

# BELOIT FICTION JOURNAL

Volume 26  
2013

## Fires

They say the part of the brain that guards memories can wake up the rest. Cambria, California. You remember it, right? I will remind you because now you have a vested interest in Cambria for the rest of your life. I know you remember it, or at least you should. It's on the central coast, not far from Hearst Castle and the famous elephant seal colony. We were just there.

Are we back there now? In your memory?

It's a big house, not far up the hill. You sign the rental agreement Otto and I sign it Ginny but we don't use our real last names, an unnecessary precaution. We sleep in the yellow living room on the floor so that the sunrise over the sea will wake us. Sappy? I've just begun.

I don't like sleeping bags but I'm making an exception because the situation demands it. There's a two-person Jacuzzi on the balcony but we think it's dumb and, even though you no longer practice medicine, you're neurotic about bacteria. Anyway we're grown-ups. If we're going to take a bath—unlikely since there's a shower in the backyard and who doesn't like an outdoor shower?—it's going to be in the bathtub. We are wearing our wedding rings but do not belong to each other. On Friday night we lit Shabbat candles and ate challah, your idea, though I brought everything, including the tiny silver candlesticks. We peel tangerines, which I don't even like, and eat altogether too much fruit. It's obscene, the amount of fruit we're eating. There's Coke in glass bottles, hot tea and, I'm sorry to say, plenty of liquor because I'm there and, well, I'm telling the story. The liquor comes into play a little later, though I wish it didn't.

We tidy the kitchen but do not wash our clothes. In this respect we probably have our priorities backwards. It's odd and gratifying to behave both like teenagers and adults. During the day we sleep in the bed—which is expansive and warm—and it's difficult to rouse ourselves to do the things that are absolutely necessary, like opening all the windows, walking along the wet crest of pebbles before the tide returns, or sitting together on the bench at the end of the street, not talking because we need not. If we must go to the village we hit the pie shop (yes, I know, me and those fucking pies) and you order vanilla ice cream.

What else? You paint; I reply over-zealously to work e-mails, watch and rewatch clips of movies I should be in an editing bay cutting instead of along the coast with you. We make menus, rarely go into town, fight a little, decide one day to ride horses but it doesn't go well, do all the humid, fleshy things that would be ruined by me

putting them down here. I guess we're trying to harness the energy while there's still some bliss and some misery. The sheets are tawny, the cold chaps our cheeks, the smells are seaweed, microwave popcorn and us. Truly, we'll be sick if we go on eating all this fruit.

Have I given you enough? Are you there with me? Now it gets a little rotten. What I didn't mention before we left—what I couldn't bear to tell you—is that there have been many houses in Cambria. My happiest memories with the children are there. We take them every summer and, yes, before the children I went with him. But. Before that it was just mine. I picked it off a map, took myself there alone, learned the west village from the east, Moonstone Beach from Park Hill.

Cambria is my town. I own every nub of jade that washes up on the beach, the row of barbeque pits in the town park, all three stoplights, the crappy pasta restaurant on the second floor of the only strip mall, the smell of pine and salt, the purple burst in the sky at dawn. It waits for me. It's for me to share when and with whom I choose. And I hate myself for all the reasons I was compelled to share it with you. I hate that I'm relinquishing it too late.

Do you remember? I mean really remember?

They say the part of the brain that guards memories can wake up the rest.

Now we are fighting (I told you there was some fighting). Our time is not yet half over and already you want to talk about coming back next month.

"At least this can wait until the drive home," I say, and open the sliding porch door to light the grill and get out of earshot.

You roll it closed—too fast, we both know it, me still gripping the handle—and snap the lock up.

"You'll pretend to be asleep in the front seat again," you say. Your voice is calm, but that thing you did, locking us in, I know where this is going.

"Because I hate saying no to you."

You skim the back of your hand down my cheek. "Then say yes."

"What if I'm on a film? Anyway, he won't let me come again."

"You mean you won't ask," you say, sliding open the door yourself and stepping onto the porch. I'm meant to follow.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"You said he knows, so what does it matter?" You are fiddling with a near-empty bottle of lighter fluid.

"I said I *think* he knows. And that's bad enough. I certainly don't want to talk about it with him."

"Next month. Or else I can't go on."

"Threats now?" I say, and light a match from the book I've been holding, toss it on the grill. Up go the flames, then they catch and spread.

"The truth. I have needs."

"I know all about your needs. Why does this only seem difficult for me? You



have a wife.”

