

## THE FUGGIT LIST

“Well, shit,” Hazel said, tapping her index finger on the edge of her wine glass.

“I know, right?” Shelley shook her head. “I’m thinking I must be a praying mantis. Marry me and die.” She slugged back a swallow of wine and coughed.

“Maybe you’re a praying anti-man-tis. Or praying woman-tis.”

“Oh, please! This set of circumstances is most definitely not the answer to any prayer of mine! Saul promised me at least five more years a month ago. On our anniversary.”

“So we should be mad at him?”

“I’m trying not to. Really! I know it’s not his fault. He didn’t just go lurk around some crappy, hideous radioactive site, looking to get cancer.”

“So true. How’s he feeling?”

“Huh. There’s what he says: ‘okay, hon. A little tired is all.’ Then there’s how he looks when he thinks I’m not watching. His face turns into putty or pudding or something that won’t stay in place. And he’s so tired.”

“Poor Saulie!” Hazel put her arm around Shelley’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “Poor Shell! What can I do?”

Shelley leaned in. “Could you wave a wand and take us back about six months? Sort of a Groundhog Day thing? If I’m remembering right, we were all happy and healthy then.”

“Back to Saul’s birthday dinner at Mon Cheri!”

“Back to that picnic in Hadley’s back yard, when Pax was just starting to sit up on his own and he kept falling over sideways. Saul was so happy that day. Wine and roses and home-smoked salmon.”

Shelley blew her nose and swiped at her eyes. “Seriously, what do you think you can do, Haze?”

That certainly was the \$64,000 question. Hazel was not a doctor or nurse or healthcare worker or even medically curious. Instead, she was scared of her own shadow a lot of the time, dreamy and introverted, way too suggestible. On a daily basis, she made herself crazy, running down the endless list of her own shortcomings. That’s as far as she usually got, before the flight mechanism kicked in and she sprang into gardening action or housekeeping action, to keep from thinking anymore. This time, she knew she’d have to kick herself over fear and inertia, to be of some use to these dear friends who were suddenly so wounded and dazed.

This was the first time in six weeks that Hazel had seen Shelley and Saul. They had been very peripatetic for the past few months: a camping trip to the Sierras (FB pics of Shelley canoeing) a theatre week in Ashland (no pics but a deluge of thoughtful reviews of the plays they had seen) and then a Fall trip to the Big Apple to reunite with former political friends (Shelley) and check in with family (Saul – born in the Bronx). And that’s where Saul took a fall, landed hard on his hip and came home bruised from knee to waist. Because of the blood thinners, said the docs. The ones keeping his blood from clotting, making it possible for him to travel in airplanes. And the testing began.

Lesions, said the docs. Liver. Lungs. Stomach. And now, after colonoscopy and scans, too much damage to radiate or chemotherapize, they said. Where can Saul go from here?

“How about Calistoga? Hot pools. Good food.”

“We did always say we were going to travel somewhere.”

“Hi, darlin’.” Saul was coming slowly down from upstairs, clinging to the banister. He was pale and transparent, blue veins throbbing in his temples, his usual embrace of a smile struggling against little grimaces of pain.

Hazel met him at the bottom of the stairs and threw her arms around him, holding and rocking ever so slightly. He kissed her gently on the lips.

“At least we’re not contagious.”

Saul and Shelley were some of the few people in Hazel’s life that knew her breast cancer was flourishing and spreading, defying the hormone suppressants, trickling through her veins.

“Okay, Saulie. Come and sit. Talk to me. What’s your wish? How should this play out?”

“I thought we’d have some answers by now. At least, we’d know where the primary source of the cancer is. Now the doctor – the oncologist - says it doesn’t really matter, that they can’t treat it anyway because my liver is too damaged to process the toxins. So it looks like hospice.” His eyes got misty. So did Hazel’s.

Shelley pushed herself up from the couch and went to fetch Saul a thimbleful of wine. Or maybe she just wanted to blow her nose unobserved.

It was late afternoon. The late Fall sun shot intensely through the living area windows. Hazel rummaged through her satchel for her sunglasses. Saul repositioned on the couch, out of the direct rays. The room looked friendly and comforting, as usual: Tansus full of books and tchotchkes, shelves of CDs, odd

and beautiful pieces of fabric art, framed political posters, pictures of baby grandson Pax, smiling, sleeping, clapping his hands. This room had held great sorrow and great joy and now sorrow had returned. There were things to discuss but, for the moment it was enough to watch the dust motes dance and enjoy the sight of Shelley rejoining them, bearing a plate of crackers, goat cheese and apple slices.

Hazel was glad to put a little nourishment under the wine. She was even more glad for the wine, which allowed her to speak boldly. To acknowledge her feelings and fears. To be “in the moment”, as her JewBu friends would say. Even when she was home alone she had the overwhelming tendency to duck and dodge true expression. She frequently thought she was actively wooing senility.

Saul was the oldest of them. Hazel was next, three years younger than he. Hazel’s partner, Axel, was nine months younger. Shelley was the baby of the group, just seventy at her last birthday. Today, in her black jeans, Portland sweatshirt and bare feet, with her bright, white hair spikey, she didn’t look a day over fifty. Particularly when she flashed her snarky smile, which hadn’t been in evidence today.

Both men were bald on top. Axel’s back-of-the-head hair, which he generally ignored, was thick and white. Saul’s (nicely combed and trimmed) was grey. Alte Kockers, they called themselves, but all four walked freely, smiled frequently and had – up till now – managed to avoid discussing their various medical conditions in public places. Shelley’s hearing aid hid shyly just inside her ear.

Last night, the phone had rung while Hazel and Ax were watching Modern Family's Gloria have a classic meltdown, after being criticized for her driving. It was a re-run, of course, chock full of commercials, during which Ax, god of the remote, flipped to a sports channel for baseball reruns or baseball scores or baseball talking heads. Hazel caught the phone in the middle of the fourth ring – just before it went to voicemail.

After introductory pleasantries had been exchanged, she asked Shelley what was up. They weren't really the kind of friends who called just to chat on a Tuesday night. Shelley, particularly, was a doer and an organizer.

"Is Ax home?"

"Yeah. Watching baseball. You want to talk to him?"

"Can you put me on speaker phone? It's just that I don't want to have to repeat myself."

Technopeasant Hazel located the speakerphone button and managed to get the apparatus to broadcast. And Shelley and Saul took deep breaths and gave their news. All Hazel could say was "Shit!"

So they had assembled the primaries, the war counsel, to come to terms with what would happen next. Axel wasn't there yet – probably caught in Bay Bridge traffic, having forgotten his cell phone. Tansy, Saul's best friend since the joyful days of hand-held cameras and high-minded pro-labor documentaries on a shoestring, had not responded to a couple of phone messages. That was clearly making Shelley anxious. Tansy is a therapist and a highly functional, quietly

capable, super-dependable person. It hardly seemed possible that she might be bagging on the situation. But where could she be?

“Shall I call her again?” Shelley brandished her iPhone.

“No, sweets. Not yet. We’re waiting for Axel anyway. Let’s have a Scherazade moment.”

“What? Seven veils for seven brothers?”

“Not quite what I had in mind. But now that you mention it. . .”

“So then telling stories? Sure. Hazel can go first.”

“Because we don’t know all her stories.”

“We hardly know any of her stories.”

“Piffle,” Hazel said, blushing. “I don’t believe you guys have told each other all your stories. You’ve only known each other for five years.”

But in fact, they were both raconteurs. They were fascinated with each other and the multiplicity of ways their paths had criss-crossed and diverged during their pre-SaulnShelley days.

“Look how rosy she is!” Shelley flipped her hand towards Hazel. “Are you going to tell us an X-rated tale, Haze?”

“I might if I could think of one but you know what a proper, upright life I’ve always led. Wanna hear about the summer afternoon when the cat bit my sister, leaving a hole in her cheek that forever after looked like a dimple and I rode my bike straight up the steepest hill in town in my hurry to go to her rescue?”

“Sure.”

“You just did.”

“Boo!!” Axel swaggered in the door. “C’mon, Haze. You’re a word person. A little more detail, if you please. And hello everyone. Sorry for having spent the last 45 minutes following a drunken soccer mom slaloming across lanes on the bridge. Glad to have actually gotten here alive. I need a drink!”

And just like that, Hazel was off the hook, whether Axel had intended that result or not. Saul and Shelley really liked him and were always happy to fall in with his agenda. In fact, Axel was why the friendship existed.

Eight years previously, Shelley was married, living and working in Portland, or Portlandia, as it has become. Seven and a half years earlier, Shelley was a widow, planning to shake Portland from her shoes. She and her husband, Vic, had been settled in for long enough to acquire masses of books and papers, which were going to need a new home. There was some institutional interest but Shelley, mired in grief while valiantly pretending to live her daily life, was uncertain how to proceed. She started calling her connections in the political left. Someone – she never remembered who – gave her a list of book dealers, including the store featuring American social movements, of which Ax was then a co-owner.

Hazel went along on the investigatory trip. She loved Portland, with its free bus service and eclectic mix of funk and bling. She was drawn to Shelley, gamely trying to hold her own in a way-too-big house full of far too many possessions and memories. Shelley’s daughter, Hadley, was in residence during the visit: in between the end of her summer internship and her final year of law school.

Mother and daughter were a practiced and efficient team. They also fed Ax and Hazel royally.

Within months, Shelley had moved to Berkeley, bought a house and found a job: not too shabby for a 60 year old leftie. At her first Thanksgiving in her new home, she introduced her guests, which list included Axel and Hazel, to Saul, a recently discovered neighbor. And things took off from there, as affinity will dictate. Easily, without discussion, they were spending birthdays, seders and Thanksgivings together. Shelley was a seder maven: definitely the one you'd want to have in charge, with her special glasses and plates, her complicated moral questions and her commie-Jewish sensibilities.

And now, rather than planning a bit of fun, they were needing to come to terms with something no one wanted to talk about: the great Nowhere After. The end. Fall of the curtain and no applause.

Saul lifted his delicate little etched glass. "A toast."

"Le chaim," they responded.

"Not so fast, my hearties. Health would be nice. Optimum. But this is about non-health, que no? This is about going gently. Or not. About going somewhere my sweetie can't accompany me and it's not a stag party. Shelley has a dead spouse. I have a dead spouse. We were both right down in the mix with everything our mates went through. But the part we both know how to do is the left-behind to put a life together part, not the dead part. Any thoughts on that? Ax? Hazel?"



Axel leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "Did you guys ever see that crappeola movie with Morgan Freeman, about these two geezers who went out adventuring? Bucket List, I think it was called. First time I ever heard that term. But, hey, it sure looked like they had a hell of a quirky road to perdition. I mean, fun."

"You mean Saul should make one?" Hazel asked. "Or we each should? Or we all should make one together?"

"I don't know what I mean. All of it, I guess."

"Could we do something about righting wrongs?" Shelley's eyebrows were knitted, her expression intense. "Something that would skew an election, maybe."

"Like when you Yippies took your pig to Chicago?" Saul was chuckling. "Maybe we could take on some local causes. But it seems more like a Fuck You list than a Oh-If-only."

"Yeah. An Up Yours. A Fuggit list, my friends." Axel stood, on his way for a wine refill, and bowed.

"Bring that container of olives from the bottom shelf, Ax. We need a vegetable. So what's our next step? Saul?"

"Lists, my good woman! No life without lists!"

A yellow pad appeared from under the coffee table. Pages were distributed, pens found. Ax had his own: a fine black ink gel pen, which couldn't help writing decisively. Hazel wanted to use pencil, she thought, in case she changed her mind, but all the pencils needed sharpening. She settled for a pale green marker. "Now what?"

“Write down three names of people you would like to pie.”

“Pie?” Hazel was imagining blueberries and cross-hatched crust, decorated with French vanilla ice cream, winningly presented.

“You know, Haze. Pie in the face. Big gobs of shaving cream dripping off of wobbling jaws. Mega-embarrassment.” Shelley mimed pie tossing technique.

