Kidnapped

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> Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone…
> For the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.
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> -Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Edward Weston's *Pepper*, *1930* is a photograph of a bell pepper shaped like two bodies embracing: one body bent slightly forward, one bent slightly back to hold the other's weight. The faces and shoulders of these "bodies" touch lightly; their necks are curved in order to see each other; their upper torsos fuse together and become inseparable. That is how I have always thought of love, both romantic and familial: as a gentle, entwined embrace, involving a willingness to fulfill the needs of another person before your own; a symbiosis in which each party is receiving what he or she needs, but in spite all of the lovely, intimate little moments, it can be difficult and stressful, and sometimes each person has to put a shoulder to the wheel and make the relationship work if it's going to continue.

My first opportunity to really test these theories came when I was a junior in high school. It's the last Sunday of a two-week spring break, and I'm lounging around my house waiting for my boyfriend to call. I've been away the entire two weeks looking at colleges, and he has gone on a two-week camping trip to Havasu Canyon with the rest of my high school's Wilderness Club, an organization I approve of dubiously at best.

We've been dating for six and a half months, and when the phone rings I'm thrilled to hear his voice. He is tall, with light curly hair and glasses and smooth skin, neither Democrat nor Republican, reads Nietzsche for fun, loves movies, and has a way of explaining everything, from pre-calculus to the nuance of where best to park so that we won't get caught making out, that is so gentle, so infused with affection.

He asks me how the college trip went, wants to know which schools I liked best, where I want to go. I tell him all the places I'm considering and ask

him, in return, how the trip to Havasu went. He tells me stories of girls falling and scraping their legs and having to be carried, of building fires at the bottom of the canyon, of camping and hiking and seeing the sun rise. He hasn't been sure yet where he wants to go to college, and this talk of my tour reminds me again that I want to know if he's made a decision.

"Yes," he says, "I think I want to go to Deep Springs."

Deep Springs College is a self-sustained alfalfa farm as well as a college, a two-year school of twenty-six men and zero women, a place where prospective freshmen are urged to skin cows during the admissions process. An older boy, a friend of my boyfriend's whom I hate, has plans to go there, and I am horrified.

"Deep Springs?" I slump down against the hard wood of the kitchen cabinet, then to the floor, back against the stained panels.

"Uh huh."

I tug at the phone cord, irritated, feeling the phone move precariously forward on the counter. "Why do you want to go *there*? There are no girls there. It sounds like prison."

"It's not like prison," he says without humor, the gentleness and placation usually so apparent in his voice nowhere to be found. "It's intellectually stimulating."

"They harvest alfalfa! They milk cows!" I'm getting irritated now and sit up, tugging harder at the phone cord.

"They also have classes."

"It sounds like *Lord of the Flies*."

"Well, it's not."

"How do you know?"

"Will told me. He's been there."

"Will," I say, on my feet and on the verge of shouting, restraining myself, "is an asshole." I stomp a socked foot on the floor, it stings. I always forget that it stings. "I don't know why you hang out with him."

"I don't hang out with him."

"You do!"

"No I don't!"

I have no idea what to say, not wanting to fight, staring at the phone, feeling left out of my own conversation. This is the voice that explains math, that recommends movies and greets my parents? This voice is not coming out of a throat that I know, a throat attached to a collarbone, shoulder blades—a back that I know so well, know so well and love.

The curves and hollows of Colin's body that I knew so well became, in the spaces between the few words we had exchanged, strange to me. Until then, all that I had ever associated with love had seemed to snap into perfect place in my relationship, and, accordingly, for the full nine months that we dated, I was convinced I loved Colin. Whether or not I actually did, I was crazy about him, overcome by powerful physical attraction and an intense admiration for his intellect, and this was enough to convince me that I had the right to be frustrated that he hadn't agreed with me, hadn't seen what I had: that he was making the wrong decision. Those nine months were littered with arguments that would, inevitably, end in victory for me not because I was right but because he would let me win—maybe out of intimidation, maybe because he loved me. And so, frightened by this new feeling of alienation, believing that I would win again, I raised my voice, raised my voice to a boy who had been known to drive the forty minutes each way between his house and mine to spend only an hour with me, who left me surprise notes in my backpack, who brought me gifts that were utterly perfect (lemons from his family's garden, apple butter from his mother, a blue blank book with a silver inset). Didn't love require of me a different response, an attempt to understand the situation from his point of view? What kind of symbiosis was this, when all I could do, when he unfailingly supported me, was cling to him, yell at him, force the issue? What kind of love was this, and why was I failing to live up to everything I had ever believed that love demanded: that I be brave, self-sacrificing, mutely supportive, and if that failed, to work at it, to chop away at what was going wrong until we could be all right again?

