My Mother's Valentine

I

Three months after my mother, Rosalie, died at 83, a valentine addressed to her arrived in my mailbox, forwarded along with other reminders that she is gone – a coupon pamphlet from her local grocery and the new television guide. The valentine says, "*You are the brightest star in my universe. Have a Happy Valentine's day ~ Gabe*."

Gabe Hoffman's name opens a chute into childhood memory: I am eight; it is a Sunday morning in 1961. I leave my little brother eating Cheerios in front of the TV, where Minnie Mouse, in heels and a flowery skirt, sweeps her kitchen. I am headed for an old beech tree in our neighbor's yard, my escape from the family system in which my father is the sun we orbit. Under the canopy of copper leaves, I am free. But I don't go tree climbing that morning. On the front stoop, I am distracted by a hippopotamus molded of lead, wearing a diaper and a note that says, "*Rosalie, Wake me up when we get to Chicago ~ Gabe*."

I try to pick it up. I need two hands and all the strength of my scrawny freckled arms. As I stagger upstairs to my parents' bedroom, I carry it, not like a baby, but hanging down near my knees. My father, Paul, is in the bathroom. My mother, thirty, girlish and loose-limbed, swooshes through in a silky nightgown to grab her robe from the back of the door. Fair-skinned, with gentian blue eyes and black hair, she brims with energy. I think she is at least as pretty and good as the First Lady, Jackie Kennedy. She eyes my unlikely burden. She reads the note.

"Oh lord." She takes it from me, almost dropping its surprising weight. "We better take this downstairs." She and I are in cahoots.

When my father descends in his boxers, button down shirt, and gold toed socks – his version of weekend wear in 1961 – and sees the cause for Mom's sudden busy-ness at the sink and my anxious silence, he lifts the hippo, reads the tag, and places it on the sideboy, saying "Let's keep this right here to remember Lover Boy Hoffman by."

While my father, now in khakis and loafers, pushes a mower over our tiny yard, my mother calls her mother, stretching the phone cord into the hall closet. I try to eavesdrop, fizzy with the excitement in the air, trying to understand what the diapered hippo and mysterious note mean. I worry how my mother will explain the long-distance phone charge when Dad gets the bill and sees she called Grandma. I am a buck-toothed bean-pole, a busybody. With vigilance, sometimes I can avoid trouble with my father. I am the one my mother asks to ask him when she wants something. I am the one who tries to stand up to him.

But I can't decipher my mother's whispered words to my grandmother, and nothing more comes of the hippo episode, as far as I know, until months later when I almost trip over a lidded glass canister left on the front stoop. I lie down on my stomach right there on the splintery boards to see if what's inside is alive. The beautifully rendered steel replica of a dragonfly with blue gem eyes balances on a cork as if it has just lighted there and will lift off with the slightest puff of air. My father does not give my mother gifts, and we all know, even without a note, that Lover Boy made it for her.

My parents met in 1946, when she, an only child, was fourteen, and her professor father invited his favorite scholarship student home for Sunday supper. Paul was startlingly handsome,

funny, and smart, and would flash a naughty-little-boy-look that could enlist his severest skeptic. Where my mother lacked confidence and dithered, he was decisive, logical, charismatic and motivated to make a success of himself. My mother imprinted on him like a gosling.

When he proposed, he slipped a little contraption along with the ring onto my mother's finger. Painfully aware of being a penniless boy, and unable to resist an opportunity for a practical joke, he used a tiny plastic magnifying glass — a prize from a box of Cracker Jacks —— which he supported with bent bits of wire and tape so when she admired her jeweled hand, the little diamond appeared substantial.

He decided my mother should have a year of employment before they married, so she'd have some life experience. For the following year, she worked in the office of a small factory that made refracting glasses for people unable to raise their heads. (This was five years after Rosie the Riveter and the women who had manned the factories during World War II were sent back home.) Mom said it wouldn't have mattered if she'd invented the patent for the glasses herself, the time was wasted. All she thought about was my father. As a little boy, he had suffered from being too sentient and sensitive a child in a missionary family plagued by trauma and loss. Before his birth, his mother assumed he was a tumor. Against terrible odds, he had grown into this man who made my mother weak in the knees.