Hazel laughed. So did Ax and, a beat later, Shelley joined the hilarity. Saul beamed at his disciples.

“Okay, but seriously folks. Write their names and then be prepared to dissertate upon how the members of your list have earned this high-level dishonor. On your mark. Get set. . .”

Oh lord, another opportunity to flub up speaking in public. Hazel felt like her ears were on fire. Her feet itched. There must be fleas nesting in her armpit. How had she ever stood up in court and pleaded convincingly for a mother’s right to doctor her children with homeopathic cures, a father’s right to overnights with his six year old, now that his girlfriend of five years had moved into his one bedroom apartment? Ever since she retired, her reluctance to speak had seemed to get stronger everyday. She could barely order coffee at her local Starbucks.

She tapped her marker on the folded piece of yellow paper on her lap. Time to think about names of villains and reasons to punish them, not dwell on her own inability to perform. Who deserved to be on her list? Did it have to be someone alive?

Saul was probably thinking of political people. Public figures, not merely obnoxious famous types like Paris Hilton or Kim the K and her infant wearing

diamond studs. And yet that's exactly who Hazel would pie, if she got the chance. Useless, entitled people whose faces leered at you in the supermarket. She quickly jotted down Kim K, Jim Carrey and Rush Limbaugh, surprised at herself for even remembering the boar of a man's name.

"Has everyone got three? Pass them over," Saul commanded. He took a moment to peruse each list.

"Well? Read them to us," Shelley instructed, gnawing on her left thumbnail.

"And what? We'll guess whose list it is?"

"Sure." No one seemed to dissent.

Hazel had a quick moment to wonder whether these friends would still like her, once they knew about her fascination with trashy magazines and trashier people. She probably could have come up with someone seriously deserving of disrespect, like General Custer (dec.) or some one of those soldiers of fortune out stirring things up in the Middle East. Or anyone domiciled in Texas surnamed Bush. Particularly Barbara, mother to the clan of arrogant reprobates.

Saul cleared his throat emphatically. He shook the piece of paper in his hand and held it close to his face. "Drum roll," he said, then read "Miss Cronin. Arnold Schwarzeneger. Monica Lewinsky. Yours, Shell?"

"Yup."

"Who's Miss Cronin? Shouldn't that be Ms. Cronin?"

Shelley raked her fingers through her hair and curled up her toes. "No, babe. She was the quintessential Miss. Dyed, Jet black hair, an inch of powder

on her face, cracking and falling onto her suit lapels every time she spoke. Big round glasses with rhinestones in the frames. Fat fingers with chipped nail polish. Smelled stale. My fifth grade teacher.”

“Poor old thing. What makes her deserving of a pie?”

“Erg. She was in love with my father. I was her pet because he was my father. ‘Oh, Shelley dear. Please give your father my best regards.’ Maybe you can imagine what fun my classmates had with that situation. It got so bad that I changed schools in the middle of the year. I missed all the Spring birthday parties.”

Saul was snorting. “Oh you poor, abused creature. I only wish you had told me when we still had oceans of time. I could have dedicated myself to making it up to you somehow.”

“Why not start now, Saul?” Shelley wiggled her substantial eyebrows. “I sense that a brand new Audi convertible might ease my pain.”

“You don’t think Miss C. is still alive, do you, Shell?” Hazel wasn’t sure she was following the thread.

“If she is, she’s a sight to behold. She’d be, like, one hundred and fifteen. Did I mention that she always wore Cuban heels? She stomped down the halls like a fat flamenco dancer. Did I mention she was fat?”

“My thought is that we can’t pie her if she’s dead.”

“Well, yeah.” Shelley continued gnawing her thumb. “I must have missed the part where you told us that people on our lists had to be alive.”

“You missed nothing, darling. You never do. I didn’t put any restrictions on the vitality of people on your lists. Monica Lewinsky, for example. I’ve never been sure whether she was really alive. She always seemed like a pod person.”

Ax scratched his head. “You raise a good point, Saul.”

“Let the record reflect that I raise nothing whatsoever for the ever-bovine Ms. Lewinsky.”

“Can I have a do-over?” Shelley asked. “I think I get it now. No dead boogie men or women on the pie list. Damn! Doesn’t that sound like a Tom Robbins title?”

“How about this? I’ll read the other three lists and then we’ll all get a do-over.”

“More wine required,” Axel said, heading for the refrigerator. “And I’m ragin’ hungry. Can we order pizza or something? I don’t care if it’s gluten-free.”

“Hey!” Shelley said. “I think we’re getting sidetracked. Didn’t we get together to figure out how to relate to the fact that there’s no cure for what Saul has? How to spread the word? How to keep on tangoing on the edge of the abyss?”

“Ostensibly. But there’s no paradigm, verdad? You and I have been through something similar before, Shell, with our respective spouses. Ax and Hazel have lost parents and Ax was actually involved with the process, each parent. Hazel’s kind of a newbie.”

“I’ve lost three friends this year, Saul,” Hazel said, quietly. “I wasn’t particularly close to any of them but there had been a time when I thought of one

of them as an intimate. I mean, even though she was the kind of talker who told you the same story, using the exact same words, over and over again. And she always made us go to lunch at Pasta Pomodoro. Sometimes we were the only people there, the entire time. Oh, and she always had wine with her lunch and tiramisu for dessert. I guess I'm trying to tell you why I got too busy to go out with her, so I don't have to tell you how mad I am at myself for not at least calling her. One day her husband sent an email on her gmail account. It said no funeral. No obit, even. I wrote right back, to say if he just wanted to plant a rose bush or something, I'd be there but I never heard anything back. A couple weeks later, I drove by their house. The garage door was open and there was absolutely nothing in the garage. Gone" Hazel's cheeks were burning. She cupped them with her cool palms.

Saul leaned in and put his hands on top of hers. "Haze. I hope you didn't think I was dissing you for your lack of hands-on death experience. I was only trying to say that Shell and I have both been through this end-of-life stuff with someone we loved and I hope that experience can somehow help inform this one."

"Thanks. I actually knew that. I don't know why I rattled on."

"I'm glad you did. It was vivid. Like all your stories."

"Really?"

"Why would I lie to you? What would that accomplish?"

On her new list, Shelley had Bill Clinton, Clarence Thomas and Phyllis Schafly. Hazel came up with Barbara Bush, Octomom and Angelina Jolie. "Sorry

guys,” she said, as three sets of eyebrows raised. “I just have this fascination with kinky celebrity. At the same time, I want to stamp it out.”

“As long as we don’t have to have them to dinner. . .” Saul mused.

While everyone else was scribbling, Axel had sat, looking off into the middle distance. When Saul called his name, he started, then quickly scrawled three lines on his bit of paper and tossed it over.

“Charles Manson. Dick Cheney. Koch brothers. I think that’s four, Axel.”

“But you see what I mean, right? Can’t do one Koch without the other. I guess I could lose Manson, since he can’t do a whole lot more harm, where he is. And Cheney? I’d rather have some more hurtful weapon than a pie.”

“Okay, Saulie. Read us yours.”

“Mitt Romney. Michelle Bachman. Pat Robertson. This was harder than I thought. I was going for people who are stupid, innately ridiculous and lacking in sense of humor.”

“I think you nailed it, amigo.”

Hazel was confused. Too much wine, no doubt. She’d hear about that when she woke up with a headache. “So now do we have to figure out how to get where we can pie these idiots?”

“I say no,” Saul responded. “We’ve identified some enemies. Or at least fools. I think we can all agree on the heinous vacuity of those on our lists. We might be able to come up with appropriate punishments for their variety of misdeeds and we can keep thinking along those lines. When we’re not busy

doing way more important things, that is. Like writing a broadside to get the word out about my incipient demise.”

Saul wolfed down pizza and salad as fast as everyone else. He ate less, that was observable, but he'd been doing that ever since his Boadecia of a physical trainer/acupuncturist put him on a diet. So far, he'd gone down three pants sizes. When the cardboard take-out boxes were empty and stacked by the front door, Shelley poured them each some pear brandy.

“Let's come to order,” she said, banging a spoon on the tansu. “It's almost Hazel's bedtime and all we've accomplished is to get silly drunk. So many people have been asking about Saul and we don't want to keep repeating ourselves. Makes it all too real, old pile driver truth.”

“How about a poem?” Ax said. “T'was on a brisk October Day when our Saul heard a doctor say 'This PET scan looks like lace, oy vey'. . .”

“Write that down!” Saul said.

“A little too antic for my taste,” Shelley frowned.

Hazel was somewhere between amused and appalled. How like Ax to dive right in to the quavering, uncertain heart of the mess and make a Yiddish joke! And so often it defused the situation and proved productive. She decided that, right this minute, she was glad for his little boy, fart joke persona.

At Shelley's continued insistence, they wrote a letter:

Dear Universe: For reasons obscure to us, none of them based on his having been a poor excuse for a person, Saul is locked in mortal combat with the Big C.



How could this happen, you ask. We ask, too. It doesn't have to do with diet or ill humor or sloth or failure to vote. It is apparently attributable to randomness.

Here's what we know: a month ago, Saul ran into a belligerent sidewalk with a too-high curb and broke his big toe. Two weeks ago, Saul and Shelley went to New York, for a taste of Fall. While there, Saul missed the final stair while descending a flight and went down on his keister. It bruised like a Fall sunset and hurt more than he was willing to say. After it had interfered with his sleep for several nights, he went to his doc and the testing began. Alphabet Cities of tests later, pictures show cancer invading liver, stomach, colon, lungs. Saul suddenly turns yellow.

What now? We've decided Hospice, at home. There aren't many options and most of them would quickly do more harm than good. Saul is opting for grace and dignity.

"Will we hate ourselves in the morning?" Hazel said, trying to hold back a yawn.

"I don't think so. This sounds like Saul and makes it clear that he's taken charge and will keep being in charge as long as he can, with a little help from his friends." Shelley hooked her iPad to the printer and ran a couple copies. "Read it again when you've waked up enough and shoot me an e-mail if you think anything needs an edit." She hugged Hazel tightly.

There was almost no traffic on the Bay Bridge. There was no conversation inside the car. Hazel gazed out the window at the swooping strings of fairy lights

and the sandcastle spikes of downtown SF. She felt lonely. Empty and full at the same time, but the fullness was not replete and comforting: more like florist's clay.

"I guess this thing with Saul is hitting me harder than I thought it had," Axel said.

"I feel that, too. Like I'm trying to find a path under snow."

"I think we did a mitzvah tonight. Getting that letter written."

"We did forget the part about what people can do to help. Or not do, which will help. They'll undoubtedly think about that. Anyway, I'll call Shelley in the morning."

Within moments of the statement flying out over the internet, answers, wishes and prayers came pouring in. Most were incredulous: how could this happen to one of our own? Nobody tried to philosophize. At least, at first. What was said under the breath or sotto voce in the privacy of a living room, looking up in shock from the bright face of an iPad was mercifully suppressed before a response was tendered. OMG was the most common reply, followed in popularity by WTF. At least, at first.

"You know we don't lock the door unless we both go out," Shelley said when Hazel called to check in. "I'm thinking that may have to change. We woke up this morning to the sound of many, many footsteps clomping up the stairs. The Maidens had come bearing breakfast. At least they didn't linger, as soon as they realized we weren't clothed."

The Maidens were the five elderly women living in the co-housing community. All except one of them had once been part of nuclear families, equipped with children, husbands, house pets. Now, they were their own family. Stalwart, forever left politically, volunteers at every worthy fund-raiser, a force to be reckoned with. Most had been part of the original planning group that established and built the community. Now they were the watchdogs, wardens, historians. Frequently, they spoke as one mind. Hazel had a clear picture of all those pairs of Birkenstocks ascending the staircase, laden with picnic baskets full of muffins made of ground fruit, fresh-picked persimmons, hard-boiled eggs and big branches of lavender for the odor and the peace it brought. Hazel loved the image of all those beaming, creased faces peering in the bedroom door, ready to burst into song or explanation of the bags and pans and cookie sheets full of enough food for the entire community for several meals and then the disorderly retreat as each pair of eyes registered nudity and leapt to a conclusion. She imagined the ragged pile of containers now gracing Shelley's counter while Shelley tried to figure out how to get most of it into the hands of the homeless without hurting anyone's feelings or discouraging this outpouring of love and concern.

