

PAM HOUSTON

CONTENTS MAY HAVE SHIFTED

#49 – #60

49. Denver, Colorado

I get out of Doug Olsen's black-sheeted bed at 5:30 in the morning, get a double latte at Peet's, and meet the CEO in the parking lot of the Wal-Mart, so he can follow me to the ranch.

The CEO gives me an antique book called *Five in One, or How To Make and Save Money* where all the little pieces of advice are numbered and include one thousand mini-chapters, for example #86 *Lice Destroyers*, and #349 *Lemon and Its Value*, and #655 *How to Make your Clothes Last Longer*, and #760 *Butter Making and Marketing*, and #858 *Blackhead Remedy*, and #948 *You Will Never Be Sorry If*, and #962 *How to Find Out a Girl's Age Without Asking Her*. As the CEO zips up Kenosha Pass behind me in his Porsche I think, *this is the summer when my life turns into a reality TV show*.

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In Aspen last week, at the millionaire's house with the three original Chagalls on the wall, the Latina writer ate Pedigree dog food, I guess, to make a point. Later when they made us tell "campfire stories" (there was no campfire) about "one thing we know for sure" to the people who were willing to pay two hundred dollars a plate for barbecued chicken and a chance to sit next to Tony Hillerman (who didn't show up), every single one of us misbehaved.

I went first and said the thing I knew for sure was something I had suspected all along and it was that black people were way cooler than white people, and Ron told the joke about King Kong that goes, "If they didn't want to let him out of the jungle, why'd they make the door so fucking big," and M. Scott Momaday told a series of tales where the cunning Indians outsmart the white people every time, and then Annick started out as if she was going to toe the line, saying one thing *she* knew for sure was that being a grandmother was way better than being a mother, and all of the rich people who paid two hundred dollars to eat barbecued chicken with Tony Hillerman (who didn't show up) started nodding, knowingly, but then she started to talk about her cracked and sore and leaking nipples and it became quite clear that she was not.

THE IOWA REVIEW

50. Mallorca, Spain

Everything is green and soft, there are goats in the hills who wear bells around their necks that I hear all night but never see, and two donkeys, one light, one lighter still, that come to the fence for fresh apricots. Yesterday we went as a class to one of the world's most perfect beaches and swam way, way out—the nice thing about the Mediterranean—and then all the way back, and I slept like a rock for the first time in months. In Pollença there is a gorgeous old square and a place to get heavenly coffee and liquid chocolate so thick you can stand a spoon in it.

I was reading Cory's most recent *I'm sorry and I want you back* e-mail out loud and all the girls were oohing and aahing and falling for it completely, and Jessica, who works with military boys in Garmish, Germany providing R and R inside a system she despises, said, "He sounds like a total narcissist to me."

This afternoon we all piled into Ralph's Land Rover on the Imelda Marcos field trip. Ten women on their way to the Camper shoe outlet: Beth the ultra marathoner who lives on a commune in Boulder where the master gets to have sex with all the women but they don't get to have sex with anybody else, and Jennifer who looks about sixteen and is nevertheless battling what Tania keeps calling mole cancer, and Tania herself, with the Botticelli hair and the BBC voice, and Mary, who is from Ohio, and who has only lived in London for six years but who has nonetheless acquired an English accent (she keeps referring to Washington and Oregon as the Western Terra-trees... and I say, "I know you have been away a long time, Mary, but we call those states now") and who seems not to know what color her own hair is. Then there is Ruth who works for *The Guardian* and keeps saying we're all mad as a box of frogs, and Kathy, who has written ten cookbooks, and Lina, who didn't want to study writing at all but just came over because she had read—perhaps erroneously—on TripAdvisor that Ralph would sleep with anybody who signed up for a course, and London Sarah and New York Sarah and me, all hurtling the wrong way down a one-way because it is a shortcut.