She often described herself to me as a one-man woman; as such, for more than sixty-one of her eighty-three years, she knuckled under.

***

Tall, gawky, and talkative, Gabe Hoffman and his then wife, Greer, befriended my parents for a time. The connection began between my mother and his wife, two pre-school moms, but like many of my mother's friendships, my father disparaged the object of her

affection, labeling Greer, The Lesbo-Bitch. I don't remember much about her; their marriage didn't survive the feminist movement sweeping the country. Gabe, I remember as friendly and awkward, stork-like with knees and elbows that might, maybe under the right conditions, bend either way. In the sun, he wore a goofy pork-pie hat.

Gabe is sporting the hat a couple of years after the appearance of the dragonfly when he materializes on the road at the island vacation house Dad rented for us. We are cut off from the world at the end of a dirt track without electricity or phone service. Dad is at work in Boston. We are relishing a free and easy week on our own, doing what we like. I have climbed up on the roof to read. Gabe's hat bounces along above the shrubbery as he approaches on the sandy road. I call down to my mother, "Lover Boy is coming." She peers up at me from below, and says, "Now? Here?" It seems he has walked all the way from the ferry landing – a good eight miles. She says, "We've got to get out of here." I slide off the roof. She grabs her car keys and her lipstick. How she looks matters. Looking pretty is a skill she mastered early to compensate for her lack of confidence.

She says we should find our library books and run to the car. My mother is someone everyone wants to be friends with, especially me, and I've heard enough of an edge in my father's voice when he jokes about Gabe to believe she needs my help, so I corral my brother. Though Dad is ninety miles away, she is as rattled as if he were standing next to her. She exaggerates her facial expressions and flaps her hands around. (I can hear him now, "Rosalie, sit on your hands.") Her hands settle on the steering wheel. I don't know if she's upset because she likes Gabe and shouldn't, or because she doesn't like Gabe and doesn't know how to duck his

attention, or because she doesn't know how she feels, but can't risk Dad's anger. I am ten and avoiding boys in general seems smart to me.

The only way out is past Gabe. She slows as we pass him. Her sunglasses mask her expression. In her cheery phone voice, she calls out the window, "I am so sorry you've come all this way just when I have to get the kids to the library." On we go, leaving him standing in the long driveway. The library won't be open until Saturday, and we know it.

***

Gabe persists. February rolls around again and again, as I grow into adulthood and on through middle age. The following scenario repeats itself occasionally over the next several decades: it is sometime not long after Valentine's day, and I am visiting my parents. We gather around the family hearth -- the TV in Dad's study -- where my mother serves supper. Through the years of Gabe's valentines, the TV soundtrack changes from Walter Cronkite reporting on the Viet Nam War and Archie Bunker telling his wife to "Stifle it, Edith," to Dan Rather covering the Reagan/Gorbachev meetings and "Cheers," to Brian Williams covering the outbreak of civil war in Syria, and "Breaking Bad." Dad asks, "Did your mother show you her latest valentine from Lover Boy?" My mother rolls her eyes. He has her fetch it, and he shows it to me while offering a pointedly funny commentary hard to resist. The cards display Gabe's quirky cleverness. I laugh and refer to him as Lover Boy, right along with my father, as if the valentine is nothing but a sly acknowledgement of my mother's continuing appeal and unavailability. As if Gabe is a running family joke.

Dad habitually dissolves us into barely controllable laughter with the hilarity of his insuppressible one-liners. He is the creator of television commercials remembered for their

humor, like the one for a home improvement loan where a boy is watching TV, a car crashes into the room, destroying one wall, and the boy, not moving his eyes from the TV screen calls out through the rubble and dust, "Dad, Mom's home."

I remember times, once riding with my father in the car on no special occasion, when my whole self reverberated with love for him so strong, it seemed the energy of it would become tangible matter in the air between us. Nevertheless, for years, my brother and I would wish someone, maybe not Gabe, but someone as attentive as Gabe, would come along and rescue our mother from her marriage.