“We were planning on coming to see you today, me and Ax. I actually cooked something to bring.”

“And what was that?” Shelley used her polite voice.

“A kale and mushroom casserole. I was only going to bring you enough for one tiny meal. It turns out that it’s pretty good but I thought you and Saul might have O’Ded on kale when you were doing that green smoothies thing.”

“No, that’s perfect, Haze. We’ve been yearning for veggies.” She sounded surprised but enthusiastic.

“Is there anything else your heart is desiring? I guess I don’t need to add ‘that’s within my power to provide’ right?”

“Actually, I need books. I mean fiction, not this high-minded political serious stuff I’ve been force-feeding myself. I need a modern day Charles Dickens. Or Armisted Maupin, if I hadn’t read everything of his that has been published. Geez. Remember when ‘Tales of the City’ ran in the Chronicle every day? I remember actually telling someone that ‘Tales’ made getting up in the morning a pleasure. Anyway, you and Ax are my book gurus.”

“Oh sure, I know we can come up with a whole variety of take-me-away-from-all-this-humdrum-reality books. I’m assuming you haven’t a lot of interest in Harlequin bodice rippers but historical fiction? Mysteries?”

“This is better than Hanukah! Bring me an assorted bushel basket full and I will loll around, happily reading quotable paragraphs to Saul, while he pretends not to be interested. Joy!”

The first time Axel and Hazel had visited the Crossroads, they hadn’t known exactly where it was. They had wandered down a dirt driveway, trying to spot numbers on a whole series of small dwellings that reminded them of the shotgun houses in New Orleans. They went down one side and up the other and

then did the whole circuit again, with an identical lack of result. The next portal off the street was full of cars but Ax was sharp-eyed enough to notice a cluster of buildings back behind the paved lot. And there they were, in a garden full of flowering vines, sunflowers, guavas, persimmons and pole beans, climbing high, and fairy tale houses, gabled and fancifully trimmed. And, halfway down the row, there was the two-story abode of Saul and Shelley: open living area on the first level, three bedrooms and a bath on the second. Ten people could be crowded around the dining table. Snugly, to be sure, but snug was convivial. Hazel thought Shelley had gotten herself quite a deal, marrying into a community that cooked for itself at least three times a week and watched out for each other at all times.

At the end of a late Fall afternoon, the sun was still filtering through the tall pines at the back of the property. The grass in the central area still smelled warm. The Maidens were sitting on Saul and Shelley's porch, Saul in their midst, a striped serape draped around his shoulders. They were singing "Good Night Irene", vigorously if not entirely tunefully, harmonizing on the chorus, drawing out the last line: "I'll see you in my dreams". Ax and Hazel joined in the applause. Shelley appeared in the doorway with a bottle of sparkling water in one hand, white wine in the other. "Who's drinking what?" she asked.

"Oh Shelley, just come and sit you down, darlin'" said Bonita, the oldest and smallest of the Maidens. She eased to her feet and patted the back cushion of her chair. "We do not need to presume upon your unfailing courtesy and hospitality. Sit, sit." Bonita wrested the bottles from Shelley's hands and nudged

her into the chair. She invariably took charge of any situation with wiggle room, but she was so capable, despite being a little unsteady on her feet, that no one minded. Much. Shelley had periodically put up some resistance but even she, the original Ms Bossy Boots, had learned to pick her battles.

Shelley waved at Hazel and Ax. "C'mon right here," she said. "Help yourself to a beverage and a bit of railing. We are getting some vocal chord exercise."

"How about some more Pete Seeger?" Ax asked.

"Michael Rowed the Boat?" That was Lorelei, with the guitar. She sounded an emphatic chord and started the song. Hazel noticed that several other porches were spilling with people, clapping and joining the song. She couldn't remember seeing the community disport itself like this since Saul and Shelley's wedding.

Whenever they attended a community event – Fourth of July, for instance, with an abundance of beer, lemonade, guacamole and chicken sausages – Ax would comment on the drive home about how pleasant it would be to live there. Hazel could definitely see some advantages but she thought there were drawbacks, as well. Like diminished privacy. Or even the obligation to cook for the whole group: four times a year didn't seem like much but who knew what special food needs folks would develop in the interim? Ax thought she was making too much of a mountain out of an anthill but when had he last tried to cook for forty people? There wasn't much to worry about, really - even if a waiting list for prospective new tenants had existed, no one in residence seemed to have

the slightest desire or necessity to move. Some of the Maidens were living in three bedroom units like Saul's, which were surely bigger than they needed. Shelley would bet that the extra rooms were overflowing with the same kind of treasured junk to be found in her own chests and closets and uninhabited rooms.

The singers had segued into "This Land Is Your Land". Hazel always got a little misty, singing that one. Ax thought it should be the national anthem. At least most singers would be able to reach all the notes and probably remember a lot of the words.

Saul was looking sallow and, suddenly, very tired. Shelley stood, reached for his hand and helped him stand. "I think my honey needs a little down time," she said. "Singing really takes it out of the lad."

People started leaving while Lorelei played "You Are My Sunshine". The voices blazed a silky trail as the singers headed toward their own houses. "You make me happy when skies are grey. . ."

"And that's how it's been," Shelley said. "I think they're building a stockpile of energy for us, so Saul has something extra to draw on. And it works. At least for a little while."

Saul was sitting on the couch, the serape wrapped around him. In the last beams of sun, his face was saffron colored. His cheek bones were prominent. He looked exhausted.

Shelley nodded towards him. "And then it's time to recharge."

Hazel had made room in the refrigerator for the kale casserole. "Should we leave you guys to your recharging?" she asked.

“Oh no,” Saul opened his eyes and beamed them at Hazel. “We have a task at hand, lassie. Let’s have a moment of peace and wine and then we’ll address it. Humor an old man, getting older by the moment.”

“How could a person refuse such a plaintive request?” She sat down next to him and took his hand. “What task have you set for us, good sir?”

“Today we focus on food. What do we like? What do we like even better. Kind of a last supper deal.”

“As in Jesus and the Apostles? Or just before they strap you down for the lethal injection?”

“The latter. Because you get your choice of vittles when they’re about to shut off your lights. Jesus and the boys were limited to what was at hand. Probably matzoh and chicken fat, washed down with yoghurt.”

“We don’t have to worry about balancing the meal, am I right?” Shelley asked.

“None of the usual worries – calories, gluten, strength of those chilis, too many sweets, no vegetables. Any edible thing you like.”

“Will you be wanting me to post the lists on the blog?” Shelley had created a Saul’s status blog on her own Pignocity web site. It was another attempt to reach the most friends with the least number of repetitions of information. Anyone who wanted to comment on a blog post could do so, though few had, so far.

“What did I expect?” she said, ruefully. “We’re getting old and some of us can barely retrieve our email.”



“Shall we each make our own lists or should we just shout out? I think I’d get more inspiration hearing what everyone else wanted to eat.”

Axel’s mind worked that way: input from others lighted him up.

“I likes me a good shout-out,” Saul said, nodding. “ Lobster roll.”

And the game was on.

“Filet Mignon” “Dungeness crab in butter and garlic” “Barbecued baby back ribs” “Pulled pork sandwich” “Lamb chops. Thick and rare.” “Mussels and fries” “Oysters Rockefeller” “Raw oysters. Bushels of them”

“Barbecued oysters” “Poached salmon” “Smoked salmon” “Salmon mousse”

“Fried clams from Cape Cod” “Maple glazed ham” “Fresh foccacio with mozzarella” “Pecan rolls” “Mac and three cheeses” “Potato and egg salad”

“Salade Nicoise” “Cobb Salad”

“Hey. Now we’re into veggies.” Ax protested

“That’s because we’re adults. With sophisticated palates.” Shelley chided him.

“Speak for thyself, Queen Fancypants. I’m still mostly an only-if-I-have-to veggie consumer.”

“Axel! That’s not even true. You like almost every vegetable that exists!”

Hazel, who made sure they ate leafy greens at every meal was indignant.

“Not for the sake of a last supper list, babe. I’m strictly high-quality protein and sweetmeats.”

“I’m hungry!” Saul announced, looking slightly surprised.

“Anyone else?” Shelley raised her eyebrows. “We only have forty-seven casseroles, not to mention that luxury shipment of lox, whitefish and bagels that came in from New York this morning.”

“Well, didn’t we just come on the right day!” Ax ambled toward the kitchen. “Haze, darling girl, I’ll put your kale thing in the oven and you can perhaps busy yourself ferrying the New York goodies to the table. That okay, Shell? Or shall we let plates teeter on our knees and stay on the upholstered surfaces? Those of us with less than ample padding in the posterior might appreciate eating in the sitting area.”

“Goofball!” Shelley said. “I don’t know how you put up with this, Hazel.” But her smile was fond.

The food was outstanding. Hazel hadn’t thought she was hungry but she kept slathering cream cheese on bagel halves and heaping them with lox. Saul ate more slowly but clearly enjoyed each bite and, in the end, left nothing on his plate but a bit of pickle stem.

“Is this what you guys do every night” Ax asked, pushing slightly back from the table. “Vocal food porn, followed by a high caloric feast? Can I just move in?”

“No, this is a first. But I’m impressed with the results.” Shelley was pressing her finger onto the bagel plate and licking the sesame seeds off of it. “Saul has been kind of ‘meh’ about food for a couple days. I guess if you’ve got a New York guy you feed him New York food.”

“So. About the blog, Shell?” Hazel felt the need for some direction.

“You’re reading it, right? I’m just not getting much in the way of comments. I was hoping folks might want to dialogue – ask the questions that they had to know everyone had but nobody quite wanted to use the D word.”

“I get that. What if I became your co-blogger?”

For most of the previous year, Shelley had been writing a memoir of her days as a Radical political activist in the 60’s and 70’s. The working title was the same name as her web site’s: Pignocity. It was a rueful, funny, gossipy look at how a girl from a conservative but flamboyant family of performers morphed into a front-lines activist and loved almost every minute of it.

Hazel was one of Shelley’s beta readers. So was Axel. Hazel had discovered that she really liked reading from an editor’s perspective. Maybe she should have followed her love for books into publishing. (Second guessing her own career choices and coming up with ones that would have been better was one of her favorite games, in retirement) She was also doing some writing of her own, structured (if at all) by the NaNoWriMo (National Write a Novel in a Month, which consumes the entire month of November for the writers who participate.) This was her fourth venture into the heady world of make-your-own make believe. She didn’t really have a plot. Or maybe she had too many plots, petulantly refusing to merge. What she loved about the program was that none of the usual constraints mattered. The idea was to get as much written in as little time as possible (1750 words per day was the suggested amount, 50,000 words during the month the ultimate goal.) Hazel was lagging behind, drastically so, and

about to provide herself with another distraction but really? Who cared? What was important, after all?

“What exactly would that mean, ‘co-blogger’?”

“Well, I think we’d have to discover that as we went along. I was thinking that you would post an observation or an incident or some new perspective on Saul and I would research, if necessary, and comment on your post. To see we could stimulate other people to kind of dialogue.”

“Would we be welcome as commentators?” Saul gestured to Ax and himself.”

“You mean you have something to say? Ax? You too? All righty then. Come one, come all.”

“Let’s just try it for a couple, three days, Shell. If it gets people talking, good.”

“If not, we’ll have to get outrageous.” She smiled. Shelley had made her rep on outrageous. Not so very many people had ever helped run a real pig for president.

When Hazel opened Pignocity, the morning following the New York nostalgia feast, Shelley’s entry read as follows:

Oiga, comadres y compadres! This is me, your commandante, Shelley Fancypants Starr, commentator, reporter and adrenaline junky, now here reporting on the perils of a night without Xanax. And why? You may ask. . . Because I could. Or, thought I could. I won’t say never again but that’s what I’m thinking. Even the groggy headed morning and the aches in the joints are better

than this twitchy, breathless state I've stumbled into, after shooting straight up in bed at 12:30 and being unable to squeeze one more doze out of the blinkin' night. While Saul serenely sawed all the logs that God gave and woke up smiling at 8:30. Readers, I didn't kill him."

