

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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In this collection of nonfiction essays, Brisker recounts her path of recovery after suffering traumatic brain injury. The memoir opens with her first waking moments in the hospital one week after she was thrown from her horse and fractured her skull, and her beginning attempts at piecing together her fragmented self. Each essay follows the author on her journey toward wholeness and the steps she took, with the help of her doctors and therapists, as well as the love of her husband, toward her physical and psychological recovery, and the spiritual awakening she experienced along the way. What is it that constitutes the self is a thread running through the essays, and how that self is both altered and stays intact is examined. The unifying theme is the retrieval of the self after its loss in trauma, and the horse is the vehicle that puts the author on the path at the beginning, and returns her to her self at the end.

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Riding Lessons

By
Kathy Jo Brisker

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APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University Libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Kathy Jo Brisker, Author

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*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time.*
– T.S. Eliot

First Fragments

What's that smell? Disinfectant? Rubbing alcohol? It smells funny, a little too clean, a little medicinal. And what's wrong with my head, why does it hurt so bad? Opening my eyes, I see some flowers in vases on the table across the room – bright reds and pinks and yellows, and a big purple iris – the only color in the room. Everything else is white. I must have been sleeping, but this isn't my own bed I'm lying in. The sheets are too stiff, and the mattress is raised up where my head and shoulders are resting. When I stretch my arm and open my balled-up fist, my fingers touch something cold and metallic on the side of the bed. I turn my head and see my husband's Levi-clad legs in the chair beside me.

"Hi, baby," Tim says. I look up. Something in his bloodshot eyes tells me that he's not just tired: he's scared. His hand squeezes mine, and when I look down and see the wristband there, I think I know where I am. But is that really my arm that has the white band on it? It doesn't feel like mine; it looks like it could belong to someone else. And is this even me lying here? I'm not sure. I have no memory of how I got here. I try to sit up and get out of the bed, but Tim reaches over and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"You can't get up," he says.

"Why not? What's wrong with me?" Then he tells me that there was an accident, that it was serious – and I have no idea what he's talking about. All I know is that my head feels like it's in a vice, and I want to go home.

"I have to go," I say. "Why am I even here?"

“You don’t remember, do you?”

“Remember what?” And then my husband says that I fell off my horse; that’s why I’m in the hospital. It makes no sense. How could I not remember something like that?

“I did? I just went riding this morning; I don’t remember falling.” I remember leaving my car at Deborah’s house, and ask Tim if it’s still there.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Then he tells me that the morning I’m remembering was over a week ago, that I’ve been in the hospital ever since. I try to wrap my head around that, to get a picture of this week I’ve been in the hospital, but I can’t.

“What happened?” I want to know.

“Your horse threw you and you fractured your skull.” I reach my hand up to my head and my fingers touch my scalp. The left side of my skull feels a little lumpy, and, sliding my thumb behind my ear, there’s a dent where what feels like a piece of bone is sticking out. It hurts when I touch it. Why isn’t there a bandage? My skull might be fractured, but what about the rest of me – is anything else fractured?

The next time I open my eyes – I think it’s the next time, but I can’t be sure; I’m not sure of anything – Deborah is standing at the foot of the bed. Her husband and son are beside her, and all three of them are looking at me. I know that she and I had gone horseback riding; I know that something happened and that’s why I’m here, but I don’t know what that something is. The last thing I remember is pulling up on the reins and stopping under the sycamore tree, just short of the landfill. There was a

big drinking fountain made out of river rock, and next to it sat a metal bucket, half-full. We watered our horses before going on. And now here I am in the hospital, and my friend is here with her family, and they're all looking at me.

I try to sit up. My head hurts. My ears are buzzing, like there's a swarm of bees inside my head. When I move my jaw, I can hear a popping in my skull – something is moving around inside. It feels like my head is wrapped with gauze – not the outside, but the inside – and I'm in there somewhere, trying to make a connection, to plug back in. I'm inside of a cave, looking out, and everyone else is on the outside, looking in. The world I'm in, inside my brain, isn't the same as the world out there. Everything outside of me – the room and the people in it – is soft and fuzzy, ill-defined, like I'm looking through a scrim. I know that this is my body in the hospital, but I'm feeling fragmented, dislocated from myself. The only thing that I can hold onto right now is that I shouldn't be here, and that pieces of me are missing.

There's another bed in my room, and Deborah's son, Eliot, has crawled onto it. He's fooling around with a machine that has instruments and lights, and a long tube hanging down. He's pushing the buttons on it and making it beep. I start to worry how seeing me in the hospital like this might affect him, that it might scare him and he won't want to ride again. He's only twelve, and I know he likes to ride horses. I want to tell him that I'm sorry, that he shouldn't let what happened to me make him change his mind about riding. I love horses and I love riding. I'm wondering when I can get out of here and finish my last ride.

Another memory of the day that landed me here floats to the surface: When Deborah and I rode down the block from her house to the trail, we had to cross Palos Verdes Drive North, with its cars and concrete and other dangers to horse and rider. I was more anxious than usual as I put both my horse's reins in my left hand and leaned over to push the button for the walk signal at the corner. In Palos Verdes, where most everyone owns a horse, the WALK/DON'T WALK buttons are placed at two levels: one human height and one horse height. Waiting for the light to change, I held on tightly to the reins with one hand and stroked Kareem's neck with the other, hoping to calm the both of us.

The day had begun sweetly enough. After my early morning yoga class in Hollywood, I had buttoned my jeans, pulled on my boots and headed down the Harbor Freeway to go trail-riding with Deborah. Deborah and I had been friends since high-school, and with her relocation to prime horse country, I had put my foot back in the stirrup of something I had always been passionate about. It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving, hot and dry, with an invitation to step off of the city streets and onto the eucalyptus-lined bridle paths of the outlying countryside. I drove up to Deborah's house and, seeing that she wasn't home yet from her Pilates class, parked my car in front and walked up the drive to the barn out back. A late fall crispness was in the air, and a clear blue sky sheltered the land. Added to the fresh, clean air I breathed in was the underlying scent of horses. The chestnut Thoroughbred in the paddock next door saw me and let out a whinny. Lavender was

growing next to his fence and, reaching down to rub some between my fingers, I brought my hand to my nose and inhaled the soft perfume.

Nearing the barn, I made a clicking sound in the back of my mouth and saw Kareem lift his head and point his ears in my direction. After putting a halter on him and tying him to the rail so I could brush him down and clean his hooves, I walked over to the tack room to get his bridle and saddle. I didn't keep my own saddle in Deborah's barn, and could only use what she had on hand, which was an endurance saddle. As much as I would have preferred a Western seat, and a good cow pony or Quarter horse, and not this cranky old Arabian, after riding Kareem for the past six months, I was beginning to feel comfortable with the saddle and the horse.

After getting the saddle on and tightening the cinch, I went to put his bridle on and he started getting a little ornery, even trying to bite me when I opened his jaws to put the snaffle bit in his mouth. Usually, after he was saddled, I would ride Kareem around the corral before taking him out. But not today. His fidgeting was making me nervous, and I was hesitant to get on him while we were alone. I tied him back up at the fence and put a halter on Deborah's pony, Jiggers, so I could comb the knots out of his mane and tail. When Deborah showed up, she finished the job, and Kareem and Jiggers were saddled up and ready to go.

Not lunging Kareem before I got on him may have been my first wrong move of the day. I watched as Deborah put her black helmet on, tucking her hair in and fastening the strap under her chin. I wasn't wearing a helmet; and even though I never wore anything on my head when I rode – other than a cowboy hat or a baseball cap – this could have been misstep number two. When I put my left foot in the

stirrup and threw my right leg over his back and found my seat, Kareem bucked a couple of times before we even got out of the corral and onto the trail. As soon as his nose was through the open gate, he tried to bolt. I pulled up short on the reins and, digging my left heel into his flank and pulling his head sharply to the left, spun him around. Never once did it occur to me that I might be in any real danger – nothing I couldn't handle – and that Kareem was just getting warmed up to pitch the third strike.

After we had safely made it across PV Drive North and Kareem's hooves touched dirt, I let out a sigh. Now I can relax, I thought. Trotting up the first hill, Kareem strained his neck and his feet left the ground; he felt like a storm cloud ready to burst and I knew I had to keep him on a tight rein. I got him back to a walk, and held him there. Until my arms started to ache. Bringing him to a halt, I sat and waited for Deborah to catch up.

Deborah went on ahead. Once on the trail, I stayed alert and present, reining him with both hands and keeping his head down. Every so often – when I felt I could let go with one hand – I stroked his neck and felt the tenseness in his muscles. We were almost up to the landfill where we liked to trot and canter, and I knew that this would be a good time to let Kareem burn off some of his energy. Stopping under the sycamore grove and letting the horses taste the water that was in the bucket there, I relaxed my hold as Kareem lowered his head for a drink.

My memory ends here.

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I learned my own story, the story of what happened, in the same way I would recover so many other things about myself in the months to come – second-hand, in fragments, incompletely, faced with the necessity of reassembling myself. There's no slow-motion replay that I can tell – nothing like the stories people have, of remembering the moments leading up to an accident, and the instant of impact opening up in time and space. None of that happened with me. When I try to imagine what occurred, of getting thrown from my horse and cracking my head on the ground, it feels like I wasn't even there. My body was, but the part that was me – my consciousness – had somehow left the scene. I don't know where I went. I have to take on faith what others told me.

This is a piece that Deborah gave me:

I was further up the trail and Kareem came running past, but you weren't on him. Jiggers wanted to take off after him, so I held him back and dismounted. I finally caught Kareem, by giving him a deep, serious, evil eye, and got him to stop. I assumed you'd come walking up behind, brushing the dust off your jeans. When I turned around to see where you were, I saw you lying on the ground a little ways off. You weren't moving.

I try to put that picture in my head. Nothing.

Do you remember the couple we had seen earlier – the woman sitting on a big gray horse, while a man walked along beside her holding the lead line?

I did remember that. I remembered saying hello to them as we passed them on the trail.

They were kneeling over you. The man looked up and told me that he was a retired sheriff. That reassured me, knowing that someone who knew what to do in an emergency was on the scene. After spending about another half a minute looking at you, he called 911 on his cell phone. Then he told me that you weren't conscious, but that you could move your arms and legs. He said that was a good sign.

How did he know I could move them? Was I thrashing on the ground – like a decapitated chicken whose nerves hadn't received the “you're dead” news yet – or did he touch me to find out? He must have known that movement in my arms and legs meant there was brain activity and that I wasn't – at least not yet – in a coma. Was I swimming to safety? I guess I was breathing, which is always a good sign. Tim gave me this piece:

I heard the phone ring. I was half-asleep, so I didn't answer it.

A typical Sunday at my house: my husband taking his afternoon nap on the sofa in the den, with a football game playing on the TV and the dogs lying close by.

When I played the message later, and listened to Deborah telling me that you'd had an accident and you were on the way to the hospital, I could hear the sirens.

What I heard was: nothing. I was unconscious, and learned later that I would stay that way for most of the next three days.

Deborah called back from the hospital, and after she told me what happened, I put the dogs outside and drove down there. Before I could get inside to see you, I had to wait in line, to go through security. It was unbelievable – two-and-a-half months after 9/11 – all the security they made me pass through, each step of the way.

When I walked up to the desk and told them who I was, why I was there, they wouldn't let me back to the ER right away.

Maybe I was the lucky one: being unconscious, I didn't have to go through the stress my husband did, of being told to wait before he could see me, and of not knowing what he would finally see.

Another piece from Deborah:

When the ambulance finally showed up, a small crowd had gathered to see what had happened. You were lying on the ground, surrounded by people, concerned about what had happened. Some of them were on their horses.

Was I on my back, my side, my stomach? In my version, I'm on my back, just like in the movies. Did I look heroic, or just stupid?

There was blood coming out of your left ear, and you were mumbling that your head really hurt. Not knowing where you were broken, or the extent of your injuries, with as little disturbance to your body as possible, the paramedics checked your vitals and then lifted you onto a stretcher and into the ambulance. The ex-sheriff and the lady he was with took our horses home, and I climbed into the back with one of the medics while the other went up front to drive.

I found out much later that they were taking me to Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance – the closest ER facility to Palos Verdes, only a ten-minute drive for an ambulance with its sirens on and no stops in between – and that minutes couldn't be lost. One of my doctors later gave me this piece:

The first half hour after a traumatic head injury is the most critical. The longer it takes to get help, the greater the brain damage.

And Deborah:

I tried calling Tim from the back of the ambulance, but no answer.

Now Tim:

When I finally went into the ER, it was pretty crowded, and I saw you lying on a gurney, in your own little corner.

This was the Sunday of a four-day holiday weekend, and what Tim saw wasn't just your run-of-the mill car accidents and falling-down-the-stairs victims. Harbor General-UCLA is one of only a handful of county emergency hospitals in Los Angeles, and it gets gang-bangers, knife and gunshot wounds – all the casualties of urban violence.

You weren't closed off from the rest of the room by a curtain or anything. The medical staff was moving from bed to bed, and I saw other gurneys being wheeled around, and I made as direct a line to your bed as best I could.

I'm filling in the blanks with my own pictures of the ER rooms I've seen on television: lots of young, good-looking doctors running around, and me bruised, bloody and semi-conscious, lying on the table.

You were lying on your back, with the blanket pulled up to your neck, but I could see that you didn't have anything on, that they hadn't put you in a gown yet. You weren't unconscious, but you weren't responsive either. Your eyes were open, but they weren't focused. I wasn't even sure if you knew who I was. There was blood coming out of your left ear.

As my husband is telling me this, I'm beginning to get a sense of how much this story belongs to him, that this is his trauma as well as mine.

Another piece from Deborah:

The EMT guy called me a few times that first week, wanting to know how you were doing. He was pretty concerned.

Much later, I wanted to tell him, “You handled me just fine, thank you. Much obliged.”

More pieces from Tim:

The doctor on duty told me that X-rays had been taken, and that you had fractured your skull. He said they were worried about the swelling in your brain, that they had to do a CT scan, and they were waiting for a room in ICU to put you in.

Short of a bullet in the brain, I imagine my broken head was as serious as it gets. If you break your leg and don't have it properly set, maybe you'll walk with a limp. Worst case scenario: you lose your leg. If you fracture your skull and its contents bleed and swell, second-to-worst case scenario: you're a vegetable; worst case: you die – or maybe it's the other way around.

Deborah's voice gives me another piece:

I drove back to the hospital, after going home with George and Eliot. While I was sitting in the ICU with Tim, I called a doctor I knew, to see if he could tell us anything. I told Tim what he said, that he wouldn't go home if he were in Tim's place. He said that it sounded pretty serious and that Tim should stay with you.

One from Tim:

I stayed by your bed while the ER staff was busy with the other patients. Then I heard you say, “I have to go to the bathroom,” over and over, and I went to get a nurse.

Now I'm intrigued by how clearly and logically he was thinking and behaving under the circumstances. As for me, I wasn't thinking at all.

She told me that you had a catheter, "We've taken care of it," she said. But they hadn't taken care of it. When I got back to your bed, I could smell that you had shit yourself all over. You weren't delusional about having to go to the bathroom.

I don't think that evacuating one's bowels, which is common with traumatic injury, is something you get to see on the TV version of life in the ER. Tim was there, witnessing further evidence of how disconnected from my body my consciousness was.

I called one of the nurses over, and they made me leave while they cleaned you up.

Deborah's piece:

When I came back, I brought your purse and gave it to Tim. He took out your cell phone and started making calls. I think he called Mitch.

And Tim:

The first person I called was your brother. After I told him what had happened to you, and that you were in the hospital, I asked him to call your father. I just didn't know how your dad would react, and I felt it would be better if he heard about what happened to his daughter from his own son and not from me.

My father was 87 years old, and just at the beginning of his own failing health.

Next, I called Robyn.

That's the woman I taught fourth grade with. Again, I'm impressed by how rationally my husband was thinking in the midst of this crisis, enough to know that, as it was late Sunday afternoon and tomorrow was Monday, the school needed to know that I wouldn't be showing up – and why.

An otologist came to examine you, and he looked in your ears. Then they wheeled you off to get a CT scan. Finally, they brought you into your own room in the ICU, and I sat by your bed, waiting for the doctor to give me some kind of official report. You were semi-conscious, and you didn't seem to have any idea of what was happening or why you were there. You thrashed around on the bed, and kept saying, "I want to go home."