As I am leaving after dinner, I pass her on the stairs and she whispers, "I tried to get to the mailbox first. Your father gets so upset by those valentines." Is she trying to protect Dad from knowing Gabe still sometimes sends a card? My father says something from the TV room at the top of the stairs, and she moves on.

This is the way she and I have communicated for years, in whispered snippets, in passing, sotto voce while serving in the kitchen, and in sneaked phone calls. A mother-daughter relationship needs more to flourish, but it is Dad's rule that she is not to speak with me without him on the line. A little red light on the phone in his study shines when she picks up the kitchen extension.

II

On receipt of my mother's last valentine, I decide I should let Gabe Hoffman know she died – and that Dad too, had gone, almost a year before her. I write Gabe that Mom's last text – before she passed away unexpectedly in her sleep – was about how she made the most of the day, how she and my brother had hung pictures in her new apartment, how she was enjoying

some peppermint ice cream with chocolate sauce, and planned to watch "Downton Abbey" that night.

To my surprise, Gabe replied:

April, 2015

Dear Tracy,

Thanks so much for picking up my note to Rosalie and letting me know what happened. It was very kind of you to write me. Your parents were very good to me a million years ago when I hardly realized how difficult life was going to become. Rosalie, a very gracious and perceptive person, clearly saw how things were with my marriage, and was a wonderfully supportive friend at a time I sorely needed one. I had hoped to stay in touch, but that didn't happen for various reasons. Even so, Rosalie and I very intermittently did keep each other informed of family events – a sparse sort of contact to be sure, but one I greatly valued, as I hope she did too. It's hard to imagine she is gone. And Paul too. I will always remember their kindnesses toward me.

With sympathy, Gabe

By the time I receive his response, I have cleaned out her desk and found a secret compartment filled with more than fifty years of his valentines. One has a heart on the front and the words, "It's not a secret that I want to be…" It opens to reveal a hippopotamus spread from margin to margin, saying "the big thing in your life." Three large folders of Gabe's letters also nestle in the secret compartment, pages and pages of communication from him to her.

I am standing with my mother, in the closet of their guest room, not exactly hiding, but certainly not in a place Dad was apt to go. I must be in my forties; the TV through the wall blares with news of harassment charges against President Clinton. "You should read this," my mother whispers. "Gabe Hoffman gets involved with the most interesting women. This is about his latest."

"Is he asking you for dating advice?" The letter is several typed pages long. As I start in, we hear Dad approaching, calling to us.

I shove the letter under a blanket on the top shelf, grab a pillow and am emerging from the closet talking about dust mites and hypo-allergenic covers when he finds us.

Later my mother says, “You are a chameleon just like me.”

Until I found her secret desk compartment, I had no idea how faithful Lover Boy had been. The earliest letter, in a hand delivered envelope with “Rosalie” written on the outside, says:

November 1, 1961

Dear Rosalie,

I wish it were possible to send you a picture clearly seen by my mind’s eye, but unfortunately not developable by any technique within my powers — a most elegant vision of you in that classic red dress at the neighborhood dance. You, with your warm and beautiful figure contrasted against, and complemented by, that intense color and the very distinct, clear lines which define it… a strikingly beautiful presence!

You were something one sees only very rarely and that, usually in pictures, where the artist or photographer can edit away the extraneous and leave only his idea of the eternal feminine. How wonderful to be talking and dancing with such a creature! I spent most of the evening looking at you – somewhat tongue-tied while reminding myself that it would be most unseemly to clasp you about and really kiss you right out in the middle of the dance floor. You were quite something. Love, Gabe

I put my hand over my mouth. The power of my mother’s image and Gabe’s reaction, makes me want to hoot with admiration for her and with surprise at his audacity.

Though many of us snapped cameras at her throughout her life, we failed to capture her. She is a beautiful blur, escaping the frame. Or she is caught between expressions, chewing or chatting. She turns her head. She blinks. “Ugh. That’s unfortunate,” she says, her wedding rings flashing as she tosses the snapshot into the rubbish.

But she hung on to the picture Gabe created in his mind’s eye.

