



Laurie Colwin at the Empire Diner, New York City, 1990
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Laurie Colwin

A memorial symposium

**Deborah Eisenberg, Anna Shapiro,
Peter Smith, Anna Quindlen, Alice
Quinn, Thisbe Nissen, Willard
Spiegelman, Tessa Brown, Sarah
Gardner Borden, Rosa Jurjevics,
and Eva Geertz**

Laurie Colwin's friends and fans seem to be everywhere, seventeen years after her early death in 1992, when she was forty-eight. The following tribute was conceived at a New Haven Review party last November, when local writer Sarah Borden mentioned to one of our editors that she was hoping to meet Eva Geertz, another local, who, she had heard, was a Colwin fan. Borden and Geertz missed each other at that party, but (we hear) they soon met at Hall-Benedict Drugs, a local institution in the East Rock neighborhood; they meet again here, where they both write about Laurie Colwin.

Once you know Colwin, through her short fiction, novels, or beloved collections of cooking essays, you discover traces of her everywhere. One of her high school classmates, Meg Bloom, turns out to live on West Rock Avenue in New Haven. Another classmate is Willard Spiegelman, a regular contributor to the New Haven Review. Colwin seems to have been a friend of everybody—the poet Edward Hirsch, the editor Alice Quinn, the photographer Nancy Crampton, the novelist Anna Quindlen. Yet she somehow seems too little discovered, though her books are all in print, a testament to the small army of fans that doesn't seem to grow but never disappears.

We are printing for the first time passages from a Laurie Colwin memorial service held in January 1993, at Symphony Space in New York City, and broadcast then on WNYC radio. These are followed by essays from Alice Quinn; Willard Spiegelman; Colwin's daughter, Rosa Jurjevics; rising fiction star Thisbe Nissen; one of her students, Tessa Brown; and Sarah Gardner Borden and Eva Geertz. The New Haven Review may collect these essays into a book, and if we do, we'll want more essays. So write to us.

And enjoy.

—The Editors

My name's Deborah Eisenberg, and I've been asked to read something from this very pretty book called *Home Cooking*. For those of you who don't know it, it's a book about home cooking. I think most of the pieces appeared in *Gourmet*. It's very much like hanging out with Laurie, really. This particular piece is called "Repulsive Dinners, A Memoir."

There is something triumphant about a really disgusting meal. It lingers in the memory with a lurid glow, just as something exalted is remembered with a kind of mellow brilliance. I am not thinking of kitchen disasters—chewy pasta, burnt brownies, curdled sauces: these can happen to anyone. I am thinking about meals that are positively loathsome from soup to nuts, although one is not usually fortunate enough to get either soup or nuts.

Bad food abounds in restaurants, but somehow a bad meal in a restaurant and a bad home-cooked meal are not the same: after all, the restaurant did not invite you to dinner.

My mother believes that people who can't cook should rely on filet mignon and boiled potatoes with parsley, and that they should be on excellent terms with an expensive bakery. But if everyone did that, there would be fewer horrible meals and the rich, complicated tapestry that is the human experience would be the poorer for it.

My life has been much enriched by ghastly meals, two of the awfulest of which took place in London. I'm a great champion of English food, but what I was given at these dinners was neither English nor food, so far as I could tell.

Once upon a time, my old friend, Richard Davies, took me to a dinner party in Shepherd's Bush, a seedy part of town, at the flat of one of his oldest friends.

"What's he like?" I asked.

"He's a genius," Richard said. "He has vast powers of abstract thought."

I didn't think this was a good sign. "How ... nice," I said. "Can he cook?"

"I don't know," Richard said, "In all these years I've never had a meal at his house. He's a Scot, and they're very mean."

When the English say mean, they mean cheap.

Our host met us at the door. He was a glum, geniusy-looking person, and he led us into a large, bare room with a table set for six. There were no smells or sounds of anything being cooked. Two other guests sat in chairs, looking as if they wished there were an hors d'oeuvre. There was none.

"I don't think there will be enough to go around," our host said, as if we were responsible for being so many. Usually this is not the sort of thing a guest likes to hear, but, in the end, we were grateful that it turned out to be true.

Hi, I'm Anna Shapiro. I met Laurie in 1976 outside the 20th Street office of the State Department of Labor, where we were both collecting unemployment. I had just reported my first earnings as a writer, and she must have overheard me because she barreled out after me, and I found myself accosted by this fierce woman saying, "Are you a writer? Don't ever tell them anything."

