

ELISE WINN

HONEY MOON

1. World's Only Corn Palace: Mitchell, South Dakota

I have held my husband up to the light like an envelope, read the Sunday newspaper through his middle. No one else likes to look through him, except children who are on their way to the bus stop, though parents yell from windows not to stare. He doesn't mind anymore. At least it's good for something, he says. He stands in the yard and lets children make faces at each other through his spine, lets them pretend to play it like a piano.

It's not so common yet, this translucence, but everyone knows someone who knows someone who is afflicted. Singers are made celebrities for writing songs about it, and they play over and over on the radio. "You look right through me," the most popular one goes, the bar set so low. I could have done better. Last week a Channel Five news anchor turned to the camera, and we could see through her face to the building on fire behind her, smoke curling where her ear should have been. Everyone has watched that clip by now, the poor woman. They found another anchor. In our town I am the poor woman whose father had it first, whose husband has it now. It's a shame—he's a kind man through and through, they say to me, not realizing how that sounds. Through and through my husband is almost nothing.

I had felt, for a while before the translucence set in, that it was only a matter of time before my parents died, and I said this to my husband often. "Everything is a matter of time," he said. "Forget about time." My parents measured miles instead of years when they started to travel, since my mother had stopped working. She quit at sixty, not because they had the money, but because she had no more work left in her, she said. She spent years on her knees, cleaning homes, cleaning offices. Her hands kept the smell of bleach, as if a counter had just been washed by them. Still, she is the one who remained solid when my father did not.

I let the bathtub go for too long between cleanings and then have to scrub until I am almost dizzy, long enough for my fingers to cramp underneath the cloth and remind me of my mother. My father stayed on four days a week at a dealership, picking up and delivering new cars. He and the owner's father had grown up together; for a while, this meant health insurance and six weeks vacation. My mother was ready to eat cake for breakfast and watch

children's shows on TV, but my father bought a camper from a neighbor and packed their things. He said he could not stand being stuck in the house with my mother for so long, but somehow a truck was okay. It used to bother me when he said things like that, but now I think he had a problem with time, too; maybe he couldn't stand to grow older at home, with so much to measure his age against. Or maybe my father bought the camper because he remembered his own father's love of driving. He wanted my mother to understand his ten-year-old self.

She began sending postcards from the road. I tacked them to the wall near the stove, feeling like a mother myself. "Where are they now?" my husband would ask, his body normal then, as see-through as brick, and I'd quiz him over dinner, holding up the mail like flashcards. Sometimes I'd have to cover the state name printed across the front with my fingers so he wouldn't cheat. They looked like any postcards you'd find in a thrift store box for twenty-five cents. My mother's notes on the back focused only on the picture, and she never wrote below the line. Did you know, she wrote once, that the Corn Palace in Mitchell isn't the only corn palace in the world but the only *surviving* corn palace in the world? I'm not sure what that means, whether corn palaces had to die in order for South Dakota to live or what. She wrote: I guess it's art.

2. *Cross of Our Lord: Groom, Texas*

I guess this is what I'm getting at: my husband and I don't travel much, so it's strange we find ourselves in a car now, just outside Vinita, Oklahoma. We both hate to drive. When we were first married, everyone asked about our honeymoon. "We recommend a cruise," they said, "but only if you don't get seasick." No one believed we wanted to stay in town; they assumed we couldn't spend the money. We didn't want the sea or mountains. We wanted our home, and us in it, and that is what we got—a few days of not worrying about anything outside. Because the *word* is what I love, I told my husband. *Honey* and *moon*, like bees rising over rock. But, you see, it all goes back to time, which I want to avoid: in other languages, *honeymoon* becomes *honey month*, and once you realize that, it's hard to tell if you're marking the beginning of a marriage or the end of love.

The beginning for my parents was 1949. I've never been sure if or when they found themselves in love; I only know they were born in the same town, held hands at a church social eighteen years later, and were married at nine-

teen. There was cake and punch in the basement of the church to mark both events, and then I was born. Like most people, I'd like to think I changed my parents' lives for the better, but as I didn't know them before, I can't say. And as my husband and I have no children, I can't make a judgment based on my own experience.

We have been married for ten years now, and we'd like to think we're in the beginning of a marriage. We've decided one of the reasons for this trip is a honeymoon. It almost feels like we're starting over, buying time, before he slips away from me like the grocery bags we see shuddering along the highway.

I drive because my husband is tired. He slides down in the passenger seat, leans his head against the window. What started as an occasional transparency, my husband shaken with static like an old TV, lasts longer and longer.