Ralph's a nice guy and a pretty good cook with the single glaring exception of the skate wing he served last night, doused liberally in ammonia and so radically undercooked that you would have to have sawed it off the bone. We had watched the sunset over Cape Formentor and so were late and therefore already in trouble. Kathy said, "Has there been an accident?" so strong was the chemical smell when we walked in the room, and she took the skate

back into the kitchen for a do-over, but even cooked through it was hard to choke down.

After dinner we found out that seven out of seven of the American women here this week, including myself, have not only been in a sorority but have held a major office in a sorority, in most cases president, though I had been chaplain of Delta Delta Delta, ostensibly in charge of eighty girls' spirituality, when I was just a girl myself.

"In what ways did you advance their spirituality, then?" asked Tania, who had never even considered the idea of a sorority.

"Well," I said, "I blindfolded them and bound their hands with silver, gold, and blue ribbons and told them stories about Poseidon, of course!

51. Berkeley, California

Victor says, "I want to say this in a way that makes you think I am a normal person. My daughter Dakota still sleeps with me. She is twelve."

50 But I already don't think he is a normal person. What he has told me so far is that his half-brother is a non-functioning bipolar married to another non-functioning bipolar and his sister committed suicide. His father has children with four different women and those are only the ones he will admit to. His stepfather was so abusive that Victor left home at fifteen.

Victor came home on the night he was going into the Navy to say goodbye to his mother, and the stepfather saw him and put a .37 Magnum to his own four-year-old's head and said if Victor didn't get out that minute he was going to blow the kid's brains out. He named his daughter after his ex-girlfriend from the Ardèche region of France, in spite of his then-wife's protests.

Not that being abnormal is necessarily a bad thing.

I look at my watch. I say the only thing I can think of saying, which is that I used to have a horse named Dakota. We are exactly thirty minutes into an hour-long lunch date. Then he says, "I must tell you, I am attracted to athletic bodies, not necessarily slender, but toned." I look at his thinning hair, his stringy ponytail, watch him eat a date wrapped in bacon, watch a drip of grease run down his chin. I want to say, *I'll bet that twelve-year-old you sleep with is real slender.* I want to say, *I can lose weight if I want to but you'll still be short.* What I do say is "Excuse me," make myself walk as far as the restroom, turn right instead of left, push through the front door of the restaurant and break into a run.

The first night the CEO stays at the ranch—in the guest room—I get an email from Fenton the human that says: “RE: New Dating Plan. I recall your saying, and wisely, about the Kentucky Reverend that good-looking men were/are at some level all alike. I knew that what you said was true, and I proceeded anyway (though, I’m glad to say, with some reservation, as I knew what was coming). We never did the deed, thank God, but in the end, just as he’d led me on for six months or so, he took me out to a restaurant called, no kidding, The Last Supper, to confess that he’d met someone else.”

## 52. Woody Creek, Colorado

Steak Fajitas Special night with Art, Allison, and the kids. It’s been twelve years since the boulder fell from the wall of Glenwood Canyon, crushing the car Art was driving, killing his wife Kathy and two little boys, Tanner and Shea, and leaving him entirely untouched. Now his new boys, Rider and Burke, play their Game Boys at the table while Allison, their mother, asks Billy how far along he is in his grief.

I have brought Billy to meet Art and Allison shortly after the two-year anniversary of his wife Sue’s death. They were boating in Cataract Canyon, a trip to celebrate twenty years of marriage, when a rapid upended the raft, tossing Sue head-first into a rock that killed her instantly, though it took Search and Rescue the whole weekend to find her, and only then with a dog who could smell human bodies, several feet below the surface of a muddy wave.

Billy looks better than he did this time last year, his eyes less shocky, his spine held slightly less erect.

It took ten minutes of steak fajitas for both men to start weeping, and now they are deep into all of it: Ram Dass and Joseph Campbell, Eckhart Tolle and Pema Chodron, Temenos and vision quests, sacred datura and peyote back in the ’70s and the one question that won’t ever go away: was this all part of some indecipherable plan?

