Marianne

When I was six years old, my mother woke me at dawn and drove us to a motel in Morristown, New Jersey. I slept in the car and woke up in a dimly lit room that smelled of bleach and oranges. We stayed there almost two weeks, sleeping in the same bed, watching movies, and swimming in the pool, despite the thin layer of dead bugs and leaves that floated on the water.

At the time, my mother was going through a divorce, not from my father, but from a man named Dylan Novak. I don't remember being afraid of him, though maybe I should have been. My mom did a good job of making our time at the motel seem like a vacation, though she must have been out of her mind with fear.

Where Dylan is now, I don't know. Prison, maybe. Or dead, hopefully. Or scaring the shit out of some other

woman. My father died when I was a baby. Sometimes I'm sure people know this just by looking at me, like they can sense that specific vulnerability. Even though I was too young to mourn him, fatherlessness shapes you.

In college I got into the occult—*The Golden Dawn*, Madame Blavatsky, conducting little séances in my dorm room. It's lucky that a cult never found me, because I would have been easy to recruit. My attempts to speak with ghosts disappointed me, probably because I was never really a believer. All the séances did was give me bad dreams. My father never appeared in those dreams, but Dylan did, laughing, rolling his eyes.

Shortly after I turned thirty, I began to have what my psychiatrists referred to as *episodes*. I hated that word, which made me think of sitcoms. Still, no one ever offered me a better one. It was hard to stand or to talk while they happened, and sometimes they lasted for hours. I didn't cry—crying would probably have been a relief. If I was in public, I dug my nails into my palms, leaving crescent moons in the flesh. Alone, I contorted my body into positions so strange I could never show them to anyone else, wrapping my limbs back around each other, like I was trying to become my own straitjacket.

At first it was just nausea. Then came images, as clear as if I were watching them on television. They were so violent. I saw myself stretched out on a piece of wood.

Then the wood snapped in half, and so did I, large splinters impaling me. I saw razor blades buried into my stomach so that only their silver handles were visible from the skin. I saw my skull crack open like an egg. They were not hallucinations, because I knew they were not real. Nor were they memories, or dreams, or things I'd seen in scary movies. It was like someone had gone inside my brain and left them there, like shards of glass across the floor. Needles.

These episodes are what drove us to move out of New York City, in the fall of 1997. At that point I had seen three therapists, two psychiatrists, an acupuncturist, a neurologist, a hypnotherapist, and a Reiki healer. Nothing and no one was helping. Also, it was getting harder to hide what was happening to me. My co-workers noticed that I left my desk to use the bathroom for hours at a time. My friends were uncertain about inviting me to dinners or parties because I might ruin it for everyone. My husband, whose kindness and generosity were superhuman, was almost as exhausted as I was.

So we moved upstate. It was my husband's idea. It was easy for him to find a job at a small bank in Rhinebeck. Though it was a step down from the one he had in the city, he said that because the cost of living was so much lower, it didn't matter.

He was sure that the fresh air and open space would be good for me. I agreed. We found a big yellow Victorian on the edge of a college town, with a backyard that extended into the woods, and beyond that, the river.

I had lots of ideas. I would get a dog, a big sweet one that would rest its head in my lap when I had an episode. I would grow vegetables in our backyard and cook with them. I would volunteer at the home for disabled children that was around the corner from us. I would learn about plant medicine. And at least I wouldn't have to grab on to a pillar when the train came by and I felt an overwhelming desire to jump in front of it.

"It's not good for humans to live in cities, Marianne," my husband told me. "We're not evolved for it. Today I saw a homeless man half-naked on the train, singing the national anthem. Staying here is taking years off our lives."

He was trying to make it seem like the move was for his benefit, as well, as if he weren't making an enormous sacrifice. This type of kindness was typical of him.

The drive up was so beautiful and peaceful. It was a clear day, just warm enough to drive with the windows down. First we listened to *Winterreise*, and then my husband turned the music off so we could enjoy the view properly, in half-reverent silence. All those enormous trees, the wide blue river—it was like we had wandered into a painting.

There were problems almost right away. The big one was that, having grown up in the city, I couldn't drive. I scheduled lessons, but I found it so difficult. It was amazing to me that so many people knew how to do it, as

easily as walking, when it took up all my brainpower and then some. After each lesson I was exhausted and terrified. My face hurt from how tightly I clenched my jaw. And as the instructor helpfully reminded me, it would only get harder once there was ice on the road.

The second problem was the dog. We picked one out from a shelter, which made us feel virtuous. She was a tall, skinny animal that we thought might have been used for racing. I named her Shelley. She was very lazy, the shelter assured us, and affectionate, and would be happy to spend her days cuddling with me around the house. Shelley was nervous for the first few weeks we had her, which we knew was normal. I bought her a big soft bed and plenty of toys, and cooked her food myself—after all, I had time.