For twelve miles I watch road signs keep time through his head. We should have brought pillows. Out loud I say the names of towns we pass. Mostly they are the names of men: Norman, which was the name of my father, Clinton, Erich, and finally, not long after we cross into Texas, Groom. East of the town, I watch the Western Hemisphere's second-largest cross grow taller and taller, then shrink again behind us. When my mother sent this postcard, she wrote that it was the largest cross. Now it may not even take second place; everywhere, it seems, people are trying to build taller ones, heavier ones. When we stop, it is late, the air thick, the moon thin. I want to remember it as a night spent in Groom, but we are in a larger, crossless city.

"I dreamed we were eating steak for dinner," my husband says, putting on his shoes, solid again. He knows where we are. "The kind where they make you sign a health release before they'll give you a fork."

"You are dreaming," I tell him. "I wouldn't let you sign it."

In bed we lie on our sides, facing each other. Like on most nights, my husband finds sleep first, and his breath falls hot on my nose. The parking lot lights travel through him, blinking up and down my arm. Our motel room is clean and bare, and in the morning we are glad to leave it.

3. *U.S. Center Chapel: Lebanon, Kansas*

Two weeks before my husband and I left the state, when his shoulders still obscured movie screens, my mother sold the camper and came through our door carrying jam and honey. "You'll have to take the blackberry," she said. "It's your father's favorite, and now that he's dead I'll feel bad eating it." My

husband and I watched as she pulled at the lid and searched the kitchen for a spoon.

“Third drawer from your right,” my husband said, giving me a look. The look said, *I can’t eat that jam.*

“We were planning on bringing these out to you,” my mother said. “After our last trip. There’s a woman in Kansas who makes it. I found some of those packing peanuts that you’re not supposed to use anymore, and put it in a box in the trunk.”

“We’ll eat it. We don’t need to open it now,” I said.

“Honey from her own bees,” my mother said. “Peach and blackberry preserves.” My mother wrapped her hand around a tea towel in order to get a better grip. “All of it safe for three hundred miles.”

“Let me get that lid for you,” my husband said, as if maybe an open jar would stop the crying.

“But your father—” my mother said. “Your father gone like that.”

For my husband and me, that was the beginning of our trip: a broken jar and my father’s death. It was the emptying of his body, suddenly, clear as a pane of glass. With most people, the transparency is a gradual sickness, flaring up and down, but with my father it was not. I pictured the slow veer of the camper into a cornfield, the way my mother opened the door so that the wind could fall where his face had been. I know he must have been relieved, worrying the way he did that she might go first, and then what would he do, stuck in the house without her?

My mother’s postcard arrived two days later, mailed from the geographic center of the country, a small stone monument overlooking cow pasture. Near the marker, there is a chapel set on wheels, filled with four short pews. I imagine that my father stood just inside, thumbing through the open Bible, while my mother took out her pen: See, she wrote, we’re almost home.

4. Madonna of the Trail: Albuquerque, New Mexico

My husband and the others aren’t sick, not as far as anyone can tell from blood or bone. He was there, solid as ever, and then he wasn’t. After my father died and my mother left without her jam, he stood on a chair to replace a lightbulb, and for the first time I saw through his arms to the plain of the ceiling. Wide and flat and dull, the plaster shone through his skin.

When I realized not only my father but my husband would die as well, I went to the kitchen and lay on the floor. I took off my shoes, socks, and set

my ring near the sink. I stretched my arms out like wings, palms down, and concentrated on the tile cooling my skin. I thought about the many snow angels I'd made as a child, when the name of something can make it holy. I thought about fevers and how they must be broken. With my eyes closed, I thought about the way, before, time had seemed not to pass, had seemed instead like an endless summer pool I could swim in, clear and lit through by the sun.

On the floor of our kitchen I thought about my husband, breathless and still. Once dead, he will not be the man I know. He will not be the one who carries his coffee from room to room, leaving behind rings of cream so that I can find him. He will not be the one who corrects the way I water the lawn or push buttons on the remote.

Another reason for this trip, though I would never tell it to my husband, is to find a miracle. Just like that, I ask the ladies who work at visitor centers and roadside shops: Any idea where we might find a miracle? When my husband is off looking at taffy or magnets, I do this. Some of them shrug and offer brochures, some of them go on about their mother's uncle, who, out of nowhere, seemed to recover, *resolidify*, they say. It's not a technical term; it's the language we've been reduced to.

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In Albuquerque, we visit, he and I, the sixth Madonna of the Trail monument, dedicated twenty days after her stone sister in Council Grove, Kansas. My husband pretends to shake her hand, but neither of us can see it, so the joke is lost. I climb the base of the statue and hug her outstretched leg instead, a mirror of the stone child on her other side. I'm trying to remember what that kind of heft feels like. Hey, Madonna, I say, I'm a rock, too. I think: *Please*.

I suspect my mother, once she was made to travel, saw something of herself in the grim-faced prairie woman. This is my husband's favorite postcard. He found an old silver frame for it, and it hangs near our front door, so that when you step inside it is the first thing you see. On the back my mother wrote nothing but the statue's inscription:

*Into the primitive west,
Face upflung toward the sun,
Bravely she came,
Her children beside her.*

*Here she made them a home.
Beautiful pioneer mother!*

I am not a mother, I pointed out when he hung it.
There's still time, he said.