Hazel scrolled down to the Comment section and sat staring at the empty box. She was intimately familiar with the kind of night that woke you gently around midnight – a soft siren song about just the smallest, plainest, meekest little piss needing to be taken before oblivion could once more descend - then grabbed you with talons and fangs and hung on like a crazy pit bull, inoculating you with fear till you shook and gasped and tried to make side deals with whoever was in charge: what you'd give up if only this would STOP. She signed in as "Schmertz"

"Fellow traveler on the dark road" she wrote. "Ain't nothin' gentle about that kind of night, nor is it good. Raging is about the only way of coping. I happen to know, by the way, that you barely take enough Xanax to keep your eyes shut for an hour and a half. Do not fear addiction. If it happens, we'll go to Canyon Ranch and reprogram."

Should I submit this? She wondered briefly, then did.

The first response was posted a half hour later.

*What is the matter with you people? Can't you sluts stay off drugs even for long enough to provide care for a man who is dying? I'm calling the Senior Hotline to tell them to get Saul out of there before you kill him by mistake. Love and kisses, Andy: PS What were those evil, middle of the night thoughts?*

Andy Carter was a friend of Shelley's since their days of revolutionary fervor. They had been gassed together in Chicago. They had worked on a workers' newspaper in Boston. Andy, now an active Grey Panther, was still one of the most fearless people Hazel had ever met. On her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday she had gone bungee jumping in Yosemite. Because she wanted to. She could probably beat death into submission with a tire iron.

An hour or so later there was another comment. "We took a vote at breakfast and are unanimous that we do not want you to kill Saul, even if he wakes up cheerful and you haven't slept a wink. But you might want the Hospice nurse to check him for sleep apnea. Or else you could sleep in your study. Wearing earphones. Love from the Maidens. Oh, and we'll be over later with Barbeque."

Next: "Don't let that Schmertz person drag you off to Canyon Ranch. There are cheaper places closer to home. Besides, Saul needs you."

"Really, Shell! Do you need some negative like that Schmertz in your life? She (I'm assuming it's a "she", since a man wouldn't be dragging you off to a spa in the middle of a crisis) is just trying to egg you on to feel sorry for yourself when now is the time for good energy and prayers. Tell "her" to get lost."

At the end of the afternoon, Hazel called Shelley on her cell. "Where are you? Have you been monitoring the comments from today?"

"I'm at the Berkeley Marina, walking near the water, kicking stones. Really, taking pictures of water birds for Saul. He wanted to come but he also didn't want to leave the bed. He kind of wavered at the top of the stairs and then retreated.

So, he gets to smell the fresh air in my hair and look at pictures of herons instead. And, yeah, I've been checking the blog on my phone. This crowd is not big on gallows humor, verdad?"

"I think they'd shoot me if they had me in their sights. But I can take it. Our blog personae are beginning to emerge. But somehow I never expected to be perceived as the one leading you down the path to perdition and ignominy."

"You must have done really well on your SATs."

"What? Where did that come from?"

"Your vocabulary. I can only stand in awe."

"Is there anything else to report? I'm just looking for a scoop, of course. You understand. We reporters and commentators need to hang together, especially when we're being vilified."

"You betcha, Brenda Starr. Well, I had a little outing to Oaksterdam this afternoon."

"What's that?"

"God, you city types are Soooo provincial. The source of all medicinal pot is all."

"Oh, right! Saul's got an MJ card now. So? Tell!"

"It felt like an armed supermarket on the gulag. Park one thousand yards from ominous, windowless black building. Walk briskly through parking lot. Many reserved slots, all empty at 2 p.m. Stopped at door by fat androgyne with lopsided tats covering forearms and pistol lolling in shoulder holster. Determined to not have filled out the right papers. Wishing desperately for a cigarette, so I

could appear nonchalant. Asked for one. Androgyne shuddered and looked like he/she would spit. Filthy habit. After 20 minutes, sheaf of papers delivered to Cerebrus by tiny elfin person, wearing a hairbow. "Here, Daddy," she said. Most of the papers required Saul's signature, so I have to go back tomorrow."

"I'm speechless! Who's Seererbuss?"

"The dog that guards the entrance to hell, if I'm remembering right. Hades, I mean."

"How's Saulie?"

"Tired. Quiet. It's like watching a Polaroid develop in reverse, you know? Going from vivid to blur. He has about an hour of energy each day, kind of split up into ten minute segments. And there have been too many visitors who have stayed too long. He doesn't have any way to recoup all the energy he puts out."

"Ax and I were thinking we'd come over for a bit today, but it sounds like I should call him off."

"Not necessarily. Saul really cheers up when you guys are around. He is more himself than almost any other time. Because you make him laugh. And you, Hazel, listen to him. If we had a guest suite, I'd insist that you guys move in for the duration."

"And we would happily do that, dogs, cats and all. You know that, Shell."

Schmertz had definitely raised some hackles.

"Shelley, bubala, why do you let somebody so negative as that Schmertz anywhere near Saul? The poor man is hanging on to life and she's talking death.



Do him a favor and put her in her place, which is not at your side or in your home.”

“Shall we tell them it’s short for Weltschmerz?”

“If they can’t figure that out, they don’t deserve to know. I’m hanging up now and taking my birds in flight back to Saul. Talk to you later.”

That was Tuesday. On Thursday, Shelley called at 6 a.m., knowing Hazel was always up and often on her way to gym by that hour.

“Can you guys pick up a big bottle of tequila and some limes and come over for lunch today?”

“Sure,” Hazel yawned. “Guacamole, too? What’s up?”

Shelley sniffed, then blew her nose.

“Shell? Are you crying?”

“Drizzling. Like the weather. I’m just sleep-deprived. Pay no attention to it.”

“Right. How’s Saul?”

“Not so jolly this morning. I think he’s hurting a lot more than he wants to admit. Every time he moves he lets out a groan.”

“Should he be getting more meds?”

“Oh, no doubt. But he’s still trying to tough it out so his mind stays clear. Old fool.” She inhaled sharply, then sobbed.

“When are the nurse people coming?”

“In a couple hours. I already called them. It just seemed good to have something to look forward to, after they tell us that he really should up the meds,

maybe intravenously and he resists and we wear ourselves out of what little stamina we have left.”

“We’ll be there by 11. I’ll have my cell – I know, you’re astounded – so call if you think of more for us to bring.”

Saul was upstairs, in bed, when Ax and Hazel trooped in. Even more surprising, he was in his underwear. The bedroom smelled a little stale. There were pill containers everywhere. The bed was heaped with books, newspapers, both an iPad and a laptop, a tea tray, a checked flannel shirt, pillows, two down quilts and four photo albums.

“We’re labeling these,” Shelley explained. They’ll go to the nephews, eventually, who will not have the least idea what relatives they are looking at. Saul’s putting together a family tree, kind of – at least the progenitors on his side of the family.”

“When you’re done with yours, can I bring you mine?” Axel asked. “Only mine are in shoeboxes and file folders instead of being all nicely mounted like this. Plus, I don’t know who half the people are. Not that it stopped me from taking a million pictures of my own, over the years. Maybe I could weed out the ones in which I remember no one’s name.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Saul said. His voice was thready, with a rasp that hadn’t been there before. “There are several other projects that are demanding precedence. I just haven’t addressed them because I didn’t want to do them.”

“Why not?” Hazel couldn’t help herself. Whenever anyone opened a conversational door, she walked right through.

“Mostly because they have to do with Anna.” Saul’s dead wife.

“Oh. Her things?”

“Her art work. I don’t remember if I ever gave you the art tour, but a lot of what you see around the house are her creations. They managed to fit in so nicely with Shelley’s political memorabilia that there was no need to change things around. But I need to catalogue what I have before it all goes to whoever gets it next. I’ve got an art dealer coming to chat next week who can maybe give me some suggestions. Anyway, what’d you bring me?”

“Another little taste of New York, baby! Some pastrami, some corned beef, some half-sours, some kugel, some dark rye. . .”

“Heaven! I’m in heaven!” Saul sounded almost like Louis Armstrong.

“No you’re not, Saul. You’re in Berkeley, at your very fine home with your delightful friends. Not heaven. Not yet.”

“Shelley! Dollink! Who needs heaven when things are this good?”

“Are you going to grace us with your presence on the parlor floor, Saul, or shall we bestrew ourselves on this sparkling linen?” Axel was calculating where the clutter on the bed could remove to, in order to make room for the abundance of food. There appeared to be no unoccupied surfaces.

“When was the last time I heard ‘bestrew’ used in a sentence? Be still, my thundering, language-mad heart!” Saul clutched his chest. “I’ll attend the festivities in the public area, dear comrade.” He swung his legs over the side of

the bed and gave a small groan. Smiled at the assemblage. "Don't even ask!" he said.

They didn't. Saul headed for the shower and the other three busied themselves in the kitchen. Hazel emptied a container of whitefish salad into a small bowl. She ran her finger around the walls of the container and licked the salad off. "Mmmmm. I think I could eat this everyday, at least once. Shelley, did you see these bagels? They are so small and shapely and " slicing one in half "look at that grain. Almost, almost as fine as a New York bagel. Lucky us!"

Axel had sliced the rest of the bagels and now bit into one, then swiped it through the whitefish. "Oh yes! I think Saul is right on the money! What could heaven have to offer that's any more desirable than this?" He dance a little heel and toe around the small kitchen, ending with a swat on Hazel's tush.

There was very little left in any container, by the time they had finished their feast. Axel rubbed his belly, contented.

"If I lived in New York I'd surely get fat," Shelley said. "Must keep that in mind."

"You have way too much will power to get fat," Hazel said, feeling her pants tighten around her stomach. She contemplated opening the top button.

"My will power only seems to work if it isn't sorely tested."

"Do we have an agenda today or can we just tell jokes?" Hazel knew Axel had been storing up jokes because he's been trying them out on her. Maybe next year he'd become a stand-up comic, an open-mic regular. Timing was a tiny

problem. Ax had a joke about that, of course: the interrupting cow. People under the age of six howled gleefully at that joke.

“Do you want to hear a joke about Ebola?”

Shelley and Hazel wrinkled their noses. Saul said “Sure.”

“You won’t get it.” A pause, while everyone tried to formulate an answer.

They all got it and snorted at the same moment.

“But seriously, folks. . . Have you heard about the blonde at the library?”

“Wow! Blonde jokes! Which century are we in?” Shelley sneered.

“A blonde walked into the library and said to the librarian ‘I’ll have a burger and an order of fries.’ The librarian said ‘Madam! This is a library!’ ‘Oh.’ And then Ax whispered ‘I’ll have a burger and an order of fries.’”

Hazel chuckled. She actually liked blonde jokes, probably because she wasn’t blonde.

“Later with the jokes,” Shelley said. “Call the meeting to order, Saul.”

“Yes ma’am! Order, y’all hear? Okay. Here’s the question of the day: burial or cremation? Sub question: if cremation, what becomes of cremains?”

“God, I hate that word! It’s too much like craisins – you know, those dried cranberries? Can’t we just call them ashes?”

“Fine with me, but I think the folks in the business prefer their newly created euphemism. Rephrasing here, in deference to Shelley, the word police, what becomes of the ashes?”

“Saul has an appointment tomorrow with somebody whose organization takes care of picking up the corpse and, if you please, rendering it and disposing

of the - residue, I guess. He also made an appointment with a rabbi we've never met, who has cemetery connections. Then there's the possibility of shipping the corpse to New Orleans or Paris, to rest forever – or until the next big flood - in one of those mausoleum thingys. We're mulling the options, you see. Thinking about where his spirit will get the most visitors."

"Crap! Why can't we just vaporize at the appropriate moment?" Hazel was getting unnerved. It felt like they were discussing which scrawny old chicken should have its neck wrung.