I really liked her. She had enormous dark eyes that absolutely melted me. When I took her for walks, the college students who lived near us fawned over her, telling me how much they missed their dogs at home, and she returned their affection with licks and wags.

But she hated my husband. The shelter had warned us that she was sometimes anxious around men, perhaps due to past abuse. *Just give her lots of time and space*, they instructed us, and that's what we did. The more Shelley liked me, the less she liked him. At first, she would hide under a chair when he entered a room. Then she started growling and baring her teeth when he came near me. One day she bit his hand so severely it required three stitches and a tetanus shot. He would have let me keep her,

even after that, if I had asked, but I felt too guilty. We decided to wait a little while and try again.

The house was not what we had expected, either. It was beautiful and intricate on the outside, like a dollhouse. But inside, the floors were uneven, the staircases absurdly steep, the plumbing unreliable at best. My husband assured me that this was just what big old houses were like, and I believed him. I scrubbed all the bathrooms with enough bleach to kill a person, but they still stank of mildew, which I realized was due to the old pipes. I got used to that.

I also got used to the way the doors opened and closed on their own if you left even one window open. The house had a big, beautiful backyard. I would look at it and think what a waste it was. For children or dogs, that backyard would have been heaven, but for us, it was just one more thing to maintain.

The episodes were not as frequent. They were happening only once or twice a week, instead of four or five times when we lived in the city. When they did occur, they were not quite as intense as before.

Also, I found a therapist I liked, in downtown Rhinebeck. I thought she might be a little kooky, because there were so many plants and crystals in her office, but I hoped they were just for decoration. I took a taxi to see her twice a week. Sometimes, if he could, my husband drove me. Sometimes we met for lunch after my appointments. I was even working a little, at a thrift store, not because we

needed money, but to give my life a little structure. So we felt we had made the right choice, moving there.

Winter changed everything. We were unprepared. The house was freezing. We bought space heaters, but I was perpetually anxious that they would fall over and set the whole place on fire with us inside. My husband joked that we would just have to use our body heat, but that was not enough.

As it got colder, the roads got more dangerous, and the taxi service I used to get to my appointments became less and less reliable. My therapist was forgiving about me being late or missing them entirely, but it was still a problem. It also meant I spent much more time alone in that cold house, which seemed to me so spooky now that I didn't have a dog to protect and comfort me.

One day in early December my husband called me from work. He wanted to bring one of his friends to dinner that night, was that OK? I didn't feel like making conversation with a stranger, and our house was still full of cardboard boxes. But I could hardly say no. It's not like I had anything better to do than cook for three instead of two.

The friend, Ted Simpson, was a colleague from the bank, and he was distraught. He had missed as many days of work as he could get away with, and now when he came to the office, he was distracted and miserable. My

husband tried to intervene on his behalf, to get him more sick days, but it didn't work.

His daughter, Meadow, from whom he had been estranged for many years, was missing. She had been in and out of rehabs and halfway houses since she was a teenager, but now she was really gone. Ted was tired from driving around all night, through the bad parts of Kingston and Poughkeepsie.

Meadow's mother had died when she was in kindergarten. I think my husband hoped that my fatherlessness and Meadow's motherlessness would create some kind of bond, and that I would be able to offer Ted some comfort. I could not. I could barely even cook him an edible meal.

As we ate, my husband and Ted discussed Meadow in low, solemn voices. My husband asked a lot of questions about her. He wanted to know how long Meadow had been gone, what the police were doing, if Ted thought it was enough. He asked if there was a reward for information. Maybe the bank could provide one. If not, maybe it could host some sort of fund-raiser. I thought Ted might be sick of answering questions like that, but he seemed grateful for the opportunity to talk about his daughter. I suspected most people in his life just didn't want to hear about anything so grim.

I admired how my husband was both practical and concerned. I wished that I could be more like him, but I was so cold and so tired. I kept seeing an image of myself

with all my limbs fused together, like a rag doll sewn up wrong.

As they talked, I kept refilling their wineglasses. I sat with my sweetest, warmest facial expression, because I hoped that Ted would look over at me and see an image of comfort. My husband asked if I would help organize a fund-raiser, and I said yes, of course, I would be more than happy to. I was really doing my best. Ted left around midnight. My husband took a shower and fell asleep right away, because of all the wine. I stayed awake until dawn, staring at his kind, unconscious face.

Three weeks later, Ted came for dinner again. This time I ordered food from a restaurant, because I didn't want to subject such a sad man to my cooking. My husband and I had a small fight about that. He thought I was being lazy. *What are you doing all day that you can't even cook a decent meal?* he probably wanted to ask. When I explained it to him, he took me in his arms and kissed the top of my head.

"I doubt Ted has much of an appetite these days. The food is just a formality."

When Ted arrived, he was already a bit drunk. Who could blame him?