“Say the word.”

“The word.”

“If I thought you meant it I’d drive home just to leave her.”

“I wouldn’t let you.”

“Next month then.”

I go back inside, slam the door, then open it again to almost-shout “You’re a goddamned bully.”

In the kitchen I have two drinks in quick succession, not bothering to mix them. I know you can see me from the porch, but you keep your eyes directed at the fire, still leaping through the grate. I pour myself a third, throat searing, and am just about to raise the glass in a cruel mock toast that will catch your peripheral attention, but you’re awash in the afternoon light.

It’s that magical time of day—the one that makes photographers’ shutters hyperventilate—and everything exquisite about you, which, for me, *is* everything, comes into focus. The slope of your soft cheeks, the few strands of silver that sprout into your golden hair just above your ears, the squared off glasses that you wear well but I never could, the way even when your jaw is set it looks a tiny bit like you’re smiling. You’re looking down through the smoke the same way you look at the floor when you become shy in conversation, when you let an uncharacteristic *ummmm* slip out. Your cerulean jacket exists in a different spectrum from the blue of the sky behind you, and I have never loved you more.

I do not know how to begin my apology. I finish my drink, slowly this time, then toss a tangerine into the air and catch it in my other hand. This you see—I see me toss it in the window and see you see me through the refraction—and you know what it means so you smile. The lid goes on the grill, douses the fire, and then you’re inside and we’re falling and we don’t bother to close the blinds or roll out the sleeping bags. We’ve been here for days and are already fuck sore, but you possess me as if it’s been weeks, months, as if you’ve never had me at all, and I can’t help making all the moist, mewling noises I thought had left me years ago.

Clearly we’re not cooking tonight. You pick me up, set me on the couch, replace my clothes. We drive into the village—a short mile that takes longer than it should because it crosses a roaring highway without the benefit of a stoplight—and I smoke a cigarette in the passenger seat, something I never do at home. You pick the vegan joint and since I’m still apologizing I don’t complain. You order the loaf—you love that thing, full of lentils and corn flakes and who knows what else—your version of a post-sex cheeseburger.

“For you, miss?” the waitress is saying, and I can’t believe there’s a place left in the world where I’m a *miss*.

“No thanks,” I say.

“You have to order something, Ginny,” you say.

“I don’t feel like it.”

“You don’t feel like anything?”

“Sure, a Monte Cristo. Just nothing here.”

“Spicy pasta salad for her,” you say to the waitress.

She takes the menus. I kiss you hard on the mouth, then walk down half a block, come back with two slices of banana cream pie and finish them, my feet in your lap, before you’re done eating. I order a glass of wine, even though it’s sulfite-free organic crap and has probably already turned, and you don’t even cock an eyebrow. I love you more for it.

“Ice cream?” I say, after you pay.

“A cone for the road. I want to paint a while tonight.”

For you a cone for the road is two scoops vanilla and one mint chip in a massive waffle crisp. I drive because I’ve already had my dessert and you cannot possibly hold the ice cream and the wheel.

“Put on your seat belt,” I say. The car wants you to put it on. It won’t stop its finicky beeping.

“We’re the only car on the road. Let me live a little.”

“I can’t stand that noise. Put your goddamned belt on,” I say.

You do, and the beeping stops, and for the rest of my life I won’t be able to stand that those are the last words I say to you because what happens next is I inch into the highway to get a better view to the right and a pickup truck doing maybe ninety slams into the car, sending it spinning across three lanes and down a boggy shoulder. And even before the long skate stops, even through my hysteria, even though you’re weirdly still holding your cone, I know you’re no longer with me.

And I’m not with you now. That’s the thing I’ve been waiting to tell you, the thing that’s hardest to tell. I’m not allowed in. It’s not so much your wife—so if you can hear this, if it’s sinking in at all, don’t be angry with her. I’m not even sure you would be mad, not sure you would want me there. Last week I would have been sure. Now nothing is sure. But it’s not her. It’s your parents. They won’t even walk through the lobby because that’s where I sit, where I sleep, where I drink endless paper cups of coffee from the drop-down machine. (“Don’t, Ginny. It doesn’t agree with you,” you’d say. But I sleep as little as possible, invite an ulcer. The square blue chair wouldn’t be more comfortable if I ceased my endless, stomach-settling rearranging, anyway. I go on writing these things to you on promotional pharmaceutical notepads stamped with names of unpronounceable drugs, drinking the coffee. My cheeks are puckered, my teeth filmy. If you take your last breath I will not be asleep.) Since the lobby is my domain, your parents park, climb a flight of stairs in back, enter on the second floor, then take a utility elevator back down to where you are in intensive care.

