



THE CHATTAHOOCHEE REVIEW
Exporting the South. Importing the World.

Winner of the Lamar York Prize for Nonfiction

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THE BLACK PLACE

For three months, my mother and I believed she was dying of cancer. The diagnosis was a mistake, an error that began when a radiologist misread a scan, and his verdict went unquestioned by a hospital cancer center. When I update my resume, I look at the hole between jobs, when I was caring for her under the impression that she was dying. That gap is a difficult thing to fill, to explain.

I was a year out of graduate school, working my first real job as a technical writer, when my mother learned she had terminal breast cancer. Her first cancer diagnosis, a very real malignant lump the size of a cherry pit, had been remedied with a mastectomy and a touch of oral chemotherapy. She was declared a surgical cure and, after her treatment was completed, moved from the flat fields and brightly lit strip malls of Oklahoma to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to take a job as a nurse.

During her first bout of cancer, I often flew home from graduate school in North Carolina to help her recover, then to help her pack. Her oncologist said that this aggressive type of cancer was likely to return, but could be corralled again, with early detections, a little chemo, another surgery. Limit stress, he said. Go somewhere you love. I listened to his platitudes with distaste, but she believed them. After her move, she drove to Santuario de Chimayo, the Catholic church in New Mexico known for its healing dirt. She stood in a dim room lined with old crutches, braces, the trappings of healing. She placed the dirt on her tongue, rubbed it on her hands and chest.

Over a year later, she called from the parking lot of a cancer center, beneath the shadow of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, to tell me that the cancer had already recurred. She described a scan lit up like a vast constellation; a small

lump of aggressive cancer, one that had only just grown palpable, spread to every lymph node in her body. Chemotherapy, her doctor said, could provide more time or might not, could cause her teeth and nails to fall off, or might not. The doctor discussed the unpredictability of a time stamp. Everyone was different. Four months, though, her doctor figured. My mother was encouraged to attend a chemotherapy orientation.

I wasn't much help. I'd found adult life difficult, profoundly unsatisfying. I was single and in my late twenties in a small Oklahoma town, working for the university I'd attended, where I'd once been a promising undergraduate student. The gin I drank was cheap, the men I met at bars young. The dog I'd adopted to assuage my loneliness had recently required an expensive front leg amputation for an injury, and my three-legged pet seemed a heavy-handed symbol of the unevenness of my life. As the only child of a single mother wrung out by divorce, I'd also played a large role in that first round of cancer, providing support I wasn't particularly equipped to give. When she called me that day, I turned on her first, asking why she hadn't gone in for a checkup earlier, why she wasn't planning on chemotherapy. She knew what she faced, having worked briefly as a hospice nurse when I was a child. I remember her coming home pale, ragged. She quit after two months.

I left work early and got drunk that night. I sat on my laptop, wine in a plastic cup, and looked at my employer's family leave plan. I had not worked at my position long enough to qualify to leave for months and return. I could either spend the summer writing textbook curriculum for fire fighters or spend those last months with my mother. I contacted her boyfriend, a man who made considerable money in real estate, and asked if I could come to New Mexico. He offered the financial support to sustain me there for the time being. The next day, I gave notice of my resignation, my supervisor and coworkers quietly understanding as I left meetings to cry in the bathroom. Weeks later, I was on a plane to New Mexico to watch my mother die.

I believed myself prepared and was not. I was twenty-eight years old, well-traveled, reasonably bright, in possession of a master's degree. I was also in possession of a burgeoning drinking problem, a long-term eating disorder, and a minimal sense of self-worth, due to the usual suspects, genetics and a childhood that required me to be more adult than child. I walked through the Santa Fe airport, a place small and kitschy as a Mexican restaurant, in a black dress, smiling and lipsticked. When I stepped out into the parking lot to find

my mother waiting, I could feel the high desert wind blow right through me.

We drove to one of her partner's homes, a two-story adobe a block from the Santa Fe plaza where tourists with fanny packs ate Häagen-Dazs sundaes and bought Kachina dolls and metal turquoise coyotes. My mother looked good. She had lost weight, but was smiling, wearing makeup and a starched linen dress, her dark hair long again. I was surprised by how healthy she appeared, though when I hugged her, she felt small, compressed, her shoulders always more narrow than mine. She'd never had to work at beauty the way I did. I'd inherited a glimmer of her loveliness, her charm, but was by then relying on heavy makeup, strange haircuts to distract from my asymmetrical features.