I, too, was smitten by my mother in that dress, which she sewed for herself out of red velveteen, from a pattern she pinned and scissored on my bedroom floor. My father held his purse strings tight, so when she needed a new dress and couldn’t find one marked down at Filene’s Basement, she sewed. She accomplished what she did – within the confines of his strictures – with a determination that bubbled out of her anxious optimism. The dress was a personal victory, like so many of her endeavors completed apart from Dad’s scrutiny.

On the night of the PTA dance, she flitted around stocking footed in a white slip, pausing at the round mirror in their bedroom to apply Maybelline products, darting down to the kitchen to start the oven for kid pizzas, back upstairs two steps at a time, to the mirror, pressing her lips together on a Kleenex, and skimming a tiny comb through her eyelashes so her mascara didn't clump. (This was when I was eight, the year President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women released its report on gender inequality, and oral contraceptives were first made available, though only to married women.) Dad watched a re-run of "The Honeymooners" while he polished his shoes. My mother slipped the red dress over her head and asked me to zip her up. She smoothed the skirt. She clipped a string of pearls around her neck, not the plastic pop-it beads she usually wore, but real pearls, which rested against her clavicle in creamy perfection. Dad, polishing his shoes, said, "Those are too much." He stood and chose a tiny gold chain from her jewelry box. He held it up and said, "The simplicity of this lets the dress speak for itself. The pearls distract." When they left the house, she wore the gold chain, with no sign of having had her intentions thwarted.

Gabe's letter from that night must have thrilled and appalled my mother (to use two of her favorite words). The expression of his admiration for her would have excited her whether she wanted the attention or not. His cheekiness in writing such things to her and hand delivering the note to our house would have been the part that appalled. Folded inside his letter I discover a page of notebook paper, a first draft in pencil in my mother's hand, but punctuated by my father's often-used words and phrases — as if they had written it together:

> You must have realized that your generous attention to me has been very flattering. All people like flattery, but my acceptance of it has apparently been misconstrued.
>
> I have invited my husband to read your writings including the last ones you left. He has tried very hard to be a friend of yours and now feels he hasn't done a very good job of it. Your letters are beginning to make ~~him~~ us feel that you may be abusing our hospitality.
>
> The irony of all this is that you have been defended by him regularly. He even wanted me to keep the nightgown! As for the comparison you make between him and your father, especially your

concern over Paul's behavior at parties, I think you may be superimposing your circumstances on mine. I wonder if you could have been as big a person as my husband has been, presented with this situation? As Ever, Rosalie

We are at a party at the Hoffmans' house. I swing out over a cliff on a long-roped swing. My dress flutters in the sudden wind. My mother has made our mother-daughter dresses. The rest of the kids wear jeans. The mothers fuss over lemonade and hamburgers in the kitchen. As the afternoon wears on, and more people arrive, Gabe sets up a tape player out on the grass. Maybe everyone is supposed to dance, but only one does. In the center of a circle of clapping, hooting men, Dad performs a solo, arms in the air, hips swiveling, while he balances a bottle of vodka upright in his teeth. The music thumps and builds. He chugs the vodka and gyrates. The men stamp and whistle. I sneak peeks from my swing and feel the sickening thrill of the ground falling away below me.

***

My mother's mother was her closest friend, and other than my father, her biggest influence. My grandmother declared often that a woman's role in life was to support her husband in his endeavors. My mother's responsibilities included everything housewifely: cleaning, baking, grocery shopping, meal preparation and child care. Before I started going to school, I spent all of my waking hours in my mother's company. I learned from her, helping with her chores, playing with baby dolls that had been hers twenty years before, learning to sew, and examining the enthralling contents of her jewelry box. I looked enough like her that she found my self-assuredness – so unlike her – stymying. She would study me with genuine confusion. She wasn't prepared for my passionate outbursts, like the time I cracked open the head of one of

our dolls swinging it in anger against a tree – or my habit of opposing my father, despite my fear of his power, until he demonstrated again that he would always win. (He'd intimidate me with his green-eyed stare and turn me into a blubbering mess by telling me how disappointed he was in me.) But usually, my mother and I were girls together. I knew the silkiness of her hair, the softness of her earlobes, and the smell of her face cream. I played with her make-up and wore her high-heels around the house. When we made cakes, we'd each take a beater to lick. Mischievously, she scraped the remaining batter out of the bowl and with a flourish, shoved the laden spatula into her mouth. We loved birthdays and Christmas, not for any spirit of giving, but because they meant presents for us. We ate fluffernutters for lunch. When Dad walked into the room, the air tightened around us, and we would attempt to keep a lightness to whatever we were doing, trying to compensate and make him feel welcome. Depending on his mood, he might elicit a laugh by making an exaggerated face of disgust, holding his nose, and claiming my baby doll badly needed a change of diapers, or he might launch into a long harangue berating my mother for forgetting to mail an important letter of his on time.

