but now am found

PATRICIA HORVATH
For Jeff
Contents

Wakey Nights 1
Sea Change 5
But Now Am Found 9
Luck Was A Taxi 19
Never Let Go 25
Griswold 34
To The Stranger Who Brings Flowers 43
Value Added: A More Fabulous You! 60
All You Wish For 71
Vigil 80
Poinsettias 87
Hold On Fast 91
In My Solitude 100
Bonita 109
The Things That Claimed Her 114
Accident 124
Sunrise 128
Fifteen across, five letters: Night in Nicaragua. She wrote noche, she wrote it in pen. Do the easy ones first.

Her coffee had turned cold, dregs of the pot. Behind her eyes a steady thrum. She squinted, blurring words, rubbed her eyes with chafed knuckles.

Twenty-one across, seven letters: Site of Triangle. Do the easy ones first because it was important to be methodical. She smoked in this way, lighting each new cigarette at half-hour intervals, five cigarettes so far.

Bermuda, where planes went down. She filled in the letters, all caps.

She did not know why she’d wakened so early, sitting up in bed, hugging her knees, telling herself it was nothing, this headache, a mother’s low anxiety. Silly to bundle into her robe, grope her way down the hall to her daughter’s room where the bed was untouched, sheets taut, hospital-like in their precision. She pulled back the comforter as though perhaps. Foolish, she said aloud. A broken curfew, that was all, she should be angry.

For a while she’d played Solitaire, spreading cards on the kitchen table, listening to the oldies station. But the cards were alarming—suicide king, ace of spades, that jack with the axe at his head. Why depict them that way? And the crackle of words on the radio. Happy Meal, Proof of Purchase, Drive By, State Lines. In her rush to switch it off, she’d upset the ashtray, spilling butts onto the floor.
The cigarettes were her daughter’s. She’d found them, two unopened packs, hidden in the girl’s bureau. Two packs of Kools, five condoms in garish red wrappers, blue eye shadow, drugstore perfume.

She hadn’t known about the cigarettes, nor the condoms, certainly not those. So there were boys—no, a boy—someone hunched in a leather jacket, mumbling, or earnest perhaps, with short hair and a football sweater. Could this be right? What were they like now, boys? And what else didn’t she know? Scribbling notes on yellow Post Its: *Do the laundry, do your homework, there’s casserole for the microwave, Love.* Hefting patients twice her weight to get at bedpans, prodding for veins, rubbing lotion into torsos, reaching to change glucose bags, untangling wires, retying gowns until her arms ached and her feet swelled in the white shoes she kicked off the moment she got home each night, her daughter already asleep or maybe, she thought now, pretending. Because what did she really know?

Sixteen and sneaky-quiet, whip thin. A temper that could wear anyone down. Wailing, *Why, why can’t I ever have the car, what’s the point in my even getting a license?*

Suspect, victim, barricade, police sketch, until she’d turned the damned thing off, knocking ashes to the floor.

Danger, she knew, was everywhere. No need to leave home. Candles sparked blazes, stoves leaked gas, animals turned rabid, even food concealed toxins. Still, one could take heed. Seal cracks, lock doors, read labels. One could control things indoors.

*You keep that cell phone on,* she’d warned. *But ma, the movies, c’mon!* And now it rang, uselessly.

Fourteen down: Father of Rome. She knew that one. She had to think.

The sun was beginning to rise, dim shapes taking form in her neighbor’s yard—swing set, sandbox, hedges. Somewhere a penned up dog was trying to bark itself free. The geraniums shivered in their boxes, a sudden wind scattering dead leaves across the empty driveway. *Make sure you’re home by midnight and—I mean it—you leave that phone on.*
But she’d never listened, not through years of piled up words: *Now I Lay Me, Drink Your Milk, Don’t Wiggle That Tooth, Clean Your Room, Put It Under The Pillow, Look Both Ways, I Don’t Care What The Other Kids, Once A Month Yes I Know, Don’t Talk Back, Two For Cramps, Take An Umbrella, Keep Your Phone On, Twelve O’clock, Period.*