We went to dinner, and over green chile stew, she made me promise that when she deteriorated I wouldn't let the hospice nurse give her so much morphine that she was removed from reality. I want to be present as long as possible, she said. I was on my third margarita by then, checking my Match.com profile under the table, messaging a man twenty-five years my senior. I, for one, did not wish to be present in the least.

My mother's boyfriend, the man who was making this Last Wish Foundation trip possible, had more resources than anyone I'd ever known. In addition to the spacious house near the Santa Fe plaza, he owned what can only be described as a compound near Abiquiu, New Mexico, ten miles from the house where Georgia O'Keeffe painted her masterpieces. The compound had been featured in *World of Interiors* magazine, an Abiquiu studio tour each fall. Five buildings, outhouses made of glass bottles, a rusted, rectangular sculpture on the ground that looked like a grave.

I knew his relationship with my mother was tenuous at times, and I think we were all astounded by his kindness in bringing me there. When I arrived, he decided that we would embark on an American road trip as the very ill often do if they can, to Marfa, Texas, a place my mother spent her childhood summers when my grandfather worked there on the Frisco railroad. After two weeks in Marfa, we would return to New Mexico, to the compound, for whatever portion of the four months was allotted to us. I had no idea what my life would be beyond this, where I would work or live. The four months was a windowless room, and I could not sense any shapes or shadows beyond its perimeter.

The next morning, we loaded up her partner's Mercedes RV with nuts, jerky, and fruit and set out from Santa Fe to Marfa. He drove. After thanking him for bringing me to New Mexico, I hadn't exchanged much conversation

with him. I didn't know him well and understood only that he was eccentric, southern, and successful. I'd grown up in small houses and trailers, and this sudden access to wealth, luxury homes, and vehicles in regions of the country without industry was utterly foreign. Yet, I'd imagined what caring for my mother would have looked like without him, with my income and the dull landscape of Oklahoma, and was achingly grateful.

I sat in the back of the RV as we drove, my mother in the front next to him. As we coasted down the highway, the rig swaying heavy as a ship, I grew increasingly unmoored. I looked out the window at the shifting landscape, the smooth, lonely mesas of northern New Mexico fading into brown, dead country.

We stopped at the McDonald's in Roswell and ate sausage biscuits inside a building made to resemble an alien spacecraft. My mother's pain seemed to be increasing, and it took both of us to boost her back up into the RV, though she was so slight. Her two Chihuahua mixes clung to her lap. We drove through oil field country and stopped at gas stations full of roughnecks buying fried chicken and Gatorade. The men I was messaging in Santa Fe (I'd worked ahead) wanted to know when I would be there, wanted photographs, language and promises I threw out dully and freely like candy from a parade float. We crested the Fort Davis Mountains and watched a rattlesnake thick as my arm and long as a man serpentine languidly across the highway in front of us. It was the landscape where the Coen brothers chose to film *No Country for Old Men*, the land of apocalypse.

I'd heard of Marfa, of course, and it was no longer the small town where my mother bought dime-store candy while her father worked on the train, but an international art community chosen for its round, otherworldly light. Donald Judd's giant cement cubes stood in a flat, blonde field next to the Chinati Foundation. Most of the old gas stations were converted to galleries. Couples in black sculptural clothing, a woman with red-soled Louboutins, walked down the main drag near ranchers in Wranglers and sweat-darkened straw hats. Some big metal trashcans were stenciled with THIS IS NOT ART, to encourage use and eliminate confusion in a place that seemed unreal as a film set. We were staying at a VRBO house whimsically named Fancy Pony Land, a slick, renovated adobe full of bright textiles and clean modern art, just down the road from a trailer flanked by a bony horse and a goat, a living space that felt much more familiar to me.

On our first night, we ate pistachio-crusted chicken fried steak and

bacon-wrapped shrimp in the courtyard of the Hotel Paisano, a place my mother remembered from her childhood. James Dean, Rock Hudson, and Liz Taylor stayed there during the filming of *Giant*, and the grand, faded hotel was a veritable shrine to them. Near our table, a group of women in heavy makeup and rhinestones, surely from Dallas, spoke excitedly of spending the night in Liz Taylor's suite that evening. I wondered if Rock Hudson's suite received as many reservations, remembering photographs of him gaunt and mustachioed in his last years, bathed in, not the clean desert sunlight, but pain.