Art and Allison got together after Art’s dead son Tanner came to Allison in a vision as she was backpacking in the Grand Canyon. He told her where the turns in the trail would be, what the approaching campsites would look like, and eventually, where she’d dropped her car keys at the trailhead several days before. Then he asked her to go back to Aspen and tell his dad that he and his brother and mother were doing all right. He told Allison his favorite toys, the number of his hockey jersey, the color of his favorite fleece—yel-

low—so that when she told Art he had come to her in a vision, Art would not doubt that it was true.

Now, Allison turns to Rider, her soul child, a kid who is surrounded by ghosts every evening and can talk to them, not only the ones that belong to his family, but countless others, who, according to Allison, recognize him as a portal, a chance to get through.

“Rider, honey,” she says, “Put the Game Boy down for a minute,” and he does.

“Billy’s wife Sue died under the water, honey,” she says, “Can you take a moment and see if she’s got anything to say to him; can you tell him if she’s okay?” Rider sighs a little sigh and closes his eyes to try to see Sue. He is ten years old, a left-winger on the Aspen Leaf’s hockey team and he is a bit tired of this gift the Universe has bestowed upon him.

“Mom,” he says, “I think you are going to have to ask God those questions.” He pauses for a minute like there might be more. “But she did come to my room last night. She has a thin face and glasses, right? And brown hair that she keeps in a ponytail most of the time. She seemed okay to me.”

52 Rider shrugs, picks up his Game Boy and turns back to his brother. We can see by the look on Billy’s face that his description is right on and I can’t tell which I love more, Rider’s gift or his boundaries.

Around us the Woody Creek tavern sighs contentedly, like an old dog returned to the porch after a long day hunting, and the ghost of Hunter Thompson, who is surely somewhere here among us, orders one more drink at the bar.

### 53. Provincetown, Massachusetts

Class is over and I take a walk out to the breakwater, the CCC project: a million tons of granite in squared-off boulders laid end to end across the bay, from the place where town gives way to marsh out to land’s end, the very, very tip of Cape Cod, curled back tight on itself like a fist. When the tide is running in or out it’s loud out there, the water rushing under the granite. If you come out at night you can see the bioluminescence that gets created when aquatic glowing microorganisms get slammed into rock.

Now it is slack tide, utterly still. A heron stands in the marsh between me and the nude beach. A harbor seal turns lazy circles in the deep water to the west.

The night before I left Davis I stood in front of the old barn, the rabbit patch that will, by the time I get back, be turned into condominiums, and took back Orion from Cory, gave it to Fenton and the future, took back the green belt and the bats and the whales.

That day at acupuncture Denise had said, "You know, Pam, you are supported," and I saw a pair of cupped hands, lined and fleshy, poised to receive, maybe water, maybe something water only stands for, and I said, "I do know," because at least in that moment I did.

An owl called from inside the hayloft door, and I had my toes in the water of feeling good without doing. Also, there is nothing more real about the moments where you are denied love, than the moments when it is all right there for you and you are truly in the center of your life.

At the queer cluster symposium that afternoon, all of the snacks were vegan. If there is a God, why would he waste all his time making Hell?

Now the sun is getting ready to set somewhere west behind Boston, and the sky's gone all soft blues and pinks.

"Okay," I say, out loud, which feels both right and ridiculous. I'll admit that I don't know who I am praying to. Something somewhere between ocean and God. "I think I am finally ready for love." I can hear the slightest trickle of tide starting up in the rocks below me. "But if you can't do that, if you think I am not ready, then maybe just a little romance to keep the conversation going." The heron spreads his wings, gives a little hop. "And if you think I'm not even ready for that, then how about just a few more signs that I am on the right path."

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Satisfied with my prayer, I train my eyes back on the heron. A dapper little man has been coming down the breakwater, wearing short shorts in psychedelic colors and a yellow shirt, walking a Westie, who is wearing a sweater, even though the day is warm. The man doesn't slow as he approaches—I've left him plenty of room to get by—but he says, "Lovely place to sit and think, isn't it?"

"Yes," I say, "it surely is."

He never breaks stride, but smiles wide as he passes. "You are a good person," he tells me. "It's all going to be okay." I watch him disappear along the granite, the tops of the big rocks turning green and gold and purple in the dimming light.