I must have already known that I wasn't here in the hospital – that parts of me were missing – and that I had to go home and find them.

Then you ripped out the IV that was in your arm, and I called for the nurse. You struggled while she tried to reconnect it, and they put you in restraints. Your hands were kept strapped to the bed the whole time you were in ICU.

That's pretty radical. It's a wonder I don't remember that part at least.

The doctor whose rounds you were assigned to the first day said that the next 48 hours were crucial, that they needed to see how much swelling there was in your brain, to determine if they needed to operate. Then I watched as they gave you steroids, directly into the IV and into your brain. They said that reduced the swelling enough to avoid surgery.

I remembered when we had to give our dog steroids, and how crazy it made her. Would these steroids make me crazy too, or just cause hair to sprout on my chin?

It had gotten dark out, and I remembered the dogs, so I called Ron and Jeannie and, after telling them what had happened, I asked them to bring them inside and feed them. I was getting tired, and I was hungry. I looked over at you lying on the bed with tubes in your arm, unconscious. I thought about what Deborah's doctor friend had said, about not leaving. The doctors at the hospital didn't say I should stay; they hadn't said anything about you dying. I didn't know what was going to happen to you, but I didn't think you were going to die either. And I wanted to go home. I left around 10:30, drove home, and didn't sleep. When I drove back down to the hospital the next morning, the doctors told me that, in addition to a non-displaced left temporal skull fracture, the CT scan of your brain showed that you had bilateral lobe contusions. They said you had traumatic brain injury.

These were just words, meaningless syllables. It would take many attempts before I could even begin to piece them together into anything having to do with me, and to put the fragments of my story together and remember them.

Glimpses of the Dance

Nobody knows exactly what happened when my horse threw me, not even me. What I do know is this: Each year, out of the approximately one million people who suffer a head injury serious enough to land them in the hospital, 70% will experience posttraumatic amnesia, and about a third may experience that condition for 28 days or more. Mine only lasted for about two weeks. Where did I go for the nearly two weeks that my body was in the hospital without my memory to record it? Was I in that in-between place, the crack in the world that the people of Mexico believe opens up between midnight and 1A.M. on November 2 – *Dia de los Muertos* – when the dead come to visit the living? Without my memory to ground me, was I even there? Like a child who makes tissue paper cutouts of figures holding hands and dancing, and then sticks them on the window to see what's revealed in the spaces in between, I hold my memory up to the light and try to discern the missing pieces by what surrounds them.

To have no memory – especially of a span of time or a crucial event – isn't the same as just forgetting. If I forgot your phone number, it means I had it in my brain at one time and now I can't recall it; but to have no memory means it was never there to begin with, and it can't be retrieved. If our memories are what make us who we are, then pieces of my self were missing. So I found myself piecing together my narrative from what others had told me, and from the barrage of impressions and oddities that bubbled to the surface through the fissure in my brain.

Twice a day, for the next three days, my husband drove down to see me in ICU. But I can't really call it a visit; I wasn't there to charm him and offer tea – I was there to be seen. Mostly, he saw me asleep. Even though a coma can be one of the outcomes of traumatic brain injury, I never went there. Sitting by the bed of his mostly unconscious wife, Tim would watch the doctors and nurses pinch me. My response might be as small as shifting away from their touch, a movement that a coma patient is incapable of. On the Glasgow Coma Scale – with points given for motor response, verbal response and eye-opening response – a patient with a score between 3 and 8 (1 being “no response” in each of the three categories) is said to be in a coma. When first admitted to emergency, I had a score of 10. My mind may not have been entirely unmoored from its sleeping body, but still – no memory.

After three days in intensive care at Harbor-UCLA, Tim had me transferred to Providence Saint Joseph Hospital in Burbank, to be closer to home and my own doctor, and on my fourth day there, I was transferred to the acute unit for extended rehabilitation. Looking at me sleeping in the hospital bed, he tells me that I was beginning to resemble a raccoon. The medical report corroborated his evaluation, saying that my head showed “bilateral raccoon's eyes.” Raccoon Eye, or Periorbital Bruising, is a sign of basal skull fracture and results from blood tracking down into the soft tissue around the eye. I may have looked like a raccoon, but I certainly wasn't acting like one. For one thing, raccoons are ravenous and omnivorous, but I refused to eat for seven days.

When I wouldn't eat the hospital food, Tim tried bringing me some of my favorites – especially Chinese – which I still wouldn't touch. One afternoon, he

showed up with a container of hot soup. When I asked him what it was, he told me it was Wonton soup. “I know how much you love it,” he said, and he set it on the tray next to my bed. Then he watched as I picked up the warm container and threw it against the wall. “I don’t want soup,” he heard me say. “I just want to go home.” Strangely, I asked Tim to bring me Snickers bars which, dutifully, he did every night I was there. Before my injury, I didn’t have much of a sweet tooth, but afterwards I craved the stuff. Yet, Tim later told me that sometimes he would return to the hospital with a Snickers bar and watch as I threw it across the room in anger. “I just want to go home,” I moaned.

When I was first admitted to Saint Joe’s, the staff had given Tim a pamphlet, *Questions You May Have About Head Injury*. Inside was a check list of *some problems your loved one might have*, which included: confusion, memory deficits, increased agitation and anger, lack of understanding about their disabilities, impulsivity, and depression. I had them all. “Wanting to go home” became my refrain the whole time I was in the hospital. They say “home is where the heart is,” but I think it was more than that. Home was where my self was – the whole person who was called Kathy – and not here in the hospital where I felt so disconnected. I had to go home and find her – find myself – to get out of this disorienting mental territory.

A high level of irritability and agitation is not uncommon in people with posttraumatic amnesia, who may also demonstrate poor social skills, impulsiveness, and other traits that were uncharacteristic of them prior to their injury. Some of these

behaviors might be new – the misfirings of a damaged brain – but maybe others had been lurking beneath the surface of consciousness, jarred loose by the trauma. My wires may have been crossed, but some of the sparks they produced weren't brand new to who I was; they were pieces of my self, the light of old memories. The physicist, Richard Feynman, writes, "When we discover how long it takes for the atoms of the brain to be replaced by other atoms, we come to realize that the thing I call my individuality is only a pattern or dance. The atoms come into my brain, dance a dance, and then go out, always new atoms but always performing the same dance, remembering what the dance was yesterday." Lying in the hospital, my memory may not have been in my conscious brain, but these new atoms came from some deeper part – from the unconscious – and they were dancing old dances.

Sometimes, pieces of my old self poked through, but what were once routine concerns became weirdly distorted preoccupations that were ludicrously out of proportion to my circumstances. Tim was sitting by my bed, telling me that I had been calling him up every day for the past week and telling him to pay our property taxes, that I hadn't paid them. I have no memory of obsessing over this thing with the taxes, at least not this time, but it must have struck Tim as evidence that the woman he knew was still here. After all, I had been the bill-payer in our nearly twenty years of marriage, and worrying that the creditors would be at our door if I took a leave of absence was an ongoing fixation of mine. But, you'd think that, lying in the hospital with a fractured skull, I would have had bigger things to worry about – or not given a shit.

"Well, did you?" I asked.

Before the accident, I was never shy or awkward about my body. But after the injury, this ease with my physical self came out as a striking unselfconsciousness that is almost embarrassing to think about now. Another afternoon when Tim came to visit, I was lying on my side while a doctor was putting medicine on my butt. When he came into the room I asked him if he wanted to see my hemorrhoids. Thankfully, I have no memory of this happening, but Tim still recalls it; in fact, sometimes it's the first thing he'll give me when I ask him for a story about my time in the hospital. "The way you were acting, you were like a little kid," he says, "and it scared me."

One of the things that usually disappears when you're in the hospital and being handled by medical workers is any self-consciousness or feelings of shame where the body is concerned, and just as it didn't embarrass me to ask Tim if he wanted to see my hemorrhoids, I wasn't ashamed of my nakedness when the nurse took me for my bath. I was sitting on the bench in the big tiled shower, and there was a woman on the bench next to me. She wasn't naked like I was, but was wearing a hospital uniform with a name tag pinned to it. When I saw that she didn't have a white plastic ID wrist band like the one I was wearing, I realized that she was my nurse, and that she was there to keep an eye on me. I thought that was weird – that I wasn't even allowed to take a shower by myself. So I made small talk. "What's your name?" She smiled and told me, "Marta." I felt a little bad for her – I mean, what a shitty job, having to take showers with the patients. I wanted to ask, "Come here often?" – but didn't.

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Some of the pieces of my self that resurfaced after years of hiding weren't merely distortions of the self I knew, but suppressed traits whose presence I may not have even been aware of to begin with. These new atoms that arrived at the dance, expressing parts of my self that I had previously held in check, were particularly disconcerting.

I remember lying in my hospital bed, feeling like I was floating in negative space – the emptiness around and between objects – and needing to grasp something solid to hold onto. There was a sycamore tree outside my window, and it felt like I was living in the molecules between the leaves. I wanted to touch the branches, to feel rooted to my body and the earth. The nurse was leaning over me – probably taking my pulse or listening to my heart beat – and my eyes focused on a gold earring in her earlobe. I reached out to touch it.

“Pretty,” I said. “Where did you get it?”

She smiled. “Thank you,” she said, and told me her husband had bought it for her at Costco, for her birthday.

The next time I saw Tim, I begged him to take me there.

“You don't need anything from Costco. And even if you did, you're in the hospital, and you're really not in any shape for a trip to Costco.”

“I don't care. I need to buy a Mercedes Benz, and I really need a Rolex.”

Somewhere in the back of my injured brain was the notion that these luxury items of the rich and ostentatious were actually sold there, and that I had to have them. And

somewhere in there was an atom, dancing a secret dance of covetousness that I didn't even know I had.

But some of the repressed impulses that surfaced were darker and more troubling. One of the primary symptoms of TBI is anger and, according to tales my husband and others told me, and reports I read after my discharge, I was displaying that in spades. When I was still in ICU and the nurse removed the restraints that had been put on me, so that I could feed myself, I ripped out my IVs, threw my glasses on the floor, and hurled the bedpan across the room. Unlike Harbor-UCLA, where I was put in restraints for my own protection, Providence Saint Joseph doesn't follow this policy. With my anger and impulsiveness, I posed a danger to myself, and the hospital insisted that I have twenty-four hour supervision – either a family member or a private nurse. The hospital didn't provide this type of care and, as Tim tells it, “patting themselves on the back for their no-restraints policy, they told me that it was my problem, not theirs, that I find someone to stay with you.” I continued to rip out my IVs and tried to get out of bed and leave, and Tim ended up having to hire a twenty-four hour private nurse, something that our insurance didn't cover. I'm not sure what any of these hired babysitters did other than sit and watch my drama play out before their eyes.

Even though my outbursts can be attributed to the bleeding in my frontal lobe – the social monitor of the brain which controls, among other things, emotions and inhibitions of impulses – that doesn't necessarily mean that letting out the anger one's held inside for a lifetime should be classified as “damage.” My therapist, who

had known me for years before the accident, actually said this was a good thing – to finally get all that anger out. To which I'd like to add: maybe falling on one's head can be the solution to what years of therapy can't resolve. In the Western philosophical belief system, where anger is ranked as one of the seven deadly sins, we're taught to repress it; whereas, for the Buddhists, anger is recognized as a destructive human emotion that needs to be allowed to follow its course through the system and be transmuted to a force that can free us from suffering. Granted, getting a gun and blowing someone's brains out because they've pissed you off is something else entirely. But that's not where I went, although, after my brain injury, I think I gained some understanding of how that can happen, how damage to the frontal lobe can push one over into psychosis. My anger was more like the tiger that had been sleeping inside, finally being set free.

People with traumatic brain injury may be unable to remember things from one day to the next, or even one hour to the next. Tim came to visit me two or three times a day, morning and afternoon. I may have been awake, but had no memory to record these visits. After he had left, he told me that I would call him on the phone, asking, "Where are you? Why aren't you here?" And he'd get in his car and drive back over to see me. But his ongoing failure to bring me a wheelchair and take me home only served to ratchet up my anger at him. I had no idea that he had just been to see me, and was coming back because I wanted him to – that I was the center of his life right now, and that he loved me. That just wasn't on my radar; all that was there were my own selfish needs not being met – and I was mad.

One of my friends who came to visit me in the hospital, later told me that she couldn't believe how I behaved toward Tim. "You were just mean," she said.

Another time, when Tim came into my room, he was carrying a grocery bag from Gelson's. And he was smiling.

"I brought you something," he said, and handed me the bag.

I dumped the contents onto my bed, and out came some snapshots of my dogs and a couple of their pictures in frames to keep me company in the hospital. I didn't even look at them; instead, I picked them up and threw them on the floor.

"I don't want these. What good are they? I want my dogs. My dogs are at home. I want to go home."

Beneath the anger that I was hurling at my husband, in the center of my heart was the love I had for him. These were the atoms that hadn't forgotten in the dance, or been extinguished in the fall. After all, even though I said some truly horrific things to him – things that apparently were so terrible and ugly that he still won't tell me what they were – I trusted him not to hurt me or to leave me. Somewhere, beneath the conscious level, I felt safe lashing out at Tim, knowing that he would forgive me. I also knew, as the atoms in my brain registered the rhythm of his heart – again, not consciously, but somewhere deep inside – that he loved me. And letting my anger out, in some ways, only strengthened our union.

I was dwelling in the land of liminality and Tim was the conduit between the interior space I was floating in and the exterior terrain I wanted to touch. He telephoned all of my friends to tell them what had happened, and he gave them daily

updates by email. He opened the door for people to visit me, write to me, support me, and love me. He may have taken on the job of reporter as a way to keep himself grounded in his own trauma, but it helped to reconnect me to the world. What my husband did for me when I was in the hospital has given me a glimmer of how deep his love is. He didn't know what path my recovery would take, or how permanent the brain damage was. Worried that he would have to take care of me for the rest of his life, he told his friends that, while he was dealing with this irascible child who had been his wife, he got a taste of why he hadn't ever wanted to have kids. Still, like a parent looking for ways to ease the pain of his hurt child, he brought me things – things I didn't ask for and probably didn't want – but that he thought I might need or would make me happy.

I was lying in bed, wondering why I was still here. I looked over toward the door and saw that Tim was standing there, holding a big envelope.

“What's that?” I asked.

“It's from the school,” he said, handing it to me.

I carefully opened the flap and started pulling out pieces of paper – all different sizes and shapes, all different colors, some with things stuck to them, some with glitter, and all with words and pictures on them. These were cards made by my fourth-grade students. Children being who they are, mostly they were variations on the one theme, and a child's hand had written, “Get well soon, we miss you, love...” The real treat – that touched me to the core – were the drawings they had made, of horses and hearts and rainbows. Holding their love in my hands and reading their

good wishes, I could feel my heart open a little bit more as the tears came to my raccoon eyes. A part of my self – a piece that I was separated from when I cracked my skull – was being held by the children, and I longed for a connection. I picked up the phone and called the school to tell them how sorry I was that I couldn't be there, that I would be back as soon as I could.

I seem to have had a rare moment of lucidity when admitted to the hospital. A note written in my medical history report sounds like something I would have said. In response to the question, "Do you have any children?" I answered, "The dogs are our kids." When my fourth-graders were told what had happened to me, one of their first concerns, which the school later reported to me, was "What about her dogs? How will she get to see them? Kathy needs her dogs."

One day in the hospital, the nurse told me to put some clothes on, that my husband was bringing my dogs to visit me, and that she was going to take me outside to a place where I could see them. After I pulled on my jeans and sweater, the nurse handed me my slippers and I sat in the wheelchair she had brought. Then she wheeled me out of my room, down the hall and into the elevator. This was my first conscious memory of leaving the floor I had been imprisoned on for – days, weeks? I didn't know and I didn't care. I was going to see my dogs.