My mother noted that the hotel looked exactly the same and added, with a weary sadness, that my grandmother's and her own young hands had touched the burnished brass doors into the restaurant. Her partner took photographs of my mother and me in front of the fountain in the courtyard of the Paisano. We threw quarters in for luck, hopeful plops in the clear water, just as she had done over forty years before as a girl. I wondered, sharply, what she wished for. Was it for some deliverance, some miracle that I now know she actually received? For a painless death? For my good fortune after she was gone or the promise of paradise? I recall that I sunk my quarter and wished for nothing, having left, by then, the country of childhood.

When I was a child, my mother pretended there were fairies in our yard. She was still married to my father then. We lived in a solid brick house, and they were both professionals in the community. This was before my father's affairs, before debt, before fragmentation. I was a towheaded blonde child, said to be precocious and an unusually early reader, though I was probably quite ordinary and prized beyond my worth by parents who wished to blot over their own painful childhoods with mine.

Back then, my mother kept beautiful flowerbeds, a riot of blood red poppies and bachelor buttons with serrated edges, as though trimmed with craft scissors, a vegetable garden with zucchini and lush lettuces, white moths flying up in the evenings like smoke. She was Poppy, the fairy, and I left her letters in my clumsy child's hand as I learned to write. With a child's greed, I wanted the letters and gifts every night, scrambling out of bed in the morning and finding, on a porch still wet with dew, a letter in minuscule handwriting, an acorn cup Poppy used as a bowl, a velvety leaf from a rabbit's ear plant she used as a comforter. Now, when I think of the hurt of that time in New Mexico, the night we scuffled in the yard of the compound when she was hallucinating from pain and I was drunk, I imagine her kneeling down on the porch in the

hours before dawn, her long neck and young brown shoulders, placing Poppy's messages there for me to find.

You aren't the first person to lose a parent, my father had said before I left for the west. It sounded cruel, but he had a point. Most people didn't quit a job, uproot a life, in the face of a parent's imminent passing. On social media, I'd seen friends, old schoolmates, speak about their parents' deaths with great restraint. Most people hadn't been depended on as children as I had, I rationalized. Most people had managed to set down roots by their late twenties. And so it was different, I thought. You're behind in your life, my father said, when I called to report in from the porch of Fancy Pony Land. And this was also true. I did not have a home and no longer had a job. With every unemployed moment, I could feel the tick in my gut of the student loan and credit card bills I could now hardly pay. Was it worth it? I thought it would be. I believed that these last months with my mother would somehow suture the flayed edges of my childhood instead of ripping the wound deeper.

My mother and I grew up like sisters, roommates, as is often the case with an only daughter and single mother. I frequently did the grocery shopping, consoled her about money and men. She was beautiful and intelligent, stunningly charismatic. I lost count of the number of houses we lived in, the jobs she held before I graduated from high school.

The first time I watched *Gilmore Girls*, that charming show about a teen daughter and mother who are more friends than parent and child, I shuddered. I'd longed for discipline, a hierarchy, stability. I'd been depended on for so many years of my life, and, surely, I thought, this final stretch was not the time to break that pattern. Yet as our days in Marfa came to a close, I was beginning to regret the decision. My mother and her partner fought with an intensity I recalled from my parents' divorce, and I again became the mediator, trying to smooth things over, sneaking beers on the porch. What little sense of autonomy I'd had began to melt away. I worked as a go-between.

While they argued, while she cried, I sat on the porch of our rental house and sent postcards to ex-boyfriends and my graduate school friends. My online flirtations were also becoming a full-time job, and I realize now that I was trying to toss out lines to everyone I knew, hoping that they might gather below me if I fell (as I realized I was falling) from a building at a great height. I hoped only to see a crowd of lovers below to catch me before I hit the asphalt.

On our last night, we met some family friends who were also visiting

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Marfa for a picnic in the public park. The park was on a rise, and in one direction I could see the island of the little town, the Dairy Queen and food trucks, the low-slung structures of chic hotels. Behind me, the endless desert rolled out like a sea, hypnotic in its vastness. There was such dark sadness in my mother's eyes that night, though she only picked a small fight with her partner when he failed to compliment the outfit she was wearing, and she did look lovely. I thought that she was already grieving for the thin desert air and prehistoric agaves, the aoudad sheep and antelope that dotted the ridges beyond us. At the time, I was almost jealous of this, wishing for a place of my own, wondering if I would ever be able to discover a landscape outside of her.