Luckily this was only her motto for the fatal Line C. I'm going to read some of what she told to her friends in letters over the years, starting with Frances Tolliver, who teaches at the Brearley School, but who saw Laurie mostly in Laurie's adopted town of Cornwall, Connecticut.

Frannie said, "It was hard to choose letters, or parts of letters, that Laurie wrote me, because she mostly communicated by postcard. Wonderful postcards, but so full of in-jokes that they really wouldn't do. One thing that is mentionable is that she had some stick-on labels, the kind you put on jars of homemade jam, and she stuck those on a series of postcards, 'Blank from the kitchen of Blank.' One of them said, 'Disgusting, cold, wet toast, from the kitchen of Rosa A. Jurjevics.' But the best one said, 'Insulin. From the kitchen of Klaus von Bulow.'"

It was from Laurie that I learned the term bread-and-butter

letter, and she was the master of this form. To her friend the photographer Nancy Crampton she wrote, in 1982, after her picture had been taken, "Dear Nancy, with your picture in hand I'm going straight to Hollywood. I told you, I feel so gorgeous I feel like a cat looking into a mirror, and, furthermore, I seem to look exactly like myself. How do you do this? Never mind, I just thought you should have a written tribute to your genius. I love these pictures."

Laurie not only learned from her students, she found at least one friend among them, Jennie Heifetz, who she teases in this letter from July of 1986:

I'm sorry I've forgotten you already, how nice of you to remind me. Which one are you? The skinny one with all the Ralph Lauren clothes or the blond with the bicycle? Or perhaps you are a tall, cute boy.

And speaking of my class, this is your big chance to tell me what I should change, what you thought worked, and what didn't. Should I give each class a theme...? Or should I meander down the byways of literature tossing brambles and nettles right and left? Please answer this letter as fully as possible, because you will be given a letter grade.

And then she ends, "When I strain to remember exactly who you are, I miss you a lot."

My name is Peter Smith. My having this privilege came about because my cherished colleague Alice Quinn sent me some posters for the event tonight to put around the campus. She did not know that Laurie Colwin was not a stranger to me, even if I was a stranger to her. For I had read every one of her books. But I told Alice as much in a note, adding forlornly, "Is there any chance I could be a reader?" As it turned out, the one place still left in the program when I asked my question was the place for someone to read excerpts from four of the multitude of letters, the hundreds and hundreds of letters, that were sent to Laurie Colwin's husband and daughter when

she died, three of the excerpts coming from people who had never met her.

From a man called Paul Lebedkin:

While I never met your wife, I keenly enjoyed her fiction and nonfiction over fifteen years.

As a young man, I dreamt of being a writer. My writing, as is the cliché in fashion, was effortful, full of obscure references, how smart is the author, how smart is the reader, dark themes, this is a poor sorry world, and family tragedy, as if family life is chiefly defined by its flaws.

It seems to me that among your wife's virtues as a writer was to avoid these horrible, short-circuited premises, and to present a world more realistic, complete, and telling than dozens of archly dark and sarcastic authors could cobble together in their lifetimes. Her imagination was finer and freer than theirs, and her readers are blessed to share it.

From Peter Darling in Philadelphia (isn't that a lovely name, as though Peter Pan had married Wendy and taken her name):

I did not know Laurie Colwin and I do not know you. I have, however, read every line she's written. Her work meant a great deal to me and was a constant reliable source of pleasure and understanding. I will miss it and her.

I'm in law school, and I was sitting in a class about, of all things, federal income taxation, about ninety minutes ago, when a classmate told me about Laurie's death. I can tell you that there are dozens of people I know who feel about her work as I do and are saddened.

I read a great deal, I come to depend on certain writers, and I depended on Laurie.

I always found something uplifting and decent in anything she wrote, and, more than once, it has helped lift me out of what my mother would describe as a poor spell. There is a copy of *The Lone*

Pilgrim on my nightstand right now, and *Another Marvelous Thing* is one of the most joyful, affirming things I've read.

I went as far as to use your wife's work as a litmus test for women. A sure test of a woman's character is to sound her out about Laurie Colwin. If she has read or reads something of hers and likes it, she passes. If not, she's not worth knowing; ultimately she will likely bore you, hurt you, or break your heart. I, like thousands and thousands of other people, will miss that clear and delightful voice.