It makes me feel better that they blame me because it justifies my guilt. I wish your wife blamed me entirely, or your children, who pretend not to understand my presence but do. Yet they smile and wave when they pass, remembering trips to the



mall and Chuck E. Cheese, days we shouldn't have spent together at the carousal park, or playing with my kids at the science museum on those long afternoons when we grabbed kisses every time their backs were turned.

So no, I am not with you. That you're hearing these words—if you're hearing these words—is an act of mercy by a petite, dark-haired night nurse named Katja who finally stopped my midnight pacing of the ward to ask for whom I was crying.

It was Katja who told me to give you memories—the freshest and the strongest, she said—to help wake you. So there's that day we spent three hours at the art supply store; we'd known each other a time but were fresh to the other's love. The memory of it whips through my solar plexus, scrapes through the pit of my lungs like a long run. If I think of it before bed—and I often do—it takes hours for the norepinephrine to subside, sends me lunging for one of the small brown bottles I keep by my bed so that, safe in the grip of a synthetic override, I can replay it again and again until my synapses slow for the night.

We talked about norepinephrine and synapses and synthetics that day, all your still-a-doctor talk, and I tell you about it now not because I think you've forgotten, but because it's the best I can do. The strongest.

First we looked at the colored markers, scribbled love notes on the scratch paper attached to their display, then we touched the covers of all the portfolios. We gave up on trying not to hold hands, but, blushing as a sales girl rounded the corner, dropped them again.

"You don't really love me," I'd said, running my fingers along a row of hanging tubes of oil paint. "You don't even know me."

At this you didn't hold my hand, but clenched it, pulled me to a \$300 wood stool at the end of the aisle, sat me on it and kneeled at my feet.

"I'll explain it to you," you said. "First there was testosterone, lust. Then dopamine—like heroin, Ginny—that's the euphoria, the daydreams, the can't-get-enough."

"You're supposed to be a painter now. Stop talking like a doctor."

"I'm a multi-hyphenate."

"Not. Impressed," I said, smiling.

"I'll tell you anyway. Norepinephrine next, adrenaline. The butterflies, goose bumps, racing heart, flush. Then serotonin, joy. So we'll bond, so you'll think of nothing else to the detriment of everything else. All the cliché crap like singing birds and laughing children."

"Let's not talk about children."

"Can't be avoided. Last is oxytocin and vasopressin so we return to each other, ensure the evolutionary safety of a tribe, think of nothing but children. And now, right now, there are all of them. Your brain is bathing in opiates, in liquid happiness, in the best and most dangerous our anatomy produces. And that's textbook love and it's wonderful and awful and doesn't matter a good goddamn how well we know



each other.”

“And your brain?” I said. “Also bathing?”

“Drowning.”

“Neurotransmitter bullshit,” I said, and you kissed me for the first time in public.

Grief works in all sorts of funny ways. There are probably dozens of books on the subject that would make you roll your eyes, and all of them would say that anger is a natural part of the process. There’s been anger between us before, but usually it came from you and usually you worked so hard to cover it up that I could only guess at it.

Trysts for which I was late (even if you showed up half an hour after our set time, I still managed to be half an hour later than that, leaving us with only minutes sometimes, not enough time to hear about the other’s day, much less begin to unwind it). Trysts for which I did not show up at all. Whole days when I never made it to the phone to talk and you would tell me the next day, a wilt in your voice, that one thing you couldn’t be expected to do was go on in the world without hearing my voice every day. Nights when you sent me endless streams of e-mails and text messages and I couldn’t get away from my husband—who I didn’t even love, not really—for a moment to write you back and tell you all was well.

What you must have imagined on those nights! I always had valid, boring reasons and apologized profusely (I really was thinking of you, never *not* thinking of you), and you always gave a tight smile and said I need not ask forgiveness for anything, ever. But. In that tight smile I saw your anguish and I knew behind that there must have been anger. I knew you’d been sitting at home imagining everything bad. Me sitting on the couch with my husband, laughing at a cheap television show. Comforting him. Falling back in love with him. Making love to him (instead of just letting him fuck me). Telling him about the affair, making a decision to plow ahead with my marriage, leave you behind. Forgetting you moment-by-moment as your unread messages blinked in on my screens.