Years of words. Reprimands, sweetness. Honey and baby and bun. *Honey bun, baby cakes, I could eat you, gobble gobble.* Blowing air into a tiny navel, the girl wriggling, shrieking, kicking fat legs in delight. Then—later—*Ma, don’t call me that why can’t you just use my name?* Summer days, strawberries rinsed from the hose, her daughter running naked through the sprinkler, not caring who might see. Or blizzards, the house swaddled in snow, a perfect, muffled world. Just the two of them, the way she’d planned it, right from the start. *You and me, pal.* Popcorn, Old Maid, anatomy texts piled on the table, studying late into the night so she could pass the exam, earn her pin, take care of them always. *You and me, who needs anyone else?*

If she could sleep. Lose herself in the murky world, wake to brightness. Her daughter eating breakfast, rumpled and defensive with some last-second excuse. Her own relief calcifying to anger. “Wakey nights” she called these sleepless hours. Wakey nights cooing the girl through some babyhood terror. Singing *Mister Sandman*, telling her about his castle of sand with its sandy furniture and turrets and moat and *Yes, I’ll build one for us, a castle with a drawbridge; we’ll live there someday.*

On the page, order and sense. Father of Rome, seven letters. There were two, though, twin infants with their sucking mouths. Romulus, Remus, abandoned to die but for the wolf.

A car pulled into the driveway. A car! Not hers. Two men in trench coats stepped from a dark green sedan.

Abandoned, but why? And what had happened to the wolf?

The men conferred by the hood of the car. One of them pointed.

The puzzle was filling too quickly. She needed to slow down. She needed coffee, fresh coffee, to quell the pounding in her head. It was louder now, it competed with the knocking on the door.
Two men in trench coats, they could not come in.

Ma’am, she heard. Ma’am, please.

But it was only grief that would find her, grief on the other side of the door, banging, insistent, and what was another word for that?
Sea Change

She listens.

A conch to her ear, she hears the ocean’s faint roar. Hours since he stormed off. She’s tucked in the children, listened to their prayers. She’s cleared the table scraps, swept sand from the cottage, changed the muddied water in the pail by the screen door, brought in their towels, scratchy with wind and sun. The conch is worn smooth, an oceanic telephone. She puts it back on its shelf, walks out to the deck, lowers herself into a sagging canvas chair. Her girth an amazement, slowing her down. The sea churns, choppy with swells, a breeze lifting the small hairs that have escaped her braid. Tomorrow or the next day it will storm. She shivers in her shift, her legs and feet bare. The baby writhes and turns, sloshing in its salty sea. She puts a hand to her swollen belly, listens for the sound of tires raking pebbles on the road.

A drink, he’d said, I’m going for a drink. Slamming the screen door behind him. Stupid their quarrel, she regrets it now. Because what’s a day, really? And so what if he wants to cut the week short, avoid the Sunday traffic? Have a day to relax before returning to his two-packs-of-Tums-a-week job? Was it, he’d said, too much to ask? But the fireworks, the children had wailed, we’ll miss the fireworks! And then, of course, there was the heat, the stifling city heat; did he have any idea what that was like in her condition?

Easy enough for her, he’d replied, relaxing here while he toiled away.
Relaxing, ha! Shows how little he knew. Trapped in this cottage, day after day of rain. The children bored, bickering. Endless games of Rummy and War, soggy peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Damp towels, mildewed paperbacks, swollen window sashes, cereal and crackers going stale overnight.

True, they’d had their sunny days, a walk into town for Italian ices and rides on the merry-go-round. Afternoons building castles, digging in low tide for fat white worms. But what she wouldn’t give for a little peace. To come home from work, mix a drink, watch a movie. Or go to dinner with friends. Something anyway. All the things he took for granted. And then when he came here, for his week at the shore…

One week, he interrupted. One lousy week…

Yes, yes, she knew. How hard he worked, all of that. But what about her? While he was lying on a towel, listening to some game on the radio. Drinking beer with the other vacationing fathers. Or flying kites with the boy, leaving the girl to play alone by the water, the tide coming in, up to her waist already, my God, she couldn’t be everywhere at once, could she? Especially now, worn out and expecting.