The nurse pushed my chair to the end of the hallway on the first floor and stopped in front of the glass doors. The doors swung open and I was wheeled out into the fresh air. When we got to the little grassy area, she told me that I could get out of my chair and sit on the bench, that my husband would meet me there. This tiny little oasis on the hospital grounds was next to a parking area and, as I sat and waited, and

deeply breathed in the clean air, my green Camry pulled up. Tim was driving, and in the back seat I could see my dogs, Chester and LuluBelle. I wanted to jump up and run to them, but the nurse told me I had to stay seated. Tim got out of the car and opened the back door. I watched as he put their leashes on. When he walked them over to where I was sitting, I noticed they looked a little unsure about where they were, and maybe even a little bit frightened. Tim, on the other hand, looked pleased with the gift he had brought me. The dogs weren't straining at the leashes to get to me. *My tail's wagging, why aren't theirs?* I thought.

Tim brought them over to the bench, gave me a kiss, and sat down. My hands reached out to touch Chester. I rubbed my fingers through the thick white fur on his chest, scratched his soft black ears, then put my arms around him and held him tight.

"Oh Chester boy, I love you so much," I whispered into his handsome neck. "I miss you. Don't worry, I'll be home soon." His warm tongue licked my hand, and I could smell his sweet doggy breath. Then I picked up little LuluBelle, and snuggled with her in my lap as she licked my face.

Chester and LuluBelle were a connection for me back to myself, the self that I was having a hard time finding since I woke up in the hospital. After sitting outside in the fresh air with my dogs for about half an hour, Tim put them in the car, gave me a hug, and I watched them drive away. *Lucky dogs – they get to go home.* The nurse walked over and told me that it was time to go back inside.

My husband, my dogs and my students had a connection to my self on a deeper level than that which had been displaced by the brain injury. Their connection was to my heart, and fracturing my skull didn't sever that connection. My

injury may have disengaged me from myself, but these elements at the very core of my life remained intact in what they meant to me – the atoms in my brain that didn't forget the dance.

This time, Tim was holding onto a wheelchair as he walked into my room.

“Get dressed,” he said. “You're going home.”

“Did I pass?”

“Did you pass what? What are you talking about?”

“The cat scan test. You know, the one where the cat gives you the once-over. Did I pass it?” I could see the hint of a smile under Tim's big mustache. Maybe I was beginning to amuse him, which would certainly have been an improvement over what his experience of me had been so far; or maybe I was making progress, with this lame five-year-old joke. Probably, I was just happy to be going home, and my anger had abated.

“Just get dressed. We have to go see Dr. Lupo. He wants to talk to you, and he has to sign the release papers.”

Dr. Lupo was the neurologist in charge of my case, and it wasn't until much later, while reading his discharge summary, that I learned that springing me from the hospital involved more than taking a picture of my brain. On the Rancho Los Amigos Cognitive Scale, I had graduated from a Level 5 – “confused and inappropriate” – to a Level 6, which meant that I was still confused, but now appropriate. No longer requiring “maximal assistance,” I was now at a “standby [meaning I couldn't be left alone] to minimal assistance for ambulation and basic self care activities.” According

to the report, I still needed “maximal verbal cuing and direction at times because of cognitive issues.” Dr. Lupo spoke with Tim several times and noted that “he [the husband] declined to keep the patient in the hospital any longer, favoring discharge home and stating that close to twenty-four hours supervision would be provided.”

If I had seen the report when I was still inside – my own damaged brain, as well as the hospital – I may have wondered if Dr. Lupo was telling the truth, if my husband really did want me to come home. When I was in the hospital and had no idea why I needed to be there, I couldn’t see how scared Tim was, and that what drove him to do what he did – to keep me in the hospital and ensure that I was given the best care possible – was love for me. But then, if I *had* seen the doctor’s report while I was still in the hospital, it wouldn’t have mattered. My temporal and parietal lobes – the areas of the brain that play a role in giving us the ability to focus on what we’re reading, to follow the words on the page for longer than a sentence, and to understand much of what we’ve read – were still in trauma.

Tim wheeled me into Dr. Lupo’s office, and I could see the doctor sitting at his desk, wearing his white coat. I smiled my good-girl smile into his old gray face. He asked me some questions and then signed a paper and handed it to Tim, and my husband wheeled me down the hallway.

“I’m not a cripple, you know,” I told him. “I can walk.”

“Okay, I guess you can walk out of here,” and he held my hand while I stood on my own two feet and walked out of the hospital.

Out the doors and into the world, I got the first taste of myself out there – living inside my own skull as I was assaulted with dizzying sights and sounds that

needed sorting and organizing through the damaged filter of my traumatized brain. Tim opened the door to my green Camry and helped to settle me into the passenger seat. This was my car, and I remembered the last time I had driven it, down to Palos Verdes to go horseback riding. I remembered parking it in front of Deborah's house, saddling Kareem and going out on the trail. Now, here I was, a passenger being driven home from the hospital.

Home is where I'm whole. That's where my self – the part that was jarred out of me in the accident – is waiting for me to rejoin it.

“I want to drive,” I said. “I’ve been stuck in there for like forever. Let me drive.”

“You can’t,” Tim said, as he put the key in the ignition.

“What do you mean I can’t? It’s my car. It’s not like I forgot how to drive or anything.”

Tim looked over at me, shook his head and drove out of the parking lot onto the streets of L.A.

Inventory

The Rancho Los Amigos Cognitive Scale has ten levels for measurement of cognitive function. Levels I through IV seem accurate in describing how my brain and, by extension, myself, were functioning for the three days we spent in ICU; or at least how someone on the outside might assess our travels through the first four stages: **Level I – No Response: Total Assistance** – check; **Level II – Generalized Response: Total Assistance** – check; **Level III – Localized Response: Total Assistance** – check; **Level IV – Confused/Agitated: Maximal Assistance** – check.

My Discharge Summary from Saint Joseph’s Hospital, eleven days later, reads: “At the time of admission, the patient was at a Rancho level 5 [sic], confused and inappropriate.” Part of this was not news. I knew that I was confused. After all, I had just regained consciousness in the hospital after fracturing my skull, with no memory of why I was there. It was the “inappropriate” that gave me pause – “inappropriate” compared to what? I assumed the yardstick they were measuring me against was the index of the cognitive abilities of some hypothetical, Level X, “normal” person. But I’d never really considered myself as a “normal person” and have no idea where I would have ranked on the scale when I was healthy. The only meaningful measurement would have had to gauge me against my self before the accident – a self that had sometimes walked the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate.

But the absence of any baseline gauge stopped no one from making measurements. When I was admitted to St. Joseph’s, I was given the first of many

psychiatric evaluations. I still have it. It reads: “The patient is awake, alert but appears markedly confused. She does not follow commands.” What did they mean by that? Sit? Stay? Commands are what you give to dogs; was I barking, or just growling? But more to the point, I didn’t follow commands before I fell on my head. Why should I be expected to follow them now?

I have never liked rules, and have always resisted people telling me what to do. On my first-grade report card, the teacher wrote: “Kathy has no respect for authority,” which, for me, was to be expected, I guess. My parents had instilled in me distrust of those in charge from a very early age. I was a child in 1950s America, and my parents were Progressives; I knew that the men who rang our doorbell and asked for my father were from the FBI and that sometimes they sat outside in their cars and watched our house. Much later I would learn that my parents were members of the American Communist Party and that my father had been called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. So I suppose it wasn’t surprising that a red-diaper baby would kick her kindergarten teacher on the first day of school and run home to the loving arms of her radical mother and father.

Since those early days, I had learned, out of necessity, to behave reasonably in conventional society. But now, as a fifty-year-old woman with an injured brain, I was showing exactly the same kind of headstrong streak, refusing to obey the doctors and nurses in charge. Fracturing my skull seemed to have jarred open the door into my childhood, and I was returning there with a vengeance.

Further evidence: the neurological notes on the hospital Consultation Report read: *She is easily distractible; she is mildly agitated at times; the patient is oriented only to name; she is not well oriented to place or time; her short-term memory and insight are significantly impaired; there may be some expressive language deficits; the patient is unsteady and impulsive, requiring minimal assistance with transfers and gait but maximal verbal cues for safety.* There are baseline gauges for cognitive functions such as response to stimuli, memory retrieval, distractibility, etc, but not for something as variable as the human personality. Without the doctors knowing who I was to begin with, their catalog was bound to be erroneous and incomplete.

One month after the accident, I find this entry in my journal: *So sad and depressed much of the time. I want my life back.* But first I had to unravel what that life had been and to reacquaint myself with the person who led it.

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Before the accident, I was a writer – not professionally, but passionately. While the rest of my family excelled in the visual arts – my father was an architect, my mother a designer, one brother a painter and the other a photographer – I fell in love with words, and the stories they could tell. I wrote bad poetry in high school, decent essays in college, and always kept a journal. Words were my paints, the pen was my brush, and the page was my canvas. I may have felt that I was as mediocre a writer as I was a painter – after all, my stories were rarely published in the school paper, just as my paintings weren't framed and hung on the walls – but I liked it. I liked the process, and sometimes it worked. But when I came home from the hospital

and could sit in my own room and take out my pen and notebook from the top drawer in the table next to my bed, I couldn't write. I couldn't find the words. Or if I could, the words were wrong or missing, they were crossed out or misspelled, and the sentences I wrote were disjointed and wandered off in their own direction. Nothing stuck.

I suffered from aphasia, a disorder of the brain that impairs the expression of language, both written and verbal. My thoughts and feelings were there inside of me; I could feel their shape and texture, but the words for bringing them out into the open were lost. The left frontal area of the brain, where our concepts clothe themselves in words before stepping out, was damaged by my head injury. And it wasn't just the loss of finding the words to write what I was thinking; what came out of my mouth was either nothing or wrong or, if forced to admit it, "inappropriate." Several months after the accident, when Tim and I were out to dinner with some friends and I tried joining in the conversation, I felt him pinch me. Not a mean pinch or a love pinch, just a friendly sort of pinch. It was my husband's signal to me that what I was saying wasn't right, and I should shut up. This happened on more than one occasion, and though I recognized that he was protecting me from my own inappropriateness, I resented it. I loved language. I feared that the ability to use it and shape it and play with it wouldn't return.

My entire life, I was an avid theatre and concert-goer, from my early years of going each December with my mother to see Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, to the later ones of not missing a Bob Dylan concert every time he rolled through town. I

loved music, and I liked it loud. To my catalog of changes, I can add this: Sound hurt, and my brain couldn't filter all the noise. I can only assume that, before the accident, my auditory processing was in the normal range, but not after. My sensitivity to sound became so acute that anything above a mid-range murmur hurt; all sound became noise clanging inside my skull. After I had been home from the hospital a few weeks, Tim and I went to see Stephen Sondheim's "Into the Woods." This would be my first big night out. And it was painful. After Act I, Tim turned to me and asked me how I was doing. "I think I have to go," I said. And he took me home.

The world became too loud. Even traffic noise rattled my brain and I had to have the windows rolled up when I was in the car. I asked the audiologist if my sensitivity to sound could be mitigated by wearing ear plugs, and he said no, that I needed to expose myself to the sounds that are out there, as my brain would get used to the audio input and would learn to adjust. The world is still too loud; I've just learned to live with it. I wanted quiet, but there was none. Now I also had tinnitus, and the quieter it got, the louder the snakes inside my head hissed.

Before my horse threw me, I knew how to take care of myself and wasn't afraid of being on my own – I even enjoyed it. The first summer after the accident, Tim and I went to the L.A. County Fair. After passing through the gates and entering the fairgrounds, we both needed to use the restroom, and agreed to meet each other outside in front, by the Mexican Village. When I came back out, I didn't see Tim. I stood by the hedges next to the wall and waited. I turned around and looked in all

directions, and all I saw were people, mostly children, walking into the fair. No Tim. The sun was shining, it was getting hot, and I could smell the grease from the taco stands, the burnt sugar and fake butter, and the soda pop. I started getting nervous. Was this where we said we'd meet? Was Tim okay, should I go look for him? I worried that if I moved he might never find me. I remembered when I was four years old and had wandered off on my own and got lost at the fair. I had started to cry, afraid that my family had forgotten about me and that I was all alone. I felt like that child again: all alone, lost and abandoned. I saw Tim come out of the bathroom and look for me. When I waved my hand, he spotted me over by the hedges. I was sobbing.

At the time of the accident, I was a fourth-grade teacher. The school I taught at was a progressive private K-6 school in Van Nuys, and I loved it. I loved everything about it: the school, the kids, the work. It was progressive in a way that aligned with the ideals I had been raised with – where individual expression and hands-on experience took precedence over conforming to the norm, where discipline and following the rules weren't the first priorities in education. It was the type of school I probably would have been much more comfortable in when I was a child. This was my third career, and finally, after years of working in the entertainment industry – first as a publicist in the music business and then as a production manager in television – I had found something that I really cared about.

I fractured my skull just three months into my first year of teaching full-time; hopefully that hadn't severed my connection to the school. One of my therapists at

the Centre for Neuro Skills said that I probably wouldn't be able to return to the classroom for a year. Then she told me a story about a woman with traumatic brain injury whose life as a teacher was over: she couldn't focus, and her frustration, with herself and the students, resulted in displays of anger that made it impossible for her to return to the classroom. That terrified me. I had to get back in the classroom. But I worried whether the connection I had found there, the ability I had and the joy it gave me, were things I could get back.

When I was a child, I was considered smart – “above average,” “gifted” – which meant, among other things, that more was expected of me. I was given more advanced school work than the rest of the class, I skipped the second grade, and in junior high school I took all of my classes with the other “gifted” students. When I began my rehab at the Centre for Neuro Skills, new tests were given to gauge my cognitive impairment, and to determine how I measured up against “normal.” On my Speech Pathology Initial Evaluation Report, using the Woodstock-Johnson III Test of Cognitive Abilities, I scored mostly between the 25th and 75th percentiles – considered within normal limits. It appeared that I had lost my “above average” ranking, but two of my scores were disturbingly below average: Cognitive Efficiency-Processing Speed, with a score of 11 (out of 100), and Cognitive Fluency, with a score of 9. Before the accident I was a fast thinker – sometimes too fast if you asked my husband, with at least two or three things going on inside my head at once, and on to the next while he was still worrying over the first – was a good problem-solver, and could make decisions. Now, I couldn't even decide which socks to put on, and I

had a hard time staying focused on any one task. I was easily distracted. If presented with a problem, I had to slowly and methodically think it through, point by point, before arriving at a solution. And by then, I may well have forgotten what the problem was to begin with.

I was a reader. My father had taught me to read when I was three, and he had passed along his own passion for books to his curious daughter. A favorite Saturday activity was going with my dad to Pickwick Bookstore – “The Big Bookshop” on Hollywood Blvd. – where I would spend hours browsing the shelves, sitting on the floor reading, and being allowed to go home with one or two new volumes held close to my chest. Some young children have blankets or toys they can’t part with; for me, it was books. With the brain injury, I didn’t lose my ability to read – to decipher the words on the page – but I couldn’t focus. I may not have read anything in the hospital, but once I was home and looked forward to reading my books, my attention would wander after a sentence or two, and I’d have to reread what I just read, and then forget it again. I wanted my books back; I wanted the pleasure I got from getting lost in the pages for hours or days at a time.

I was a devoted yoga practitioner, and I wanted my yoga back. Yoga had been an integral part of my life before the accident, and the Center for Yoga on Larchmont had become my second home since my mother’s death nearly ten years earlier. With the guidance and support of my teachers there, I had developed a whole new connection to myself, both physically and spiritually. The yoga community was

my community, and I didn't want to lose it. When riding Kareem the last few times before the accident, I carried the thread of my yoga with me, off of the mat and into the saddle.

After putting my left foot in the stirrup and swinging my right leg over his back, I settled my sit bones firmly into the saddle. The union of our two bodies began at this juncture. I picked up the reins in both hands and, rolling my shoulders up and back, I softly bent my elbows and rested the back of my hands on his withers at the base of his neck. The balls of my big toes pressed firmly down, and my feet relayed the message through my boots to stay in direct contact with the stirrups. I flexed my ankles so that my heels were slightly lowered – the cellular memory I carried with me from my earliest days of riding, that my feet need to be able to easily slide out of the stirrups in case something happens. With my knees slightly bent, my inner thighs gripped my horse's flanks. I lifted my spine and took a deep breath in and out. I had my seat. The signals I gave my horse had to be precise and clear, and I needed to stay conscious at all moments that I was on him.

Our rides together got better – until the last one. And even though I was so badly injured, I think my yoga body knew how to protect itself as best as it could. Now I needed my yoga to help me heal.