I know it sounds stupid now, but I wish I’d made all my choices differently. That I never let a single phone call from you ring through to voicemail.

If you were angry it was justified. But I never felt angry with you. In all that time—what has it been, nearly two years?—I was sometimes frustrated, hurt, at wit’s end, but never really angry.

Until I had to call your wife and tell her.

While they were setting my collar bone an administrator with a clipboard came around to ask if I was your next of kin.

“I killed him,” I said.

“Goodness sakes you didn’t,” she said.

I wailed into the hand that wasn’t being loaded into a sling. “Yes,” I said. “He slumped over. I’d had four drinks. He just folded up.”



At this a male nurse working on my arm gave a harsh tug that sent convulsions of heat cracking along the contours of my shoulder bones and when I looked at him, eyebrows drawn, pricks of tears beading, he shook his head slightly, bit his lip. I understood that he was trying to shut me up, to protect me. But self-preservation had no more meaning, because I was no longer known to the world, no longer of myself. For a wild moment I hoped that if I went on talking he would cover my mouth with his hands, with a pillow, suffocate me to save me.

“I did. I did it. I killed him.”

The nurse lowered his head, and the woman with the clipboard turned snappy.

“You didn’t. He’s not dead. You *are* next of kin, aren’t you?”

“No. His wife is in Los Angeles. His kids.”

“And I suppose you’re not his sister?”

“Are you lying to me so I’ll answer your questions?”

“He’s in a coma. It’s serious. He wasn’t carrying a wallet. Do you know how to reach the wife? Otherwise the police will look into it.”

So now that I’m thinking of it I guess I didn’t have to call your wife. I guess I could have left it for the police. But calling her was my first ablution. (Why have I always liked throwing around religious phrases I don’t understand? Remember the time you spilled olive oil down my back before a massage and I called it a sacrament and you asked if I knew what the hell a sacrament was and I said didn’t it sometimes have to do with holy oil and something about how to me your body moving against mine was the definition of holy?) It never occurred to me not to call. But Christ was I mad at you for not being there to help me along, to nod when I said the right thing, cut me off with a nudge when I went wrong.

When your wife picked up she said, “Oh. Ginny. He’s on one of his painting retreats. You know. Dank motel room. Central coast. Lots of In-n-Out burgers. I just tried, he’s not picking up his cell.”

“I have his cell.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

I got out the important stuff without crying and heard an unmistakable thump over the line and thought, that’s one thing they get right in the movies. I should have asked if she was sitting down first.

It’s illogical and unreasonable, but goddamn you for leaving me to do that by myself.

You would have known what to do with her in that moment, that moment where gravity tripled and her body condensed with affliction, phone clattering to the tile floor beside her. You always knew what to do. Besides all the other feelings I had for you—have for you, at this moment you still *are*—there is the feeling of safety. I like being with a doctor. With my doctor. I like that you know everything in my chart, every bottle by my bed, every cough I’ve had for six years, everything that was too embarrassing to tell even my husband. I like that you’d seen me naked, seen



my puckered legs in the glare of fluorescent light, knew all about the 20 pounds I need to lose and where they reside, and still you came to me. I like that your wife and children had been to our house for dinner, that we sometimes sat next to you at college basketball games, that once, before the affair, we double-dated at the movies with our spouses. I like all the questions you asked me about being a film editor, all the sad, thwarted details you shared about your life of wanting to be an artist, of drawing secretly. The filled sketchbooks you pulled out of your credenza when we sat for five appointments-worth of your afternoon time. The way I assumed your drawings would be awful and the way my mind burst open with the truth of them, the fidelity of your charcoal strokes, the way you made pictures and the pictures you chose to make.

Mostly I loved the feeling of knowing, when you first pushed into me—in the dark backseat of my car parked in your office garage, because you were not yet able to make love to me in an exam room, though that came later—that you'd been there before, known me every way, been long acquainted with the secrets of my body and, through our talks, the complex series of cellular actions and reactions that even you have to concede is best called a soul.

So yes, I felt safe with you. Nights out, weekend trips with you, they became the only time I could relax. You could always take care of me; would never let me choke, suffocate, crash, fade to nothing late one night as has always been my fear. You were not afraid of blood, a convenience on our take-it-when-we-can-get-it schedule. Once you tended to a torrential gash on the bottom of my left foot (the ruin of our barefooted beach walks) not as if I was a patient, but as if I was *every* patient. And once, when you loved me so hard you had to give me three stitches yourself (possibly the hardest thing I've ever lied my way out of and nearly the ruin of everything), your hands sewing up my cunt were like the hands of a creator tending his cosmic design.

