I had something to tell him and that it was not going to be easy. He stopped playing and looked at me, but he kept his hands on the guitar, holding it gently. This man whom I'd loved for years, had loved enough to marry, who had been with me through my mother's death and the aftermath, who'd offered to go down on me in the gentlest of ways, who would do anything, anything for me, listened as I told him about the Technically Still a Virgin Mexican Teenager, the Prematurely Graying Wilderness Guide, the Recently Unemployed Graduate of Juilliard.

He fell straight forward out of his chair onto his knees and then face down onto the floor. His guitar went with him and it made clanging, strumming, hollow sounds as it went. I attempted to rub his back. He screamed for me to get my hands off him.

Later, spent, he calmly told me that he wanted to kill me. He promised he would if I'd given him AIDS.

WOMEN ARE USED to the bad behavior of men. But I had broken the rules. Even among our group of alternative, left-wing, hippie, punk-rock, artsy politicians, I was viewed by many as the worst kind of woman: the whore, the slut, the adulteress, the liar, the cheat. And to top it all off, I had wronged the best of men. Mark had been faithful to me all along.

He moved out and rented a room in the attic of a house. Slowly we told our friends. The Insanely Young, Insanely Happy, Insanely In-Love Married Couple was coming apart. First, they were in disbelief. Next, they were mad, or several of them were — not at us, but at me. One of my dearest friends took the photograph of me she kept in a frame in her bedroom, ripped it in half, and mailed it to me. Another made out with Mark. When I was hurt and jealous about this I was told that perhaps it was exactly what I needed: a taste of my own medicine. I couldn't rightfully disagree, but still my heart was broken. I lay alone in our bed feeling myself almost levitate from the pain.

We couldn't decide whether to get divorced or not. We went to a marriage counselor and tried to work it out. Months later, we stopped the counseling and put the decision on hold. Mark began to date. He dated one of those women who, instead of a purse, carry a teeny-weeny backpack. He dated a biologist who also happened to be a model. He dated a woman I'd met once who'd made an enormous pot of very good chili of which I'd eaten two bowls.

His sex life temporarily cured me of mine. I didn't fuck anyone, and I got crabs from a pair of used jeans I'd bought at a thrift store. I spent several days eradicating the translucent bugs from my person and my apartment. Then the Teeny-Weeny Backpack Woman started to play tambourine in Mark's budding band. I couldn't take it anymore. I went to visit a friend in Portland and decided to stay. I met a man: a Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held under the Thumb of Heroin. I found him remotely enchanting. I found heroin more enchanting. Quickly, without intending to, I slipped into a habit. *Here*, I thought. *At last*.

By now Mark pretty much hated me, but he showed up in Portland anyway and dragged me back home. He set a futon down for me in the corner of his room and let me stay until I could find a job and an apartment. At night we lay in our separate beds fighting about why we loved and hated each other so much. We made love once. He was cheating on someone for the first time. He was back with the Biologist Who Also Happened to Be a Model, and he was cheating on her with his own wife. *Hmmm*, we thought. *What's this?*

But it was not to be. I was sorry. He was sorry. I wasn't getting my period. I was really, really, really sorry. He was really, really, really mad. I was pregnant by the Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held under the Thumb of Heroin. We were at the end of the line. We loved each other, but love was not enough. We had become the Insanely Young, Insanely Sad, Insanely Messed-Up Married Couple. He wanted me gone. He pulled the blankets from my futon in his room and flung them down the stairs.

I SAT FOR five hours in the office of an extremely overbooked abortion doctor, waiting for my abortion. The temperature in the room was somewhere around fifty-six degrees. It was packed with microscopically pregnant women who were starving because we had been ordered not to eat since the night before. The assistants of the Extremely Overbooked Abortion Doctor did not want to clean up any puke.

At last, I was brought into a room. I was told to undress and hold a paper sheet around myself. I was given a plastic breast and instructed to palpate it, searching for a lump of cancer hidden within its depths, while I waited for my abortion. I waited, naked, palpating, finding the cancer over and over again. The Extremely Overbooked Abortion Doctor needed to take an emergency long-distance phone call. An hour went by. Finally, she came in.

I lay back on the table and stared at a poster on the ceiling of a Victorian mansion that was actually composed of miniature photographs of the faces of a hundred famous and important women in history. I was told to lie still and peacefully for a while and then to stand up very quickly and pull my underwear on while an assistant of the Extremely Overbooked Abortion Doctor held me up. I was told not to have sex for a very long time. The procedure cost me four hundred dollars, half of which I was ridiculously hoping to receive from the Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held under the Thumb of Heroin. I went home to my new apartment. The light on my answering machine said I had three messages. I lay on my couch, ill and weak and bleeding, and listened to them.