We endured a silent drive back to the northern New Mexico mountains, through a small village, to the compound. Though I had stayed there on a previous visit, I still did not count on the sheer isolation of the place. My mother had chosen to die in a converted cabin with large windows in the bedroom. Resting in bed, she could see tall jackrabbits lope by, their black-tipped ears lit up pink and translucent. She could see clusters of elk in a valley below a dark ridge. At dusk, the coyotes would come close, gray and large as wolves. I slept in a bed that had been moved into the living room, a space without doors. Cell phone reception was spotty, at best. No Internet, no TV. I drove to Espanola to the Red Box outside a Walgreens and rented DVDs to watch on my laptop. I texted nude photos to ex-boyfriends, smuggled wine in with the groceries. In the mornings, I walked the ridges until my fair skin bubbled under the desert sun. Standing on the highest ridge, I could see the buildings of the compound, the village, and the Catholic graveyard laid out before me.

Monsoon season arrived. The cold rain beat against the windows in the middle of each afternoon and seemed to float her pain to the surface. Her partner disappeared to Santa Fe for short stints, until she became convinced he was having an affair. She worried over this all day, though I knew he was overwhelmed and grieving, and she was haunted by the ghosts of my father's mistresses. I begged her to move back into Santa Fe, closer to medical care, but some animal wildness in her resisted, clinging to the land. When I drove her to doctor's appointments, down the bumpy gravel road and through the village to the highway, she cried out in pain, held onto the car door when I took a turn on a curvy mountain road. She became terrified of speed, of accidents, even as we were both caught in the slow rollover of her illness. I escaped to Santa Fe alone to meet men, all significantly older. I had two murky encounters, returning hungover and hollowed out.

While she slept in the afternoons, I looked out at the harsh land. Georgia O’Keeffe’s house was only fifteen minutes away. Two hours past the village was the black place, the row of dark, volcanic hills O’Keeffe had painted over and over again. She said if she painted them enough, they would become hers. I didn’t want to own any part of this place. The days seemed endless, as did my mother’s suffering. She evaded medication when she surely needed it, savoring the pain, a fiery reminder of aliveness snapping in her joints, and I sought out any way to make it disappear.

To burn off my rage, I’d spend hours sprinting back and forth down the dry bellies of arroyos. Once, I ran too far and grew disoriented, too weak to clamor up a steep ridge that would allow me to spot the rooftop of the house. The black monsoon clouds knitted together and broke over me, the arroyos abruptly rushing with water, lightning splintering across the thirsty mountains. I returned to the cabin understanding how easy it was to disappear into this land, to give yourself over to it.

Throughout this time, we brought her offerings. When her partner came back from Santa Fe, he would hike up into the mountains and return with blocks of cloudy quartz. He lined them outside her bedroom window for healing. After the storms passed, I went walking for pottery shards and came back with my pockets sagging. The lips of bowls, red and black line work. When she could leave the bed, we laid the shards out on the big metal table in the kitchen and wondered about the women who made them. I thought of mothers teaching their daughters how to cook over open flames, how to grind corn. I couldn’t cook, and I made my mother badly poached eggs and ramen noodles and instant mashed potatoes on the single burner of the camp stove in the kitchen. I did not know how to nourish her, how to nourish myself. I didn’t know how this was all going to end. I drank every night when she was asleep, and I could feel something dangerous rising inside of me. Alone, her death felt palpable as hot breath on my neck.

By mid-June, the first tumor she’d detected within her left armpit had grown to a frightening extent, the skin taut over a baseball-sized mass, perfectly round and ravenously hungry. She could only rest comfortably with an assortment of small pillows behind her shoulder and beneath her arms. I came to hate the pillows, the constant arranging of them, and the misery etched into her face. The visible tumor had wrapped around her nerves, and, on her worst days, she gasped with each movement and breath. She told me she was afraid that the mass would break through her skin and began assembling

gauze and bandages on the bedside table.

Her doctors had spoken of radiation to reduce the size of the tumor. I understood the necessity of this, of palliative care, but, in my mind, there was such futility to the idea of undergoing radiation only to shrink the mass, rather than be rid of it. As the tumor swelled and thinned her skin, she scheduled an appointment to discuss radiation. I drove her to Santa Fe in a dusty Prius, and we stopped at a gas station on the way for Diet Coke, cheese crackers, something to settle her stomach.