I did try to work at it, despite my fear of losing Colin to a world both unknown and inaccessible to me, despite my inability to hold up my end of the unspoken deal we had made when we first said that we loved each other. And not only that, I continued to love him, continued to be there for him in every other way, continued to try to make him understand the problems we were having, continued to interfere, until we broke up, and even afterward. We had agreed to be friends, agreed to try to keep talking to each other so that it wouldn't be so hard later when we were actually ready for it and not just pretending to be, and for several weeks I was utterly miserable. When we hardly talked, when we couldn't look at each other as we crossed the quad, even in that post-breakup stage when the appetite goes and everything is fine during the day, but at night, doing the dishes, you lose it a little bit, I thought that I still loved him because of the pain I was experiencing. I spoke to a teacher at my high school, a writing mentor and friend, a few days after the breakup, still weepy, and he said, "If you still feel like shit on Day 18, marry

the guy." He knew me better than I thought: by Day 18 I was eating normally and flirting with other boys. And two months later, in July, I was having an intense summer fling with an English boy—and in Paris, no less—to whom I confessed my love, as well.

Almost exactly a year before, during the summer before Colin and I started dating, he had sent me a letter in which he wrote that he loved me, but that I shouldn't worry—"It will dissipate over time." And, as he had predicted, it did—just not in the way he had meant. He had meant that if I didn't love him back he would eventually get over it, that it would be another instance of unrequited affection whose remnants he would eventually sweep away. He wasn't expecting me to come back to school in late August and tell him that I wanted to try things out and see what happened. And after all those months of happiness, what we had worked so hard on did begin to dissipate the way relationships sometimes, and, in my experience, often, do—we suddenly look at the other person across a table and realize that we are barely acquainted. We suddenly understand that we are alone in our relationships, that for us, the other party is as much, if not more, a manifestation of what we need as they are themselves. We realize that we have projected any number of qualities on the other person and see that it may not be the person that we love but these qualities that we have invented. And when all of this turns out to be something other than reality, when, finally, the façade drops, we have so thoroughly convinced ourselves that our inventions are the truth that we are always, always surprised.

This dropping of the façade, this parting of the curtains, is most likely to occur at a moment when we can take no more of each other, a moment of sudden and unexpected excess. One night during my senior year of high school I was having an evening of pure meltdown—I had had a hard day at school and the stress of being a first-semester senior, of college applications, of all the homework, of all the things that seniors stereotypically worry about, had gotten to me until there was just nothing else left for me to do but cry. So I did: I sat at the kitchen table while my father cooked and simply cried. He and I both knew that I did that sometimes, that I was just exhausted and releasing tension, that eventually, probably in the morning, I would be just fine.

I called my mother downstairs at my father's request so that she could make the salad, and as she talked and dressed the salad I got the plates out of the cabinet, white plates that look like porcelain but are in reality indestructible, plates for the salad that look like glass but are also in reality indestructible. My mother, finished with the salad, came to the table with the bowl and

served it, dropping it onto the aged wood of the table, and I followed her with a paper towel, replacing the pieces of dressed lettuce and cucumber and wiping up the droplets of vinaigrette from between the placemats. It was not until we sat down together and began to eat that my mother noticed that I was upset. She asked me what was wrong, and I responded in all of the usual ways: school was difficult, I was having problems with boys, my extracurricular activities were extraordinarily demanding—in short, there was pressure on me from all sides, and I was just so tired. I began to cry more, looking into my juice and destroying the delicate mandala of color my father had arranged from the stir fry on my plate, and when I looked up there were tears streaming down my mother's face.

"I put pressure on you," she said, and sobbed into her napkin.

"No, Mom, it's not you, it's everything else," but it was too late. She wanted to know what she could do to make my life easier, and I wanted to yell that if she really wanted to make my life easier she could quit breaking down when I needed her to be strong. Yes, my mother loves me, but this love is not the phenomenon I had assumed it to be: even though she loves me, sometimes she needs my father and me to look up from our stir fry and see her, and if she has to cry to get there, then that's all right. In that moment, she needed to regain her place at the center of our family, needed to feel in the middle of things just the way I did when I derided my boyfriend for wanting to attend Deep Springs. She felt excluded, perhaps, from both the quiet understanding between my father and me and from the turbulence in my life at the moment; she wanted to be able to take the credit for my problems not because she wishes suffering on me but because that is the normalcy to which she's accustomed. Much as I felt with my boyfriend, she felt left out of not only what was going on in my life, being used to having its events orbit around her, but also being left out of the parent-child relationship. She cried because it was the easiest way to break back into a pattern that she had been a part of and that, it seemed, was excluding her, and, as a result, she could not give me the space I needed.