54. Creede, Colorado

If there are twenty-nine points of matching, Dr. Carl, Dr. Neil, and Dr. Hans, then why do I keep winding up on coffee dates with men who have just finished reading Ann Coulter?

55. Taos, New Mexico

On Friday the thirteenth, after we had dinked around in the cowboy bar; after we had agreed to exchange addresses and then couldn't find a pen; after we had gone up to Rick's room, nothing salacious but he knew there was a pen there; after he became the fourth man in six months to say, "I want to say this in a way that makes you think I am a normal person"; after he had told me about the woman who had a face and arms but no body, and the man who had no face but was only a suit of clothes; after he pulled out of his briefcase a card with the very same hands I had seen in the sky over Davis; after so many hours had gone by that we couldn't sit up anymore but we didn't want to part; after I'd said, "well how about this, we just lie down on the bed, no sex, and no clothing removal...it will be just like what we are doing now, except horizontally; after he'd told me his favorite song and his favorite color and his favorite fishing hole and I'd told him my favorite movie and my favorite country and my favorite dog, when it couldn't have been more than an hour until the sun would start creeping over the horizon, he said, "If you aren't too sleepy can you please keep talking? It doesn't really matter at all what you say."

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56. New York, New York

In the alley in front of Freeman's, there is a man staring at and praying—prostrating himself, to be more precise—to a life-sized graffiti horse. The horse is gray and looks a lot like the My Little Ponies of my youth, but the words written in fat letters across its back are "Her Glory Always Reinstated."

Heather and I are staying at the Bowery Hotel, a place so new its rates are going to triple the day after we leave, a place so new that it has been artificially weathered. Both elevators look like people have had chainsaw fights inside of them.

We are here to see Tom Stoppard's play about the Russian Revolution, but we are also being girlfriends on a trip to New York. Heather always knows the best places for everything decadent: double lattes, red velvet cupcakes, gorgonzola with rhubarb chutney on the cheese board at the Met.

Last night Kevin Bacon stood so close to us, smoking his cigar, that I could have tripped him on the way back to the stage. So far today we have seen skinny Kirsten Dunst, and her even skinnier rock star boyfriend; we have gone to Rice to Riches, the place that has twenty-five flavors of rice pudding such as “Sex, Drugs and Rocky Road,” and “I’ll Take Eggnog for \$200, Alex,” which they serve in these excellent reusable flying saucers; and Heather has bought a pair of white plastic shoes for a hundred dollars and forty-nine cents. Then we bumped into Janeane Garofalo’s dog walker with her two black Danes with their spiked-out collars even though they were the sweetest peas ever, and that counted as a celebrity sighting I could really get behind.

I grew up in Trenton, New Jersey, and when I was a kid, my mother would keep me out of school a day or two a week so I could go into Manhattan with her for her auditions. At the end of the day we would get Italian ices while we waited in the traffic line for the Lincoln Tunnel—she always got lemon, I always got cherry—and we kept the top down on the old Mustang both ways through that tunnel and never even thought about exhaust.

Tucked into our Frette sheets at the Bowery, I report to Heather that Bucky Baxter recently said I was the most interesting woman in Creede, which I realize could fall under the category of damming with faint praise, and Heather smiles sweetly and says, “Bucky wants you to be his next ex-wife.”

At the Elks Fourth of July dance Bucky told me that now that he has turned fifty-two he has decided to only fuck women he really likes. Which was not to make me think he didn’t still fuck like an animal, because he could assure me that he did.

I know I am supposed to only think this about outdoor adventures, but there is something about flying down Fifth Avenue in a cab, after dark, barely making lights, you know, like everybody’s life depends on it, maybe a fine coating of rain hissing under the tires, the driver screaming in Tigrinya into his cell phone, that makes me feel like I could round a corner and turn my life into just about anything at all.