I was wearing your Hard Rock sweatshirt when we crashed. The blood splattered on the sleeve is mine, but I wish it was yours. I won't wash it. Already your smell seeps from it, replaced by my unbathed funk, from one hundred and twenty some hours of clutching it to me. I did bathe once. They released me from the hospital just after your wife and children arrived, and, not thinking, I went all the way back to the rental house at dusk. I stood in the outdoor shower, first clothed, then peeling off my layers like bandages: my second ablution. The water turned from hot to warm to tepid to glacial and the world turned dark. The shadows of the trees—cypress and a flowering tree I do not know—turned to you in the crooks of the yard. My skin turned the impossible grayish white of Elmer's paste, then blue. I tried to sit down but could not command my knees to bend. Small, red splotches formed and dissipated where my tears fell—hot, melting splashes on my cheeks, my chest, the slope of my hip, my thighs, even. Then you called me from the balcony by my name, something you only do when you're exasperated, and finally I turned toward the empty house, looked up, shifted enough for the motion-activated lights to



catch me. I couldn't move my fingers enough to shut the water, and it stayed on for almost another hour while I thawed by my own sobs, coming to terms with a world in which I was no longer safe.

I am in the lobby writing this to you, trying to keep my words neat so they can be read, straining to hear the voices of your children down the hall because I love them, because it is the sound of you.

Katja has enlisted the help of a day nurse whose name I try to remember but can't. She's a wide woman with stick-straight blonde hair dyed even blonder, a plain, doughy face and a whiny smoker's voice. I imagine she wears lumpy sweaters and neutral colors when she's not in scrubs. Her name might be Lori but could just as easily be Irene and I want to like her because she brings me important information but she's unfailingly sour and what she brings are the administrative details of your slow death, so the truth of it is I hate her.

Just now—a moment ago—I had to put down my pen because she came to tell me that when you die (it's only been hours since they stopped saying if) you will be cremated. This is a detail I know well—my will has long called for cremation; you changed yours after I convinced you—but forgot. Your will also calls for your ashes to be scattered or interred according to the wishes of your family, so I have control over nothing. I think now of every fire we've seen together. Of the little candle we sometimes burned on a shelf in your office; of the beach bonfire to which we once took all the children (giving our spouses yet another day off); of the first hotel room we rented, staying less than two hours but long enough for you to turn on the fire in the twee gas hearth; lighters being blown out by the wind and then reignited during *Scarborough Fair* the time we managed to sneak to the Simon & Garfunkel concert; tiki torches in front of a frat house when we left the university hospital together on your last day as a practicing doctor and strolled around the campus before going our separate ways; the flames you doused on the barbeque just before the last time we made love.

The thought of flames taking that body I love, eating into your flesh and reducing you to dust and teeth, is worse than any horror I could conjure by my own imagination and a wail slips out, a throaty, animal wail that comes from well below my voice box, that reverberates off the white walls and tile, that sends Lori/Irene back to the desk in a huff to call for the sedatives they always have ready for me and which I've so far been able to refuse. They do not understand—not even tiny, kind Katja—that I will never take another drug that wasn't prescribed in your large, round handwriting (your Os not connecting at the top, your Bs written in cursive even though your other letters are in block).

But before she can bring me a paper cup containing tiny pills your wife appears in the lobby—looking at once worse and better than I imagine I look—holds up a hand to Lori/Irene and comes to take a seat next to the soda machine, across from where I sit, writhing.



It's not that we look alike, but I've always wished we were more dissimilar. That we didn't both put gold highlights in our once-naturally-blond hair. That we weren't both fair-skinned and quick to sunburn, that one of us—I never cared which—still had perky tits. I've always been glad that it's her, not me, whose face is sprinkled with freckles. That I am the prettier never made me feel much better, never stopped the guilty flow of loathing towards her about all the things she did and didn't do for you. That you love me more did make me feel better, but only in the fleeting moments of our togetherness. When we were apart the absence of what I owned bucked and seethed against my ego and I hated her for having even a sliver of what was mine, for knowing from long ago—though I never believed completely—what it was I possessed.

If she says even one word it will be the most I've talked with her since I called to tell her I lost you.

She starts with a long sigh.

"You're in his will," she says. "But I suppose you know that."

