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## *from* Marigold

### STRAITJACKET

MY FATHER CALLS in tears to tell me that two burly paramedics have just wrestled my mother to the ground, strapped her into a straitjacket, and forced her inside an ambulance. I am, in this moment, on a meditation retreat. Never in my life have I gone on a meditation retreat. And never since.

By the time my mother is trapped in the straitjacket, I've been meditating daily for several years. I first tried it, in desperation, when I began to lose the children. Mysteriously, I discovered that meditation keeps me functional. All I have to do is close my eyes and count each breath. Thirty breaths, and I can get out of bed, follow a schedule, converse.

I am attempting the retreat because the abrupt disappearance of my mother's mind has put me over the edge. A fellow playwright tells me that, deep in mourning, she once found solace on a meditation retreat. I grasp at this straw. I am not in a position to debate. I seek relief, temporary escape, some form of cosmic help. I find the ashram randomly, online. It's an easy drive in a rental car. I decide to stay a week.

The timing seems good: my mother has just been diagnosed with a brain inflammation. First they thought it was a series of seizures. Then sudden bipolar disorder. Next they declared dementia, yet—advanced dementia, overnight? Wrong again. Good news—it's autoimmune encephalopathy, and inflammation is, theoretically, reversible! Finally, proper treatment is underway. We've seen improvement.

But now my mother is in a straitjacket. The intravenous steroid has worked only temporarily, or the disease has taken a turn for the worse, or. . . no one knows. The diagnosis is so rare that all treatments are experimental. The paramedics were big and strong. As was my manic mother. She fought them. They couldn't help but hurt her. The only other experience I have with something like this is a Tennessee Williams play. Unlike Blanche, my mother never got the chance to place her hand in the crook of a kindly elbow, while murmuring *I have always depended*

*on the kindness of strangers.* At least Blanche got to walk out. They heaved my mother onto a gurney and strapped her down. Having not previously called 911 for help with someone who is mentally deranged, my father was unprepared to witness my mother's violation. He could never have imagined. On the phone with me, he talks for almost an hour. She is, once more, delusional and aggressive. She is suddenly refusing further treatment. He had to do it, didn't he? He had to call for help. Despite my own devastation, I try to calm him. I speak of plans.

Prior to this conversation, I have fielded other calls from my father, wherein he's begged me *sotto voce* to ring back, talk to my mother, and convince her to . . . Fill in the blank. He tried everything to get her in the car so he could drive her to the Mayo Clinic. But, on the grounds that he's involved in a plot to burn her to death, she doesn't trust him. I, too, struck out. Turns out she doesn't trust me either. We don't blame her—we are making plans behind her back. We do blame ourselves. I whisper, as much as I can. I'm breaking the rules: Phone conversations are discouraged at the ashram. These calls also cause me to miss the group meditation session, and the chanting.

Later, during the communal midday meal, an ashram resident approaches me. She is studying closely with one of the yoga teachers. The residents in her group wear robes. She is young. I've noticed her during meals because she's so thin. I can't help myself; I've taken to watching her eat, inwardly urging her to put more than a few salad leaves on her plate. When she comes up to me, she quivers with emotion. She tells me she has noticed that I missed the morning meditation session. *Yes.* She tells me she wants to check in with me to see if there is anything wrong. *Do you need help?* She seems angry. Apparently, the group meditation session is more mandatory than recommended. *How are you?* she asks, with something other than concern. My heart pounds in response. Do I need help? She's damned right I need help. How am I? I'm going crazy. My children are dead, and I'm about to sue for guardianship of my mother, who is in a straitjacket, bruised from the takedown and terrified that I will light her on fire and watch her burn. How am I??? After a pause, I answer her. *I'm fine,* I say. *How are you?* In a flash of fantasy, Yoga Robes herself is bound in a straitjacket, and I am spoon-feeding her *ghee*. As though she can read my mind (maybe Yoga Robes is onto something), she glares at me, wordless, indignant, then turns her back and walks away. I return to my room before anyone can see me cry.