He regularly rearranged my mother's desk and the innards of her handbag, as well as her wallet. Laughing heartily, as if they were playing (while she said, "Ow, Ow, Ow,") he twisted her arm behind her back until she capitulated. Mom prepared steak and onions, his favorite, as often as they could afford it, though she was allergic to beef.

Dad made the decisions, large and small; where we would live, whom we would see, and what we would do, when. Using his smarts and his charm, he worked his way from radio announcer to advertising executive in a Boston firm. He took parenting seriously, trying to instill in me that it always pays to tell the truth, that expressions of emotion are a sign of weakness, that one should be a man of his word, and that one should treat others as one would want to be

treated. Seeing an education as the ticket for his children, he planned our births four years apart so he'd be better able to cover our college expenses. He taught me to ride a bike, operate a camera, tie a square knot, throw like a boy, and steer a canoe. Many lessons involved my resistance, and eventually, a storm of outrage, and then, that ultimate "female trick" as he called it: tears.

All along, my mother shared secrets with me that she kept from Dad. She stowed a stash of her favorite chocolates inside a pot on the bottom shelf in the kitchen. A shoebox in the back of her closet labeled "GOOD THINGS," hid four-leaf clovers she'd picked from the lawn, a letter from her ob-gyn detailing the birth of my brother, a favorite recipe for chocolate cake, and her beloved grandmother's wedding ring. When Dad restricted her use of email, she hid a pay-as-you-go flip-phone in a spare purse and used it to call me when she could get away for a few minutes.

She didn't ever say anything like "don't tell your father." She didn't need to; we were allies. But we did have fiercely whispered conversations. For example, when I was in my late thirties, she ladled rice onto plates, and said, "He says I don't have permission to use the car to visit my mother."

My grandmother had been found by the police, wandering, wearing nothing but a raincoat and one boot. I put the plate down on the counter instead of adding chicken to it, and turned to face her. "You mean, when you need it, the car is his?"

"I'm just going to ride the Peter Pan bus. Come on, we need to get these plates on while the food is hot."

"That's not right."

"You forget he never had a father to show him the right way to do things." She'd told me the stories. He'd been a sensitive little boy who shared a room with his father while he died a slow death from lung disease. Dad had been left to a brutal childhood where nothing was sure, not mother love, not knowing he would have enough to eat, or if he'd be physically safe. He'd been shaped by and survived a rudderless aloneness hard to imagine.

I grabbed the spoon out of her hand to make sure I had her attention. "Grandma's wandering and he's stopping you from helping her. Does that seem okay to you?"

In my own words, I heard my father's tone of condescension. She slammed open the drawer for another serving spoon.

"How are you supposed to pay for the bus?" I asked.

"I've sold some pencil drawings of our neighbors' houses."

I shook my head.

"The bus stops right on Main Street. I will walk from there."

My desire for her to blossom and thrive – for those parts of herself, which were suppressed, to be freed – was matched in power by the impossibility of it. I stopped letting myself imagine what it would be like for her to love someone less damaged, someone who would not stunt and twist her, who would allow her to express her full, enthusiastic self.

I never knew – she never told me – about Gabe giving her a nightgown. For the longest time, I thought my alliance with my mother was complete. For the longest time, I had not understood.

As an adult reading Gabe's letters, it shocked me my mother shared the early ones with Dad. I rarely shared anything with him. But, of course she would. I survived being controlled by

a bullying father by subscribing to the belief I had an ally in my mother. My mother survived by loving the man who controlled her.

The next letter I opened included notes inserted between the lines in red pen.