"That's a terrific idea but not an available option, I'm sorry to say." Saul leaned over and patted Hazel's hand.

"Do you have a preference, Saul?"

"Yes, but it is apt to change from day to day. Right now, I'm favoring the New Orleans solution, just because it's kind of gaudy and I might be able to have a jazz band march my coffin to the burying grounds."

"We don't have much time to set that up, Saul. I haven't even figured out where the graveyards are and whether there is any space available. This is probably the priciest option. Except for Paris. But I don't think you get a jazz band in Paris. Really, aren't you just running videos of 'Treme' in your head?"

"Shelley makes a good point about available space. Do we know whether there's anything other than the Columbarium with space to spare?"

"What's the Columbarium?"

"A place in San Francisco where you can store your little canister of ashes in perpetuity. Or, anyway, until the next major earthquake."

“But no jazz band, I would guess.” Saul was pensive.

“Who knows? Maybe music can be played at anytime. Maybe they’ve got Chopin Nocturnes on a tape loop, running 24/7. It has always sounded like an interesting place. Why don’t Haze and I pay it a visit, take some pictures, if that’s allowed. You can probably get the rundown on how it works and how much it costs from the Internet, but it would be nice to know how it feels to be there.”

The matter was then tabled for further investigation. The sun has just set as Ax and Hazel drove home. From the Bridge, the afterglow and illumination were spectacular.

“Just another gorgeous day in Paradise,” Ax observed. “Are you up for a trip to the Columbarium, Haze? Maybe tomorrow.”

“I guess so. I mean, I know all this planning is the right thing to do. But it kind of gives me the creeps.”

“And cemeteries don’t?”

“Well, they’re usually all green in all directions. . .”

“So you can pretend to be on the lawn of somebody’s enormous estate? The green, rolling hills of West Virginia. . . . Saul is dying, Hazel. Nothing short of a miracle is going to change that, at this point. If planning the details of what becomes of his corporeal yet moribund self is what keeps him engaged, I say bring it. Besides, it’s all information that could be useful to us someday.”

Knowing what he said was true, knowing that the information might be relevant fairly soon, Hazel still felt silenced. Even though she knew he was

whistling in the dark and was sad about losing the kinship he and Saul had developed, she was still irritated.

Hazel made a list of everyone she had lost from her life in the preceding twelve months. Her childhood friend from Williamstown was the first to go, after a years long struggle with breast cancer. Melinda had taken an aggressive approach to facing down the big C, including getting all her old fillings removed and replaced. She was a white witch and a shaman and she died.

Saul's cousin was on her list, even though she had never met him and probably wouldn't have liked him if she had. There were countless stories about hard-headed Morris, holed up in his cold water 5<sup>th</sup> floor walkup in the East Village, living on Twinkies and baked beans cold from the can, amidst towering stacks of newspapers and political demonstration flyers. He had flown his cat to Texas before he swallowed the pills that put him permanently to sleep.

A woman named Bonnie Joan, met in an exercise program, quietly left her life at the end of the summer. Their friendship had gone inactive after Bonnie Joan cut herself off from the casual group of women that had formed during a shared early morning round of circuit training. Apparently, no one had reacted appropriately, in BJ's opinion, to the health episode she'd had one Thanksgiving, which wound her up in the hospital for two weeks and hitched to a portable oxygen tank for the rest of her life.

The trouble was that BJ had a wide mean streak and was OCD about cleanliness. She scrubbed her brick back yard with diluted Clorox and a toothbrush. Hazel had liked hearing the stories of BJ's air hostess career: a stew



on R&R flights out of Vietnam to Hawaii or Indonesia. Once, BJ had driven them to Sausalito for lunch and then cruised her Lexus by the crumbling apartment complex near the highway where BJ had shared living space with three other stews. She pointed up at the top floor unit where much merriment and consumption of alcohol and illicit gropings had occurred.

Hazel had cut back on their encounters and had suddenly gotten too busy to even return BJ's calls, after BJ, bored with seeing to the multiplying needs of her ninety year old next door neighbor just stopped seeing him. She had her reasons but the old guy was dead within a couple months. He had probably thought that, despite his incontinence and insistence on starting drinking (rye and ginger ale) before noon, she had a little crush, a fondness, an affinity. Hazel had previously seen BJ cozy up to another neighbor – an irascible old woman, liked by no one – in the same way. She made herself indispensable then pulled away when it got clear that no wills were going to be changed in her favor.

Still, BJ wasn't supposed to die. It might have been death by boredom, Hazel thought. There were no more elderly neighbors to befriend. She didn't use her backyard for fear of having to interact with the young family on the north side. Her husband was a rage king, with a mania for experimental cooking and bicycles. BJ's only pleasures in life were her Marlboro lights and bottomless glasses of cheap white wine.

After a prolonged silence, Hazel got an email from BJ. She didn't open it right away. She had been thinking about BJ, halfway planning to call, not in any hurry to do so and unsure what she wanted to say. The email was signed by the

husband. It said simply that she had died and, per her request, there would be no services. Hazel wrote back immediately, expressing her regrets and – even though he had said there would be none - asking to be included in any kind of commemorative event. She heard nothing more. It gave her the same eerie feeling that she'd gotten from a long-ago note, informing her that one of her daughter's ex boyfriends had succumbed to the tuberculosis that had been stripping him of energy and flesh for several years. On some level, Hazel felt that it was just a hoax, a way to slide out from under paying child support to the several women with whom he had begotten children. He was a joker, after all: completely capable of ducking, running and creating an entirely new, possibly even healthy identity for himself.

On the cusp of Fall, Nora up the street died suddenly. She was nearing 80 and had suffered for years with arthritis and lupus, but she got up every morning and swept her driveway and took her little lumpy old Chihuahua for a stiff legged frolic in the park. On Sundays, she went to Mass twice. She had lived in the neighborhood her entire adult life. Her best friend was a Spanish priest. Her death was a shock because she had seemed indomitable.

The last name on the list was Rasta, the big long-haired black cat Hazel had shared with several other families in her neighborhood. Rasta had once belonged to her daughter, Polly. She'd gotten him as a kitten, in Seattle, and allowed him to follow his own inclination to roam back yards and snack along the way. When Polly moved to Brooklyn, she bestowed Rasta on her mother. "We couldn't let him out in Brooklyn," she reasoned. "He'd go nuts."

Hazel had met him several times and hadn't liked him much. He was a huffy, imperious kind of cat. Untrustworthy, she thought. But Rasta's heart was broken by Polly's departure. He camped out in Hazel's basement for almost a year. He established one corner as a base and laid a trail of tiny skeletons across the basement floor. Occasionally, he would deign to allow Hazel a few moments in his presence. Sometimes he'd forget himself enough to draw near and purr by her knees. By the end of the year he would come into the house and eat cat food, if it was appealing enough. He hissed mightily at the other cats and the dogs. The cats were fascinated, the dogs taken aback.

For the next eleven years, Rasta roamed at will. Hazel learned that he often came hurtling over the back fence if she stood in the yard and called. He would eat, drink, sit on her lap briefly and be off on another excursion, like a young widow.

Inevitably he got into trouble. His ears were torn and he had a perpetually oozing sore on the left side of his nose. He had no use for having any ailment attended to and Hazel's attempts were met with days of absence. He exasperated her but she worried about him. When he came in soaked and stinking and was weak enough to not fight her when she sponged him off, she knew it was time for the vet. The other cats had not forgiven Hazel for disappearing Rasta, although they seemed drawn to the spot in the backyard where the small box of ashes was buried.

So much death. How does a person accommodate loss after loss? What does it mean about life, that people and animals are wrested from it, will they or not?

Polly called, sounding cheerful. News about the super's tiny daughter: off to Hollywood, with a movie role, even though she needed help with math. News about granddaughter Maribel, singing her heart out with the Brooklyn Children's Chorus and loving the music.

Smiles in Polly's voice always made Hazel happy. She tried not to worry about her children and had succeeded for quite awhile until the year, now a decade in the past, when both of their marriages fell apart and they were flailing and suffering, on opposite coasts. Polly has been hurt again, by someone who should never have been near her life: a husk of a person. In Native American society, there would have been a way to isolate this person who so clearly wanted nothing except to plant discord and uncertainty. Stoic Polly had never, during the course of her marriage, let on how stifled she was feeling, how little her husband respected or appreciated her. How do you protect such a grown up child?

Of course, Hazel hadn't mentioned her own altering medical status. It was easy to avoid the questions by asking more. Who doesn't like to talk about themselves? And Polly, too busy to cultivate friendships outside of the public elementary school where she taught, could always be lured into talking about her students and their foibles. But she did want Polly to know there was turbulence in the channel, so she talked about Saul and Shelley.

Polly didn't know them well – in fact, might have met them once, at a holiday party. She did know that Hazel and Axel got together with them, as though part of a nomadic tribe, on holidays and for family events. She knew that Saul and Shelley lived in a co-housing community and that Ax and Haze were envious of the small town within a city. She expressed her sorrow to hear of Saul's dwindling connection with life. And, predictably, she asked how her mother had been doing.

“Not so great,” Hazel confessed.

A squeak came into Polly's voice as her vocal chords tightened. “ Why, Mom? What's wrong?”

Hazel told her about the new batch of scans and the spots on the lungs: too small to biopsy but quite probably traveling breast cancer cells. Nothing else alarming, really, as far as the oncologist was concerned. Lumps under the arm, growing. Red irritation at the edges of the armpit. Pain in the right hip, sometimes felling like bone scraping bone, but that wasn't new. Headaches were new. Grey floaters and dizziness were new.

Polly had listened quietly and now needed to get off the phone and start dinner for her boyfriend and her troubador child. Hazel felt marginally better for having blurted out the newest symptoms and for not talking about how scared she was about all these things she couldn't control. Why couldn't she be as calm as Saul? Was Saul as calm as he appeared to be?

Shelley's blog said "Words are flying away from Saul like shore birds caught in high winds. He smiles and waits, patient. He wishes there were peaches, strawberries. I curl up beside him and let the warmth relax all the tight places in my abdomen. People visit and stay too long. We trade our thoughts silently."

Hazel called Shelley. "Come to the City. We can have lunch on the waterfront and find a place for a pedicure."

"I can't promise. Saul may need me."

"Will the nurses come tomorrow?"

"Let me check." They would be coming, from 10 – 1, to show Saul more tricks with the morphine and to give him a leg massage.

"Do they need you there?"

No, if anything, they'd rather she wasn't. All the nurses had fallen in love with courtly Saul and didn't want the competition or the distracting questions from Shelley.

"Then I'll meet you in front of the Ferry Building at 11. We can walk along the water until the restaurants open."

As they walked towards each other, against the backdrop of soaring building and sparkling water, the women assessed. Hazel thought Shelley looked tired and thin, shoulders hunching, her hair dry, her step not so certain and bold. She was dressed as usual: quirky and stylish in her skinny black pants and asymmetric grey jacket, but the clothes seemed to hang on her. Her boot tips were scuffed and her pant legs brushed the ground. Shelley saw the familiar

outline of her tall, broad-shouldered friend, dressed in denim and down vest, somewhat tentative, as though each step forward required an effort, a reminder to proceed. They hugged and took hold of each other's hands.

"Shall we stroll? Or just go sit and look at the water?" Hazel asked, hostess to honored guest. Walking was noisier and more interactive. The water was alluring. "Or should we try to find a spa and get prettified?"

"I think what I'd like is a nice glass of wine," Shelley said. "Let's go to that place we had our aperitifs after 'Midnight in Paris'."

As they were evolving traditions, movies and after food on Christmas Day had emerged as a keeper. But 'Midnight' had been the first and the Ferry Building Wine Shop just happened to have a few high tables and stools, just right for sharing pates and deliberating over a bottle of perfectly chilled Alsatian Reisling. Half a glass later, and some fond memories shared of the best Woody Allen since Annie Hall, Shelley looked straight at Hazel, sighed and said, "Thanks for thinking of this and being available. It's been tough."

"And you've been handling it beautifully. You're the poster child for grace under pressure."