"I call the police every day. Local and state, to see if there are any updates. They talk to me like I'm some idiot. I want to yell, 'I pay your salaries! You work for me!' But

I can't afford to antagonize them," Ted told us. He was a big man, maybe fifty years old, who had lost the hair on top of his head, which made him look a bit like a clown. We sat in the kitchen because the big dining room was too cold. Ted kept his jacket on.

"It's a disgrace," my husband replied. He wanted to write letters and make phone calls. He was a man who believed that most things could be solved by letters and phone calls.

Ted occasionally tried to have a normal conversation with me about the house, if I missed the city. I replied politely and succinctly. I knew that he didn't really want to talk about any of that. Meadow had been gone for three months.

After dinner we switched from wine to whiskey. I wasn't supposed to drink hard liquor because of my medications, but my husband didn't say anything, and I sipped it carefully. It was clear that Ted was too drunk to drive home, so I set up a little bed for him in the room my husband sometimes used as an office. There was a big, comfortable couch downstairs, but I feared that the room would get too cold.

Around one in the morning my husband helped Ted upstairs. It was hard to tell in the half-light, but I thought that Ted might have been weeping.

"I hope you can get some rest," my husband said. "Good night."

The idea of a grown man sleeping on our squeaky, flimsy futon, in a room still full of unpacked boxes, made me so sad. I went downstairs to see if I could find any extra blankets or pillows to make him more comfortable. There was one wool throw, a wedding present, that we sometimes used when we watched television. I decided to take it up to him.

I knocked on the door.

"Come in," said Ted.

He was sitting on the edge of the futon. His shoes were off, but he was still fully dressed. I could have just handed him the blanket, but instead I draped it around his shoulders. As I did, he pulled me toward him and stuck his cold hand up my skirt.

He was a tired, drunk old man, and I could have stopped him with a slap, but I didn't. I looked around the room, like I hoped for someone who could tell me, *Yes, this is really happening*. But, of course, it was just the two of us.

He squeezed me so hard. I later thought it must have been the pain, more than anything else, that interested him. I just stood there. Part of me felt sorry for him, and part of me felt scared. Neither part of me could move. After what felt like a long time, he removed his hand and turned away from me.

I went to take a shower. My husband was already asleep. What upset me the most, I realized, was not the pain but Ted's certainty that I would not scream. He was that sure

of my pity and shame. As I crawled into bed in the darkness, I was terrified of what my brain would show me. But there was only emptiness.

The snow had fallen so heavily overnight that Ted could not get his car out of our driveway. He and my husband spent all day watching TV, playing Risk, and drinking whiskey. They ate leftovers. I pretended to be busy in bed with a book, when I was really sitting with the emptiness. For the first time I longed for one of my visions. I wanted to see Ted's head crack open, to see myself scooping out his brain with my fingernails. It took two days for the snow to melt. Ted suggested calling a tow truck, but when my husband said that he was free to stay with us, to get some rest, he happily agreed.

On the third day, I made breakfast, a really good breakfast, home fries and bacon and eggs and tomatoes. We all sat around eating and talking and reading the newspaper. When my husband got up to use the bathroom, I leaned over and whispered in Ted's ear.

"Your daughter is dead. Everybody knows it. She was raped and killed and left in an alley like garbage."

Then I cleared my plate and went upstairs.

About an hour later, my husband came into our room without knocking.

"Marianne, what is wrong with you?" he asked. The question was not rhetorical. I was silent.

"What kind of a person says something like that?" He seemed on the verge of tears even as he towered over me.

I could not respond. I could not tell him what Ted had done to me, even though it might make him forgive me. But when I looked at his face, I did not see even a scrap of love or affection. He was looking at me like he was trying to figure out exactly how badly he'd fucked up his life for my sake, and how he was going to fix it. He looked like he wanted me dead.

"I'm going for a walk" was all I said. I put on my boots and a coat that was not nearly warm enough and went into the woods. The melting snow made it muddy, but it was still beautiful, a clean blanket placed over the world. *So this is why people live up here*, I thought.

When I got to the river, I saw a girl, her flesh all white and blue, half-covered in dirt and leaves. I knew immediately that she was dead, but I wasn't sure if she was real or not. I knelt beside her and took off my glove to touch her face. Then I ran back to my house to call the police.

When I got there, both my husband's and Ted's cars were gone. The heat was off. I was shaking so badly it was hard to dial the numbers. By the time the police arrived—two men in uniform—I had not calmed down. Speaking felt as painful and unnatural as pulling out my own teeth. They asked if I could lead them to the body. I said I would try. As they followed me through the woods, I wondered if they thought I was insane. When we reached

her, I felt a twinge of triumph. Then I vomited all over one of the officers.

It wasn't until weeks later, when I was living with my mother, that I learned who it was. She was a college girl named Sara who had been killed by her boyfriend. I was afraid that I would be called to testify, that I would have to tell them how I found her.

If I had, I might have told them: What I felt when I saw that frozen face was not fear or disgust. It was relief. It lasted only a moment, but it was so profound that it bordered on joy.