And did she always have to be so God damned melodramatic? That’s what he wanted to know. As if the girl were in danger, as if he’d let that happen. He was going for a drink!

For hours she’s been expecting him. Their last night of vacation, a shame. He should be with her, in this low-slung empty chair. Listening to the sea, running through their list of baby names, his choices, hers, wondering how this new little creature might be stamped, eyes and mouth, which of them it might turn out to resemble. She is anxious to see it, the baby. Anxious for him to come home.

She takes up her knitting, the booties she’d abandoned, though she feels no desire to knit. She might, she thinks, make a cup of tea. Or start a new jigsaw puzzle. Something to distract her from what she knows she’s about to do, though she’s sworn she would not, even as she dials the number. Noise in the background—laughter, music, shouting. His voice slurry with alcohol. Did he have any idea how late it was?
All right, all right. His last night of vacation. Just one more, the bartender was bringing it over. Then he’d come straight home.

He hangs up without saying good-bye. And didn’t that just beat all? Sloshed, after he’d insisted on taking the car, after she’d asked him not to. A short walk, would’ve done him good. Well, he was in no condition to drive, short trip or no. Another drink and one more for the road, she knows how he gets when he gets going. If he wants to stay, fine, just hand over the keys.

She straps on a pair of worn white sandals, locks both the doors. The children, she thinks, will be fine.

At the end of the line of cottages she has to stop. The baby is kicking. She presses her knuckles to the small of her back, the pain knotted there. The first contraction washes over her. She breathes, surfaces. Sees moon, cottages, seawall—familiar things. Closer now to the bar than to home, she turns onto the access road. The wind has picked up, a hint of fall in the air. Waves break against the shore, a soothing sound. Late at night, when she can’t sleep, it comforts her.

The road is dark; she takes her time. Soon she can see headlights coming from the parking lot. She knows this place, of course, has been here before, and to places like it, The Rusty Scupper, The Lobster Trap, The Salty Dog, places with ships’ wheels on the wall, fishermen’s nets hung from ceilings, a dartboard, a jukebox, Golden Oldies from when she was the age of these tanned and muscled boys, these girls in cutoffs and halter tops, townies who know they won’t be carded, who can drink all night because they won’t wake hung over, not even faced with a day of mowing lawns, serving soft ice cream, or babysitting a pack of whiny children, just as she had done, years ago, while she waited for something to happen.

Her husband is at a table, his back to her. His hand grips the hand of a man half his age, a boy really, a good looking boy with floppy, sun-lightened hair. A ring of spectators eggs them on. The boy grimaces. His hand is locked in her husband’s hand, their forearms pressed together. Then the boy’s arm yields, a cheer erupts, and her
husband is downing the victory shot that someone, a girl, has passed to him. He does not turn around, does not see her, but she knows how he must look, his broad and handsome face flushed with triumph, his rakish grin. She wants to reach out, tousle his hair. The girl, all cleavage, leans forward, her chest in his face. She pours him a beer. In one quick motion his puts his arm around her waist and pulls the girl, squealing, onto his lap.

She does not think. The second contraction nearly knocks her down. Hey, someone says, hey, you all right? and he is turning in his chair, still holding the girl, even as she reaches for the pitcher. Beer gushes over his head, down his back, onto the floor. The girl shrieks. Who is this woman, this crazed and hugely pregnant woman, and why is she causing this commotion? He jumps up, grabs her from behind. That’s when she feels it, her water break, fluid coursing down her legs, soaking her sandals. The front of her shift is drenched. Beer drips from his hair, his beard. She is slipping in the muck, clinging to him for support. Hang on, he says, hang on, but she is losing her grip, no way to stop what has begun, the tide inside her, the baby on its way now, too early and far too late.