November 7, 1961

Dear Rosalie,

Unfortunately, society has made no provision whatever for certain types of friendship, since it considers them dangerous. Curious, but the only private communication allowed us is that on the dance floor, or perhaps at a large cocktail party. Yet I do think we have a legitimate concern for each other, and I *will* occasionally whisper to you, Thisbe, through the great walls of propriety and custom that surround both of us and our families. What we say is innocent enough, certainly, though it would be idle to pretend for my part, that nothing in particular more than chit chat animates me or breathes life into my thoughts. You are a particularly beautiful, very desirable, feminine woman and you turn my head, quite!

But more directly, I am very much concerned that you are happy and amused. I could convince myself that you were miserable; then I could be sorry for you and be all noble like. Maybe you are perfectly happy. I think not. I don't really know you well, but I see what I see.

Your husband's going into business is fine for him and let's hope for you. I worry though. And for once I will tell you. My mind keeps returning to an incident of last summer which I hope is really nothing, but which bothers me still.

We surprised you drying your hair, you will remember, and you disappeared. Somehow your husband was slightly annoyed you wouldn't show yourself, and he more or less apologized to me at length. Oh, dear Rosalie! Does he have so little regard for you, as a person and your privacy, is the public image so very, very important that he would have to explain to me? Sometimes I think you are a mannequin in his display window. Watching him at parties reminds me of my father and scares me sick for you. I hope that his business is successful without him using you. Please forgive me if I have gone too far, but I would rather have done this than to have stood impassively by and never reached out. Rosalie, you know you have my love – I hope it makes you as proud as simply knowing you exist does me. ~G.

Between the lines where Gabe says "Your husband's going into business is fine for him," is printed, in my father's precise handwriting, "I am doing it for the family." And where Gabe writes, "My mind keeps returning to an incident of last summer which I hope is really nothing," Dad responds, "You are right. It is nothing."

Writing directly on Gabe's letter to my mother fits Dad's patterns, but still, I am flabbergasted to see him assert himself right there on her letter as if the correspondence were between the men.

But Gabe wouldn't have seen Dad's tidy, sad rebuttals. The only one to see them would have been my mother.

III

For fifty years, the perfect bejeweled dragonfly and the heavy hippo were displayed on a shelf in my parents' living room. I assumed my father set them there as a reminder to my mother that he'd kept to the high road. He was patient. He allowed her to keep gifts from another man, as if the petty challenges of a rival were nothing to him.

But now I wonder: Could the sculptures have been a daily reminder from Mom to Dad that there was someone who wanted her to run away with him to Chicago?

Had I carried the leaden hippo into our house not understanding its role as a small but weighty Trojan Horse? How much of my mother's acceptance and rejection of Gabe strengthened her position in relation to my father? How much of Dad's reaction to Gabe was the self-defensiveness of an insecure husband?

Dad knew about the valentines, so why the secret compartment in the desk? Maybe, like me, he didn't know she'd kept them all. Maybe he didn't know about the numbers of letters that arrived between the valentines. I can understand her needing to hold on to flattery from someone. With mockery, intimidation and patronizing, Dad kept her belief in herself wavering and tenuous.

One of Gabe's letters is twenty single-spaced pages. He addressed it to my mother at a P.O. Box, as he did many subsequent missives. He wrote it in 1987, twenty-six years after his first letter. This long one, which he refers to as a monologue, reads as a running diary of Gabe's

thoughts and actions over a period of months. “Lacking any input from yourself, I tend to run on and on,” he writes. In essence, through many digressions about his work, his oddball colleagues, and descriptions of failed relationships, he explains that no one has ever measured up to Rosalie, and his love for her remains, even if unrequited. He mentions running into her at the bank and how the upheaval it caused in him was something he just had to live with. “I think of you all the time, Rosalie.”

Did she lease a P.O. box because she loved him? I can’t quite see her in the post office paying rent on a secret mailbox. She would have thought of that as sneaky, unbecoming behavior. What could have motivated her? Had Gabe’s correspondence and interest proved so important to her it was necessary to keep his letters out of the house? Did she see him as her lifeline?