I was independent, which meant that I didn't need other people to get me where I wanted to go. As an expression of my independence and, by necessity, as an Angelino, I drove a car. In Los Angeles, not being able to drive a car meant that you pretty much couldn't do anything, except stay home, and I didn't want to stay home.

Forget walking – everything was too far away for that; forget riding a bike – the physical and mental impairments I had suffered precluded that; and never mind taking a bus – besides the fact that I had been rendered incapable of negotiating the fares and routes, the public transportation system in L.A. was notoriously sub-par. Wheels were wings, and mine had been clipped.

I treasured my independence, and I was fortunate to be married to someone who honored that. My psychotherapist at the Centre for Neuro Skills wrote on her initial report: “Kathy and her husband have led very independent lives, thus her injury resulted in creating stress in the marital relationship.”

One afternoon, after I was home from the hospital and still couldn't go anywhere by myself, I wanted Tim to stop whatever it was he was doing – probably sitting at his computer and playing solitaire, or reading a magazine – and take me somewhere – probably to the movies or the mall, or maybe to the beach. When he wouldn't do what I wanted, I yelled, “Fuck you! I'm taking the dogs and going to New Mexico.” Maybe my independence had been taken away with my brain injury, but it still breathed inside of me. I wanted my independence back, and I wanted to stop hating my husband for telling me what I could and couldn't do.

Before the accident, I never spoke in tongues. The languages I had learned – Hebrew in Sunday school, French in high school, Italian in college, and Spanish here and there – didn't stick around beyond the basics: *Dónde está la biblioteca? Où es le parc?* English was my native tongue, and I'd never mastered bilingualism. Then, something new and playful showed up: foreign words started rolling off my tongue.

Not whole thoughts, just a spattering of words here and there, with an occasional sentence thrown in. I know that the optimal time for learning language, when the brain is most plastic and receptive for language acquisition, is the very early years. I can only imagine that, as my brain injury opened a door into my early childhood, those foreign tongues that I had mostly forgotten were still lodged somewhere inside, and when I cracked my skull they had been jogged loose and were finding their way out.

I was a social drinker. Alcohol wasn't my drug of choice, but I liked a glass of wine or a beer now and then, or a real drink for special occasions. The neurosurgeon told me that it would take my brain at least a year to heal and not to have any alcohol during that time. Tim and I went out to dinner for the first time a few months after the accident, and I wanted a martini. "What harm could one drink do? I'll be fine." The hangover lasted a week, and I became a teetotaler.

I was a traveler. Each December, for the past five or six years, Tim and I had been flying down to Oaxaca for Christmas and New Years, to see friends and visit the land that we loved. Plans we had made months earlier for this year's trip had stayed in my memory after the accident, and I was looking forward to going. When I came home from the hospital, Tim told me that it had been cancelled, that the doctors said that I couldn't fly, that it wasn't safe. This didn't make any sense to me, but, who knew – maybe the air pressure would cause my brain to explode? My husband did

know what I had yet to learn: that the overstimulation of a trip to Mexico might be too much for my traumatized brain to process. I was grounded.

I was adventurous and strong, and I wasn't afraid to do things; I liked to hike, and I liked to climb. As a child, I was a tree-climber, and even though I sometimes fell out, that didn't stop me from climbing right back up. I took chances. But not any more. Now I played it safe. Even being a passenger in a car was a little bit scary: I kept my eyes shut and wished that I was wearing a helmet. One glorious day when I was back at school and teaching part-time, I went on a field trip with the kids to Malibu Creek State Park. We had to cross the creek using only a narrow bridge we had made out of stones and branches, and a couple of fourth-graders had to help me across – two brave kids leading a fearful third. After the accident, I was afraid of falling, I was afraid of getting hurt. I had lost my balance.

I was a non-believer. I may have had a spiritual life, but I didn't believe in miracles. Afterwards, friends told me they were praying for me and I believed it would help. I slept with "holy" dirt from El Santuario de Chimayo in my pillow. I carried a striped fluorite stone in my pocket for its energetic power to heal. I wore a Ganesh pendant around my neck.

I felt like my life had meaning and purpose. Then I lost my place. I had been taken out of my own story and needed to find the way back in.

I was a woman who loved to ride horses. After I was thrown, I was afraid to get back on.

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After two weeks in the hospital, my Discharge Summary reads: “She made gradual improvement cognitively and is at a Rancho level 6 [sic] approximately at the time of discharge.” Level VI on the Rancho Los Amigos Cognitive Scale is defined as **Confused, Appropriate: Moderate Assistance**.

Taking stock of who I was before the accident, and looking at the person I had apparently become after, I held pieces of two selves in my hand, and neither of them added up to me. I was more than these two parts; I was some third thing, that couldn't be measured or codified. My self was fractured, and I needed to reconnect the pieces that made up the whole, in order to get my life back.

Going Home

At last, out of the hospital where I had spent the past two weeks, with its antiseptic smell, cold metallic equipment and linoleum floors, and safely stepping into the warm, dark wood and rich colors of my house, with its faint odor of garlic and dog. I reached my hand out to steady myself against the wall while Tim walked behind me as we went up the stairs to the living room. I could hear my dogs barking outside. All I wanted was to be with them. Tim walked me over to the red couch and made me sit down. While he went to let the dogs in, I rubbed my palm across the velvety nap and remembered when we used to fool around on this sexy sofa. But that was such a long time ago, it felt like it didn't even belong to me any more – not the couch, but the playfulness with my husband. When Chester and LuluBelle came in, they ran over to me, and I sat there while they sniffed my legs, finding my familiar scent hidden under the foreign odors of the hospital. I got down on the floor with them, and they licked my hands and face. This felt like home.

Reassured that I was safe and happy, Tim left me in the living room and walked toward the kitchen. I went after him, and found him pouring himself a glass of wine. When I turned my head, I could see that the granite-top island in the center of our big kitchen was loaded with vases full of flowers.

“Who died?” I asked Tim.

“Not you,” he said, taking a sip of his wine. “Do you want to read the cards, see who sent them?”

“Yeah, but later. I'm really tired. I'm gonna go lie down.”

When I woke up from my nap, I saw that the private nurse Tim had hired to keep an eye on me – as part of the proviso that I would be under nearly twenty-four hour supervision after being released – was sitting on the chair in my bedroom, watching me.

“Oh, hi,” I said, and smiled. She smiled back, but didn’t say anything. I got up to pee, and she followed me into the bathroom. Okay, so now I had a shadow. I went into the office, and Tim was sitting at his computer, playing solitaire.

“Hey,” I said. “I need to take the dogs for a walk. Why don’t you come with me.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea right now,” he said. “You just got home from the hospital.”

“They need their walk! You probably didn’t even walk them while I was gone.”

“I walked them.”

“I don’t believe you. And even if you did, you didn’t do it the right way.”

“Kathy, please. You need to try and understand.”

“Fuck you! *You* don’t understand,” and I stomped out of the room, passing my shadow nurse in the hall.

The anger that I had been hurling at Tim since the injury had followed me home from the hospital. But this indignation I was feeling wasn’t a new thing; it had been an ongoing refrain in our marriage for the past several years. Tim would often spend hours at his computer or in front of the television – which I mostly judged as inane and unproductive, things that smart people didn’t do, and Tim was smart. He

had recently retired from his career as a television producer, and it never even crossed my mind that, with the daily stresses of his life, this might have been his way of coping; or that maybe he actually liked doing these things that I considered a complete waste of time. What I really didn't understand, post-accident, was that Tim's new occupation – taking care of me, his brain-injured wife – was more stressful than anything else life had thrown his way.

When I came home from the hospital, I assumed that I could round up the pieces of my self that had strayed with the injury and, even though I couldn't get back in the saddle, I could at least have my life back. What I didn't know was that that wasn't possible, that my independent spirit needed to be reined in so that my brain, and my psyche, could heal. Clearly, I had no idea how seriously I was injured, which is another – not uncommon – symptom of traumatic brain injury. TBI patients are often in denial about the extent and nature of their injury, and my husband knew this. He knew that I had to be corralled. Tim was the one who decided what I could and couldn't do, and as I reacquainted myself with my home surroundings, his constant supervision was an irritation. For the first few days that I was back, out of fear that I might fall and bang my head again, he would sit on the edge of the bathtub while I took my shower. No matter where I was or what I was doing – whether sitting outside with the dogs, or lying on the bed and trying to read – he was always checking up on me. But that wasn't the only annoyance: I had to go see my doctors and therapists and, worst of all, Tim had to drive me.

After I had been home for a few days and was growing weary of all the visitors, of having to tell the story over and over again that I had no memory of what

had happened, and watching my friends look at me like the displaced person I had become, I wanted out. I wanted to get in my car and drive somewhere, and so I asked Tim where my car keys were.

“You can’t drive,” he said. “Don’t you remember? I already told you that.” And then he told me again: When I was released from ICU at Harbor-UCLA Emergency Hospital and transferred to St. Joseph’s, the hospital staff had to report my head injury to the DMV; it was the law.

“So they know I hurt my head. So what?” *Does the DMV have jurisdiction over horseback riding? Can they take my driver’s license away when I was driving a horse and not a car? Sure, car engines are measured in ‘horse power’ – but since when is a horse a motor vehicle? Are they going to take away my license to ride?* I still couldn’t connect the dots.

“You didn’t give them my license, did you?”

“No.”

“Well then, what difference does it make? I can still drive my car.”

Tim had to explain it to me. He told me that I was a liability, that the Department of Motor Vehicles had a record of my head injury, and if I was ever involved in a car accident, no matter whose fault or how minor, I – meaning we – could be sued. I wouldn’t be permitted to drive until I passed a driver evaluation with an occupational therapist.

These were new words regarding me – “liability,” “evaluation,” “therapist” – words that I would develop an intimate, if angry, relationship with over the next several months. But the anger was, once again, directed at Tim. In Los Angeles, cars

mean freedom, and my husband was holding the keys to mine. It didn't occur to me that this had anything to do with his concern for my safety – or the safety of anyone who crossed my path – if I got behind the wheel. I didn't know that he was holding onto a piece of my self that I was incapable of owning: that I was less now than I had been before. I thought that all he cared about was that I was a liability, and that all he was worried about was getting sued. And it pissed me off. If he really cared, I thought, he would give me my car keys.

“Screw the law,” I said. “I can drive.”

Tim's shoulders dropped and he shook his head as he walked out of the room and into the den.

House-bound and unhappy, I spent a lot of time sleeping, and when I wasn't sleeping, I tried to read or write – without much success. I may have known that I wasn't myself – not completely – but I didn't realize how compromised I was in what I could and couldn't do. Since I was now out of the hospital, I assumed that pieces of my life that had been routine, like walking the dogs or going shopping, would be available to me. Tim knew better; he knew that I wasn't ready, and he reshaped the boundaries of my life so that I would heal. But this wasn't just about me; he had to make changes in his own life in order to accommodate mine.

In my first days home, when I was released from the care of the doctors and handed over to that of my husband, one incident in particular has stayed with him. When I ask him, “What do you remember, what was it like for you, having to deal with my craziness?” this is what he often reveals:

“Robert and Beth were in town, and they had invited me out to dinner.”

Robert was the man who Tim had been working for when we first started going out, and their friendship meant a lot to him; I knew that getting to see him was a big deal.

“When I told you I was going, and that you had to stay home, you ignored me.” I remember that part – the thrill I felt at getting out of my sweats and putting on a nice dress. And I remember the look on Tim’s face when he saw what I had done – the frustration, and the anger in his eyes.

“You were horrible,” he told me. “When I tried explaining to you that you were in no condition to go, you turned into the bratty two-year-old I had been dealing with. Only this was worse. It was awful.”

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t go. I stayed home.”

“Did you call Rob and tell him why, that you had to take care of me?”

“He knew. But no, I didn’t call him.” When Tim told me this, I could feel a piece of his own sadness slide into the space between us.

“He must have understood what it was like for you. I mean, with Jeanie and all.” Robert’s wife, Jeanie, was very ill with Parkinson’s, and he had been her caretaker for a number of years; and Beth was an old friend, who he was now keeping company with. I assumed he would have known what it was like for Tim, who now had a sick wife to take care of. “How could he be mad at you?”

“I never talked to them after that. I think they were both mad that I never showed up, and Rob was too angry – I didn’t even call.”

Tim did talk to Robert and Beth after several years passed – we even visited them a few times in New York, and saw him when he was back in L.A. When Tim told me this story, I began to rethink what it must have meant for him. It wasn't so much that I was able to impose my will on him, or that my behavior might have injured a friendship that needed several years to mend. It was more than that: I had forced my husband to make a decision that it wasn't really necessary to make. I made him choose, and he chose me – just as he had done throughout my hospitalization and recovery. I'm almost certain that, before the accident, when I still had my wits about me, something like this wouldn't have happened, that if I was sick at home and Tim had the opportunity to have dinner with friends, I would've told him to just go and have a good time, don't worry about me, I'll be fine. But not in the early stages of post-traumatic brain injury, when I was the center of my own universe. I was the source of Tim's *tsuris*, and this incident has stayed with him in his gut.

At some point after my first week at home, Tim gave in to my incessant whining about walking the dogs. But, rather than go with me himself, he insisted that the nurse on duty accompany me. As the dogs ran down the stairs in front of me, my left hand reached for the wrought-iron railing on the side of the stairs. This was a new impulse for me. Not only had I refused to wear a helmet when I went horseback riding, but as a child I had insisted on learning to walk without any help, pushing away any hands that were offered. I wanted to stand on my own two feet all by myself and if I fell, I would just get myself back up again. Now, something had changed inside of me. My brain may not have had any memory of the accident, but my nervous system did and, like a toddler who is just learning to stand up, or an

invalid who walks with a cane, I needed to touch the railing in order to feel safe, in order to keep from falling. My nurse trailed behind.

When we had all made it safely down the stairs and into the entrance hall, I told the dogs to sit. Bits of memory that hadn't been lost with the injury found their way into my hands as I slipped the dogs' leashes around their necks, then grabbed a couple of poop bags from the drawer where I always kept a stash and put the house key in my pocket. I opened the front door and the four of us stepped out into the cool December day.

There aren't any sidewalks in the hills of Silver Lake where I was living, and everyone walked in the street. My dogs and I were known by all of them. Jocelyn, nanny to one of the neighbor's children, approached us, pushing her charge, Sammy.

"Hi," I said, smiling a weak smile.

"I haven't seen you," she said. "You been away?"

"No, not away. Well, sort of. I was in the hospital."

"Oh," and her bright smile faded. "You okay?" Her eyes glanced at the nurse who was by my side, wearing some sort of uniform – a cotton, smock-like blouse with a happy-face design all over it.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just glad to be back home with my dogs."

"Okay. Me and Sammy, we miss seeing you. Your little dog, she so big now," and she bent over to pet LuluBelle.

We continued up the block, and my nurse told me to be careful of cars, that it wasn't safe to be walking in the street.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I told her. “I’m always real careful. I know my way.” We walked a few more paces and I heard a low hum.

“Car,” I said, and pulled the dogs closer to the curb.

After the car passed, and we stepped away from the curb, I saw Mrs. Fitzpatrick walking very slowly toward us. She was holding onto her walker and her nurse was holding onto her elbow. Mrs. Fitzpatrick lived up the block, and she had recently had a stroke. When we got up close to her, I sort of half smiled, and then I looked down. Old Mrs. Fitzpatrick, with her wispy white hair, was standing in front of me, supported by her nurse.

“Hi, Mrs. Fitzpatrick,” I said. “It’s nice to see you out walking. Are you feeling okay?”

Her soft blue eyes looked up at me, and she smiled. I wondered, *Does she even know who I am?* And then I thought, *But this isn’t really me. I’m not sick like she is, and I don’t need a nurse. Do I?*

“C’mon,” I said. “Let’s go” and I tugged at the dogs’ leashes. I may have been home, but I didn’t feel quite right in my own world. Before the accident, mostly what I saw walking on the street were babies being pushed in their strollers, and occasionally the old and infirm being helped along. Today, I was both.

Even though I was out on my own without Tim, I felt his absence. Something was missing, and that something was the person I trusted and relied on to make sure that I was safe. I felt a little wobbly – not just physically, but emotionally. I may have believed that I was ready to stand on my own two feet, but deep in my core I

knew that I needed my husband's guidance and support, and – most of all – I needed his love.