"Saul is making it as easy as he possibly can and I can sort of slipstream on his benevolent energy a lot of the time. We make a good team. But there are those long, dark hours in the middle of the night. . ."

"How do you handle those?"

"Since I've realized that Saul is sleeping too deeply, with the morphine, to notice when I get up, I slide out of bed and go into my office: close enough to

hear if he calls, far enough away to be able to turn on light. We've got a little fridge and an electric kettle up there now, so I make some kind of hot beverage and wrap my hand around it and brood. It gives me a little bit more control over the whim-whams. Not much, but a little. Sometimes I can turn off the waterworks."

"Ah. I wondered if you ever got to cry."

"This is not like the first time, with Vic. Then, I was stiff as a poker every minute. I didn't shed one tear until Vic gave up the struggle. Now? I cry a lot. Those stupid Youtube animal films. A kid with muddy hands in the side yard of a house with a plastic rockinghorse on the porch. Saul's socks. Ducks crossing the road"

"Chick flicks work for me. Sometimes books, but I hate getting snot on them. But what I want to know is are you taking care of you?"

"I'm eating every day, if that's what you mean. The community would probably force-feed me if I wasn't. I always try everything they bring us as soon as it waltzes in the door, so they know it's been appreciated, even if it's a tofu and turnip casserole. Otherwise, Saul is still doing his best to take care of me. He had his financial guru over yesterday, to go over a list of his assets and how they are to be distributed."

"He's amazing. But that's still not what I'm asking. I don't quite know how to ask it, even though I don't mean to be euphemistic. I'm not asking about food or assets or sex, just more like mental health. Crying is good. Laughing is good."



“That’s what we have you and Ax for, Hazel. Saul never laughs as much with other people as he does with you guys.

They agreed that one glass of wine each had really done the trick and any more would probably put them under their bar stools. They wandered the length of the building, stopping for exotic ice cream in tiny cups, then a hand-made piece of chocolate. Shelley bought a pale blue mason jar full of preserved peaches. Once she had it, it made her sad. “I’d like to think he’d be here for another season of stone fruit. Did I tell you we had roasted slices of those giant peaches that were coming in from the Delta last summer? Did it on the hibachi, with just the smallest drizzle of olive oil. Oooh, they were good!”

Outside in the plaza, canvas booths were selling all sorts of odd touristy items. They spent a good while at a hat booth, trying on hipster snap brims and lacy woven straw. Shelley looked good in hats. “My grandmother. Grandma Beth. She was a milliner. I got to hang with her at the shop a couple summers. She could have sold freezers to Eskimos.” Shelley demonstrated how the hat was to be placed on the head at the most flattering angle, just the kind of delighted smile that should break over the vender’s face, beholding the vision of beauty in the gorgeous hat. Hazel laughed so hard that her stomach hurt.

They walked together to the BART and made a plan to meet two days later. Shelley would call if anything changed and would definitely call with a shopping list. And maybe, just maybe, they’d suggest to the guys an afternoon of chess or bridge and take themselves off to College Avenue for a wee shop. “I

need something that fits,” Shelley said, “but I don’t think I could bear to try anything on unless you were with me, telling me I looked terrific.”

“Y’know,” Saul said, “I’ve always wanted to sing.” He had actually gotten dressed and come slowly down the steep staircase with his new walker. He perched on a stool at the kitchen counter, looking expectant.

“Hah! So have I!” Axel responded, as he unloaded the assortment of shopping bags. “Not that I don’t. . .”

Hazel was startled by Saul’s appearance. It had been no more than five days since she’d seen him and he looked half the size she remembered. He was almost as pale as the white T-shirt that peeked over the top of his Mendocino sweatshirt. His hair had been cut, apparently, and seemed very sparsely distributed on his head. But he was animated and smiling: happy to see them, just barely restraining himself from asking what they’d brought.

They had stocked up at Wise Sons deli in San Francisco. Plenty of lox, since that was so clearly a favorite and would not need to be consumed all at once. Matzoh ball soup – Ax said it was almost as good as his mother’s and at least the matzoh balls were fluffy. An assortment of pastrami, salami and corned beef and a beautiful, still-warm loaf of rye bread. Four enormous dill pickles. A vat of cole slaw. A small container of mustard. A jar of pickled beets.

“Oh my ears and whiskers!” Saul exclaimed, rubbing his disappearing belly.

“We couldn’t decide which so we got some of everything. Hazel said you’ve been getting a few too many tofu casserole deliveries, so we thought we’d bring enough deli to give you several days of options.” He had spoken in a half-whisper and looked around to make sure no tofu-bearing elf was sneaking in the door.

“Are you guys hungry now? Or shall we wait to eat until Hazel and I get back from romping around?”

“How about we eat now and later? Maybe you’ll capture some ice cream on your travels.” But Saul could tell that Shelley was ready to depart. “why don’t you fair ladies be off on your appointed rounds, leaving us gents to cater to our own culinary needs here? We do have one thing to discuss before the day is over.”

“Okay. Will we need infusions of alcohol?”

“Absolutely. Bring home some Sam Adams and some single malt Scotch.”

“Scotch, Saul? I’ve never seen you ask for Scotch.”

“No time like the present, is there?”

Hazel had to ask, “What’s our topic today?”

“My wake, babycakes. I either want it held before I go or, at least, get to have my say about the music.”

“Have you guys been talking about a wake?” Hazel asked, as she and Shelley headed for the parking lot. “Oh, sorry Shell. Are you okay with driving? I just don’t know where I’m going, driving in Berkeley.”

“And you don’t like driving at the best of times and circumstances, am I right?”

“I am that transparent?”

“I think Axel might have mentioned your car phobia a time or three. He thinks it’s kind of funny.”

“Unless he needs an errand run and then it pisses him off. But about Saul’s wake? He really wants to have it before he – um – dies?”

They strapped themselves into Saul’s Honda and joined the flow of traffic on Shattuck Ave. “I can’t quite make it out,” Shelley said. “He keeps mentioning it, so I know it’s on his mind. It might have something to do with being remembered? Wanting a look at how he will be remembered? Because that’s what you do, right? Tell stories about the deceased. Drink. Dance. Not that Saul’s much into dancing these days. Or drinking, although that may be about to change.”

“You guys are not particularly religious, as far as I can tell.”

“True dat. You know what we do. You and Ax are there for most of it. A yartzeit for Vic, but now that’s more for Hadley and Paz, since it’s the only way to keep Zaide Vic in his life. At least one seder each Passover. Maybe we’ll do something for Paz around Channukah: gelt and a dreidel. Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, not so much. If I think of it, I say a few words – quietly, you know, in my head, for the bygone ancestors. What’s funny is that, even though I don’t do much, it’s still more than my parents did and they both grew up Orthodox.” She

neatly parked in front of a consignment shop. “Oh, we are in luck, Haze. There’s never any parking over here, these days.”

“Maybe Ax sent his amazing parking karma to keep us company.”

“Saul has that, too. Funny, isn’t it? They both wear super-strong glasses and never notice what we’re wearing or that we’ve had major haircuts and yet they can spot a parking place from a block away.”

One of Hazel’s favorite things to do was to help friends shop. She was good at it: spotted colors, styles, items that shouldn’t have looked good but did and was as satisfied, at the end of a session, as if she had bought the garments or boots or ballet flats herself. But she hadn’t shopped like that ever since her best friend, a true and devout clothes horse, with the rangy build to wear extremely odd, interesting couture items had died. The joy went out of it, somehow. But Shelley needed some wardrobe infusion that brought a moment or two of happiness – a look in the mirror that said ‘Not so bad for an old broad.’ And Hazel was equal to the task.

An hour later, laden with recycled shopping bags, they tumbled into outside chairs at the café next door to Twice Around. Shelley was wearing the pale blue cashmere scarf with the beaded embroidery, for which she had paid \$7.50. She set the bag containing green elf boots on the table, in order to admire them.

“My mother always said one should never place shoes on a dining table,” she said. “Supposed to bring bad luck. How much worse can my luck get?”

Hazel envied Shelley's feet, small enough to be comfortable in such dainty boots. She wondered if she would have bought them herself, had they fit. No., the question was would she have worn them, if she'd bought them. Axel had taught her to ask that question by asking it so much, when he deigned to shop with her, that now it resounded in her head and she tried to avoid buying anything that wasn't consumable. Since she had several closets full of garments that mostly still fit, staying clothed was not a problem. But she did love new shoes.

They each ordered a large, elaborate coffee drink and an assortment of macarons: a rainbow of cookies. Glutted with sweets, they lingered as the afternoon began to slope toward evening.

"Not that I'm hungry but do you suppose the boys have eaten all the deli?" Shelley was planning the trip home, trying to forestall another foray for provisions.

"My, I should certainly hope not! They'll be rolling around like piglets, uttering little squeaky moans and huge burps. I suppose it's time to go check in." Hazel stood, stiffly arching her back.

Not only was there an abundance of deli left, the table was artfully set and decorated with cloth napkins and a large bunch of sunflowers when the women walked in, laden with shopping, beer and Scotch. A bottle of wine rested in an ice bath. Neither of the men appeared to have gained an ounce. Perhaps they had nibbled – just a corner of a slice of corned beef, a gingerly teaspoon taste of kugel. They were full of stories about their respective chess triumphs. Even

though everyone professed not to be hungry, they were somehow able to cram down most of what was on the table.

Saul had eaten more slowly and lightly than the others and was lingering over his kugel. "Is the assemblage ready to talk wake?"

"Is that even an English sentence?" Axel teased.

"Maybe it's Erse. But you understood. What we talk about when we talk wake."

"Show off!" Shelley gave Saul a small pat. "You literary poseurs just can't help yourselves, can you?"

"My darling, you can only imagine what a pleasure it is for me to be in a group that understands the reference. But, before I become disinclined, let's talk wake."

It wasn't really a discussion – more like a briefing in which Saul made his wishes explicitly known and the others nodded. No one took notes at first but, as Hazel found the information piling into snowdrifts around her knees, she rummaged a small notebook out of her bag and began making cryptic notations. She wished she could draw, since her head was full of images that seemed to better express Saul's wishes than mere words could ever do. The farewell, as Saul's spirit left his depleted body. The phone call to the Hospice nurses, who would come and gently remove the discarded body-shell. Shelley, standing small and alone in the doorway of her echoing home, watching Saul leave for the last time. The crematorium. . . but this picture jumped and crackled and danced and Hazel couldn't bear to look at it.

“Okay. So much for logistics. Done with the mea culpas and tears. Now for the soul part. The sacred part of the brain where every piece of music you’ve ever loved resides. What you can never forget.”

Hazel was stuck at “mea culpas”. Whose? Why? Was it guilt for the acts or failures to act as to little things, like forgetting to pick up someone’s prescription for cough syrup or the sin of saying something despicable about a new friend? Stella and Axel had meanwhile jumped enthusiastically into singing pieces of song: “Had a dog and his name was Blue. . .” “Louis, Louis” “La Bamba” “I Wonder If I Care As Much” “All I Have To Do Is Dream”. Hazel thought, as she started singing a high Everley Brothers harmony, that she could ask Saul about the mea culpas the next time they were alone together.

“All of them!” Saul decreed, tears of laughter running down his cheeks. They had just completed a lugubrious and atonal version of “To Know Him Is To Love Him” which cracked them all up. “Keepers, all.”

Hazel’s birthday had been planned as a group effort. When Saul’s health became a factor, they had decided to celebrate with the first crab of the season at Saul and Shelley’s. Saul had been increasingly unsteady on his feet. He had also stopped eating much, so dragging him off to some noisy restaurant was a non-starter.

The week before the event, Ax and Hazel went out to dinner with Jack and Valentine, in town for the weekend to celebrate Val’s birthday. They had an early



reservation (the website had insisted on reservations and the restaurant was small) mainly so the visitors could compensate for jet lag by getting to bed early.

Both Jack and Val looked a little the worse for wear, when they arrived. Val, who had fallen off her bicycle the day before, was wearing a removable brace on her right leg and enjoying the euphoria of percodan.