I hope it won't be an impertinence for me to say, after reading Mr. Darling's letter, that Laurie Colwin's work would also be a fine litmus test for any man's character.

From Ann Hirsch, writing from Spain:

I didn't know it was possible to feel the death of someone I had never met, before the death of Laurie Colwin.

Laurie Colwin is one of my favorite authors. No one comes close in nonchalance, humor, and truth combined. She did what professionals in any field do: That is, she made it look easy, effortless. In her August column in *Gourmet* she wrote, "There are very few things mankind cannot live without. For centuries we survived without compact disks, without automated bank tellers, iceberg lettuce, and bubblegum-flavored toothpaste, to say nothing of the internal combustion engine. But life as we know it would be unimaginable without the tomato." For me, life as I know it is unimaginable without Laurie Colwin's writing.

And finally from Ephraim Paul, also writing from Philadelphia:

Laurie was my teacher in the fall of 1986 in the NYU graduate program.... She was wise, offering up conversation that put us fledglings at ease; as well as demanding, exhorting us to read more, write more, think more, and not take anything for granted.

I remember her speaking of your daughter, Rosa, about three at the time, with such passion and involvement, as if Rosa were her greatest work of art. Now, I have a two-year-old son, and I understand what she was talking about.

It wasn't until yesterday that I came to understand how close I came to knowing Laurie Colwin. My colleague in the writing division met her last summer, and he and she had several conversations about the possibility that she would come and teach in the school. Finally, she decided she would put it off because she wanted to spend more time with Rosa.

My name is Anna Quindlen. I was most surprised in 1982 to be told by a mutual friend that the author of *Happy All the Time*, which I, like everyone else, admired, wanted to take me on a tour of the Port Authority Bus Terminal. She knew the story of two elderly homeless women who had become each other's family, and she thought that it would be perfect fodder for a column I was then writing about New York because she could tell that, in my own way, I was trying to cover the territory of the human heart, a territory which she understood much, much better than I did.

That was the only time that I ever spent time with her, yet, in a way that I think is peculiar to women in New York City, I spent the next ten years walking through Greenwich Village convinced that any moment I would turn a corner and run into Laurie Colwin and we would both be delighted to see one another, first with our babies, then with our toddlers, finally with our nine-year-olds.

The fact is that in recent years I did feel as though I had run into her and as if I had talked to her many times, because I have in my kitchen a book called *Home Cooking*. And, in between following the recipes for Extremely Easy Beef Stew, or Estelle Colwin Snel-lenberg's Potato Pancakes, I would frequently sit down on a little stool in my kitchen and read through one of the essays in that book.

I never read through *The Joy of Cooking*, and I can read the *Silver Palate Cookbook* standing up, but I always sat down to read these. *All of the following essays were written specially for this issue; they were written by—in order—an old friend, a fan, a high school classmate, two more fans, the daughter, and another fan of Laurie Colwin.*

Things to be Cherished Like the Thought of Heaven

Alice Quinn

Like most friends of Laurie Colwin, I find my apartment is redolent of her. I look up to a shelf in the kitchen and see a serving dish in the shape of an acorn squash resting atop a Victorian cake platter with an angel embossed in the center.

In my bedroom, there's a beautiful lustreware bowl picturing an Austenesque lady petting a dog, from the years when we all seemed to lust after lustreware and search it out at the flea market on 26th and Sixth.

In my closet are several sweaters Laurie's eye settled on: hand-knit cardigans with beautiful buttons in the shape of shells or clear glass buttons with the sheen of puries, the marbles I most loved in childhood.

On the wall is a watercolor of a marsh tit (*Talus talustris*), a page from a young boy's bird watching album, circa 1910 or so, which Laurie and I found in an antique shop in Salisbury, Connecticut, one summer day. She worried about displaying the tit once she had a little girl. On the bedroom bookshelf there's a picture of Laurie gazing at Rosa, that infant girl, alongside a picture of her husband, Juris, relaxing in a hammock in the yard of their summer rental in Old Cornwall.

On my shelf, too, is *Strange Gods Before Me*, a memoir by Mother Mary Francis, a poor Clare nun, from the days when Laurie was seriously smitten with Anglo-Catholicism, attending vespers each evening at the seminary across the street from her apartment.