I leave the ashram the next day, well ahead of schedule. I no longer feel welcome. I have already prepaid for the week, and the fee is non-refundable. The resident who checks me out is puzzled but doesn't want to pry. But does want to pry. So he asks if my stay was all right. I say something came up and I have to go. Truth is, I am not a good candidate for an ashram, not for a week, not for a day. I've realized that I can't be inaccessible. Nor can I be saved. There is no escape.

## THE WORST THING

PREGNANT WITH LIAM, I'm working at a landmark downtown theater in New York City, as an artist in residence. My collaborators and I are developing a play I've written, readying it for a scheduled production. In this play a woman is mourning her dead child. Most of the other resident artists don't know my history, and I am interested in keeping it this way. I am fragile. They are spectacular, hard at work on their own projects. We are having one of our regular resident artist meetings, where we share work, tools, processes, fundraising strategies. Soulful, witty, sharp, exquisitely talented—this is a typical gathering of hardcore, mid-career, multidisciplinary theater-makers. Step right up: Here are the best and the brightest, dedicated to resurrecting a dying art form, while earning barely enough money to buy a small cup of coffee each morning. For the cost of a cup of coffee, you can support a nationally recognized theater artist. Start today.

A fellow artist is leading the rest of us through a mini-workshop, a writing exercise. He is sharing his method for generating material. He says: *Write down the worst thing that's ever happened to you. The worst thing. Don't be shy. For now, it's private. Just jot it down. The thing you are most ashamed of.* To encourage us, he tells a story of his own, a tale of a sexual escapade gone wrong, gone dark. He talks about how he turned this incident—one of the worst moments of his life—into the best moment in a theater piece. How the laughter rose in response to how real it was. Redemption.

We all bend to our notebooks and begin to write. My pad presses against my pregnant belly. *I am most ashamed.* My hands shake and tears flood my eye sockets. I will not cry. The effort exerts a squeezing pressure on my eyeballs. They are compressed into stone pits, sightless. *The worst.* How do I choose between my two daughters—which death? What about the other children, who never even had the chance to be born? How do I choose my children over my mother? What if a colleague

glances over and sees me scrawl *I caused the death of my daughter Lilah*.

I want to tear up the piece of paper. I want to substitute for it a sexual escapade. I want to be having sex, period. For fun. I want it to turn foul; I want to become a victim of someone else's carnal predilection. I want to unveil this to others in a dark theater and let it spurt with daggerlike precision until recognition transforms the laughter from uncomfortable to hysterical. I want people to view me as the kind of maverick artist who turns wild personal experience into cutting-edge art. *The worst thing*: I want his for my own, most desperately. In this moment, in this context, I can see no way to turn my own shame into redemption. It is beyond salvation. Even if salvation were possible, my shame is all I have left. I am nothing without it. If I forgive myself, if I surrender my shame, I will lose Lilah forever. She will be released into a realm where wishful thinking and time travel and fixing the past do not exist, a realm where she will never, ever, in a parallel universe, grow up, grow old. I can't take that risk, so I do not forgive myself. I keep my shame alive. I swaddle it. I give it my breast.

When we are done writing, we all look up. Our fellow artist, the workshop leader, nods. *The worst thing*. *Now write about it*, he says. I already have. Indirectly, in the play we are producing, not that anyone here would suspect. I am somehow humiliated by this. I realize it is likely that most of the people in this room have not lost a child or a parent, yet. We are in our thirties. The sense of displacement, the alienation, is familiar. I am becoming accustomed to this form of humiliation. I'm ahead of the grief curve.

## URGE

MOST EVERY CULTURE has linked sex with death, in countless stories, through countless eras. Orgasm as the little death. Abandon, then loss. I used to wonder at it. I understood it intellectually, but not viscerally; it seemed either heady or clinical. Now I feel it.

Increased sexual appetite is a common response to the death of a loved one. I heard this for the first time in college, when a good friend's mother died in a terrible accident. He confided in me, describing his suddenly manic sex drive. Not only was his libido out of control, those around him caught the bug. He was besieged by women seeking sex. Most of them felt, as I did, sad for his untimely loss. Most felt, as I did, uncontainable generosity toward him. His tragedy made him unusual

enough to be dangerous, vulnerable enough to be safe—a tempting combination. All of this was tinder.