“Are you drinking?” Hazel asked, wine bottle at the ready but nothing poured.”

“Mos def! Why the hell not? I’m not driving.”

Jack wandered around the kitchen, looking at the titles of the books piled up on the table and the window ledges. He started talking about a dizzy spell he had experienced a few hours before: prolonged enough that he pulled over to the curb and waited until it passed. He’d had a repeat, on the way to Ax and Hazel’s. But now he knew what to expect, he said. Jack was probably the most stubborn person Hazel had ever met. It wasn’t a quality she particularly admired but, somehow, she liked it in curly headed Jack. Because it seemed so silly.

Right away, the restaurant felt inhospitable. The greeting person, probably an owner, looked them over and didn’t see anything to relate to. She seated them at a booth, bisected on one side by a narrow pipe. Hazel and Axel chose that side and squashed themselves together on one side of the pipe. Val tried, unsuccessfully, to find a comfortable way of placing her leg. Jack got very quiet.

They ordered a bunch of appetizers, including fresh sardines, which came whole, with heads and eyes. The waiter offered to bone the fish and began that process, only to discover they were raw inside. The fish went back to the kitchen.

“Jesus, Jack. Are you okay?” Axel had noticed Jack’s uncharacteristic silence.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m okay.” But he clearly wasn’t. He didn’t make eye contact.

They picked at the coarsely chunked tuna tartar and cut the big chunk of red beet accompanying it into bite-sized pieces. Jack – usually a hearty and resolute trencherman – took one small piece of tuna on his plate and left it sitting. Hazel saw all the color fade from his face.

“We’re going home,” she announced. “Jack needs to be out of here.”

Out in the cool air, away from the noise, Jack’s spirits improved. By the time they had walked the two blocks back to the car, he was animated again. Axel had waited while the food was packaged to go and did not get home before they left.

“Sheesh. Happy birthday Val, huh? So shall we eat this now or what?” He held at least \$50 worth of food in handsome black boxes.

“I’ve got no appetite. None. I guess we save it for tomorrow?”

“Good by me. Let’s make some popcorn.”

On the morning of her birthday, Hazel took a shower. Because of water constraints, she had been taking two or maybe three showers per week and trying to keep them brief but a birthday needed acknowledgment and some kind of nod to the new beginning. When she slid back the shower door to start the water, she noticed an asymmetric black shape huddled in a bump on the shower mat. It was not unusual for a spider to invade the shower stall, though it was

never clear where they came in from or why they stayed. Sometimes Hazel washed them down the drain. Sometimes, if they kept their distance at the back of the tub, she tried to let them live.

When she turned on the water, the spider started skittering toward the steep side of the tub. Hazel sighed, turned the water off, got a glass from the kitchen and plopped it down over the spider, then slid the torn back cover of an old MAD paperback under the glass, lifted it out of the tub and carried it out the back door to the deck, then set the spider free. She could not start down the slippery slope of this next year with the death of a spider as her first act.

Hazel was glad she had stopped having hopes or fantasies about her own birthday celebrations. Ax was not inclined to create parties. They usually managed to go out somewhere to eat, often dragging friends along, but that was the norm until birthdays became another chance to party with Saul and Shelley.

Axel had meant to leave the City at 3, since it was raining intermittently and every driver seemed to get crazy in the rain. But they had both fallen asleep after lunch and then there were dog walks which had to occur and they didn't get on the road until 3:30. By then, there were accidents to be negotiated. It took two hours to make the drive they usually completed in 30 minutes.

Clouds surged and billowed towards them from the north although there were glimmerings of sun to the east. Shelley had called around the noon hour to say how glad she was they were coming and to warn that Saul was slipping fast. The day before, he'd had a party, presiding from the hospital bed now dominating the living room, drinking a little champagne and having a taste of chocolate torte

with his former office mates. It tired him out, maintaining wakefulness and a social presence, and he was sleeping a lot today. Don't call, she said, the ring of the phone startled and upset him.

Hazel had been to her Rosen method class in the morning, which almost always improved her mental and physical balance. Prone on her mat, at the end of class, her thoughts were with Saul and the poem she would like to write him.

I wish I could tie you down, anchor you to the ground,  
Lace my fingers around your string and let you float  
Buoyant, like my first helium balloon  
Till your tether slipped through my sticky palm  
And you sailed away to the sun.

That was as far as she'd gotten and didn't seem as expressive as she'd hoped. A sore throat she'd been dodging found her as they sat in traffic. By the time they reached Berkeley, she had a headache, too.

"I'm not sure Shelley should let me in," she croaked to Axel. Before they had gotten on the freeway, she had suggested they turn around and head for home, but Ax had vetoed that idea. Perhaps he thought he was doing her a favor: cajoling her into doing something she was resisting. He frequently played the Ax-knows-better card. After all these years, she couldn't anymore determine whether he did or didn't.

Saul was in bed at the far end of the living room. His arms were bare in his short-sleeved T-shirt. He was propping one arm up with the other and the upper arm was beautiful, like the leg of a deer or gazelle, Hazel thought. The branch of

a deciduous tree in mid winter after an ice storm. She wanted to hug him, to put her head down beside his and breathe with him but the sore throat insisted that she keep her distance. He opened his eyes and may have smiled, before they closed again. Did he recognize her?

“It’s me, Saul. Hazel. I cut my hair, is all that’s different. All day long people haven’t recognized me.”

His eyes opened again and shut almost immediately.

“Happy birthday, sweetie. I was wondering about a birthday present and then I realized that I was giving you something very rare indeed. An opportunity to celebrate your day with a dying man.” Shelley smiled.

After a tiny beat, so did Hazel. Because this is how they roll, right? Gallows humor. They’d probably all been beggars at public hangings back in the Dark Ages.

“Maybe we should franchise this type of celebration?”

“Heh!” said Axel. “Shelley, can we shovel some aspirin into this babe?”

They were talking in quiet voices, almost whispering. Each glanced at Saul before speaking. “I’m not sure how much he can hear,” Shelley said.

Hazel thought about the advice given to the friends and families of someone in a coma: Assume they can hear everything. Not for the first time, she pondered the difference between hearing and comprehending.

Ax had wisely gotten the crab cooked, cleaned and cracked. All that remained was mixing in the melted butter and squashed garlic and putting the mixture into a very hot oven for a very short time. Shelley went to the common

house to search for more butter. Ax started putting his Caesar salad dressing together. Hazel sat on the couch and watched Saul wake and sleep, startle at small noises and sleep. The double dose of aspirin was beginning to work. She could swallow with almost no pain. The wine someone had poured her was slightly anesthetizing.

When the food was ready, the first order of business was to fix some crab on a plate for Saul. Hazel put a medium-sized claw on her plate. In holding it steady to enter the arms of the nutcracker, she burned the end of her middle finger. Saul ate a tiny morsel of crab, pronounced it tasty and fell back asleep. Shelley spoke to him sharply. He was not to go to sleep with food in his mouth. It sounded like the continuation of an ongoing argument. Saul may have responded but his voice was inaudible.

Just as Shelley sat down, someone climbed the front steps and peered in. "It's Maria," Shelley said, standing up to hug the woman who came in.

"Just checking in," Maria said, patting Shelley firmly on the back. "I wanted to say goodnight to Saul." She crossed the room and bent down to speak into Saul's ear. One of his arms reached toward her, or toward the ceiling, and remained like that, thrust into the air, swaying just a bit. Again, Hazel caught the impression of a shy, clean-limbed woodland creature. Then the hospice nurse arrived.

Nurse Shulamith was a large presence, radiating calm, very at ease with taking care of the business of the dying. Shelley had apparently been concerned that Saul – no longer strong enough to get himself out of bed and go to the

nearest toilet – was not unriating. But he had done so, it was quickly discovered. Shelley did not seem entirely pleased with this discovery. Hazel realized Shelley was viewing it as yet another downward step on the steep staircase.

The next door neighbor from the western side stopped in, to check the thermostat, which had not been working earlier, during the morning cold snap. She turned it up as high as it would go. In a couple of minutes the house was almost stifling. “Works fine!” she said, satisfied, and turned it all off.

The crab was merely warm by the time all the visitors had left. Hazel’s burnt finger was already blistering, making it difficult for her to separate crab from carapace. She wasn’t hungry, she realized. The aspirin had taken care of that, replacing slight hunger with slight nausea.

As Shulamith prepared to leave, Shelley had asked for her opinion about how much time Saul had left. “Days,” was the response. The word hung over the dining table, making everyone a little absent minded. Days. 24 hour periods of time. In the past 24 hours, Saul had gone from being a jovial keen-eyed, sharp-minded loving friend to being an almost inanimate, wounded creature, coming to stillness. He was getting smaller, farther away, with each minute. Would it be possible to bundle him up, to wrap Shelley in her warmest shawl and spirit them to somewhere with music and a fingernail moon to dance under? Could Saul shake free of the iron grip squeezing away his vitality and reach for the sky?

Shelley rested her elbows on the table and put her head in her hands. Rubbed her eyes. “I’m sorry, guys. I’m suddenly really tired. I wish I could be entertaining but. . .”

They left the crab for Shelley. Maybe she would eat it. She was starting to become concave. Such a social person, she had no desire to eat or sleep alone. The night before, the first night of the hospital bed in residence. Shelley had slept by herself upstairs, in the bedroom they shared. She woke herself up reaching for Saul, finding nothing but chilly sheets on his side of the bed. A defining moment.

Hazel thought there had been way too many defining moments in the past ten months. Too much time for sorrow, not enough for joy.

On daily dog walks, she found herself wondering about her mother’s old age. Maybe Audra could tolerate the long dull days and longer solitary nights because she had been alone the majority of her adult life – not living solo, just left alone, left behind, left without company or conversation. Hazel called her every day at 4 p.m. and they chatted for ten or fifteen minutes. Audra would have some tidbit of gossip from her bi-weekly soup and salad group or the local historical society or the latest Drama Club effort. Until she was in her mid-80s, Audra continued to travel. Hazel was proud of her mother for her exploits, even when she started ending every trip with a bladder infection. It slowed her down but it didn’t stop her until the day came when she didn’t turn up on a flight from Boston to Burlington, VT. Hazel’s sister, Willow, was in Burlington to meet the plane and fairly quickly established that Audra had managed to get on a flight



back to Maine, her point of origin. The airlines were extremely apologetic. They carefully corralled Audra and didn't let go of her until she could step into Willow's outstretched arms.. Audra laughed it off. Or so it seemed.

And now Hazel, fifteen years younger than her mother when Audra stopped traveling, found herself afraid to ride the underground. She had first noticed this five years earlier, in New York, visiting Polly. It was early Fall, warm days, cool nights, gingko berries rotting and stinking on the streets of Brooklyn. It rained torrentially, which ruined Axel's leather jacket. The Bleecker Street/W 4<sup>th</sup> intricate maze of tunnels to trains was hot in a way that made a walking person peel off layers of clothing and think of Hell. It was noisy. It was full of wrong directions. It gave Hazel the creeps and the creeps didn't go away.

She could, and did, ride the BART to and from work. But it never felt routine and comfortable. She took an occasional bus, but bus rides seemed to feature characters invented for the purpose of harassing reluctant commuters: friendly, chatty Downs syndrome young guys, looking forward to the can of Diet Coke they will be able to drink at the end of the ride; Old women in mismatched socks, over leggings, with a ragged-hemmed burka type garment over the top and a bright magenta feather boa shedding strands wrapped somewhere in the neck area, crooning 60's rock songs with lyrics apparently in Polish or Farsi; teenagers from the middle school generating so much heat it's a wonder the bus doesn't spontaneously combust. Hazel yearns for the country, the small town where she grew up, in western Mass. The town is so pretty that it has its own website where Hazel and other émigrés can review each other's childhood

snapshots. Or gaze longingly at pictures of maples, touched by frost or that place in the river like a large bowl, deep enough to swim in, leaving your bikes up by the road.