It's possible, of course, that I'm not giving my mother enough credit. It's possible that she wanted to assume responsibility for my troubles not to regain control but because she wanted to help resolve them, and who knows—maybe the sight of her child crying was enough to make her cry too (she tells me often that that is the case). She has been my advocate my whole life, a master of wrathful intervention on behalf of a small daughter, and often advocating to the point of invasion. In eighth grade I had a young English teacher who was brilliantly talented both in the classroom and as a writer, and

as a budding poet myself, I was thrilled when he took me under his wing. We spent hours together outside of class discussing books and laughing together, much to the mystification of the other eighth-graders, and he would send me e-mails even though we saw each other every day. My parents and I were living at the time in my grandmother's guest house, a place that, after so many months of living there, felt much smaller than it was. It was at least tiny enough that my parents' bedroom had to double as my mother's office, and privacy was minimal for all of us. One afternoon, home from school, I had signed onto the computer to check my e-mail. My mother, who hated this teacher, was in the shower. My father, who didn't know anything about it, was at the office. In this relative privacy, I checked to see if my teacher had written to me. He had, and I clicked on the e-mail eagerly. It opened with the customary greeting—he called me "The Pistol" every chance he got—and then he added, simply and without grammar, "this is a poem i really like." I skimmed the poem, which was short and very beautiful, and my face flushed, and my mother came out of the shower. I clicked print and closed the e-mail.

"What is that, honey?" she asked. Just an e-mail from Mr. Hall, I told her, and refused to elaborate. "I don't like you two e-mailing," she said from inside the closet. "It's shady."

"It is not shady, Mom. What do you think he's going to say to me?"

"How do I know?"

"It's nothing he wouldn't say to me at school." I signed off AOL and, clutching the printout, scurried away to my own little bedroom. The poem was "Kidnap Poem," by Nikki Giovanni: "Ever been kidnapped/by a poet/if i were a poet/i'd kidnap you." Reading it, I wondered, did adults behave this way? Did they, when their wives were still living in another state, unable to afford the move, find provocative poems and send them to thirteen-year-old girls? Apparently so. And not only that, I wanted to be kidnapped.

It is the kidnapping that my mother feared, the abandoning of control to someone else, the distance between the lover and the loved. I had kidnapped my boyfriend from his parents, encouraging him, such a sweet, shy boy, to love me as well as them, only to have him kidnapped from me, just a few months later, by Deep Springs. My mother watched as I was nearly kidnapped from her by that English teacher, and four years later I finally was snatched away from her by school, and extracurricular activities, and problems I refused to discuss with her, and even, to an extent, by my father, in our tacit mutual comprehension of the moment I had to have.

As much as I needed those moments, I was even less prepared to see them happen to my parents as a pair than I was simply to see my mother cry. One

night, home from a sixth grade class that I detested, full of prepubescent girls at the peak of their cliquey bitchiness, I sat on the wooden steps between the kitchen and the family room, reading, and relieved to be home. My father was unloading groceries, my mother doing a crossword puzzle, and we were all listening to one of my father's ancient, deteriorating mix tapes from the seventies. Suddenly the James Taylor song "Honey Don't Leave L.A." came on over the speakers, and my parents, drawn by some force that I absolutely would not understand at all until high school dances, when I would move toward a boyfriend via a similar magnetic pull, glided past me and down the stairs to the family room. My father, at least a full ten inches taller than my mother, bent his knees, and she stood on her toes, and they wrapped around each other until they looked like Edward Weston's *Pepper*, like the one body that seems to be two, but these were two bodies that seem to be one. They swayed around the floor; my mother came in too early with the chorus and my father, tone-deaf, spoke the lyrics along with James Taylor.

"Dad," I called, but there was no answer. "Dad," I called again, increasingly agitated, "when are we going to have dinner?" But he was wrapped up in holding my mother, in moving her tiny body, a body that I did not inherit. I got up abruptly, leaving my book on the stairs, and fled the kitchen—through the swinging door, which clattered behind me, through the dark dining room that we never use, and onto the stairs, the actual flight of stairs that leads up to my bedroom. I curled up there and waited for them to finish, waited for my mother to call me downstairs for dinner and ask me where I had been.