But in spite of all this cherished direct evidence of our bond, I have long maintained that readers of Laurie's novels, stories, and essays on cooking have direct access to who she was and know the same person her friends knew. She is, of course, the domestic sensualist she describes in her fiction as well as the helpless romantic, and also an assiduous realist on the subject of life's difficulties.

I think Laurie would agree with Patrick Kavanagh that the self is only an example, at least from the artist's point of view. From the very beginning, Laurie reached out to her readers, with an extraordinarily empathic understanding of how perilous the journey can feel, and her readers experience, I think, the clear sense of witness to their lives and struggles that she gave to her dearest friends.

We all care about how things turn out for our friends, but Laurie really fretted. She turned our fates over in her mind, hoping that we would find the work and love that would fulfill us. "I need it for my art, Al," she would say, trying to pry a secret thought or crush from me. And when one needed a lift, she sprang into action. She might spontaneously volunteer that someone you loved did, in fact, love you but lacked the courage of reciprocal expression. And in those moments, she seemed to emphatically know that this was so.

How fitting that her readers should regularly stand up to pay witness to the profoundly personal experience that reading her provides. I am reminded of Emily Dickinson's beautiful tribute to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, written immediately following her death, the poem that begins, "I went to thank Her—"

How to Cure Homesickness

Thisbe Nissen

Some years ago, when I was teaching in a summer program for talented teenage writers, I had a student who didn't seem likely to last the full two weeks. She was terribly, incapacitatingly homesick, and so embarrassed about it she could barely bring herself to speak. I'm not sure what made her more panicked: the desperate sensation of

displacement, or the mortification of being a seventeen-year-old who could not stop crying for home. She was wickedly smart, driven, successful in most everything she did—she looked a little like Chelsea Clinton, and reminded me of her, too, that poise and precocity—but she was away from home for the first time and just could not get her bearings in this new place.

I knew the feeling. Once, as a kid at sleepaway camp, I'd been paralytically homesick, and it's not a sensation you forget. It comes back—in anxiety attacks, episodes of panic, any time I've felt like I've skittered off my life's axis and I'm flailing in a boundless infinity—and when it returns, I can't help but remember how it felt, as a kid, before I'd learned the handholds to grab and anchor myself to the swiftly tilting universe once again. My student had never been alone in a new environment before, and so hadn't yet learned how to help herself through the panic of that initial confusion. She approached me after our first class meeting to try to tell me what was going on with her; I'd expected she was coming to tell me that she had ADD and might get jittery during workshop, or that she was dyslexic and might have trouble completing all the required reading. Instead, with her eyes either cast down in shame or fixed on mine in desperation, she confessed to her homesickness as though admitting some absurd ailment that had come upon her all of a sudden and kept her from participating in class discussion: "I have hysterical blindness," or "I smell my dead grandmother's banana bread everywhere." But what she said was: "It's the stupidest thing in the world, but I'm so homesick I might have to leave."

I begged her to give it a day or two, to try to bear through the anxiety. I told her about that first summer at Camp McAllister, when I wrote to my parents "If you love me you will get in the car as soon as you read this and come get me." She could barely laugh. "By the time my folks got the letter," I told her, "I was already okay. My mom called camp, in a panic herself, and when I got on the phone I was brimming with stories, dying to tell her how I'd passed my swimming test, and gone horseback riding, and and and..." My student tried to

smile, but it didn't work. Recovery was at that point inconceivable. I made her promise she'd stick it out through the night. She didn't have much choice; she couldn't get a flight home until the next day at the earliest. "Good," I said. Then I ran home to fetch her some Laurie Colwin.

For I just so happen to keep an inordinate number of copies of Laurie Colwin's books on hand for use in just this sort of emergency. I buy up her three story collections whenever I find used copies for sale, because I like to give them to fiction students; when I come upon a student who just seems like a good candidate—someone who needs Laurie Colwin in her writing life the way I did when I was introduced to her as a young writer—I like to be able to give her a copy. It makes an impression: *I am your poor, starving creative writing professor, but this book means so much to me that I spend my spare pennies on used copies to give to my beloved students.* I also just like having all the different editions of each of her books, seeing the evolution of the covers, the cheesy 1970s paperbacks, the romantic 1980s illustrations. But the book I needed for the homesick student was the one I stock most regularly, and give away most frequently: *Happy All The Time*. In this case, it had to be a novel anyway: my student needed to be able to get lost in another world until her own sorted itself out.