This shuts me up as if she's pressed a mute button, not because of what she's said or the shock of it, but because I can see how childish my quaking sobs seem, especially compared to her fatigue and composure. And I think yes, this is what love does to us. It is a returning. A primal regression. Like sharing a womb; without need for outside sustenance, exterior warmth. It is two heartbeats shared ceaselessly and now they tell me they will pull a plug and yours *will* cease and what can I do other than wail like I've just been ripped from the only home I've ever known? Not childish. Infantile. And embarrassing (I'm a mother for Christ's sake). And until your wife opened her mouth to speak to me, impossible to control.

"I didn't know."

"He changed it to be cremated. Even though we have a double plot."

"That I knew."

"And you're okay with it? With a Jew being cremated? Don't you usually cling to those sorts of archaic cultural standards?"

"He talked about me?"

"Ginny, you were my friend."

"My will also calls for cremation," I say, unable to stop myself.

"One mystery solved."

"But I'm changing it. I can't even think of. . ." I've long been out of proper, wet tears, but the parched cry builds again.

"I don't have the energy to comfort you," she says.

I wipe my nose on the sleeve of your sweatshirt—if she's noticed that I'm wearing it, she hasn't let on—and take one long, interrupted breath.

"How am I in the will?"

"You get half his ashes. I'm sure if he could have designated further he would have left the brain, the heart, the cock to you, and us with the functional but less interesting bits."

“You should keep it all,” I say, wishing I meant it, wishing I didn’t feel the great surge of gratitude for you leaving me the one thing that would matter to me.

“I don’t want what he didn’t want me to have. He also left you some things. You’ll have to look over the list after.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“And some money.”

At this the cry returns definitively. I know why you did this, but it is wrong, a shitty told-you-so. I know there is plenty, but none of it should be for me. I can see all at once what you long saw, that we should have shared our lives wholly (“People leave people all the time, Ginny,” you said.); that you shouldn’t have had to leave me anything because whatever did not go to the children would just have been mine; that they should have been part of my life officially and mine part of yours. If you can hear this now, know this before you die: that I am sorry for not listening. I was all yours and should have let myself be for you.

“I can’t take it,” I say.

“I can’t keep it,” she says.

“The kids—”

“Don’t you talk to me about my children.” Finally, a rise in her voice.

“I’ll donate it.”

“I don’t give a good goddamn. He loved you, not me. I knew it was someone. I will never, never forgive you for what you did, for the children, but let me give you this little gift: it’s been a long time since I was in love with him. And that’s all you get.”

She unfolds herself from the chair and pushes a hand through her hair, which is clean, possibly even still damp. The shady red light from the soda machine glows behind her and she’s looking down at me now with what looks like—yes it is, it’s pity.

“Please don’t. . .” I say, and she stands there a moment but I don’t know how to finish the sentence, so she walks back to your room.

By the time they set the hour and minute Katja is back on shift and she’s the one who tells me.

“You can’t be there,” she says. “The parents want to have you arrested, press charges. If not for his wife they would have filed a restraining order barring you from the hospital altogether.”

“Can they?” I say.

“Listen to me. Get out of the hospital, Ginny. Don’t be here for this. Will you stop writing for a moment and listen? You’ve got to leave.”

I consider the options. My own husband, who told me he will not be staying at the house once I return to it, is already on his way to San Luis Obispo General to pick me up, possibly with my mother in tow. I’ve asked him not to come, begged him to leave me be, but of course no one listens to a grieving woman in situations like this. They call psychiatrists, check for available beds at mental hospitals, talk



in cloying, derisive tones, exchange dark glances with other sane folk. But listen? Never.

So I can wait for him to arrive, to bundle me up and drive me back and place me somewhere and bring the children to see me until they decide I've recovered from the lunacy of being in love.

I can walk along the piney shelf near our bench, let the salt air absolve me, pick a place to scatter those ashes that I will soon own.

I can, in fact, walk right into the ocean, like Edna Pontellier, like Virginia Woolf, let the water fill my lungs as they drain the oxygen from yours.

"Can you read these last things to him?" I say to Katja. "Before. . ."

"I can try," she says, reaching for them.

But before I hand them over I think of what I wanted to say to your wife.

*Please don't let them unplug him without letting me touch the ragged ridges of his dirty fingernails, kiss him along the scarred rim where his jaw meets his neck, bathe my hands in the sweet oil of his hair, cleanse him in the sterile brine of my tears, press my cheek against the dry pleats of that mouth I know from memory, run my fingers over the soft part of his belly, wash his feet, say goodbye.*