There was a message from the Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held under the Thumb of Heroin, only he didn't say anything. Instead he played a recording of a Radiohead song that went, "You're so fucking special / I wish I was special / But I'm a creep / I'm a weirdo."

There was a message that consisted of a thirty-second dial tone because the person had hung up.

There was a message from Mark wondering how I was.

MY MOTHER HAD been dead for three years. I was twenty-five. I had intended, by this point in my life, to have a title of my own: The Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. I had planned to be the kind of woman whose miniature photographed face was placed artfully into a poster of a Victorian mansion that future generations of women would concentrate on while their cervixes were forcefully dilated by the tip of a plastic tube about the size of a drinking straw and the beginnings of babies were sucked out of them. I wasn't anywhere close. I was a pile of shit.

Despite my mother's hopes, I had not graduated from college. I pushed my way numbly through that last quarter, but I did not, in the end, receive my bachelor's degree because I had neglected to do one assignment: write a five-page paper about a short story called "The Nose," by Nikolai Gogol. It's a rollicking tale about a man who wakes up one morning and realizes that his nose is gone. Indeed, his nose has not only left him but has also dressed in the man's clothes, taken his carriage, and gone gadding about town. The man does what anyone would do if he woke up and found that his nose was gone: he goes out to find it. I thought the story was preposterous and incomprehensible. Your nose does not just up and leave you. I was told not to focus on the unreality of it. I was told that the story was actually about vanity, pretentiousness, and opportunism in nineteenth-century Russia. Alternately, I could interpret it as a commentary upon either male sexual impotency or divine Immaculate Conception. I tried dutifully to pick one of these concepts and write about it, but I couldn't do it, and I could not discuss with my professor why this was so. In my myopic, grief-addled state, the story seemed to me to be about something else entirely: a man who woke up one morning and no longer had a nose and then went looking for it. There was no subtext to me. It was simply a story about what it was about, which is to say, the absurd and arbitrary nature of disappearance, our hungry ache to resurrect what we've lost, and the bald truth that the impossible can become possible faster than anyone dreams.

All the time that I'd been thinking, *I cannot continue to live*, I'd also had the opposite thought, which was by far the more unbearable: that I would continue to live, and that every day for the rest of my life I would have to live without my mother. Sometimes I forgot this, like a trick of the brain, a primitive survival mechanism. Somewhere, floating on the surface of my subconscious, I believed — I still believe — that if I endured without her for one year, or five years, or ten years, or twenty, she would be given back to me; that her absence was a ruse, a darkly comic literary device, a terrible and surreal dream.

WHAT DOES IT mean to heal? To move on? To let go? Whatever it means, it is usually said and not done, and the people who talk about it the most have almost never had to do it. I cannot say anything about healing, but I can say that something happened as I lay on the couch bleeding and listening to my answering machine play the Radiohead song and then the dial tone and then Mark's voice wondering how I was: I thought about writing the five-page paper about the story of the man who lost his nose. I thought about calling Mark and asking him to marry me again. I thought about becoming the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. I thought about taking a very long walk. I decided to do all of these things immediately, but I did not move from the couch. I didn't set out the next day either to write the paper about the guy who lost his nose. I didn't call Mark and ask him to marry me again. I didn't start to work on becoming the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. Instead I ordered pizza and listened to that one Lucinda Williams CD that I could not ever get enough of, and, after a few days, I went back to my job waiting tables. I let my uterus heal and then slept at least once with each of the five guys who worked in the kitchen. I did, however, hold on to one intention, and I set about fulfilling it: I was going to take a long walk. One thousand six hundred and thirty-eight miles, to be exact. Alone.

Mark and I had filed the papers for our divorce. My stepfather was going to marry the woman he'd started dating immediately after my mother died. I wanted to get out of Minnesota. I needed a new life and, unoriginally, I was going west to find it. I decided to hike the Pacific Crest Trail — a wilderness trail that runs along the backbone of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Mountains, from Mexico to Canada. Rather, I decided to hike a large portion of it — from the Mojave Desert in California to the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border. It would take me four months. I'd grown up in the country, done a good amount of camping, and taken a few weekend backpacking trips, but I had a lot to learn: how, for example, to read a topographical map, ford a river, handle an ice ax, navigate using a compass, and avoid being struck by lightning. Everyone who knew me thought that I was nuts. I proceeded anyway, researching, reading maps, dehydrating food and packing it into plastic bags and then into boxes that would be mailed at roughly two-week intervals to the ranger stations and post offices I'd occasionally pass near.