And, for some (and, just based on the little interaction we'd had, I suspected this student to be one of those people, one of my people), there is little that brings more comfort and assurance and affirmation that one is not entirely alone in the world than to spend some time with Guido and Holly and Vincent and Misty. The friend who'd told me about Laurie Colwin—during our junior year of college, when we were getting to know each other over the course of a fiction workshop—said that whenever she got to a new place the very first thing she did was to sit down—in that empty dorm room, that summer sublet apartment, the shared rental during a New York publishing internship—and read *Happy All The Time* cover to cover. The book set her right in the world; it reminded her what was im-

portant to her; it made her feel, at the potentially loneliest of times, that she was among friends. I hoped the same might come to be true for my homesick student.

I wish I could remember now which copy I gave my student. It wasn't the 1979 Pocket Books edition with the shiny red heart-shaped exclamation point. On that one, the title is printed in white bubble letters within the heart, and inside the exclamation point's dot are two hands, a man's and a woman's, clinking "Cheers!" with the kind of wide-mouthed, champagne-cocktail saucers they drink from in Jacuzzis at Hugh Hefner's mansion. I'd have been unable to part with this copy.

I likely gave her a tamer-looking version, probably one with that watercolor of the man holding flowers, standing outside a window and looking in on a woman playing the violin. Gentle and literary-looking. I brought it to her dorm room. I told her what it meant to me. She seemed grateful, if shaky and exhausted. I left her there, in Laurie Colwin's care, my fingers crossed. What I wanted was for her to meet those characters—those marvelously quirky, difficult, intelligent, particular, irresistible women Colwin wrote about—and to take from them (as I had—and still do) a kind of permission.

For me, this permission is both writerly and also simply human. When I was just starting to cohere my artistic impulses, to begin collaging images and scenes and characters into the form of fiction, Laurie Colwin's work gave me permission to write the kind of stories I had in me to write. That she was taken seriously as a writer—published and read, literarily and prestigiously—who wrote mainly about the emotional lives and relationships among quirky, intelligent, delightfully regular people, meant that such a thing was possible. That I could write about the people I knew, make observations about the world around me and the people inhabiting it, and that in writing those people I might aspire to literature. As a writer, I didn't have to be anyone but myself, because Laurie Colwin was a writer without pretension—so real, earnest, down-to-earth, so genuine, so ... well, so unpretentious.

But her work lent me permission not only to write like the writer I am, but to be the person I am. Here was Laurie Colwin, loving her characters in and for all their oddities and foibles. Here on these pages were lovely, well-meaning, inept and confused but serious men. And it was these darling, utterly human men who fell in love with Colwin's women: those temperamental, hard-to-please, unconventionally-and-strangely-attractive-if-not-actually-beautiful women. Women who were absolutely fallible and nothing but wholly and entirely human. Reading *Happy All The Time* was like getting permission to be as "hard to get through to" and "unnecessarily complicated" as Holly Sturgis, someone who could undo Guido Morris entirely. "Everything about her—the calculation of her moves, the grace with which she walked, the fact that she took off her gloves with her teeth—moved him." He knew "that she hated sheets that weren't pressed; that she thought suntans were show-offy unless gotten in the line of work; that she felt letters ought to be written with a fountain pen; that she took a firm stand against ice in drinks; that she took an equally firm stand against bright colors with the exception of red; that she would eat oranges but nothing that was orange-flavored. He was deeply in love with these quirks and he felt that he could see the big picture beneath them." To be loved for the things that rendered one impossible! It was possible! Guido loved Holly, and that meant that someday someone might love me.

This was what I wanted my homesick student to find in Laurie Colwin. I wanted Laurie Colwin to tell her, as she'd told me, that the world had plenty of well-adjusted, easily adaptable, assimilating people in it already, and that they were not the interesting ones. The interesting ones are the Holly Sturgises of the world. And the Misty Berkowitzes: "She had amber-colored hair that fell into her eyes and small gold spectacles that slipped down her nose. She looked bored and misanthropic. The sight of her caused Vincent's heart to leap in an unexpected manner." When Vincent sticks his head into her office to say good morning, she growls, "Get the hell away from me," which only makes Vincent love her more. Which is what I

wanted *Happy All The Time* to reveal to my homesick student: that there are plenty of people who can jog off to summer camp and have a great time and make lots of great friends, and come home with great memories, but it takes an exceptional person to go to writing camp at age seventeen and be overcome with such tremendous and unexpected homesickness as to be unrecognizable to herself. Laurie Colwin would have liked you, I wanted to tell her. I think Laurie Colwin would've said: "For goodness sake, be who you are! Be seventeen and strung out with homesickness. You're more interesting that way. And that's what matters."