In Central Park yesterday there were no less than twenty-five birders, ganging up as they do on a three-inch Kentucky warbler, giant lenses jockeying for position between the hippies camped out at Strawberry Fields. Near Belvedere Castle we saw a couple who were either walking to or from their wedding. The man with shock-white hair and shock-white teeth, the woman



in a long white dress carrying a bouquet of white tulips, neither of them a day under seventy, both of them as happy as two people have ever been.

"Congratulations," came tumbling out of my mouth before I knew I was speaking, and they were so grateful, so eager to smile back their gratitude, so humbled by their good fortune.

"Did you see them?" I asked Heather, just to make sure they were real.

57. Buena Vista, Colorado

On the phone, Rick said, "I've got something I need to say and I want you to know that it is a considered thought. I know what it means and I know what it means to say it."

I was just past the Gunsmoke truck stop, about to head into the canyon of the Arkansas where I knew the reception would get squirrely, so I pulled over near the little airstrip to hear what he had to say.

"I love you already," he said. "I know it to be true. I love you right down to the bone."

56 A little Cessna was practicing touch-and-go landings, and I watched it and waited for the "But."

"But I am forty-nine years old," he continued, "We have gone so far in, so quickly. I know what it means to go deep and I can go deep with you. I know I can do it, but I have done it at least once before and it hasn't lasted."

I wanted to say, "Yeah, but that was with a woman who changed her name from Sophie to SoFree." I wanted to say, "Six days is not time enough to love me all the way down to the bone." I wanted to say, "If I love you then I will not have the opportunity to fulfill Tami's prophecy and break furniture with Bucky Baxter." But on the off chance that I already loved him back, I, for a change, said nothing at all.

"Come here and talk to me for a minute," Amanda had said, after that first Watsu, bobbing backwards to the part of the pool that was shaded by a fine mesh overhead. "Something happened during our session, and it was pretty unusual, and I think I should tell you about it."

"Yes," I said, "please."

"Well," she said, "We got into the quiet place, you know?"

I nodded. So that was where we had been.

"And I was trying to work that spike out of your hip."

I nodded again.

"Anyway," she said, "I got that spike out."

I flexed my hip under the water, and sure enough, the pain that had been with me since they set my four-year-old femur incorrectly was at least temporarily gone.

“And then this big...” she paused a moment, “let’s call it,” she paused again, “well, let’s not call it anything right now.” But with her hands she had made the distinct outline of a cage. “It came down with us inside it, and I thought, ‘Wow, what is this?’ And then all of a sudden there was this wooosh! And this thing pulled every single spike out of your body.”

“Like a magnet,” I said.

“Exactly,” she said.

“And they told me to tell you,” she went on, “they said, it’s up to you, you know? You can do whatever you want, but as of right now, you are spike-free. You’ve got a clean slate. It’s entirely up to you how many of those spikes you want to put back in there.”

“None of them!” I said, so I wouldn’t have to ask who the *they* were.

“Pretty cool, huh?” she said, and lay back in the water, blowing bubbles like a fish.

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#### 58. Drigung, Tibet

Tsering and Shelly and I follow an old lama to the top of a bald hill above the monastery in the cool morning air. We have been told there will be three corpses, a man, a woman, and a child, and that they are unrelated, though they appear to us like a little family, laid out on the platform, wrapped in their cotton shrouds.

“We are very lucky,” Tsering says, “Many corpses today.” When he says corpse, it sounds like copse, as in pines.

The man who will prepare the bodies arrives and begins to unwrap the first corpse. Tsering told us the bodies would be quartered, but the word *filleted* is the one that jumps to mind. A little way up the hill, roughly a hundred vultures jockey for position against a rope held in place by several family members of the deceased. They are wild birds, but Drigung is one of the most accessible monasteries practicing sky burials, and the birds know to come at 11 a.m. for their almost daily feed.

Tsering explains that the man with the big knife will make four incisions, one around the chin, one down the center of the torso, and two at a diagonal down the shoulder blades. They pull the skin off the bones, he says, because if they don’t give the vultures the bones first, they sometimes eat the flesh

and leave the bones, and then the whole person doesn't ascend together, and there is more work for the butchers to pound the bones into pulp. He hesitates enough over the word *butcher* that I know he is not quite happy with it, but he doesn't know a better one.