She was in devastating pain throughout that hour-and-a-half-long car ride, and I could not parcel out how much was physical, how much was fear of a truncated timeline. On the last leg of the drive, when she finally settled, she began to tell me about a trip to the Grand Canyon she had taken with her partner shortly after her diagnosis and before my arrival. She said they walked right up to the southern rim of the canyon, close, and peered over until she grew dizzy. At the edge of her vision, she saw a man, dressed like a 1950s cowboy, on a striking gray horse. When she turned to point him out to her partner, he was gone. I knew that, in all likelihood, there had been a man on a horse, riding the trails of the canyon. But we had both slipped behind the veil by this point, and reality had grown thin and watery. As we drove past Camel Rock and into Santa Fe, resting in its bowl of mountains, I believed that the man she spoke of was, indeed, some dark rider waiting to collect her. I believed he would arrive sooner rather than later. By then, I was drinking with such conviction that I thought he might take me with him, too.

In the cancer center, we sat in the waiting room and watched a Food Network star build an enchilada casserole. The center was always crowded, and the worst part was the range of ages, the more pronounced distress on the faces of the younger women. The nurses were cheery and kind. Because my mother was sent to charm school as a young woman, she, as always, was lucid, polite, and smiling through every interaction. I was sweating from the previous evening's secret box of wine, growing chubby from a diet of camp stove instant mashed potatoes. When we were finally called back, my heart was hammering against my chest, my nails torn to the quick.

The doctor was new. He examined my mother with soft hands, and then announced that he wanted to look at her last scan. With my mother and I watching, he loaded the scan on the room's computer. My mother sat on the exam table in a gown, the paper below her rustling with each shift. I slumped against the wall in a plastic chair, compulsively shuffling through social media

on my phone like a teenager. He looked at the images for a long time, and silence swelled in the little space. Then, he excused himself for an even longer duration. When he came back, his brows were drawn, his expression concerned. What more could they possibly tell us, I thought? There was no diagnosis worse than the terminal one that had already been assigned months before. He said he didn't want to get our hopes up, but something was off. My mother hadn't lost enough weight. She was moving too comfortably. With a front-row view to her pain, I found this hard to believe.

The illness, he said, should have progressed further by now. Standing in the middle of the exam room, he rifled through my mother's medical chart and found that she had rheumatoid arthritis, a hereditary illness switched on when she was compromised during that first round of cancer. It's possible, he said, that the lymph nodes we saw on the scan were inflamed from arthritis. It's possible that it wasn't cancer at all. But this, my mother said, raising her arm to reveal the convex shape of the thing. That is cancer, her doctor agreed. And I don't want to get your hopes up. And that tumor may have metastasized by now. My ears were ringing, and I could see from the man's discomfort that he felt he was saying too much. We need to biopsy the lymph nodes, he said, to be sure. The biopsy was scheduled for the next day, and we stumbled out into the parking lot, dazed and blinking in the bright desert light. We barely spoke of the possibility of salvation as we shared an All Kale Caesar salad at a café on Cerrillos Road. We had, by then, walked through enough stages of acceptance that the idea was incomprehensible.

When she received the call about the biopsy results, we sat at the kitchen table in the adobe Santa Fe house, waiting. Those bright markers on the scan were only inflamed lymph nodes after all. But what about this tumor under my arm, my mother asked the doctor, her voice high-pitched. It's serious, he said. A definite problem, and it might not respond well to standard chemo. There's a new drug on the market designed to target these particular cancer cells. Your insurance may not cover it, but we're going to see what we can do.

They did see, and the insurance did cover it. A number of doctors called the insurance company directly. There was a board meeting at the cancer center about my mother's case. A week after this abrupt reversal of fortune, we were back in Santa Fe again, in an airy chemo ward. I sat next to my mother and posted something trite on social media, asking for good wishes and commenting on her bravery. She was given a ham sandwich. A therapy

poodle padded silently by and rested his heavy, curly head in her lap. I watched the infusion drip through the IV tube, ten thousand dollars' worth of the best chemotherapy invented for this illness, and a treatment few women could access, moving through her veins. If it didn't work, this tumor was likely to kill her, and we would be back exactly where we started. Despite the news, it was hard to be jubilant, to be hopeful. As I folded my legs beneath me in the cushy chair next to my mother, my phone dinged with a message from an old friend asking how I was, and I wish I could have known then, hungover and gasping with loneliness, that, years later, I would marry him.