And whatever Laurie Colwin did say to my student, she said it until the girl fell asleep reading in her bunk bed that night, and when she came to class the next day, she looked less teary-eyed, less bleary-headed.

I said: "You're still here!" and she said, sheepishly, "I am."

"How's *Happy All The Time*?" I asked.

She smiled. "I almost cut your class to keep reading."

Past and Present

Willard Spiegelman

When Laurie and I won the cha-cha contest at the ninth-grade prom at Elkins Park Junior High School, in 1959, we had known one another for two years. Another fifty have elapsed. I don't believe it. She died in 1992, and I have thought about her probably every day since then.

I remember Laurie's laugh, composed in equal parts of heartiness, surprise, generosity, and healthy skepticism. "Why Billy," she asked me incredulously on the first of her two trips to Dallas (1980, 1992), where she had come to read her work to enthusiastic audiences and to charm, and be charmed by, the locals, "you've never heard of Flaco Jimenez? Don't you know anything about Tex-Mex music?"

"Jeez," I thought, "she's on my turf, and she knows the local culture better than I do." Leave it to Laurie.

Laurie didn't tell jokes; she didn't have a routine. She was naturally shy, almost agoraphobic. She did not perform, although she did accents with scary accuracy. Instead, she told stories. With a satirist's eye for human errors, and a novelist's ear for a good yarn, she was always alert to the conversations, habits, and activities of people all around her. Weird or commonplace, everything gave her grist for her narrative mill. She recalled going one August day to a town fair in West Cornwall, Connecticut, a town she lived in part-time and loved full-time. There she saw a horsey, lock-jawed, Talbot's-clothed Wellesley alumna, mother of three. She was holding up a hand-knit sweater and she said to her Madras-shorts-wearing husband (ENTER: Laurie, in character): "It won't fit Bunkie, it won't fit Binkie but maybe it'll fit the Beezer!" And then Laurie howled. In life as well as in her fiction, Laurie seemed born to document the tribulations of the declining preppy aristocracy.

Another incident worthy of a William Hamilton *New Yorker* cartoon: Laurie overheard a woman on line at Dean & DeLuca say to her pearl-necklaced companion, in frustrated wonder, incredulity, and concern, "I told her I would bring a Brie, but she had a Brie. I told her I'd bring a pâté, but she had a pâté. So I told her I'd bring a quiche, but she had a quiche!" What's an Upper East Side lady to do? Laurie was in stitches, and left her listeners in stitches, always.

It was ever thus. We grew up in Cheltenham Township, just north of Philadelphia; it was a quiet suburb of old stone houses and manicured lawns, and the Reading Railroad passed through it. Two miles to the west, our high school in Wyncote was a long stone's throw from the houses (are they still standing?) where Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle grew up in the early years of the last century. Our set was all college-bound, mostly Jewish, and—a condition that probably doesn't exist anywhere these days—both intellectually sophisticated and incredibly naïve. We read Freud. We talked about sex. (Talk: that was about as far as most of us got.) We smoked cigarettes. No one knew about pot. No one drank. (Remember the

old cliché about Jews versus goyim: The former feed you, the latter douse you in drink.) We hung out at coffee houses near the Penn campus; we listened to folk music; we engaged in hopeful political protest during that narrow window between the beginning of the Civil Rights movement in the late 1950s and the assassination of the president on November 22, 1963. Between early Elvis and the Beatles' first LP. Optimism was in the air and we, the liberal adolescent offspring of New Deal Democrats, breathed it in. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" exclaimed Wordsworth about his radical youth in Cambridge, watching from afar the French Revolution in its early, idealistic stage, before the massacres, the terror, and the guillotine sent rivers of blood flowing throughout the land.