Why couldn't I watch my parents dance together? Partially because my mother and I don't have the moments of silent understanding that my father and I have—we have to sit down and hash everything out. We have the same short fuse, and the same things make us snap, but my father and I are connected at the brain—we process everything through our brains and detach ourselves from a situation, and from each other, so that we can figure everything out. Knowing that my mother has no such filter, that everything she feels hits her directly in the gut, and that my father is the cool, rational one in their relationship, it was strange not only to see my father override the part of himself that I connect with, but to see him override it so that he could share this dance with my mother. I saw how private this moment was, saw that sometimes the web that we have created between the three of us only accommodates two—sometimes my father and myself, when he understands that I need to cry at the kitchen table and that soon I will be all right; sometimes my mother and myself, on nights when we make my father sleep on the couch

and lie in her bed giggling together; and sometimes, oddly enough, my mother and father, whirling along the floor of our family room. And this exclusion, this silent request for privacy, hurt me in almost the same way as the new distance between my boyfriend and me, the same way that it hurt my mother as I cried and my father sat and ate. I couldn't talk to Colin after the revelation that he wanted to go to Deep Springs, that he would be far away from me, and the threat of a similar kind of distance was what my mother saw at the dinner table. She saw my stress taking me away just as my English teacher had tried to take me away, saw these concerns drawing me in, and she tried to bring me back, just as she had seen me on the edge of being seduced and stepped in.

Even though we are both motivated by love, my mother and I, there is something about the way we love (if that is, in fact, what we have been doing) that is not at all the symbiosis that I had thought love was. The magic of Weston's *Pepper* is that the positioning of the components into their "embrace" is what makes them appear animate, but so much of the time, in my experience, engaging in the embrace with someone is the first step to rendering that person, in effect, inanimate, inaccessible—kidnapped, even, by someone or something else. The love that my mother and I practice is both the result of closeness and the source of distance: we are alike in that we don't know how simply to embrace, to lean back romantically into the arms of some man or, in a completely different way, into each other's arms, so that we appear to merge into one body—we are stubbornly and insistently ourselves. And we will continue to be this way, continue to foist our opinions on each other, on men, despite the numerous ways this approach may backfire. So it may be that neither of us will come to an understanding about the proper, correct, adult way to love (or at least the type of love I thought was proper and correct), that we will create conflict with each other and with our lovers, that we will charge head-on through our relationships and hope that whomever else is involved can hang on tight. We leave no room for the other person to do the same, to teach us, to change us the way we try to change them, and there, in that lack of equality, is where the trouble begins. My mother and I are full of conflicting impulses—we want romance, we want love, but we also want to be the kidnappers, the ones in control, the ones to whom the other party listens. Sometimes, though, this intervention that we crave, at which we are experts, is crucial—sometimes closeness is necessary, and that, I think, is where parent-child relationships differ so significantly from romantic ones. In order to make our romantic relationship work, in order to hang on to what we have (whether it deserves to be kept or not), my

mother and I have had to learn to let go of control and be willing to let the men in our lives have what we expect them to accept in us: the freedom to be alone with their decisions and the confidence that we will be able to handle whatever they decide.

That said, for different types of love there are different ways to allow the other person to have space, to breathe. Sometimes distance is the desired end, sometimes it is the result of a relationship that is disintegrating, and sometimes the two go hand in hand. When I told my boyfriend that Deep Springs was not the place for him, I compressed the space between us so that it had to press outward against us both, expanding like a spring, and our relationship, from that moment on, was different. In the instance of my senior year meltdown, my mother did the same—her need to have closeness between us forced me away from her, stopped my tears and disgusted me. When I was an eighth grader she tried to put distance between myself and my English teacher, with whom I shared an intimacy that I had with no one else in my everyday interactions but that I wanted desperately with boys my age and didn't know how to have. And I would like to be able to say that when I was watching my parents dance together, sitting on the steps in the very first years of a difficult, alienated middle-school experience, I somehow knew instinctively to leave them alone, but really, I ran to the stairs because their closeness frightened and excluded me—my motivations, though I love them both, were totally selfish. Maybe, subconsciously, I did know that they needed to be alone, and that was a part of what propelled me out of the kitchen, but at the moment all I felt was profound discomfort.

Distance and space can cause this discomfort—it's terrifying to be wrapped in something as reassuring as a good relationship and find one day that it has unraveled, has been quietly unraveling, unnoticed, for weeks. It's bizarre to see two people you love dance together and feel not pleasure but estrangement, to experience the pull between the desire for them to love each other and the desire to be included. The paradox, though, is that love can be just as intimidating as the threatened lack of it—love waits behind doors, ready to leap out and kidnap, to drag away, to, as Nikki Giovanni writes later in her poem, "play the lyre for you/ode you with my love song/anything to win you." But the kidnapping, the thrill, the not knowing what will happen to that space between the lover and the loved, is what fascinates me, what keeps me coming back and trying again, attempting to separate my love from my fear that what I have found or fabricated will disappear, that I will ruin it. I continue to seek love out, find it, ruin it, and seek it out again, cycling through each stage with absolute confidence that I'm doing the right thing, that this

time I’m loving correctly. I pull closer and push away, trying to balance between too much space and not enough, when in fact intimacy and distance are not separate at all, but are as entangled as an embrace.