I packed my possessions and stored them in my stepfather's barn. I took off my wedding ring and put it into a small velvet box and moved my mother's wedding ring from my right hand to my left. I was going to drive to Portland first and then leave my truck with a friend and fly to LA and take a bus to the start of the trail. I drove through the flatlands and Badlands and Black Hills of South Dakota, positive that I'd made a vast mistake.

Deep in the night, I pulled into a small camping area in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming and slept in the back of my truck. In the morning I climbed out to the sight of field of blue flowers that went right up to the Tongue River. I had the place to myself. It was spring and still cold, but I felt compelled anyway to go into the river. I decided I would perform something like a baptism to initiate this new part of my life. I took my clothes off and plunged in. The water was like ice, so cold it hurt. I dove under one time, two times, three times, then dashed out and dried off and dressed. As I walked back to my truck I noticed my hand: my mother's wedding ring was gone.

At first I couldn't believe it. I had believed that if I lost one thing, I would then be protected from losing another; that my mother's death would inoculate me against further loss. It is an indefensible belief, but it was there, the same way I believed that if I endured long enough, my mother would be returned to me.

A ring is such a small thing, such a very small thing.

I went down on my hands and knees and searched for it. I patted every inch of ground where I had walked. I searched the back of my truck and my pockets, but I knew. I knew that the ring had come off in the river. Of course it had; what did I expect? I went to the edge of the water and thought about going back in, diving under again and again until I found it, but it was a useless idea, and I was defeated by it before I even began. I sat down on the edge of the water and cried. Tears, tears, so many kinds of tears, so many ways of crying. I had collected them, mastered them; I was a priestess, a virtuoso of crying.

I sat in the mud on the bank of the river for a long time and waited for the river to give the ring back to me. I waited and thought about everything. I thought about Mark and my boat of life. I thought what I would say to him then, now, forever: *You, get in*. I thought about the Formerly Gay Organic Farmer and the Quietly Perverse Poet and the Terribly Large Texas Bull Rider and the Five Line Cooks I Had on Separate Occasions over the Course of One Month. I thought about how I was never again going to sleep with anyone who had a title instead of a name. I was sick of it. Sick of fucking, of wanting to fuck the wrong people and not wanting to fuck the right ones. I thought about how if you lose a ring in a river, you are never going to get it back, no matter how badly you want it or how long you wait.

I leaned forward and put my hands into the water and held them flat and open beneath the surface. The soft current made rivulets over my bare fingers. I was no longer married to Mark. I was no longer married to my mother.

I was no longer married to my mother. I couldn't believe that this thought had never occurred to me before: that it was her I'd been faithful to all along, and that I couldn't be faithful any longer.

IF THIS WERE fiction, what would happen next is that the woman would stand up and get into her truck and drive away. It wouldn't matter that the woman had lost her mother's wedding ring, even though it was gone to her forever, because the loss would mean something else entirely: that what was gone now was actually her sorrow and the shackles of grief that had held her down. And in this loss she would see, and the reader would know, that the woman had been in error all along. That, indeed, the love she'd had for her mother was too much love, really; too much love and also too much sorrow. She would realize this and get on with her life. There would be what happened in the story and also everything it stood for: the river, representing life's constant changing; the tiny blue flowers, beauty; the **spring air, rebirth**. All of these symbols would collide and mean that the woman was actually lucky to have lost the ring, and not just to have lost it, but to have loved it, to have ached for it, and to have had it taken from her forever.

The story would end, and you would know that she was the better for it. That she was wiser, stronger, more interesting, and, most of all, finally starting down her path to glory. I would show you the leaf when it unfurls in a single motion: the end of one thing, the beginning of another. And you would know the answers to all the questions without being told. Did she ever write that five-page paper about the guy who lost his nose? Did she ask Mark to marry her again? Did she stop sleeping with people who had titles instead of names? Did she manage to walk 1,638 miles? Did she get to work and become the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer? You'd believe the answers to all these questions to be yes. I would have given you what you wanted then: to be a witness to a healing.

But this isn't fiction. Sometimes a story is not about anything except what it is about. Sometimes you wake up and find that you actually have lost your nose. Losing my mother's wedding ring in the Tongue River was not OK. I did not feel better for it. It was not a passage or a release. What happened is that I lost my mother's wedding ring and I understood that I was not going to get it back, that it would be yet another piece of my mother that I would not have for all the days of my life, and I understood that I could not bear this truth, but that I would have to.

Healing is a small and ordinary and very burnt thing. And it's one thing and one thing only: it's doing what you have to do. It's what I did then and there. I stood up and got into my truck and drove away from a part of my mother. The part of her that had been my lover, my wife, my first love, my true love, the love of my life.

<http://thesunmagazine.org/archives/2192>

✦ *What is to give light must endure burning. – Viktor Frankl*

Copyright © 1974–2013 The Sun Magazine. All rights reserved.