We went to concerts at the Academy of Music, buying rush seats for fifty cents and mounting the back stairs five flights up to the amphitheatre to take our places in "the gods" and watch Eugene Ormandy lead the well-oiled machine of the Philadelphia Orchestra through the standard repertoire.

We couldn't wait to get out of the suburbs. Our parents wanted country clubs and greenery; we yearned for the city. We were baby beatniks. We scowled; we wore black. But we always obeyed, and we did well in school. In other words, we were completely, transparently predictable.

Mostly, we read. Books and literacy were, even more than politics and music, the nourishment we required. We prized the predictable adolescent stuff: Hesse's *Siddhartha*; Dylan Thomas; the early Beats and anything published by New Directions; e.e. cummings or anyone who violated normal typography. Perhaps I'm the only person alive with copies of Laurie's high school poems, which adhered to the cummings aesthetic. We clutched to our bosoms the little Harcourt paperback—with a gray cover—of *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. This, we knew, was real poetry, precisely because we couldn't understand a word of it. Clarity was anathema. You can see how far Laurie progressed from her bohemian adolescence to the

elegant clarity of her mature work.

Among our cadre of harmlessly pretentious suburban intellectuals, Laurie reigned supreme as some combination of queen bee, social arbiter, and distant object of desire. She was the only person I knew who lived in an apartment, near the train station. Her mother was an art dealer and something of a social climber. While some of us, still only a couple of steps from the shtetl, lived in houses with plastic covering the new furniture, the Colwins, old German Jews from New York, had paintings on the walls, floor to ceiling. Laurie's lair, big enough for a single bed, a small desk, a dresser and a chair, must have been what used to be called the "maid's room," next to the kitchen. In it she held court. Like squeezing students into a phone booth or a VW—that harmless prank for college students—we piled into Laurie's room, chatting and smoking for hours on end.

Talking. The human voice: It's what all story tellers and listeners prize, whether scouts around campfires; Garrison Keillor on the radio weaving his tales of Lake Wobegon; Eudora Welty sitting under the piano hearing the adults talk; James Agee in Knoxville, summer of 1915, hearing the tales of adults in the night; Elizabeth Bishop ("The Moose") hearing "voices in eternity" at the back of the bus on an overnight ride from Nova Scotia to Boston. Laurie had a pair of ears, antennae that were sensitive to reports and news from all frequencies. And she had a voice. She was a storyteller, both in life and on the page.

The intersections between life and art are always porous, but I don't think I exaggerate when I say that her unexpected death, in her sleep at the age of forty-eight, provoked a response in her reading public that was both surprising at the time, and, in retrospect, fairly predictable. Her fans and readers—those who filled Symphony Space for her memorial service in 1993, and an equal number left standing outside on Broadway in the snow, or still countless others from far away—thought they had lost a friend. Not just the ironic confidante who narrated the stories and the novels with a combination of sympathy and judgment, the clear-sighted moralist who understood and

excused normal human foibles, but also the writer of cookbooks who wove into her *Gourmet* columns the details and vignettes of her lived life.

As a giver of recipes Laurie is pretty inexact. She is no Julia Child. Try to follow one of her recipes and you may find yourself coming up short. She forgets certain steps, certain ingredients. She takes things for granted. Measurements are not her forte. (She barely passed high school geometry.) Of the many meals I had in her garden-level Chelsea apartment, I don't think a single one came out of a book, a set of precise instructions, or anything more than daring, common sense, and an innate sense of what might work out well. As a teller of tales about food, however, she is nonpareil. The recipes didn't come from books but they made their skewed way into her own.

The reader will notice my use of the present tense in the preceding paragraph: "Laurie is inexact ... Laurie is no Julia Child." This is a testimony to both a friend and a writer. The reason people thought of her as their older, wiser sister or chum even when they didn't know her was that they found her voice as comforting as hot chocolate on a cold winter day. They could hear the laughter; they could feel the sympathy; they could understand that someone who could laugh at herself would allow them to take themselves less seriously as well. Laurie settles your nerves by making you laugh at yourself.

I can think of no finer testimonies to a writer's afterlife than remaining in print, remaining read and talked about, and having one's voice carry across the page into the inner ear. Seventeen years after her death, Laurie still has a fan base, a following, new as well as old readers. Her books are available. She lives in her writing, and she speaks from it. Whenever we talk about cooking, about food, about how to do things in the kitchen, my partner and I always say, "Well, Laurie does it this way." Or "Laurie says you should add the butter first." It's always "Laurie," in the present tense.