But the spark that ignited it? He had nothing left to lose. I can see that now, because I've been there. Inhibition takes a back seat, self-consciousness dissolves, impulses do not get redirected: you are no longer in your own way. The worst has happened, it's all gone, there is nothing to guard, you are free. Yet there is a flip side to this coin, and I've been there too. The other side is terror. Yes, you know that another loss will strike. It will be senseless, and it will show you, too late, exactly what else you have to lose. Someone, something, is always tossing this coin, and you never know which side will land facing up.

So my friend was also afraid to sleep unaccompanied. If he escaped insomnia, he had nightmares. He asked me if I would stay with him while he slept. I kept watch a few times so he could close his eyes, wondering how many others he'd asked. I alone, it seems, did not have sex with him, or so he intimated. That I did not take this opportunity is testament to my love for him. He was my ex. Grief sex, with him, had the ring of a really bad idea.

Years later, the repeated loss of children begets in me an urge. My analytical self observes this urge from a distance, as might a biologist, acknowledging it, defining it specifically as the urge to find a new mate. Sex with my husband? No thanks, too fraught. Sex with anyone else? Gladly, any time. This new shape to my sex drive is so clear-cut, so straightforward, so obviously Darwinian. I find it outrageous. I have been reduced to an animal, nosing about, powerless against the imperative towards survival of the fittest, lifting my scarlet behind to invite a broader gene pool. I also wonder if this might, after all, be the best idea. Maybe then the losses would stop. My urge is constant. *Are you just going to run away?*

A number of friends and colleagues must be picking up on some covert yet unmistakable signal I emit. They respond. *What are you doing, right now? I was thinking of getting a drink.* I am not at all in the same boat as my college friend, am I? A mother in mourning isn't enticing in her tragedy, is she? The men are available while my pregnant body expands then contracts (on infinite loop), available while sudden silver strands snake themselves through my dark hair. Most responders flirt openly and therefore harmlessly, hinting here or there that they will follow my lead. They don't press the issue. Once, someone does, and I am sorely tempted. He asks, his eyes a challenge, *Are you just going to run away?*

We drink for a couple of hours. We decide to meet again, later, to keep drinking and talking, talking and drinking. He is direct, a pleasure. He suggests a bar near his apartment. We haven't seen each other for a while. We catch up. Another life lived in another country. I ask a lot of questions. I speak about my work. He knew me long before. How or why should I mention the only things that really matter? I realize that something new defines me, and without it I am no one, or at least not myself. The rest of my existence, in comparison, is bloodless. I don't know what to say—unless I speak the truth, I've betrayed myself, I've betrayed my children. That's how it is, at such times. So after some hours, I own up to my mother's encephalopathy and one stillbirth. Anything more would be too much. He appears to take it all in stride; I doubt he does, but how else should he appear? I assume this will neutralize the charge, eliminate the chemistry. I relax.

We talk a bit more. We wind things down. We will leave the bar, and he will go to a party next. On the sidewalk, I begin to say good-bye. He walks away without a parting word. I pause, looking for the subway. He turns and asks, *Where are you going?* Confused, I say, *Home*. He indicates direction with a nod: *The party is just down here. Near my place*. I say *I have to go home*, but my words lack conviction. We come together for a parting embrace. A kiss on the cheek becomes a brush across the mouth. It takes me a minute, a pregnant pause. We stand as I weigh one thing, and another. Then I step back. I keep moving back. I walk backward, watching him. His eyes fix. He calls after me. *Are you just going to run away?*

I intuit that the divorce rate for couples who lose a child, or endure miscarriage, is high, and I don't need a study to verify my urge. I wonder often if my husband and I will survive intact. When I write this, I research the statistics at last. One recent study reports that after a miscarriage (a pregnancy loss prior to twenty weeks), the likelihood of a split is twenty-two percent higher than if the pregnancy had not been lost. This increase in risk lasts for up to three years. Post-stillbirth (a pregnancy loss after twenty weeks), the odds of a couple splitting increase by forty percent, and this increased risk can last for up to ten years. Common responses to stillbirth include anxiety, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I smile when I read this: it strikes me as funny that anyone needs a study to come to such an obvious conclusion. But that is science.