That was before the translucence; now I don't suppose any child of mine will ever see their father.

5. *San Miguel Chapel: Santa Fe, New Mexico*

What amazes me about seeing my husband in Santa Fe is the way his arms start to turn in the sun, a little pink, a little brown. This goes on until I can no longer find the edge of him; in the shade against adobe, his skin recedes into baked sand.

"What are *you* looking at?" he says.

We eat our lunch, folding fried tortillas and dipping them in honey. My husband is handsome, even now. I did not know that a long trip would deepen the lines around his eyes. Even though he has not yet laughed this morning, it is as if these lines are waiting, preparing. His father died young, before I met him, so I'm never sure if he's becoming more himself or more his father. Neither of us can know. In a way, it must be nice to have that freedom. When I met my husband, he had shaggy, straw-colored hair. Once we married, he cut it close to his head. Over the years it has lightened, and now it too is beginning to disappear. It turns brittle like onion paper and falls away. He jokes that the lost strands of hair will lead us home, as if we were Hansel and Gretel scattering stale bread across the country. As if by the time I return home, he will be there. I want to touch it, his hair, while we eat. I want to touch it nearly all the time, come away with a tuft to stick in my pocket, where I will be able to touch it whenever I want, even after he's gone. Though it's almost noon, it is smoothed, down-like, from his night against the pillow and his naps against the window of the car. "I want to feel like the oldest stone in the world," he says. We are standing in front of the oldest church in the country, just up the street from the oldest house.

In my mother's postcard, the church rises out of a slight layer of snow, the adobe lifted to orange by sun in a blue sky. It is more homely than the St. Francis Cathedral, so we have chosen to stop here only. In the gift shop we learn the legend of its bell, brought from Spain in 1356.

“It was in the 1800s when the miracle took place,” says the teenage girl at the register. “An old man attended church here every day at noon. He was blind and prayed fervently for God to give him back his sight.”

“Was he married?” I ask.

The girl is confused. “I don’t know,” she says. “But his prayers moved this bell to ring without anyone pulling the rope. While it rang, he was able to see. Everyone in the church was amazed to witness the work of God.”

“That’s a nice story,” my husband says.

I squeeze his hand before it flickers again, and begin composing prayers to the bell. I can’t believe my mother didn’t write this on the postcard.

“Sadly,” the girl says, “the man went blind again as soon as the bell stopped ringing. In 1872 the bell fell from the tower, and now it’s here, in the gift shop.”

“Do you believe that?” I ask. I really want to know.

“Maybe,” the girl says. “Maybe he just thought he could see.”

“Quiet,” the tourists around us whisper. “Quiet—can you hear it?”

6. *Ocean Beach: San Francisco, California*

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My father wanted to make up for the vacations we’d never taken as a family, the postcards said, when I added them up. Or maybe he wanted to recreate the road trips he’d taken when he was a boy, all four siblings and him sleeping in the back of a van, the story goes. He was ten when his parents drove them all to California. They didn’t have much money, so it was a big event, driving that long way from the middle of the country. Of course, not many people flew in planes then, and gas was cheap. They didn’t go to Disneyland, though my father said he and his brothers prayed for it all the way from Kansas. “That was my first crisis of faith,” he always said. My father, I think my mother would agree, was not a man with doubts. But that’s how he put it.

I am sure he wanted to go back, my father, to the ocean. Each trip, he took the camper farther and farther west, as if he was working up to it. His is the only postcard I have without writing on it. It is a black-and-white stretch of Ocean Beach, the sand dotted with sunbathers and umbrellas. Maybe my father looked through the cornfield as he died and knew he would never make it home, and my mother sat in the passenger seat hoping she would not have to leave Kansas again.

I used to wonder why my mother did not write more on the postcards she sent. Did she enjoy the things she saw? Did my father? She blamed herself

for his transparency, for worrying him into thin air. Did they hold hands for a moment like we did, standing in front of the chapel? Did they hear its broken bell? They bickered, I am sure, over things like mileage and speed limits and where to stop for lunch. Perhaps my mother wanted to spare me the arguments and so distilled their marriage until nothing was left but the bones of places, the still, sunny pictures printed on the card fronts.

The postcards I mail to her now are almost as blank, all unpeopled landscapes I fit into a paragraph on the back. I leave room for us to sign underneath. We never pose in front of monuments, afraid a picture of my husband will show only what's behind him. I wish I could see as clearly what's ahead of us—honey months is what I want, days slow and sweet. We are every day closer to the ocean, with no idea what to do when we get there. See if I shine like a piece of sea glass, jokes my husband. See if I dissolve into a thousand grains of salt.