She would not have had the gumption, or even the sense of self as an independent person, to consider having a physical extra-marital relationship. If the way she held me at arm’s length to give me a peck on the cheek was any indication, physical intimacy didn’t come easily to her.

Gabe hand-delivered several of the early letters. The hippo and dragonfly both materialized on our porch very early on weekend mornings. He knew his way to our house while we slept. Was he eager or creepy? Did she want him to stop? Did she have the combination to a post office box because he wouldn’t stop and she didn’t want to hurt his feelings?

I haven’t mentioned the photos of Gabe included with the letters. He sits at a desk in a white lab coat, stethoscope in his ears, listening to the heart of the lead hippo which lies on its back on his desk. He looks kind.

In another, in a suit and tie, he carves an insanely complicated jack-o'lantern. He is not Cary Grant. He is not Dad. His regular features, capacious brow, thick, dark eyebrows, short hair and a chin my mother would have called "a little weak," add up to being neither attractive nor unattractive. He seems to be one of those men who will grow better looking as he ages.

I guess Mom held on to these photos as proof, as if to say, see? This is the author of these many letters to me, Rosalie. Keeping the photos seems an expression of surprised awe that there was this funny man who was in love with her, and he was real. I see her archiving the photos with the letters as a sign she wanted to remember him, and maybe as way to remember herself as she wished others would — as someone intriguing enough to have an admirer. Keeping and hiding his artifacts seems to acknowledge her fondness for him and records the span of years of his enduring affection. I can't help but be amused at the earnest, geeky face of young Gabe checking the health of his hippo creation. He'd written, "Maybe you are perfectly happy…but I see what I see." I feel grateful to him for being the only adult ever to confirm I had reason to worry for her.

I am coming to think Mom enjoyed Gabe's attention, but only from the distance that Dad ensured. Would she have felt differently if Gabe had been less dogged? More attractive? She had to have recognized the vulnerability behind my father's mockery of Lover Boy. Making Gabe into a family joke defanged the reality of his long-lasting attention. Everyone agreeing that, heh heh, Mom has a wannabe boyfriend, makes it hard for any of us to determine how willing a participant she was in Gabe's gambits.

Though I don't want to think so, it's possible, and perhaps likely that arranging for another place to receive mail was her response to the pressure from *both* men. No matter how much Gabe projected on her, or how much Dad objected to Gabe's pursuit of her, a P.O. Box

would allow her to relax her vigilance and not rush to intercept the mail at home. A separate mailbox reduced the likelihood of Gabe hand-delivering letters to the house. She could maintain peace *and* accept Gabe's attention from a distance. I can see her riding her bike to the P.O. wearing her swishy felt hat, and, as was her habit, pocketing the coins she found in the street along the way as if each were a little gift just for her.

With her secret boxes, she protected Dad from knowing how often and how much Gabe contacted her. If my father had known, he would have suffered. She didn't want him to suffer. She loved him.

IV

Until I was out from under their roof, and bullying had become a less acceptable behavior, I couldn't afford to see my mother's role in my father's behavior. I have blanked out many of the incidents that instilled fear of my father in me and granted him his power. I find evidence in the photos Dad took of me for their holiday card when I had just turned three. I am dressed in a kimono, leaning into a mirror inscribed in lipstick with "HAPPY HOLIDAYS from TRACY WINN and her parents." My eyes are swollen with crying. My stance is cute, but not natural for a child. I have my palms on the mirror and my eyes on the camera. My mother, the photographer's assistant, is inadvertently caught backstage at an angle in the mirror, holding a packet of flash bulbs and extra film canisters. She compresses her lips in a flat line, displeased by one or the other of us. Those many blue bulbs lay spent and scattered on the floor by the time I gave in and stood facing the way he insisted I would.

She was present when I was terrified by the rocking and pounding of a swing set lurching on its feet as he pushed me higher and harder. I could feel the structure thumping, and see its

supports lifting out of the ground as if it would tip over, but he needed me to be the kind of child who understood the physics of swings so he pushed me higher and harder, despite my tears.

At a party they hosted for his boss, she watched Dad hand me his cigarette. I was three years old and he urged me to inhale, laughing in anticipation of the result. How could she stop him?