The first afternoon home from the hospital, I was lying on my own bed, in my own bedroom, with my two dogs curled up next to me, when Tim walked in. Hearing the wooden floor creak with his footsteps, I turned my head and opened my eyes. I could see that he was holding a big brown grocery bag.

“Here baby,” he said. “I may not have gotten you flowers, but welcome home.”

After I rolled over and sat up, he handed me the bag. Having no idea what was inside, I carefully opened it up and peered inside. Then I put my hand in, curious to discover what surprise this welcome-home gift the bag was hiding. What I pulled out were pieces of my life from the day it happened. First to come out were my jeans, the Wranglers I was wearing when Kareem threw me. I saw that they had been cut straight up each leg, from the hem to the pocket. Next, out came the flannel shirt that I had bought in the men's department because I liked the way it hung on my shoulders better than the ladies' version. The shirt had also been neatly sliced, just like the jeans, with each sleeve cut open from cuff to shoulder.

“What is this?” I asked Tim. “Where did you get it?”

“Deborah gave it to me, that first day when I went to see you in the ER. I've been keeping it for you.”

The jeans and shirt both looked like they were cut with some level of care straight up the legs and the sleeves – care for getting them off my possibly injured body, but not care for how much those faded jeans and soft flannel shirt meant to me. Even my boots – my treasured Lucchesees – were in the bag but, thankfully, they weren't cut or damaged, other than a big scrape on the back of the right heel, which gave me a clue to my twisted right knee. I wondered how in the world the paramedics, who had loaded me, unconscious, into the ambulance and had taken me to the hospital, ever got them off when they were so concerned with not moving me. I thought I was done when, sticking my hand into the grab bag one last time, I felt something soft and silky. Not just my outer clothes, but my underwear had been cut off also. When I pulled my carefully cut bra and panties out of the bag, I was grateful that I had heeded the proverbial mother's advice: Always be sure your underwear is clean in case you're in an accident.

Tim had been standing there the whole time, watching me unwrap this strange gift. When I looked up and saw him, a crevice in my heart opened, and a little piece of the truth sidled in. At the time, I was touched by this gesture in a way I couldn't quite explain. To the husband who went through his own trauma by nearly losing his wife in a serious horse accident, and holding onto me with his love and care, keeping this bag of clothes for my return home *was* a gift. My anger folded itself back up into the part of my brain where it had been sleeping, not conquered or dispelled, but quieted for a time.

As I've revisited this episode of my return home, I've often pondered the question: What was really in the bag? Maybe it was Tim's hope that I would live that he folded in with the clothing. And maybe his desperation found its way into the bag – his fear that I wouldn't come home, that the woman who he knew and loved would be lost to him forever. His terror that I might die had probably found a place in the bag. Maybe, in a sense, it was me that was in the bag, and that's what he was holding onto. When Tim first brought my clothes home with him from the hospital, it may have just been a bag of clothes. But over the two weeks that I stayed in the hospital, and he was at home without me, the weight of what that bag carried grew. He had held onto these old riding clothes of mine, even though they were now cut up and useless, as something more than a souvenir. He was saving them for me, anticipating this day when I would come home and he could give them to me. With this poignant gesture, some of the weight my husband had placed in the bag had been lifted, and the gift that he gave me was really a gift for us both.

The Sum of Her Parts

I must have agreed to this. I have the letter – signed by both me and my husband – confirming my authorization for admission to the Centre for Neuro Skills-Los Angeles. I have no memory of reading or signing – certainly not of understanding – this document, which says that I was to receive twenty hours of clinical therapy a week, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech/language therapy and psycho-therapy. I would also receive thirty-six hours of Neuro-Rehabilitation Specialist services in my home to assess and teach self-care skills, community safety/social skills, implement therapeutic home programs as prescribed by the therapists, monitor behavioral outbursts and provide appropriate intervention.

As I look at this letter now through the distance of years, and get a glimpse of the pieces of my fractured self, it's the "behavioral outbursts" language that steps off the page of boilerplate rehab therapy and resonates with specificity: I know, from what I was subsequently told and what I hold in my bones to be true, that they were indeed talking about me.

The Centre for Neuro Skills is a post-acute, inpatient and outpatient neurological rehabilitation facility geared specifically toward individuals with traumatic brain injury, and the head injury that I sustained when my horse threw me put me at the top of their list of applicable neurological impairment categories. I was admitted as an outpatient to their Encino clinic. After my first full day at CNS – of which I have a very vague memory – meeting with the therapists, being interviewed and observed, I told Tim that I'd had enough, that I didn't want to go back. I didn't

like having to spend all my time there, when there were better things I could be doing – like teaching, or yoga, or even staying home with the dogs – and I didn't see the point. I still didn't think there was anything wrong with me that I couldn't handle on my own. When Tim was driving me home, he told me something that gave me a glimpse into how serious the situation was – something that I still have a very clear memory of.

“Initially,” he said, “when you got out of the hospital, the doctors recommended that I take you up to the residential facility they have in Bakersfield, and that you stay there for a few weeks.”

“Why? That's crazy.”

“Well, with your erratic behavior, they decided you needed twenty-four hour supervision. They didn't even want me to take you home.” A picture of me prying open the window in the room I was consigned to and jumping out played inside my head as he told me this; I was pretty sure I would have killed myself if I was locked up.

“What did you do?”

“I refused.” When he told me this, he took his right hand off the steering wheel and laid it gently on my thigh. A ray of trust, that he wouldn't hurt me, that he really was on my side, seeped in with this news.

I may not have thought that I needed the therapists' help, but what they wrote in their Initial Evaluation Admission reports filed after my first two weeks there, says otherwise. Their notes, which I read when I was discharged, also give clues to the

pissed-off, still inappropriate person they were dealing with. Here is what each of the four therapists observed:

Speech Pathology: Weakness was noted for Processing Speed and Cognitive Fluency. Despite scores within normal limits for Fluid Reasoning and Executive Processing, scores were expected to be higher based on her education level and job skills. Decreased initiation and increased frustration were noted when tasks increased in difficulty, as exhibited by inappropriate language, such as “This pisses me off,” “This is stupid,” and “I chose to ignore it.”

Difficulties with follow through for tasks, increased frustration and tolerance, and processing speed may influence her ability to fully perform job skills and school assignments. It is therefore recommended that Speech Therapy and Therapeutic Home Programs continue to strengthen needed skills.

Occupational Therapy: Decreased safety awareness and decreased judgment to safety situations were noted. She demonstrated decreased activity tolerance and increased frustration level with complex or undesired assessments. She demonstrated with verbal aggression and inappropriate language. She should continue with occupational therapy sessions to address deficit areas and to assist with pre-driving and pre-vocational skills.

Psychotherapy: Although she was told she sustained a head injury she did not feel she had any difficulty other than some dizziness when she moved too fast, headaches, and increased appetite for sweets. She did not feel that she was adversely affected by the fall and could not understand the restrictions which were being placed upon her, which resulted in her acting with verbal aggression. Initially, she did not report any feelings of depression, anxiety, fears nor suicidal ideation, however during the course of therapy she did start to express some feelings of depression. Kathy exhibited being short-tempered, quick to respond verbally with inappropriate language. She was also unwilling to compromise on any issues. She was upset as she was being told what to do and did not feel having any control and did not feel others were hearing her demands.

Physical Therapy: She would benefit from physical therapy services to increase her cervical range of motion, lower extremity strength and endurance, and to improve her balance and coordination in deficient areas to allow her to return to her previous line of work.

Tim drove me to the Centre for Neuro Skills four mornings a week, where I had appointments with my therapists from 9am to 4pm. My schedule for the week, telling me which therapists I was to see each day and which rehab specialist would be coming home with me in the afternoon, was posted on the bulletin board in the

hallway outside the kitchen. I would look at the schedule every morning, and groan. It was like going to work, and I hated it. It *was* going to work, and it wasn't what I wanted to be doing. What *did* I want? I wanted everything to be the way it was before, which meant – what? All I knew was that I didn't want to be there, and I lashed out at everyone whose job it was to help me.

They recorded a videotape of me on that first day of rehab, when I was so sad and angry. I have no memory of a camera being pointed at me, and was surprised when they asked me, during my exit interview two months later, if I wanted to see it. Of course I was curious, so I said, "Okay." I was shocked, and even a little embarrassed, at what I saw on the screen: a grown woman, whose behavior and appearance wasn't that of the nice person I thought I was, but a frightened and angry child – reminiscent of some of the young children I had to help when they were dropped off at school in the morning and were mad about being there. I was slouching in a chair, my shoulders hunched, and I kept my arms folded in front of me. I had a scowl on my face. Off-camera, someone would ask me a question, and my answers were short and belligerent; I even heard myself muttering a few *fucks* or *shits*. Watching the video, the ambulatory me was especially startling. I was a little tentative and wobbly in my steps, and reached out to touch the wall as I walked down the hallways. I saw how physically compromised I was initially – another piece of my post-injury disability of which I had no recollection.

As I watched this movie of the person who had entered neuro-rehab two months prior, my first thought was: *What a mess*. But something more troubling was at stake. Ever since the accident, I had held onto a picture of myself, the same

picture, in fact, as that of the person who had first presented herself for observation when the therapists wrote their evaluation reports. I saw myself as someone who had fallen off her horse but was basically just fine and didn't need anyone's help, thank you very much (or *fuck you*, as I put it at the time), who just needed to be left alone so she could get on with her life. I do recall at times during my rehab being stubborn and irascible with the therapists, acting like a two-year-old who didn't want to be there. But then, they were treating me like a two-year-old, with their patronizing tone, asking me to perform insultingly simple little mental and physical tasks. How else could I act? On my last day there, I was given a big white binder containing, among other things, the evaluation reports from which I previously excerpted. It felt like a going away present, this document chronicling my time spent in rehab. Reading through the pages was a little disconcerting, but I recognized myself in the person they were describing. I believed that I was shaken up a bit from the accident and a trifle disoriented and that, after spending two weeks in the hospital, I hadn't had time to settle back in, at home or inside my own skin, but that I was basically okay. I held onto this mental picture until the day I left rehab.

When they played for me the visual documentation of how other people saw me during the early stages of recovery, what I saw wasn't only shocking – it was also enlightening. What struck me wasn't just the way I saw myself behaving, but how my own memory had betrayed me – that what I was looking at didn't jibe with any remembrance I had of my first days in rehab – how my perception of myself had been so askew. After two months in rehab, I knew that my brain still had a lot of healing to do; but I also knew that I had made some progress, that I had become more

cooperative with the therapists and was being granted a release from this probationary period in my recovery. What I didn't know was what a train wreck I was at the beginning. My internal monitor, the one that envisions how what we might say or do would make other people, or ourselves, feel before we actually say or do it, was absent. Seeing myself in the video gave me my first post-injury taste of how clueless I was about my own behavior. Maybe other people were telling me the truth when they responded to how I looked and acted; maybe I couldn't trust my own perceptions, especially about myself. Tim's refrain might have been that I was acting like a two-year-old; but a two-year-old doesn't care how she's perceived by others or how her behavior impacts others, and I did. I didn't want to lose my relationship with my husband or my ability to be in the classroom as a teacher, and I felt I was on shaky ground in both of these areas. Looking through the eye of the video camera, I saw myself as other people saw me, which was far different from how I saw myself.

Krista was my occupational therapist. In the beginning, I hated her most of all. Locked inside my own self-perception, I didn't see what she saw, that my participation in occupational therapy sessions was needed, "to address deficit areas of visual perceptual skills, safety awareness and activity tolerance." I was given a variety of tests, all geared toward assessing how I might function independently in the real world – like the time Krista walked with me to the market and watched as I put the groceries in the cart and counted out the money at the check-out counter, making me feel like a five-year-old. Not cutting off a finger or burning the place down when I baked brownies in the rehab clinic's kitchen meant that I passed. I aced most of the other tests as well, but not in the beginning. It felt like my frustration level was what

was really being tested, and I had no patience with being asked to do things that seemed beneath my intelligence – like the “9 Hole Peg Test,” that assesses the ability to perform quick, manipulative movements of small objects for tasks such as buttoning and zipping clothing; or being told to draw a person and asked to identify the right and left side. I verbally attacked Krista. The kindergartner who, all those years ago had kicked her teacher and ran home, stopped in for a visit. I remember tossing a *fuck you!* at Krista and getting up and leaving the room.

After a few weeks of my OT sessions, I figured out that the sooner I settled down and played the game, the sooner I could get out of there. I even started to feel a little bad about my atrocious behavior and, one afternoon when Krista was still in her office, I took some paper and markers off the shelf and made her a card, telling her I was sorry.

Tamara was my speech pathologist, and my work with her wasn't inane, the way I thought the OT work was. And it wasn't boring. As much as I resisted going to my rehab, if I saw that I had an appointment with Tami, the day brightened just a bit. The therapeutic activities I did with my speech pathologist to test my brain's function were interesting and kind of fun; sometimes they were even challenging. I liked that. I had always been a bit of a brainy person, and now here was someone who was testing how it all worked. The exercises included re-ordering numbers from largest to smallest; describing objects using eight salient features from concrete to abstract; sorting hardware pieces into 14 categories with auditory distractions in the background; being shown a card with three lines of letters on it for two seconds, and being asked to recall the row requested by the therapist; placing in the proper linear

order a series of pictures and telling the story that these pictures were about; being asked to answer questions about details in paragraphs that were read aloud to me, from factual to inferential; and being given concrete and abstract categories and asked to name as many items as possible in 60 seconds.

As I did these activities with Tami, I began to see that what I really needed to do was to pay attention, that my inability to focus was a serious result of the brain injury. Of course, there were other holes in my cognitive functioning that needed filling, and the therapeutic tasks that she had me doing addressed them as well. After a while, most of the activities felt pretty easy, like something I would have second or third-graders do – I even imagined bringing some of them back to school with me when I returned. Seeing how well I did on them, and knowing I wasn't stupid, I asked Tami why I had to do them. She told me to think of it like exercise for the brain: Just as people go to the gym and work out on the equipment to strengthen their biceps or quads, the exercises she had me doing were designed to strengthen and, if necessary, reconnect the synapses in my brain. This explanation made sense; it was something I could hold onto and believe in. I may not have been a weight-lifter or a gym rat, but I could connect what she said to my yoga practice. I knew that my daily practice strengthened not only my muscles and bones, but my mind as well. I looked at what I did in speech therapy as *asanas* for the brain.

Mike was my physical therapist, and I didn't mind my sessions with him; in fact, sometimes I even liked them. I knew they were good for me. My years of yoga practice had given me an understanding of and respect for my physical body, and I

was familiar with most of the terms he used: flexion, extension, abduction, rotation; and some of the exercises he had me do, like standing on one leg and not falling over, rotating each arm in the shoulder socket, bending one knee at a time and placing my foot on a chair, and standing up with my eyes closed. These exercises felt connected to some of what I knew from doing yoga – the attention and focus on places in each part of the body for balance and alignment – and I worked hard at it. He also had me walk on a treadmill, with a heart monitor attached, and that mostly just made me tired. The brain needs plenty of rest to heal, and my physical endurance was at its nadir. If I was early for my appointment with Mike, I would lie down on the big cot in the physical therapy room and take a nap. (This was another side-effect from the injury: For nearly my entire life, I hadn't slept during the daytime; for months after the accident, I would have to take a two or three hour nap every afternoon.)

We worked on improving my balance and range of motion, as well as ambulation, and after a session using the physical therapy modalities in these areas, sometimes I would demonstrate a yoga pose for him. The two that particularly dazzled him were *Vrksasana* (Tree pose) and *Ardha Chandrasana* (Half-Moon pose) that require balancing on one leg. As wobbly as I was, once or twice I threw in *Virabhadrasana III* (Warrior pose) – a particularly difficult one – just to show him how steady and focused I was in my yoga. He was impressed and, even though I ungracefully toppled out of the pose, it gave us both a passing glimpse of my inner foundation and a taste of how we could work together, with Mike providing the scaffolding for my shaky core.