In the middle of the night after the birthday party that failed, Hazel turned over in bed, brought to wakefulness by hearing a man's voice say "Bye." Had she dreamed it? Was Axel going somewhere in the middle of the night? But that wasn't Ax's voice. It sounded like Saul, today's Saul, with too much breath in his quiet voice.

In the afternoon of the following day, Shelley posted "He's gone" on her blog, which then went silent. Hazel sat with her laptop, open to the screen with that message, and let her mind loose over the small piece of Saul's life to which she had access. She thought about how responsive he was to women and how much his manner endeared him to the sisterhood. He had always seemed trustworthy. He had found a way to balance the force of nature that was Shelley. He supported her endeavors enthusiastically, as though she stepped off the end of the high diving board and he opened a net to cushion her plunge and in case she needed rescue. Last year, he had joined Shelley in a marathon swim, to benefit the Breast Cancer Center. A picture of him in the water made him look like a friendly seal.

Hazel couldn't cry. She wondered if Shelley could.

Hazel's sore throat became a chest cough, became a sinus infection. She always had trouble sleeping and now it seemed to elude all her efforts to throw herself over the edge, into merciful oblivion. She felt imprisoned in her skin. Had

Saul felt that way, in the bed with side rails? How had Shelley born up, as her second husband made an exit? What was Fate playing at, to arrange for Saul to follow the same route out of life that Vic had taken? Shelley had once said that, having been this way before, it was easier for her to keep pace with what was needed. She said “I think Saul might beat Vic’s record. With Vic, the hospital bed came Thursday and he was gone Monday. Saul got the hospital bed on Tuesday. I don’t think he’ll make it to the weekend.” It was then Wednesday.

How do you tell when someone is fixing to leave this life? People have survived for years in comas. People have dropped dead in the middle of their 4 mile-a-day jogs in steep terrain. Saul is lying very languidly in bed and seeming not to notice much around him plus he has little interest in food, which is so unlike him. Could that be the key? Signs of letting go of pleasure?

The day of the death, Hadley sent Hazel an e-mail, titled Thanksgiving/Shiva. She was affirming their turkey day plans, assigning Ax and Hazel to provision appetizers and wine and did not mention Saul. Hazel vacillated. Was this a death notice or just a heads-up, you bring munchies ordinary communication? She opted for the latter interpretation. It was hours later before Hadley announced Saul’s death, on Facebook. And then the paucity of vocabulary around such moments became painfully clear, as Hadley’s and Shelley’s FB pages filled up with responses, using words like “Sympathy” “Condolence” “Respects” “Peace”.

Right. How about Distress? Devastation? Rage? Disgust? Rejection?

Even anger. When Shelley and Saul got married, they promised each other five years. And, when five years had passed, five years in which Shelley had discovered she had breast cancer, treated it and beaten it into submission and Saul had developed blood clots in his legs, requiring hospitalization and surgery, in early September of this very year, they had renewed that promise. Only six weeks later, the promise has been forever broken.

Shelley is a home girl. She likes a well-feathered nest and a heart to beat close to hers under the duvet, late in the night. She likes listening to a sleeping partner breathe. She likes a responsive voice to lilt a welcome when she comes home and calls out a greeting. She likes someone to appreciate her gluten-free pasta dishes and her quirky boho fashion sense. She likes being a wife. This being the case, she will probably find a way to try it again. Will she find anyone as accepting, as interested in her and her world as Saul? Will all the friends have to bite their tongues to keep from critiquing and comparing? Will she have to sneak around like a grounded teenager to see a lover? Hazel is titillated just thinking about that sort of sly exhilaration.

Hazel has wondered whether, nature taking her toll and culling the weakest, Ax and Shelley might find themselves together, teamed up. It would certainly work to Axel's benefit, to have someone so organized and lively in charge of his days and nights. Even though he claims to dislike Jewish women – "Princesses, all!" – there is no question that he finds them attractive and enjoys the sparring, the bickering, the over-weening interest in what the partner does. Hazel has retreated and retreated, deliberately failing to engage in endless

squabbling. It has built a dense wall between herself and Axel. They are cordial, at the best of times. They work well, socially. But Ax cannot seem to learn to read her oblique approach to issues between them and, perversely, she has failed to develop alternative ways to communicate. She continues to ask what he'd like for dinner and he continues to respond "Surprise me." He continues to ask where she'd like to go for breakfast and to reject any suggestion she makes. Which gives her nothing to work with and the sure knowledge that whatever she devises will be criticized. The situation is both ludicrous and stifling.

Once, knowing that Hazel has to go to bed by 9 if she wants to sleep, Shelley had asked what they did about snuggle time. Ax deflected the question with some reference to hot flashes. The subject was quickly changed but there was a glimpse of trouble in Paradise.

Shelley is at a crossroads, for sure. She is a presence at the community, now and is also one of the older people there, which lends her even more gravitas. And there are always repairs to be made, decisions to be taken, small upkeep details, larger interpersonal details. Saul has been so integral to the thriving of this small band of urban pioneers. Even in his last few days when he was barely conscious for more than a minute at a stretch, people were bringing him their questions and fears and he was rallying, as best he could, to help address them. Will Shelley step into those shoes? Could she find the patience?

Tansy, Saul's dear friend for most of their lives, is wrecked by the suddenness of Saul's passing. He was her brother, her playmate, her rock in a stormy sea and, after the nature of good old friends, he was supposed to be

available in those multiple capacities for as long as they both should live. She is a quiet and thoughtful person, a tireless helper on the periphery of any situation with a keen eye for what needs to get done, but this death thing has knocked her to her knees. The shine has left her world, wrapped around Saul's bony shoulders. She never fully fell in love with Shelley and Shelley has always been a bit wary, a little dismissive of Tansy. Will their mutual loss strengthen or destroy the fragile bond they had forged?

So Thanksgiving will indeed be one of the days of Saul's shiva. He will be present at the feast, in fragments, perhaps, but definitely still in attendance in the house, the room from which his spirit took flight. Maybe he will just hang around forever.

Hazel remembers a long ago couple of New Yorker stories about ghosts. The author's theory seemed to be that the newly dead were obliged to stay in their last known place of residence until they had completed whatever pieces of business they had left unfinished. Obviously, these sojourns could be prolonged indefinitely, depending on the age of the decedent, how complicated the life had been, and his or her willingness to organize affairs. The stories were told with rue and dry humor. Hazel was drawn to the premise. Which led her to thinking about the afterlife and – inevitably - reincarnation, where she still was. More or less.

She wasn't so sure about being born into other than human form. A blade of grass? A spider mite? A hyena or rhinoceros? Lacking the underlying understanding provided by faith in whatever religious system was making the rules, Hazel was just cobbling together something to alleviate fear. She had

thought to discuss this with Saul, assuming there would be a stretch of time for serious, soulful conversations. There was, it turned out, almost no time.

Almost as many people showed up at the Community House on the first day of Saul's shiva as had attended Saul and Shelley's wedding. That bright September wedding day, five years earlier, had brought out a large number of entrenched Berkeley eminences, all of whom were in celebratory mode and delighted to see and be seen. The shiva was less exuberant, less fueled by alcohol and maybe more complicated, more densely emotional than Shelley could readily handle. She was uncharacteristically quiet: happy to hear people's stories, glad for the accolades, but every speaker seemed to remind her that an era had ended, her anchor had been weighed and she was once more adrift in the ocean of uncertainty. She wanted to cry but tears wouldn't flow. Hadley and Pax sat close, often holding her hand or whispering in her ear. When Pax – who, after all was only 12 months and five days old – got restless, Shelley waved Hadley off to the luxuriant grass out in the Commons area, where Pax could scoot after bugs to his heart's content.

"Saul was my savior!" proclaimed a grey bearded, casually yet expensively dressed person. "Madoff just about sank my boat in the deepest part of the lagoon but fortunately for me, I'd left a few progressive investments in Saul's hands and he'd parlayed them into real money!" On an ordinary day, many of the assemblage might have nailed this man with penetrating questions but the shiva was not a place for political argument.

“Saul and I met making films for Newsreel” another man offered. “So much earnest commitment to the Farmworkers! So much argument about whose footage was more includable. So many all-nighters and so much beer!” A nice laugh from the assemblage.

“Shelley,” said a thin woman, wrapped in a striped serape. “Do you know whether Saul ever learned to ride a bike?”

“It didn’t come up,” Shelley responded. “Why do you ask?” because who could resist that question?

“I dreamed about him last night, riding a bicycle, looping around in great circles and laughing. Such a lovely dream. I could see him clearly as I was waking up and it was several hours before I realized that I had never seen him on a bike. But he seemed to feel so free!”

People had come from Saul’s last office, bringing dense chocolate cake and armloads of lilies and birds of paradise, telling about how particular Saul had been with regard to his coffee drinks, what a fine, patient mentor he had been to the neophyte financial analysts, the sense of solidity and durability that he provided. Community kids came in, bringing pictures they had drawn of Saul in numbers of dashing hats. Shelley told them all about the crow that had roosted on her front porch that very morning and spoken to her, in caws, for a lengthy period. Was it Saul? She wondered. The overwhelming consensus was that it most certainly was.

That was the first day of the shiva for Saul. That was the first night Shelley spent alone in the house.



The week sped by. Shelley was living in a Henry James novel, she sometimes thought. Leisurely mornings, in which to sip herbal tea and make lists. Visits in the afternoons, roughly from two to six. Dinner with some group or another. And night came again and she was alone. Xanax was no longer able to entice her down the dreamland route.

“How about this?” she said to Hazel and Axel, by email. “We fly to Tucson on Xmas Day, home on New Years. I’ve got a friend with a place we can stay. Pool, hot tub, warm weather, change of scene. It belongs to my old friend, Bernie. I spent some time there after Vic died.”

So is this a good idea? Hazel doesn’t know, although most of her brain is leaning toward “no” as the answer. There is not one way or one right way to grieve and there is no ritual for effective grieving. Maybe there should be. A nice ritual or five or six would relieve the mourner from having to make it all up as she went along. But doesn’t each dear departed deserve not to be conflated with the other dead? On the other hand, this is Shelley’s road to walk and she gets to choose. This is the sort of crossroads Hazel often wanders into, then finds it impossible to go any farther.

Hazel, of course, doesn’t want to fly to Tucson. She never wants to go anywhere. Not quite right: she’d go anywhere in a heartbeat as long as she didn’t have to travel to get there. But maybe she and Ax and Shelley could travel together. Maybe that would ease the transitions. Maybe she could shake loose the shackles of health constraints and wiggling teeth and just go somewhere and let whatever happens happen.

So she doesn't say no. She says maybe. She says "Well, go ahead and get your ticket. I have to wait until after my doc appointments, to figure out what's next."

Two hours later, Shelley forwards her ticket information. It is only then that Hazel remembers their pre-existing social commitments: a Christmas eve party she and Ax are hosting. A New Years' Eve wine tasting. These are the moments when she is forcibly reminded that her short term memory is like a fanciful piece of macramé: gauzy and full of holes. Sometimes she feels she should be writing down every thought on a little pad that has been surgically attached to her arm.

"Glasses on bathrm sink"

"Bring empty cup to Kitch"

"\$\$ in pocket of green vest"

"Start potatoes by 5"

Tansy and Hazel have started a tentative correspondence. Tansy is walking around feeling that the ground is not solid beneath her. She takes the right steps and heads in the right direction but all her joy and enthusiasm seems to have gone into hibernation. She is tentative in a way that Hazel (who doesn't know her well) has never seen before. And she is invited to Thanksgiving, the fifth day of shiva, at Shelley's.

"I don't know how to proceed," she emails Hazel. "I've never been in that house without Saul being there or at least being somewhere close by. "

Tansy has seen two hospital beds come and go at that residence. She was Saul's wife Annie's friend before she met Saul, in a wake-your-body class at

the Berkeley Y. She was a rock and a refuge for him when Annie was slowly dying and afterward, when he was an automaton. Did she love him? Would she have moved in, if the offer was made? Probably not. They were comfortable in their separate but often intersecting lives. They could always rely on one another if they needed a dinner companion or a fellow adventurer at a theatre event.

Tansy struggled with hurricane Shelley.