What did she feel witnessing, even participating in, the imposition of her husband's will on their child? How could she have any agency in the sort of relationship she and I would develop between us?

I don't remember when it was, sometime late in my childhood, the first inkling crept in that – though she enlisted my help so it felt like we schemed together to make sure an evening went smoothly, though she drew me into planning how to work around Dad's moods, though she drew out my frustrations with him by sharing her own — she told him everything I told her. Increasingly, as I grew older, my father would start in on me with the phrase, "Your mother tells me you…"

I stopped confiding in my mother, and I stopped opposing my father openly. I don't think of myself as a chameleon, but I learned to keep my opinions to myself. I became skilled at appearing amenable while maintaining my own autonomous path. Sometime around the era when my grandmother was losing her grip, I started blending into the background – which I suppose is a chameleonic tactic. It allowed me to be more helpful to my mother from an emotional distance I never wanted.

Toward the end of my father's life, when she and I kept him company in the hospital, there was a sign in the bathroom, positioned so she couldn't miss it:

DO YOU FEEL SAFE IN YOUR HOME?

1. Do you feel anxious or nervous when you are around your partner?

2. Do you watch what you are doing in order to avoid making your partner angry or upset?
3. Do you feel obligated or coerced into having sex with your partner?
4. Does your partner criticize you or embarrass you in front of others?
5. Does your partner check up on what you have been doing?
6. Is your partner jealous, such as accusing you of having affairs?
7. Have you stopped seeing your friends or family because of your partner?
8. Do you try to please your partner rather than yourself in order to avoid difficulty?
9. Does your partner keep you from going out or doing things that you want to do?

I marveled that she could confront that sign every time she used the hospital bathroom, without comment. Maybe she didn't see the questions as having any relevance to her. She might have said she felt perfectly safe in her home.

On their sixtieth wedding anniversary, my father said, "People keep asking how we did it. I've been telling them it was years ago that we buried the hatchet." He paused for effect, "In each other."

Taking care of Dad in his later years, when he was riddled with illness, wore my mother down to a place she couldn't come back from. She weighed ninety-eight pounds when he died, and she chose not to stay by him with my brother and me while he breathed his last. That day, after more than sixty-one years of loving and supporting him, she flipped the toilet paper roll in each bathroom from the way he liked it, to face the way she preferred it to unroll.

***

A few months later, she and I stood on the balcony of an empty apartment in the town where I live, checking out the view of the river in the distance, looking down at the lush crowns

of summer trees. Now that she was on her own, she thought she'd take the place. The view was sweet.

She said, "I've been lucky, you know. I've had a lot of freedom. All those years with so little responsibility." She gestured at the trees and the river. "And now this!"

I thought of pressing her, of asking her to explain how she defined lucky, but I remembered days when I was too young for school, and we traveled by subway to Filene's Basement. She'd hold my hand, and we'd wind through the underground tunnels at Downtown Crossing, and skip down the central stairway of the store. She made a party of nabbing just the right nylons at the lowest price. When my zest for watching her sort through mark-downs under the buzzing fluorescent lights fizzled, she led me on an expedition around the bins and islands of clothing to where they sold the best cookies, as if she might have indulged herself that way many times before.

I steadied myself against her new apartment's balcony railing, and asked, "Were the benefits worth the price you paid loving him?"

Turning away from both me and the view, she said, "Your father needed me."

***

When I discovered Gabe's last valentine in the mail those several months after my mother died, and saw the return address, I longed for her to be there to receive it. I imagined her in the high-ceilinged front hallway of our old house sorting through the mail where it landed under the slot in the front door. Her pleasure and irritation and amusement at Gabe's persistence

would have rushed across her face all at once. What would she have thought of Gabe's fidelity outlasting her vitality?

Grief swirled around in me, grief that my bubbly mother had ceased to be before she could experience any of a life independent of my father, and grief for the rounded, full, mature relationship which I wish she and I had shared.

Holding my mother's last valentine, I noticed how the yellow forwarding sticker obscured her old address on the envelope, and I understood one more facet of the story. Gabe didn't know she'd moved. She had never told him she was free.