As much as I relished strengthening my physical body and the synapses in my brain, my sessions with Marion, the psychotherapist, were painful and difficult. But more than that, they were a study in denial. I knew that I was scared and anxious – I could feel it each morning when I got in the car and Tim drove me to the rehab clinic – but I wouldn't admit to being anything less than perfect to my therapist. My Progress Report bears this out. I was given the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 test, and Marion wrote that, “The client has responded to the MMPI-2 items by claiming to be unrealistically virtuous. This test-taking attitude weakens the validity of the test and shows an unwillingness and inability on the part of the client to disclose personal information. Many reasons may be found for this pattern of uncooperativeness. The reasons could be conscious distortions to present herself in a favorable light.” Or maybe I was in denial about who I was, not just to my therapist, but to myself as well. Maybe I just didn't know.

Mostly, I remember sitting in the chair in Marion's office with an impenetrable wall constructed around me; I wasn't going to let her in. If I looked okay, and said I was fine, then maybe she would leave me alone and I wouldn't have to go there anymore. But the video I watched of myself at the end of the two months showed me how wrong I was, that what she had in front of her was a belligerent, stubborn child, and that it was my fear that ignited my anger. Tim was often in these sessions with me. I might have known that he was there to support me, that he wanted me to get better, to be the wife he had before the accident and not this damaged and crazy person he now had to take care of – but that awareness wasn't in my consciousness when my brain was still broken and my own perception of reality

was off-kilter. I saw him as being on the therapist's side, and therefore the enemy. A shadow memory of one incident in particular has stayed with me. Tim was standing in the doorway, and Marion was sitting behind her desk. All eyes were on me. I felt cornered. My husband was refuting whatever it was I had just said to the therapist – probably something having to do with my inability to acknowledge that I was less than perfect, or a dismissal of my own inappropriate behavior – with hard evidence of what he saw and knew. When I looked up and told him to fuck off, to just go away and leave me alone, I saw the hurt in his eyes. But I couldn't help myself.

After a while I began to relax the constraints I had placed on myself in these sessions, and tell Marion some of what I was feeling. “During the course of therapy she did admit to feeling different from who she was prior to her injury,” she wrote in my Progress Report. When I felt safe enough to confide in her that sometimes, before getting out of bed in the morning, I would just lie there and think: why bother, what have I got to live for; and that I really didn't see much point in going on – she said something that opened a door and illuminated what I was feeling. She told me that I was mourning for my old self, the one I had lost, and I knew that she had hit the truth.

But who was the self that I was mourning? In the drama of life, we all lose pieces of ourselves and pick up new ones along the way, and we can't go back to who we were before. But at the core is the unchanging part, the individual self or essence that dons new costumes for each role we embody along the way. When my horse threw me, I had lost my script, and was looking out through the curtain and onto the stage. I could see the other players reciting their lines and hitting their marks, but I

didn't know how to join them. And even though my self at the center wasn't dead, only fractured, I may have been mourning the loss of who I was before – the role that had defined me – and was now standing naked in the wings without a costume to step into.

I was making some progress in my therapies: each separate piece of my self was beginning to heal, to function more normally. But I could tell even then that they still weren't adding up to me. Modern medicine is pretty good with parts of things – knees, eyes, kidneys. The whole system is set up that way, with orthopedists, ophthalmologists, nephrologists, and all the others, and it rests on the assumption that the sum of the parts is equal to the whole. Fix the pieces, and the complete assembly will work properly. That may work with car repair but not with people, or at least people with damaged brains. A person is not a machine. A person is more like a performance. Or maybe it's the “self” that's the performance.

When all the parts that go into a making a play – actors and actresses, lights and sets, costumes, scripts – come together for a performance, they may be well-rehearsed and finely-crafted, but that doesn't necessarily make for a fine drama. The therapists at the Centre for Neuro Skills worked on each part separately, the physical and the mental, leaving the soul out of the equation. The individual pieces in a play can be perfect, but they need to be coordinated by a director in order for the whole to work. In yoga, it's the teacher who shows the practitioner how to integrate the parts, to bring one's consciousness into the bones, sinew and nerves that make us human, so that the soul can resonate in each layer of our being.

Going to the Centre for Neuro Skills may have been like going to work or school, but going to the Center for Yoga on Larchmont was like going home. The last time I had been at my yoga studio was the morning of the accident, and ever since I had come home from the hospital, I had been bugging Tim to take me there. Finally, a month later, he drove me over and waited outside on a bench with the Sunday *New York Times* and a Starbucks. Yoga wasn't a part of my husband's life; it's not something he had ever done or had any interest in doing, but he knew how important it was to me. From witnessing my dedication over the years and seeing how it had helped me mentally, physically and emotionally, not to mention spiritually, he also knew how much I needed it. I think he also needed it; he needed his wife back, and so he drove me to my yoga.

After leaving my shoes on the shelf by the door and holding onto the wall for balance, slowly and tentatively – with an elation that I hadn't felt since the Sunday after Thanksgiving when I had gone out to the barn to go riding – I walked up the stairs to the studio. I went to the desk to sign in, and posted on the wall next to the registrar was a letter. The letterhead at the top of the page told me that it was from my husband, and when I looked at the date at the top, I was surprised to see that he had written it while I was still in the hospital. It was a full-page missive giving everyone at the Center for Yoga an account of what had happened to me, and why I wouldn't be coming to my yoga classes. He went into some detail about the injury and about my prognosis, or what was known about it in the initial days. Unlike the schedule that I read each morning at the Centre for Neuro Skills and that put my stomach in a knot and made me want to disappear, this piece of paper with my name

on it made my insides glow. As I read the letter, I got a glimpse into Tim's heart, and steps he had taken to negotiate his way through his own trauma after the accident. A current of love flowed from the mustachioed guy sitting outside on Larchmont and reading the paper, up to the words I was now reading before I went into my yoga class, and into me.

I went into the big *asana* room, unrolled my mat, folded my blankets and sat, waiting for the class to begin. When the teacher walked in, she came over to where I was sitting. She knelt down and, placing her hand on my back and fixing her gaze on mine, she asked me how I was feeling. "Great," I said, with a big smile. But she didn't want the easy answer that spontaneously flew out; she wanted me to go inside and tell her how my body was feeling. I told Sue that I got bad headaches, that sometimes I was dizzy and lightheaded, that I couldn't focus very well, that my head felt like it was filled with cotton and my ears were always buzzing – and that I was happy to be here.

For the next few months, I didn't stand up. While the rest of the class took each pose that the instructor asked for – standing, seated, backbends, inversions – I sat on my mat and did supported forward bends. With my legs bent or straight, I would fold forward and rest my head on a bolster and blankets. I held each pose for three to five minutes with the teacher's stop-watch counting down the seconds beside me. With each pose that I took, I went deeper inside myself. While my brain was being given the rest and support it needed to heal, I stayed conscious in my breathing and followed my breath as it flowed out from my lungs and into all the layers of my

body. I imagined the synapses inside my brain, and felt them gaining strength from the yoga.

After about two months of going to class and only doing forward bends, I was getting restless. I still thought I was in better shape than I really was. When I told Sue that I wanted to join the rest of the class, she said that I had to continue with this practice for six months before I could begin to do other poses, that the instruction she was giving me had been given to her by a Senior Iyengar teacher as the prescription for someone with an injury like mine. As much as I knew what a big deal this was, I bridled. The rebellious child still inside of me wasn't about to let go. The next week, I went to a different class and neglected to tell the teacher about the specific instruction that had been given me. Carl knew about my injury, and when it was time to do the standing poses, he had me do them at the wall and use a chair for support. As good as it felt to be standing up and stretching my muscles and limbs in a way that I hadn't done in so long, I quickly got dizzy. My head also started to hurt and, with tears in my eyes, I told Carl that I needed to sit down and do forward bends.

Yoga was teaching me how to pay attention to my inner self – the pearl in the oyster – and what it was that I needed to grow whole and strong. It was teaching me to slow down, to focus and to trust what my body was telling me. *Ahimsa*, or non-violence, is the first of the *yamas*, or ethical disciplines, of yoga, and with each *asana*, I was learning to honor my body as the vessel that contains my soul – to first do no harm. The second *yama* is *satya*, which means honesty, or truthfulness. I had to be truthful with myself.

I was going to my yoga classes while still in rehab, but something was preventing me from bringing these insights I got from yoga with me to my therapy. I think the fault for this wasn't in the therapists or the work they had me do, but in myself. My self was still fractured, and I was getting in my own way.

In Yogic philosophy, there are five layers, or sheaths, that constitute the self. The whole might be visualized as an onion and, layer by layer, the practice of yoga brings one to the jewel at the center. This jewel is the *atman*, or individual self. When the sheaths are misaligned, fragmentation ensues, but when they're in harmony with one another, integration is achieved. My rehab regimens addressed some of these five layers, beginning with the *Annamaya kosa*, the physical body. My physical therapist worked with me on that layer, as did the occupational therapist. The second sheath, *Pranamaya kosa*, is the energetic body, where the physiological self resides. This includes breathing and heart rate, which the PT worked on with me. *Prana* is the life energy, the breath that permeates the body, and in rehab this wasn't taken into account. The next sheath, the *Manomaya kosa*, is where the mental and emotional self dwells. The psychotherapist helped me to address some of the emotional issues I was dealing with, and the speech therapist addressed the mental. The therapists at the rehab center worked on each of these outer layers separately, not recognizing their connectedness. The fourth sheath is the *Vijnanamaya kosa*, the intellectual body, where the mind dwells – which isn't the same as the brain – and at the heart is the *Anandamaya kosa*, or soul. Yoga recognizes the connection of the parts, and it was through my yoga practice, beginning with the outermost sheath, that I began to get a glimpse of the possibility of integration with the innermost. B.K.S Iyengar, the

teacher whose method I am devoted to, has said: “Like rivers that join in the sea, the various pieces of the soul unite in *asana*.”

There were two paths to my healing: one prescribed, and one chosen; one I dreaded, and one I relished. Both were critical to my brain healing and to finding my footing again. I graduated from the Centre for Neuro Skills after just two months of therapy. For most people with brain injury, the process can take longer; but the goal is to graduate, to get on with one’s life. One doesn’t graduate from yoga. The work I did with the therapists was necessary to strengthen the parts, and now that my individual parts had been rehearsed and learned to hit their marks, I was beginning – in harmony with the direction of my yoga teachers – to practice an ensemble performance of myself.

Yizkor

I was sitting on a cushion in the *zendo* with my legs crossed, my spine erect and my eyes closed. To the outside observer, I may have looked like I was meditating, but what I was really doing was watching my thoughts flit inside my head like a hummingbird – darting from blossom to blossom and hovering in between. The wings were beating rapidly as my mind searched for a place to rest.

This morning when I woke up, I lay in bed thinking: Why bother getting out of bed – maybe I should just die now. After my shower I sat on the edge of the bathtub, traced the veins in my wrists with the tip of my finger and wondered what it would be like to open them up, to watch the blood flow out. Would it make a difference? Would anyone care? When these dark moods came on me, I remembered what my therapist had said, about mourning the self I had lost when my horse threw me and I fractured my skull. But I liked my acupuncturist's version better: that I was looking for reintegration, since my body and mind had been severed in some way.

I really hadn't come here to meditate. After gathering the pieces of myself up from this morning's trial, I remembered that today was Yom Kippur. I don't know if it was serendipity, or God tending to my fragmentation that had brought me to the Zen Center in Los Angeles on this holiest of days, but here I was. Last week, when I wished my yoga teacher *L'shanah tovah* before class and told her that since I didn't belong to a synagogue I probably wouldn't be observing the holidays, she told me about a rabbi who would be conducting services at the Zen Center and why didn't I

come there? Why not? I thought. I had nowhere else to go. So here I sat in the *zendo*, waiting.

After sitting for about 20 minutes, my right knee started to ache. I was getting bored with trying to focus on my breath in order to quiet the mind. Fat chance of that happening; my agitated mind had no interest in shutting up, so I figured it was time to join the congregation in the garden. The moment I stepped outside, my vision was dazzled by the sharpness in the air and the clarity of the blue sky. The Santa Ana winds had been blowing all week and had just stopped this morning. During these Days of Awe, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, one is supposed to repent whatever misdeeds she may have committed during the year, and seek forgiveness. The L.A. basin may have been swept clean, but I knew I hadn't done my part. Now, it seemed, I was being given this blessed opportunity to atone for whatever sins I had committed over the past year, before God sealed the book shut and I was stuck with the fate that had been inscribed for me.

I don't think I really believed in any of this – certainly not the God's judgment part – but I did believe in karma. According to Buddhist philosophy, our past deeds may determine our present situation, but it's our intentions at the moment of action that can take us out of the mire and into the open field. The intention for atonement in my heart was good. I may not have sinned, but I had had a pretty shitty year with the injury – not just what it had done to me, but what it had caused me to do to others. Maybe, just maybe, by showing up today I really could start the New Year clean and whole.

Across the yard, past the small, neatly pruned trees and hedges in the Japanese garden, I could see that the service had already begun. At the front edge of the green lawn, a long table covered with a white cloth had been set up, and resting on top of it was the Torah, covered in a blue velvet cloth. Behind the table stood the rabbi. He was a tall man, and a circle of dark blue trim separated the fringe of his gray hair from the white of the rest of his yarmulke. A white shawl was draped over his shoulders, as were those of many of the men and some of the women who were seated in chairs on the lawn. A young woman was in front of the table, lighting the candles. While the congregation stood for the blessing, *Baruch atah adonai eloheinu...*, I looked over my right shoulder and saw the monks whose monastery this was. They were wearing light brown robes, and unlike the tops of most of the heads I saw in front of me that were covered with yarmulkes – mostly white, a few blue and gold and black – theirs were bare and closely shaven. The monks also had stood for the blessing, and now were sitting back down on the ground as the congregation returned to their chairs.

I looked from the Buddhists to the Jews and didn't know where I belonged. At the far side of the yard stood a tall oak tree and, finding an empty chair, I carried it over there. I set it down just on the edge of where everyone else was sitting, with the longest branches of the tree shading my head. As soon as I sat, it was time to stand up again. The *Shacharit* was being recited, and I stood with everyone else, including the monks. The rabbi began the recitation of the prayers, and his strong voice carried those of the congregation along. I hadn't picked up a *Machzor* after leaving the zendo and finding a seat, so my voice was silent. After this first morning prayer,

everyone sat. Then, up again for the Torah reading. I watched as one of the men from the congregation approached the table, picked up the pointer, and began to read. More Hebrew, more prayers, more recitation; more standing up, sitting down, standing up.

But this time, as I stood with the rest and heard the prayers recited, my body began to sway back and forth. I looked around and saw that I wasn't the only one davening. As my torso moved, sounds came out of my mouth that matched the Hebrew I heard the others intoning. It felt good, to not be thinking about what I was doing, but just to be doing it. And, best of all, to be doing it with other people and not feeling separated; to feel connected. When these prayers ended and it was time to sit down again, I looked up toward the front and saw my yoga teacher, the one who had told me that I should be here today. She turned her head and our eyes met. I saw a smile spread across her face; I nodded and lowered my gaze.

Then it was time for the *Yizkor*, the memorial prayer service, when you're supposed to remember any loved ones who had died and say their names out loud. I stood for the prayer along with everyone else, and then sat down and listened to the names that were spoken: Sophie Geller, David Bernstein, Sol Rothman, Susie Weiss, Jacob Klein...Generally, if you haven't lost someone over the past year, you're supposed to leave the room for this part of the service. Since it had been nearly ten years since my mother had died and everyone else I cared about was still around, I probably should have exited; but we weren't inside, we were in the garden at the Zen Center, and the earth was our room, so I sat – as did the congregants and the monks. I heard more names said out loud, and I felt a fluttering in my throat and my lips

parted. Like a bird leaving its cage, my name slowly flew out: K A T H...but before I could complete the sounds, I took a breath in and felt another piece of myself return.

Some Third Thing

At the still point of the turning of the world.
– T.S. Eliot

I had been home from the hospital for three weeks and walked outside, same as I had done countless of times on countless of other evenings. But this night was different. While I stood beside the pecan tree on our upper patio and waited for the dogs to have their last pee of the night, I lifted my eyes and looked up. Putting words to what happened when I saw the winter sky over Los Angeles isn't easy, but it felt something like this: There was no separation between me and the stars; the light-years between us had collapsed into this one point of time and space, and we were one, a singularity. Not a black hole singularity, more like a center-of-the-universe singularity. It felt as if my chest had been split open – not painfully, but allowing a raw exposure of the heart – and the light from the stars was shining directly in. I had touched the edge of my mortality, and now I could feel myself alive in the universe that held me. Wiping the tear that had slid down my cheek, I called the dogs and went back into the house.