Research on multiple stillbirths and multiple miscarriages is less

easy to come by. I figure each additional loss must increase the strain on a relationship. It does for us. More interesting is why we are still together: there is also, in our string of serial losses, a binding force. I feel it beyond a doubt. Our grief solders us to one another. It dwarfs annoyance. It outweighs grudges. It blots petty anger. It obliterates our wants. Most of all, we are the only other people who know exactly what it is like to have lost this much, in this way. I need him. And I need to not need him. I fantasize about what it would be like to be with someone minus the weight of this grief between us. It's a great fantasy. The latest research is illuminating in this context: only nine percent of couples who lose a child split up. Many report that the loss brings them closer together. For us, the two stillbirths feel more like losing children than losing pregnancies. Once I told my husband that I wished we could separate, but we can't—because he is the only other person who knows our two daughters. The weight of them in our arms, their faces, their scents.

A renowned doctor recently joked that I should come with a sign taped to my forehead: "Caution. If it can go wrong, it will. Pay attention." I'm fond of him. I took it well, with a smile of recognition. That same sign is always on my forehead. How did I become someone to whom things happen? I still wonder at it, stunned. I wonder if I believe it. I wonder what I might believe instead. When terror rules, there is no escape. Once identified by the fates, I am forever fingered on their cosmic map. I am caught in a searchlight. I can never again fade into obscurity and muddle through life with my duck's back, shedding danger like water, oblivious.

When terror temporarily cedes place to other forces, it seems I am traveling through a dark tunnel. I used to think I was moving toward a glimmer of light. Whether or not this metaphor represents some form of truth, I now experience it as a habit of mind that proved, for a time, useful. However clichéd, it was a structure of hope to house my belief, for example, that if I kept going my living child would come. As with all old habits I've quit, I despise light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel thinking. This puts me in an awkward place, with no concrete vision to replace the tunnel. So I'm in there still, but the light streaks through it—the tunnel is pure trajectory, endless. I straddle the light, and I hang on for dear life.

A year and a half after my mother dies, my father is living in Mexico with his fiancé and her family. He has distanced himself from us. He is

grieving and he is angry. He is intensely critical. When I call him on it, he defends his withdrawal from me, my husband, my three-year-old son. He talks about what a relief it is to be with his new family. How simple things are, how easy it is to enjoy living. How he needs now, at last, to be happy. He deserves this. He says he can't take so much of us. I know how he feels. I, too, long for a fresh start. I, too, want to escape being the person with all the problems. But I am determined not to lose what I already have.

### THEY TOOK HER AWAY

WHEN LILAH IS BORN, before I see her, I'm afraid. We are both, my husband and I, afraid to see her like that: dead. The doctor is just as scared—her face, her voice, they give her away. It is probably her first stillbirth as well. The doctor's palpable fear—a form of pity verging on disgust—peaks when Lilah comes out. *Do you want to hold her?*

In this instant, I will defend Lilah against anything, against repugnance, against fear. Yes, I want to hold her. Immediately I know: I will call her beautiful. The doctor hands her to me. *She's beautiful*, I insist, through my tears, before I've even had the chance to take her in. I don't expect to believe my own words. And then I find her beautiful. I look again, blinking in shock. *She's beautiful. Beautiful*, I repeat. My husband chimes in. Lilah is perfect. Fully formed, small, but already herself. We can't take our eyes off her. They give us a hospital-issue baby blanket, and a tiny stocking cap. We bundle her. As we hold her, she grows colder and colder. Her skin seems a darker shade than mine, closer to my husband's. She has plenty of black hair. We can see what long legs she has, how tall she is already, how very tall she would have grown. She has my husband's hands and my mother's height. I nuzzle her head, again and again. She smells good, like herself. I kiss her face, her hands. They snap a Polaroid picture of us, of our family.