"These men," he says, "that do the cutting. They are not allowed to marry. Their karma is very very bad; no one would marry them because of what they do. It is the same with the men who butcher animals."

"Do you mean that this job is punishment for their last life," I ask him, "or that they will be punished for this job in the next life?"

"Yes," he says. "Also jewelers. It is the same."

"Jewelers?" I say, "Why?"

"It is just what we believe," he tells me.

"Is it because they are wealthy?" I ask.

"It is just what we believe," he says again.

58 All three bodies are cut into pieces, and I miss whatever sign the lama gives to the men who have been holding the rope. When the vultures run in, the smell takes up all the air on the mountaintop, and as they rush past me I can see they are huge birds, each of them half the size of a man. There is squawking and shrieking; several birds go after one femur, another makes off with a forearm, the hand, with all the flesh still on it, bouncing along the stones at my feet. No less than six birds are pulling in different directions on a skull that is still attached to a spine that is still attached to one leg and the skull is laughing. The old lama plays tug of war with a vulture over a leg bone, and when he wins he lifts another vulture, this one nearly featherless, out of the melee and gives him what is left of the bone.

"That is a sick one," Tsering says.

Every so often the butcher picks up a really aggressive vulture by its head and hauls it off to the side.

When there is nothing left but skulls and pelvises, the butcher steps in again and pounds the big bones into pulp with a giant mallet. Bone pulp flies all over the place and a huge wad of it lands on Tsering's arm. In seconds a member of the family of the deceased comes over with a little bottle of alcohol and wipes it clean for him. His preparedness makes me realize this must happen all the time. Tsering smiles at the man from under his Scooby-Doo hat.

On the walk back down the hill Tsering says, "When I see the sky burial, all the desire to have money and get more things goes away, because you see

a man, then you see him dead in a ball, then you see him cut to pieces, and in twenty or thirty minutes he is nothing, it is like he never existed.”

Tsering picks sage so that we can burn it in the little stupa back at the monastery. When we get there he shows me how to stick my whole upper body in so that I won't take the bad luck with me back into the world. When I can't see or breathe anymore I pull my head out, but Denzing grabs me by the scruff of the neck and pushes me back in.

“It is very unusual,” Tsering says, when Denzing finally turns me loose, “a westerner, here, at this ceremony. Denzing is afraid that now the car will crash.”

Denzing holds Shelley in the stupa so long I think she will surely asphyxiate. When he finally lets her out he talks with some urgency for several minutes to Tsering in Tibetan, and when he is finished we ask what he said. Tsering thinks a long time and says, “Denzing says it is good to be happy all the time.”

“Really,” Shelly says, “All those words?”

“And,” Tsering says, after a pause, “He says it is sometimes also good to be sad.”

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59. Canyon Ranch, Tucson, Arizona

I have not been on the property thirty minutes when I am lying on a massage table in a softly lit, frangipani-scented room with a person named Daryl towering over me.

“I can see,” he says, “that you are doing a lot of spiritual work because look how far you are out in your hair.”

His accent is vaguely South African, and he has the most impressive uni-brow I have ever seen. “I do not read poetry,” he says, “because I live poetry.”

He picks my feet up and lets them fall back to the table. “May I ask you,” he says, “Why the lower half of your body is perpetually standing in ice-cold water?” He means energetically, of course, because the room is warm and my legs are dry. “And what happened here?” he asks, not waiting for an answer to the last question. He has his hand on my leg at the exact place where my father broke my femur when I was four years old. The bone healed forty years ago, but he is not the first healer to be able to “see” what happened.

“My father...” I begin.

“I am not afraid of your pain,” Daryl interrupts. “I am not afraid of your grief. I am not afraid of your terror. Do you want to know why I am not afraid

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of your terror?" I nod. "I am not afraid of your terror because I have gone inside the monster, and inside the monster is pure wonder."