I know how flakey this must sound – like the ramblings of an ankh-wearing, bead-encrusted, turned-on, tuned-in and dropped-out hippie driving her VW Microbus up to Esalen in Big Sur – to be describing what I was experiencing as some sort of cosmic consciousness moment. But what I felt was real. With this moment of illumination, this feeling of oneness with the cosmos, I found myself in the place that the doyenne of flower children, Joni Mitchell, had given voice to when she sang,

We are stardust. But that was in the '60s when, with the help of psychedelics, we were stoned (and young) enough to feel, or believe we felt, the boundary between ourselves and our world dissolve. On what seemed like a cellular level, I was experiencing what I had only read about in books, and what I had barely touched the surface of in my meditation practice.

I didn't ask myself if it was any more real than the time all those years ago, when I was in the twelfth grade and tripping, that my friend and I spent the night outside in my yard and saw the leaves on the trees reconfigure into little Buddhas and melt into the sky and, placing our hands on the ground, watched as our fingers merged with the grass. The feeling, the altered perception – whether induced by a mystical state, an acid trip or a brain injury – is of course real. But is the thing that's perceived really authentic, or is it a kind of self-delusion? Is there any difference between a shaman having a vision, or a blissed-out mushroom eater at a Grateful Dead concert, and me experiencing the world with a damaged brain – standing outside in the cool night air and connecting with the cosmos in this way? Was this transcendent moment a vision into something real – glimpses into the nature of being – or a neurochemical hiccup brought on by brain damage? Did I experience a moment of enlightenment, or did I experience something I wanted to feel, or was taught to believe in through yoga or accounts I had read of mystical insight? I decided that it didn't matter.

What does matter is that it was authentically felt, and that it was my injured brain that brought me there. Scientists, in their search for empirical proof of the transcendent, have recently been studying the brains of Tibetan monks when they're

meditating, to see if they can find a correlation between spiritual experience and physical science. Using technology, they have identified the neuroanatomy that underlies our ability to undergo a shift in consciousness away from being an individual to feeling that we are at one with the universe. Something had shifted in my brain, and the door into this new and changed perception was opened. And ultimately, what mattered was that what I found there was a part of who I was.

One person's metaphor is another woman's life. The injury I sustained, and that I was treated for, was to my skull and my brain. But the deeper impact that I felt was in my heart. Getting thrown from my horse didn't sever our connection; rather, it tethered me even stronger, not only to the horse, but to myself and the world.

Chakras, from the Sanskrit, in yogic philosophy are the seven energy centers in our bodies, and the heart *chakra* – situated right in the middle between earth at the base of the spine and heaven at the crown of the head – is about love and compassion, as well as healing. I was thrown up to heaven and cracked my head on the earth. My heart *chakra* was opened. In some cultures, the spirit of the horse carries consciousness to the human heart, and falling off your horse can be used as a metaphor for the opening of the heart *chakra*; for me it was the real thing. I was thrown from my familiar world, the terrain that I knew, and was tossed into a new land. And in this new land, through the opening of my heart that I could viscerally feel, some third thing appeared – something greater than me or the horse.

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There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in.
– Leonard Cohen

This altered perception wasn't a one-time-only experience, and I believe it was genuine. It gave me a new sense of myself in the world. And even though I may not have been walking around in a permanent state of nirvana, the occasional resurfacing of transcendent bliss didn't always happen when I was by myself.

Several months after the accident, I went to a meditation workshop at my yoga studio. Sharon Salzberg is an American Buddhist and one of the leading teachers of Insight Meditation. At the core of her teachings is *metta*, which is Pali for “lovingkindness.” As I sat on the floor in the large *asana* room, with about a hundred other curious souls, and listened to her talk about Lovingkindness Meditation as a path to opening our hearts and freeing ourselves from the illusion of separation, I had my own moment of insight. My epiphany went something like this: I am here; nothing to achieve. The boundary separating me from my self had dissolved. In yogic terms: the *atma*, or individual, had joined with the *purusa*, or soul, and my core was in unity with every molecule in the room. It was a moment of clarity and connectedness with my self and the world that was both similar to, and different from, that night on the patio; this time I wasn't alone, but felt the energy of the others in the room with me. In an instant, I had arrived at the place that some poets, philosophers, mystics and monks spend a lifetime trying to attain – what E.M. Forster intimated when he wrote, “Only connect.” Listening to the low-level hum inside my skull, I intuited that this insight had something to do with my brain injury, and everything to do with my heart *chakra* being opened.

Of course, it didn't last, this moment of enlightenment, this third thing that I was in the presence of – but it was transcendent while it did. When the workshop was over, and everyone thanked Sharon for her teachings and folded the blankets they had been sitting on and went to find their shoes, I quietly left the room. I like to think that I carried some of the radiance that I felt – from my core to my fingertips – out into the world with me.

Healing does not mean going back to the way things were before, but rather allowing what is now to move us closer to God. – Ram Das

My therapists at the Center for Neuro Skills wouldn't certify me fit to return to my life as a fourth-grade teacher for another two months, but the pull of the children on my heart was strong – from the moment in the hospital when I opened the lovely cards they had made for me, with drawings of horses and hearts and rainbows, to the day I finally got to see them. While stumbling in this new and uncharted territory my horse had tossed me into, I had been imagining how my time with the students would help me return to safer shores. Finally, after two months, I was allowed back in the classroom; and while it may have been for only a few hours a day, a few days a week, it was enough. When I was there, the children's love surrounded me, soothing my brain and opening my heart even more. One of a teacher's jobs is to protect her students from harm, but after my accident it felt as though we had traded places. The students' concern was shielding me from further injury.

One afternoon, I was sitting out on the yard with Alana and Tina, two of my fourth-graders. They were telling me how much they had missed me, and how happy they were that I was back. Alana said that, when she was first told about what had happened to me, she was afraid I would die; and when I didn't, she knew that God was looking out for me. Then she told me that her parents had prayed for me each night while I was in the hospital. Tina said she had prayed for me too. In my previous life, I might have rolled my eyes at this, dismissing the possibility that prayer could be any more than a belief in magic, or wishful thinking. But not anymore. Now I began to feel that there might be something to this prayer thing, that maybe prayer actually can heal – whether your prayer is heard by some higher power who can intercede on your behalf, or whether it's a matter of the energy you put out there in the universe having an effect, didn't matter. Either way, sometimes things happen. What mattered was that I was alive and mostly okay. Maybe the prayers people were sending my way had been woven into the healing, allowing for something greater than myself to bring me back home.

With the girls opening their hearts to me, mine was present to receive their love, and I started to cry. I may have known that teachers aren't supposed to let go like this in front of their students, but it didn't matter. Tina softly touched my hand, and the three of us put our arms around each other. We sat there quietly while the sun warmed us.

A little over a month after the accident, one of the nurses from the rehab center had driven me over to the school so I could visit with the children. They were

in art class when we got there, and before going to see them, I went into the classroom. Looking around the room at the work the students had done in my absence and feeling their energy permeate my skin even as they were off in the art studio, I found a book sitting on the back table: *Wild Horses I Have Known*. Intrigued, I picked it up and, opening the front cover, read on the book plate that it had been donated in my honor by the family of one of my students. The book had gorgeous photographs of the wild Mustangs in Wyoming and Montana, similar to those I had tracked and photographed in the Owens Valley of California 15 years earlier. Holding the book open in my hands and gazing at the magnificent equine bodies running free, my eyes filled with tears.

Those who love horses are impelled by an ever-receding vision, some enchanted transformation through which the horse and the rider become a third, much greater thing.

– Thomas McGuane

Fracturing your skull and suffering Traumatic Brain Injury is very serious stuff, but having it occur because your horse threw you tinges it with adventure. While my story may have the patina of romance and mystery, it's the horse, both literally and figuratively, that holds my attention.

I've talked to other people who have had head injuries – whether they were in a car accident, got hit by a piece of heavy equipment, skied into a tree, or even suffered a stroke – and their injuries were all, to varying degrees, debilitating and life-threatening, but still, a bit mundane. But, “There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man,” as Winston Churchill famously said.

John Steinbeck gave voice to the horse-human connection when he wrote that, “A man on a horse is spiritually as well as physically bigger than a man on foot.” The horse is a powerful metaphor for strength, freedom and trust, and the yearning of the human heart for transcendence; he’s even – in some cultures and beliefs – a metaphor for the healing power of unconditional love. In Tibetan Buddhism, the horse is used in allegory as a symbol for the human soul. In the warrior teachings of Tibet, windhorse, or *lungta*, means vitality, and when we have windhorse, our life moves forward in the way we want. The literature of nearly every nation is filled with stories about the special relationship established between horses and humans, from Greek mythology with the centaur who’s half horse and half human, symbolizing the merging of the two into a single form, and Pegasus, the winged horse sired by Poseidon, to Gandalf’s stallion Shadowfax, the magnificent horse of Middle-Earth, who could understand the speech of men, all the way to the tall tale of Pecos Bill who, with his horse, Widow Maker, galloped into the myth of the American West.

It may have been the cowboy who rode the horse into the heart of the American West, but it was the Indian whose life it transformed. When the Spaniards came to America in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they inadvertently brought the native peoples the gift of the horse. The Spanish used the horse as an instrument of warfare and control, but as soon as horses came into Indian hands, an alliance was woven between the Native Americans and what some tribes called the Horse Nation. The horse gave the Indians speed and the ability to travel great distances in a short period of time without tiring. With the horse, they could hunt buffalo swifter and more proficiently than they could do on foot. Sitting astride the horse, the Indian

didn't just become a stronger and faster hunter; he also became a more powerful warrior. A paradigm shift in the Indian's relationship to himself and his world occurred with the introduction of the horse, particularly for the Nez Perce of the Pacific Northwest, who developed the spotted Appaloosa, and all of the tribes that together comprise the Plains Indians. In some tribes, the horse was both the physical form of material wealth and the visible symbol of the social status that that wealth brought. The horse didn't just change the Indians' vision of themselves in their land, it also altered their vision of themselves as people; together, with the horse, they became this "third, much greater thing."

I may have wanted to be a cowboy when I grew up, but, when my horse threw me, I was lifted out of that dream and into the transformative power of the horse. The horse became for me, as it did for the Native Americans, both the literal and metaphorical agent of change. It was a horse that delivered me to this new interior landscape, opening my heart *chakra* and giving me this altered relationship with the world. My metaphor was made real.

Noo Tas

In March, four months after the accident, with rain falling, not in torrents but enough to soak the thirsty earth, I took my class on a field trip to the Southwest Museum to see an exhibit on the Plains Indians. In the adjacent gallery there was an exhibit on the Blackfeet, and an elder from the tribe was painting designs on the skin of a tipi that had been spread across the gallery floor. When I stepped into the gallery

with my students, I could smell the incense that was burning. Traditionally, the herb used for this smudging would have been sweet elm, but today it was fir, and the aroma carried his Montana home into my consciousness. The ritual of the Blackfoot painting his tipi was a sacred act of healing and purification – similar to that of Tibetan Buddhist monks when they make their sand mandalas – and I was transfixed in this space.

While the other teacher took the students into the adjacent gallery, I stayed behind and watched the artist make his large brushstrokes in yellow and orange across the sides of the tipi. His long black hair was tied behind his back, and his tee-shirt had galloping horses airbrushed across the front. The Blackfeet were renowned for their horsemanship, and today they maintain herds of the Spanish Mustang, which they hold dear and sacred. I wanted to speak with this elder from the tribe about his horses, and he set his brush down and walked over to where I was standing. He told me his name was Darrell Norman/*Ee-ness-too-wah-see*/Buffalo Body. When I told him my story – about my fall and my injury, and my enduring passion for the horse – he showed me a horse fetish that he had made. It was about 10 inches long, from nose to tail, and 6 inches tall, from hoof to forelock, and had been made in the traditional Indian way, out of brain-cured buckskin, with horse-hair, beads and feathers attached. It was beautiful to look at, and when I held it in my hand I could feel the energy that had gone into it traveling from my palm, up my arm and straight into my heart. Mr. Norman said I could have the horse. Speechless, I looked up into his eyes, and he taught me how to say “my horse” in Blackfoot: “*noo tas.*”

Animal fetishes are said to embody the spirit of the animal they depict, and the horse fetish, symbolizing strength, swiftness, inspiration and freedom, is also believed to have healing powers. My Blackfoot horse fetish hangs on the wall above my desk, and I often gaze up at it when I sit down at my computer to write. I can still smell the smudging in the buckskin, and I'm reverent, knowing that it's cured in brains and that my own brain injury brought him to me. The Indians used brains for curing their hides because it helped to make the leather soft and pliable. But what else did they know, and that maybe I knew in my heart, about the chemistry of the brain penetrating the tissues of the skin – about the intelligence of the mind flowing into the cells of the body and creating this third thing? If I had a horse of flesh and blood, I would name him Noo Tas.

One of the things I desperately wanted after returning to consciousness while still in the hospital was to go see Kareem. I know it sounds crazy – wanting to see the horse that was responsible for my fractured skull – but I never blamed him for the accident. All I knew was that, no matter the reason for my fall, he was just being a horse, and I still cared for him. I guess it had something to do with my life-long love of horses, and when my heart was opened with the brain injury, that love rose more strongly to the surface. But why Kareem? He was the last thing my mind and body were in contact with before they separated; but it was deeper than that – it was his equine spirit that had brought me to this new land I was in.

About four months passed before I was able to finally get back down to Palos Verdes and see him. It was spring, and Tim and I were driving to Deborah's for

Passover. I was happy to be going to visit my friends, but mostly I was thrilled to be seeing the horse that somehow – I was now beginning to feel – had put me right where I belonged. Having spent the day making *charoset* – one of the symbolic foods eaten at the Seder – I saved a nice juicy apple to bring him (although my husband said what I should really deliver to him is a two-by-four to the head). When I went out to the corral and clicked my tongue in the side of my mouth to get his attention, his ears swiveled to the sound as he lifted his head and trotted over to the fence to greet me. Putting the palm of my hand on his chest, we stood together for about five minutes – with the fence between us – quietly sharing a deep part of ourselves. By doing this, it felt like I was going directly to the heart of Kareem. At the Seder, the question is asked, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” On this night, I had a new answer. Looking him in the eye and giving him his apple, I thanked him for the gift, this third thing that he had given me.

Chance

In the small corral, Chance was waiting. His head was lowered and his long dark mane draped toward the ground as he picked through the dirt for any grass that was growing there. Susan opened the gate and I walked in behind her. This was the first time I'd ventured over, the first time I'd crossed the boundary that separated me from a horse and stood with nothing between us but the clean, open air. What I saw nearly took my breath away, and my heart raced in anticipation of what I was about to do. When we stepped into the corral he raised his head, gave us a look, and lowered his neck back down. Chance was a buckskin Paint gelding, and with his soft, tawny coat and four white socks, he looked like he belonged to these dusty foothills east of Taos. He was small – just about 15 hands – and I could sense his gentle nature. I felt safe – so far.

For these eight long years since my injury, it wasn't just fear that had kept me reluctant to put my foot back in the stirrup. A part of me was holding onto the identity that had been forged, and that I had willfully maintained: that of the woman who had been thrown from her horse and had fractured her skull, who was too scared to just dust herself off and get back on. But the wheel turns, and when the opportunity arises and you're ready to try your luck, you roll the dice, you place your bet, and with a turn of the card comes a possibility for fortune to grace you. Whether it's a crapshoot or a certainty, it's palpable, and Chance, right down to his name, seemed all of these things.

###

Tim and I were in Taos for our friends Tom and Carol's wedding, with the 40th anniversary of the Summer of Love playing in the background and strains of The Byrds' "Ballad of Easy Rider" heard in the wind. From the moment our rental car left the Albuquerque airport and headed north up the highway to Taos, my bones had come alive with an ache for horses. In the sweltering July heat of New Mexico, I rolled the window down to smell the sage and piñon of the high desert, and there they were: pintos, bays, sorrels and browns, standing in their big corrals along the road, all a part of this Western terrain where the cowboy spirit runs deep. *I want to ride*, I said inside myself, and then said it out loud when we got to where our friends live in Arroyo Seco.