As my mother began her regimen of chemo, the situation with her partner continued to deteriorate. I ratcheted up my drinking, realizing, unemployed and half-crazed, that I had absolutely nowhere to go. I realize now how much my own addiction must have frightened my mother, who grew up with an alcoholic father. She decided that it would be best if I left, returned, like a library book, to my father's house in Oklahoma. When I called him, he turned me away, telling me to have my mother take care of her mess. This dynamic recalled their endless custody disputes when I was a child, shuffling me back and forth between them like heavy luggage. When I called my father to beg for housing for the third time, I was collecting empty beer bottles from the counter in the Santa Fe house where I was hiding to drink alone, and they made a sharp ting, clinking together, that he could hear on the phone. Washing dishes? he asked, his voice filled with disgust. He knew exactly what I was doing. Sure, I said. Eventually, he agreed that I could briefly light at his house. A plane ticket was purchased, plans made. My mother had only just begun her infusions, and much was still uncertain.

I returned to the cabin to pack my things and, against my mother's wishes, took the Prius to buy wine in the village under some transparent pretext. I was gone a long time, snaking down mountain roads, a box of wine secured in my tote bag. That dangerous wildness I had felt burning and building below my skin broke over me, and I took the corners sharply and with abandon. An evening storm was gathering over the mountains as I drove back up. A cold wind rippled through the sage and chamisa. The clouds were heavy and flat as congealing wax, scuttling over the tops of the Sangre de Cristos. When I pulled into the drive, going too fast, the tires crunching over the gravel, my mother flew out of the cabin to meet me. Where have you been, she asked, her eyes wild with fear and rage. I noticed that she was holding her arm against her chest, that her shirt was pulled off the shoulder and billowing out in the cold

wind. I didn't have any reception, I said. What's wrong? I needed to go in and pack before my early morning flight. Whatever this was, I didn't have time for it.

The tumor ruptured, she said. I don't know what to do. The rain was pouring now, bursting from the sky, and I was dizzy with shame, for abandoning her on a mountaintop during a medical emergency to buy alcohol. I thought of her own father's alcoholism and knew that all this time she had seen the darkness of her childhood blooming in me like ink in water, the cycle restarting. Let me help you, I said, reaching toward her, but her anger was hot and sharp. Inside, she ordered me to pack as she tended to the open wound. I spilled my clothes over the floor of the cabin, stuffing them into bags. I received a text from my dad that he had left a truck parked, bizarrely, at the airport in Oklahoma City for me, with a key under the mat. He and his younger wife had been in the city anyway, and a designated ride from the airport didn't appear to come with my new room and board. My mother packed her arm with gauze, refusing to go to the hospital. In the morning, she drove me to the Santa Fe airport as I curled catatonic in the backseat. The New Mexico sky was a pure, devastating blue.

My mother's doctor said that her rheumatoid arthritis, the disease responsible for the inflamed lymph nodes that imitated tumors on a scan, was switched on during her first bout of cancer. I thought my drinking was no different. Waiting, genetically programmed there, for the right set of circumstances to bring it roaring out. I recall a wildfire that began in the Sangre de Cristos when a chain dragging from a truck sparked near brush. It didn't take much, I knew, when the land was so dry.

A year after my return to Oklahoma, I finally tried to quit drinking. There was a period of floundering, sputtering until it stuck. I began to teach again, eventually married. My mother's chemo drug did good work, melting the tumor away like ice. My father continued to look at me with veiled dislike and confusion, but some things are unchangeable. I'd tried to help, I wanted to tell him, but the greater world does not thank you for messy altruism. As it turns out, no one is particularly impressed when you derail your own life so spectacularly, even in the service of someone you love.

My mother and I are softer now, separately, and with one another, still hollowed out in some places that will likely never fill again. Yet how many people have the opportunity to walk out of their own death, only to have life

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reinstated? It is a strange gift, to be able to do a soft opening. Years after this chaos, I do not see much fear left in her eyes, even as the disease has returned again and again, beaten back each time by additional infusions, the good care of the doctors at that cancer center, and her own ferocity.

For a while, I wanted an apology. I wanted reparations for that summer, some acknowledgement of time lost, as though I had been falsely imprisoned. Those months are now only a blank spot on a resume, a sentence blacked out with marker. Yet, the man on the horse did not come for any of us, and our survival is still remarkable. I have not returned to that cabin since. My mother, having repaired her relationship with her partner as well, recently began renovations there, stripping out the kitchen and camp stove, dusting the vigas, and painting the walls a fresh slate gray. Outside the windows, the land remains, dry, indifferent and unyielding. When the monsoons return each summer, it is washed clean again.