Somewhere in this building my friend Cindy, who I have come to Canyon Ranch with, is getting a nice simple lavender scrub and an herbal wrap. Cindy looked through the catalog, thought, *yes, the first night, maybe a nice herbal wrap after all of that travel.*

"Pamela," Daryl says, "Will you tell me your father's name so that I may ask him to excuse himself from the lower half of your body?"

"Yes," I say, and I do.

"Beverly," Daryl says, "Beverly, you must get out of there! Beverly, he says it does not belong to you!" He has his eyes closed and his hands tight around my ankles. "No, Beverly," he says, more forcefully now, "there are no options!"

We stay just like that for an excruciating amount of time. Then he folds both my hands across my chest and covers them with his. "If you could have only one thing," he says, "would you choose peace or ecstasy?" Ecstasy, I think, though I'm pretty sure I am supposed to say peace.

60 "Peace is an illusion," Daryl says. "I am in the ecstasy nearly all the time now, even when I sleep."

I think of Doug Olson's lonely bedroom, the terrible black sheets, the clock-radio projecting blood red numbers up to the ceiling, his bald head a glinting cabernet color like someone already dead, the musical he wrote where all the gorillas sang, *whatever he is, he's alive.*

"Pamela," Daryl says, slapping on the bottom of my feet with his palms. "Yes, sir," I say, out of habit. He's got my wrists now, is stretching them back over my head. No one has ever called me Pamela except my father. "You have two glasses," Daryl says, "one is completely full, and one is completely empty. In which glass is stillness possible?"

"The full one," I say. The questions are getting easier. Daryl now has his powerful thumbs wrapped almost completely around my uppermost vertebrae. "You can get to stillness through ecstasy," he says, "but you can't get to ecstasy through stillness."

I think about all the ways the language of the New Age is custom-made for terrorism.

I think about when a pink mouth opened in a white sky over Davis, and I saw, for the second time, the cupped waiting hands.

"When one of the doing lines in your life intersects with the circle of your now," Daryl says, "what happens?"

"It has to bend," I say, confident now. "It bends and bends and eventually becomes a circle."

"Precisely," he says, and releases his death grip on my neck.

#### 60. Istanbul, Turkey

At the Sultan's Palace: beautiful long-limbed girl, sexy, but not too sexy, lots of brassy hair, surrounded by seven or eight international travelers her age. To an Australian boy with acne scars, she says, "You are walking through the Topkapi Palace with three beautiful women, what more do you want?" The other young women are not in the same room of beautiful as she, but they accept the compliment, don't dare to interrupt.

The boy says, "Maybe if you were all naked." And laughs.

One of the other girls, a Swede, says "No," meaning, *go fuck yourself, acne face*. The brassy-haired girl holds her fingers to the Swede's lips, says, "My parents taught me to never say no immediately."

"To men?" the Swede asks.

"To anything," she says.

We are in line waiting to get into the harem, miles of tiled, low-lit corridors and rooms so thick with ghosts of women in captivity you can feel their hair on your arm, their jasmine-scented breath on your face.

In contemporary Istanbul, the dervishes have finally invited the women to whirl.

In the Blue Mosque there are two hundred fifty thousand tiles the color of sky. When the sun comes out, inside is sky and outside is golden. I am forty-six years old and ashamed of the fact that this is the first mosque of my life, but later, when the evening call to prayer catches me in the garden between the Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia, call and echo, echo and answer, bouncing off domes and turrets that have stood on this hill for fifteen hundred years, I know that faith springs out of doubt like topsoil, and that one sure thing I am is here right now.

Across the Golden Horn where the Bosphorus meets the Sea of Marmara, the Asian half of the city glistens in the twilight. As a candidate for the center of everything, Istanbul beats Pueblo, Colorado hands down. The gulls are turning cartwheels around the towers of the Blue Mosque and cawing like crazy women. *Byzantium*, I say to them, *Constantinople*.

The circle of my now is wreaking havoc with the lines of my doing. I am learning to say yes, if not always immediately. A sweet-faced Turkish boy, maybe nineteen, offers me a Kleenex, puts both hands over his heart when I take it, says I look just like his mother when I cry.