Tom has always known how much I love horses, and he knew how much Tim loved me. When I showed up at our friends' place in Arroyo Seco and the word 'horse' jumped out of my mouth, he was there to catch it. Tom and Tim have been friends for over 40 years – long before I showed up on the scene. After my injury, when I was home from the hospital and get-well cards were still coming in the mail, a big blue envelope arrived. Inside was a picture drawn by Tom: a horse stands on the ground, and in this simple pen-and-ink drawing it's evident, from the angle of the animal's legs and the motion lines sketched next to the stirrup, that he's stopped suddenly. In front of him is someone – must be me – upside down in the air. On the ground below her head is a big cloud-like thing attached to the horse's bridle by a long cord, and on its side are the words: EQUESTRIAN AIR BAG MFG CO. In the upper right-hand corner of the drawing, Tom has written: BY 2002 ALL HORSES WILL BE EQUIPPED WITH DRIVER SIDE AIR BAGS.

Now he was telling me about a friend of his who lived on the other side of Taos. He knew she had a horse, and he said she might be the one to take me riding – if I was ready. Tim was standing next to me, and I could feel his steady gaze on me as I tried to process what I was hearing. When I turned my head, I saw the beginnings of a smile under his big mustache. Added to the unspoken support my husband was giving me for this chance to reconnect with a missing piece of myself, was what I knew about the woman who might offer it. Susan was Tom’s oldest friend – they’ve known each other since they were 14, over 50 years ago in Alabama – and both of them were now living in New Mexico. I may not have known who Susan was, but I knew Tommy, and that was enough.

I met Susan that evening, at a party the night before the wedding. She was small, with short blonde hair and blue-gray eyes, and looked years younger than I knew she had to be. Tom introduced us and, before much else was said, before I could let her get away in the crowd, I started talking horses. When I told her about my accident, and that Tommy said she had a horse I might be able to ride, she told me about Chance.

“He’s the sweetest horse I’ve ever known,” she said, “and his gait is steady and smooth.” I watched her eyes brighten as she told me about this horse she so obviously loved. “If you really want to get back on, you can trust Chance.” I trusted my husband, and I trusted his friend, and now I trusted Susan. A date was set for an early morning ride.

###

Two mornings after the wedding, I woke up with half a smile on my sleepy face. A ray of New Mexico sunshine was peeking through the blinds, and the sweet scent of pine was in the air. I rolled over, saw that Tim was still sleeping, gave him a shake, and crawled out of bed. When I got out of the shower, he was dressed and ready to go – light jacket on over his tee-shirt and car keys in hand.

“Thank you for taking me over there,” I said. “It means a lot to me.” And I gave him a kiss.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s just go.”

I read Susan’s carefully written directions aloud to Tim as he drove the rented Ford Explorer across the hot and dusty 15 miles from Arroyo Seco, onto the roads through Taos and east into the hills past Kit Carson Park. When the juniper and spruce began to thicken, we drove up the few miles of dirt road, turned right onto Susan’s street and then turned left up her long driveway. We pulled in a little after 8 A.M and she was waiting for us in her dark blue riding breeches, boots and white helmet. When I stepped out of the truck, Susan told me that she had ridden Chance earlier that morning, making sure that he would be steady and calm. She said he was ready for me and asked, was I ready for him? I nodded.

No one asked Tim if he was ready – to see me get back on a horse, maybe to watch me get hurt again. After the accident, when I first asked Tim how he felt about me riding, he had said, “Next time you fall, that’s grounds for divorce.” The kernel of truth burning in the middle of his joke had singed my desire to ride. I knew that he wasn’t interested in going through any of that again: the trauma of nearly losing his wife and then having to take care of her and watch her bizarre behavior as she

recovered; the nightmare of being married to, as he once put it, “Kathy’s evil twin sister.” But now he chose to accompany me on this final leg – or first new step – with camera in hand, to document the morning. I was aware, peripherally at least, of how this must’ve been for him, the same as for me: fear, and excitement. The simple act of his being here told me that he was ready.

I hadn’t brought any riding clothes with me to Taos, and was wearing shorts and sandals – a bit like wanting to fly fish and forgetting to bring your waders. Susan is just a little bit smaller than me, and she had a pair of breeches she said I could borrow. After pulling them up my slightly longer legs and walking back into the living room where she and Tim were waiting, I felt like a debutante at her coming-out party. They both gave me the once-over and smiled.

Before I went outside to meet the horse, Susan approached me with a little vial in her hand. “Wait,” she said, “I want you to put this on.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Calming oil,” she said, and put a few drops on my fingertips. Before the accident, I might have cringed at this bit of mumbo-jumbo, but not today. Susan told me to rub it on my temples, and I closed my eyes as I anointed myself with the oil, inhaling its fresh citrus scent.

Out in the corral, after Susan put Chance’s bridle on, she took the vial out of her pocket and rubbed the oil on his tall ears. His big brown eyes were soft and dreamy: did he know I had the same oil on me, and did that make us calm together? I took a few cautious steps closer until I was standing right in front of him. I reached my hand out and, putting my fingers underneath his long dark forelock, tentatively

scratched his forehead. He lifted his head to my touch and I involuntarily pulled my hand away – still afraid. I wanted Susan to believe that I was brave and strong, that I understood horses – and I forced myself to bring my hand to his face, this time stroking down his white-flecked nose and closer to his muzzle. He lowered his head and moved into my touch. I took a breath in and relaxed a tiny bit. Susan went into the tack room to get Chance’s saddle and I walked around to his side. I could see his long Paint tail, white with a few splotches of brown, as if a brush loaded with dark pigment had splattered here and there. He had a high round rump with a jagged, shocking white spot above the tail’s insertion. Susan threw his saddle blanket over his back, and told me she called that his “Harry Potter mark.” Hearing her voice caress the syllables as she described him to me, and watching her hands stroke his flank, I could sense how clearly she loved this little horse. And more than that, she had faith in him for giving me a safe ride. I felt my own faith returning after the trust I had in horses had been broken with the fall, and I hoped it would stick.

As I watched Susan put Chance’s saddle on and tighten the cinch, the little brown donkey who shares the corral with him strolled right up next to me and stood still, as if listening to what Susan and I were saying. Marley stood about as tall as an Irish wolfhound and had a slightly doleful manner, like Eeyore. I reached out to scratch his head. While Susan and I talked – with Susan doing most of the talking, telling me about Chance’s fine qualities as a trustworthy horse with an easy gait – my hand traveled down the donkey’s back and scratched his hind end. I looked over my shoulder and saw Tim, standing outside the corral, take a picture of the four of us.

When he lowered the camera, his eyes stayed on me, and I could see him relax the grip in his left hand.

When Susan had Chance all tacked up, she led him over to a rise in the dirt next to the barn, where I could get on easily. As she held him steady up front, I put my sandal-clad foot in the stirrup and mounted. No problem. Sitting my butt in the saddle, my inner torso was tingly and jumpy, as if a flock of sparrows were being chased by a hawk. Susan put a halter on over Chance's bridle, with a lead rope attached, and she turned him away from the barn and toward an open area next to the trailer. I was holding on for dear life – gripping the reins and clenching my gut – for these first few easy steps I took. When we were out in the open space, Susan walked Chance around, with me sitting in the saddle and my feet resting in the stirrups. I wasn't doing much of anything, at least not on the outside. I was afraid to touch his sides with my legs, afraid to give him any signal to move faster than his nice slow walk. This was a far cry from my days of wearing spurs to get my mount to go faster: I was back at the beginning, taking one baby-step at a time. And besides, who would want to spur a sweet horse like Chance? Susan had told me that he was a Tennessee Walker, bred for his steady even gait – with a little bit of Spotted Saddle horse mixed in for color. Maybe not a Quarter horse, but an American-bred, trustworthy mount just the same.

As I was finding my seat on Chance, Susan stopped him and he rested his big head on her shoulder while she checked in with me, to see how I was doing. I looked down at her and saw the white helmet on her head, reached my hand up to touch my own and felt – nothing. No helmet. I felt naked and scared – and stupid. I caught

Susan's eye, pointed to my head, and laughed. Oh man – the most important part about riding a horse, the part I didn't do that fateful Sunday in Palos Verdes – and now here I was, lost in the excitement of the moment, and I had gotten on a horse without a helmet. Susan laughed too, as she took her helmet off and handed it to me. I put it on and, feeling the good snug fit, buckled the strap under my chin. I was hoping Tim hadn't witnessed this serious faux pas on both our parts; if he had, my ride might have ended right there.

“Now I think I'm ready,” I said, and took a deep breath. I leaned forward, resting my torso along Chance's neck and circled my arms around. My heart beat against his withers, and my cheek pressed into the downy side of his strong neck. I breathed in his loamy scent – sweat and all – and closed my eyes.

Chance's rein was a thick blue rope, and I picked it up as Susan led us down to the long dirt road Tim and I had driven up before turning onto her street. Like everything else so far this day, the saddle was new for me and nearly perfect. It wasn't Western, and it wasn't English either; it wasn't any type of saddle I had ever ridden before. Susan told me it was called a Bob Marshall treeless endurance saddle, built for small horses and small riders, which meant it fit Chance's body and my own perfectly. But, in addition to the big Western stirrups that hang long enough below my hips to give my legs a natural bend when I ride, it had a substantial cantle that gave me added security, like a helping hand to hold my butt in place – something else to keep me from falling. I could feel every single one of Chance's footsteps and was terrified that at any moment he might take off into a run and I wouldn't know what to do; the saddle helped to keep me grounded. Walking beside his left shoulder and

quietly talking to him, Susan was attuned to the both of us – to the movement and attitude of her horse, and to my own fear and need to feel comfortable.

As we ambled down the road, she talked to Chance quietly and gently, with loving kindness, the way one would talk to a dog: “stop,” “come,” “stay,” “slow.” I held the rein in both hands, occasionally letting go with my right and letting my fingers run through his buckskin mane, dark brown and lightly salted with white. But, just as my legs weren’t involved in giving Chance directions, neither were my hands – or so I thought. Chance’s gait wasn’t as smooth and steady as I would have liked, but a little bit choppy with the loose gravel on the road, and I still didn’t trust him enough, or maybe I didn’t trust myself. Susan’s job of leading him looked like a lot more work than just taking him for a walk with me on top. Sometimes she had to press her small torso into his shoulder to keep him from turning, and she had to remind him to not walk faster.

“Slow, slow.” Susan’s voice was soothing as she spoke these words – soothing to me as much as to Chance. We were barely down the road when she asked Chance to stop, and turned around to look at me. “I think he’s getting mixed signals,” she said. I knew she meant from the lead rope and rein.

“Do you want me to let go?” I asked, and she nodded her head yes. As I opened my hands and released the fat rope rein, letting it rest on Chance’s neck, I saw the other great thing about this saddle: in front, attached to the pommel, was a thick leather strap, something to actually hold onto. If only I’d had something like that when I’d ridden Kareem, if only... Since I had no memory of what happened, this was only conjecture. I felt the steady roll of Chance’s body beneath mine, and slowly

found the joining point that connected us as horse and rider. Wrapping the fingers of my right hand around the strap, I remembered a lyric from Ian Tyson: *Hey mister vaquero/Put a handle on my pony for me/Teach me the mystery.*

Susan's two dogs ran behind us. Once in a while, Chance bent to eat the shrubs and grass and Susan, in her kind voice, asked him to behave. Tim, camera in hand, followed along, staying by the side of the road. I was aware of him documenting my ride, but more than that, I was aware that he kept his distance. He wasn't beside me, like Susan was, but stayed a safe twenty or thirty feet behind, and hugged the side of the road where the trees offered a little shade. Tim held up the camera, and I stretched out my arms. "Look, no hands," I wanted to shout, but whispered instead, as I wiggled my fingers and grinned. The morning was too quiet, too easy, for loud noise, and I kept my shouting inside. My connection to the horse was through my seat and my thighs, and Susan's guiding hand. I was beginning to feel free, un-tethered from the reins that had held me these past years. Remembering how I had brought my yoga with me when I rode, I grounded my buttocks, straightened my spine and lifted my chest. Just as my nervous system carried the memory of the accident, every cell in my body remembered the pleasure – and the mystery – I found in riding horses. Sitting on Chance, these cells were waking up again.

I may have felt like a child riding a horse for the very first time that day, but it was miles away from the picture my mother took of me at summer camp in San Luis Obispo when I was seven years old. In that picture – black & white, of course – I see a little girl, wearing jeans and sneakers and a tee shirt, sitting on top of a great big

horse. Her feet don't even reach the stirrups, but that doesn't seem to bother her. She has an intensely focused look on her face as her head, with its mass of curly hair – no helmet for that little cowgirl – looks down at the horse. Her hands are holding the reins, and the horse has his head lowered as he lifts his front hoof. Horse and rider in that picture both show a lot more movement than they do in the one from today – the horse may even be in a trot – and there's no one else there, just the girl and the horse on a trail in California. In one of the pictures Tim took of me riding Chance, I see a grown woman, wearing a helmet, sitting on a small dun-colored horse and holding onto the saddle while another woman, wearing a cowboy hat and carrying a long rope, is leading the horse and rider down the road – with the big New Mexico sky and Sangre de Cristo mountains in the background. Riding Chance, I really was a beginner, and the confidence and daring I had when I was seven wasn't ready to return – at least not the daring part.

After meandering down the road a few hundred yards, just as Chance stopped grabbing for leaves and grass and I began to feel more comfortable, as my body listened to the horse's movements and responded accordingly, it was time to turn around. Susan said she wanted to take me up a hill so I could get the feel of riding on an incline. We turned up the road that her house was on and, as the memory of how to sit a horse flowed back into my body more and more with each step we took, I settled in. The morning was lengthening and the sun was getting higher in the cloudless, cerulean blue sky, and it was high-desert hot. Susan was hot, and Chance was hot, and I know Tim was hot because he was standing under a tree at the bottom of the hill, sweating. I suppose I would've been hot if I wasn't feeling so cool riding

a horse on this juniper pine and scrub oak trail in New Mexico. At the top of the hill, we stopped before going back down. Sitting high in the saddle, I looked out over the sagebrush sea of Taos. There was something so pure about this moment; I remembered that old dream I had of being a cowboy, of wanting to rope and ride. Only now the cowboy part had stepped aside and it was simply the union of me and the horse and the terrain we inhabited together – this third thing.

Before we walked back down the hill, I leaned forward and draped my body over Chance's neck one more time. Looking at the photograph Tim took of us here, I see that my eyes are closed and my lips are parted with half a smile. Green oak trees are sheltering this woman and horse, joined in a moment of peace. Like an aura that surrounds us, the light from the morning sun shines across our back, from the cantle behind me as I'm leaning forward, radiating along my spine and onto the top of Chance's mane. Even my helmet, the crown of my head, is shining, and I imagine that the soft green of the heart chakra and the glowing violet of the crown chakra could be seen. There's a direct line of energy connecting Chance's heart, below where my palm is resting on his chest, to my own, flowing up through my sternum and out my back, where it disperses into the air.

Shamans believe in something called "soul retrieval" and it looks like this: a part of the human soul is free to leave the body, and trauma is one of the occasions of such a departure – a protective measure. In shamanistic practices around the world, one way to retrieve the soul pieces that want to return is through a healing ceremony, with the shaman returning the soul essence to the person's body. Another way to retrieve the soul is to return to the place where the trauma occurred and, in hindsight,

I honestly believe this is what happened when I rode Chance. It didn't matter that he wasn't the one that had thrown me; when I found my seat on the horse once again, I found a wholeness that had gone astray. The 'I' in this equation wasn't the ego, the thinking part, but the cellular, feeling part – the soul. At the core of shamanic healing in the practice of soul retrieval is the love that's felt by the healer for the patient. Today in New Mexico, I felt that love – from Susan through Chance and into me. Soul retrieval may be a metaphor for my story, but metaphors don't work without having a truth at their center to ground them. I had taken a chance and felt whole and connected. This sweet young horse brought me home.

We returned to the barn and stopped just outside the corral. Susan looked up at me in the saddle and asked if I wanted to take Chance into the small ring, for just a few steps on my own. I felt the horse beneath me, looked in the corral, and gave it about half a minute's thought.

“No,” I said. “I think this is enough for today.”

Walking back to the car, I wanted to shout, to laugh, to sing, or at least to blab. But Tim looked over at me and shook his head.

“Don't talk,” he said. “Just keep it inside, let it settle.”

And I did.