They let us keep her for a long time. We take turns holding her. They bring lunch, then dinner. We eat. We hold her while we eat, or put her to rest in her bassinet. We talk. Small talk, contented. How tiny it is, her hat. How much better than expected, the hospital food. How finely formed, her piano hands. How lucky we are, to have this private room. How high, her cheekbones. How awake we feel, though we were up all night. How light she is, yet how substantial. We hold her and hold her. We are euphoric, just to hold her. The luxury of the



commonplace is ours. We keep her all day long and into the night. She belongs with us. We belong together.

Shortly before ten in the evening, they come for her. It is time to say goodbye. This does not seem right. They will take her somewhere in the hospital, since we had requested an autopsy and second genetic analysis—results will confirm a perfect baby girl, will provide no peace of mind. Then she will go to the funeral home, then she will be cremated. Institutional wheels are turning. We have made these arrangements in advance, without understanding that these arrangements mean we have to let them take her away. If not for these arrangements, I would have kept her. I know this. I would never have stopped holding her. The notion of us without her is impossible. There is no way to believe it. They tell us we won't see her again. We say our goodbyes. It is time now. We put her in her bassinet. We watch as the nurse wheels her out of the room. When she is out of sight, we listen for the squeaking of the wheels down the hall. I shake. I gulp. My teeth chatter. I become someone new, myself without Lilah.

They give us a box. There is always a box. Inside the box is Lilah's blanket, stained with the blood of her birth, her hat, her footprints, and measurements. I open this box many times in the months to come. I open it, over the years. Each time, I raise the blanket and hat to my nose and inhale. Her scent.

## GRATEFUL

FOR EVERY THING that went wrong, so many things went right. It often seemed I was the only one who could see the serendipity; I remember being frustrated at the blindness of others. When I hemorrhaged after giving birth to blue Carolina, doctors shook their heads, *You've had some bad luck*. I would respond, *But I've survived, and recovered. What about all the things that could have gone wrong? I could have died, but I didn't. My fertility is intact. There is nothing stopping us from trying again*. My body bounced back in a way that left me awestruck. My body recovered even as my spirit struggled. It began to seem that my body was a separate entity. I grew to respect my body in the way I might respect the accomplishments of a family member. A thing both strange and familiar, my body had a mind of its own, it knew how to heal. Its talent for resilience was mysterious. I was so proud and so amazed that I never once envied it. Most of all, I was grateful. There

were many things, big and small, that still functioned. I took nothing for granted.

Gratitude is impossibly complicated. Many cultures are superstitious about speaking well of a baby, of a child. In these cultures, caution is exercised. Do not give a child too many gifts. If the fairies or spirits get wind of how beautiful and beloved a child is, they will steal the child away to treasure as their own. It is important to sequester your joy. When Liam was born, instinctively, I veiled mine. I kept as much of it inside as possible.

Somewhere along the way, something shifted. I am no longer so focused on my gratitude, on having it or hiding it. My gratitude ebbs and flows. It occurs in a mix of other emotions, and I can't always rouse it. Am I less grateful? I try not to beat myself up over it. Any four- or five-year-old will drive you crazy at times. Mine does me. Once when I show my annoyance, he says, *Mama, I don't think you are in a shape to have a child*. I hear his preschool teacher's voice in this construction. When Liam becomes frustrated, she tells him she doesn't think he is in a shape to do X, that he should take a break. There is nothing he hates more than taking a break. I understand that I hurt Liam's feelings; in his upset, he is trying on the mantel of a kind of power. I know it means nothing more, yet the phrase stabs. *I don't think you are in a shape to have a child*. Am I the only mother who, upon hearing such a thing, actually wonders if it is true? The best I can do for my son is to pretend I don't believe him. And take a break, because in this moment, he's right.

Later, while on the toilet, Liam declares: *You know, the words we say are poems*. We've just read a book about poetry. I tell him I agree: The words we say can trap the truth of a moment, so that it will never disappear, and this is a poem. I tell him that we must choose them carefully, the words we say, since the words we say are poems.