After a half century she is still with me, in the present.

High on Life

Tessa Brown

The summer before my senior year of high school, Thisbe Nissen, my teacher at the Iowa Young Writers' Studio, introduced me to Laurie Colwin. Thisbe had been prescient enough to notice a blushing feminism behind my juvenile obsession with older men and unrequited love, and she directed me to *The Lone Pilgrim*, Colwin's bright collection of stories on lovers, affairs successful and not, and, occasionally, domestic bliss. The entire collection is wonderful, but it was its penultimate piece, "The Achieve of, the Mastery of the Thing"—the story of Mrs. Ann Speizer: professor's wife, pothead, and fairy-tale princess—which solidified my obsession with this book.

The story, set in the early 1960s, follows Ann—known to her various dealers as Mrs. Ann, a moniker meant to address her transcendent position of extremely young, stoned, professor's wife—as she marries her teacher, moves off to a country campus with him, and proceeds to entertain herself, worry Thorne, and confound his colleagues and their pent-up wives. Whenever I return to this story, I have a powerful recollection of turning to it for the first time, on an El train somewhere under Chicago, and feeling a foolish grin spread over my young, hungry face. This book, as Ann Speizer eventually says about her husband Thorne, had "possibilities I had not counted on."

"In matters of dope," Ann explains, "it depends who gets to you first." Young Ann was converted by some well-bred family friends in Paris, who furthered her cultural education with such French language lessons as, "Yes, this African kif is quite heavenly. Do you have more? How much more? How much will you charge me per matchbox?" I had been turned on by a wild-haired fellow Jewess I'd met on a summer camping trip, whose total radiance, in my eyes, may go some distance in explaining my casual and even celebratory

attitude toward herb. Visiting her in Miami, where she lived with her hippie parents in a house filled with instruments and artwork, I learned that one could smoke drugs for breakfast and toke up with little brother using dad's old bong. We brought joints to go kayaking. This was something I could get used to.

By the time I reached Thisbe's classroom two years later, I had matured enough to weather my mother's ill-conceived concerns that a college boy, on campus for the summer, would find me and smoke me out. Obviously, no college kids talked to me. It would be many years before any man would seek me out, and anyway, like one of Colwin's heroines, I was used to a condition of longing. Instead, my new writer friend and I solicited a dime bag from the gyro man in the Grateful Dead t-shirt, which we smoked in our dorm room, listening to Bob Marley and nervously eyeing the place where the screen had been. I was helpless in romance, but not with reefer, and here was a realm of pleasure over which I had total control.

Colwin is ubiquitously described as a "domestic sensualist," a term she herself concocts in the person of her first narrator, the original lone pilgrim. And indeed, pleasure is one of Colwin's primary concerns. As it should be, her attitude is celebratory: This is the realm of pleasure whose myriad denizens include music, marijuana, and food; your mother's coffee creamer; the bindings of rare books; and kisses. Known to as many for her essay-filled cookbooks as for her fiction, Colwin's writing beams with a love of sensuous pleasure and the relish of a balabusta manufacturing shared joy. This concern for domestic bliss and stimulated senses lives on in Ann Speizer, who surprises us with her domestic stash, which, hidden in her lingerie drawer, always "tasted vaguely of sachet." Like Colwin's ideal dinner dinner party, a fat reefer envelops erstwhile strangers in bonds of camaraderie, spirited conversation, and pleasing lethargy. Dope is also best when shared, inspires passionate allegiance, and harbors a dangerous potential for gluttony. As Ann Speizer notes, it improves the flavor of music, not to mention that of a cheese plate.

My own celebratory attitude toward herb was fostered by my undersupervised public high school, which gave me the freedom to pursue my interests without fear of risk, reward, or public humiliation. Our campus, situated on the edge of a large public park, seemed designed for furtive adolescent toking. At this fine institution of secondary education, marijuana was the uniting social factor in a group of students whose drugged-out heroes spanned the gamut of American demography. None of us was exempt from Snoop's injunction that we smoke weed every day.

As I did, Ann Speizer considers marijuana a "great aid to mental entertainment," which "mixed the senses and gave flavor to music." Thus, she is bewildered when she arrives at college to discover her fellow heads are mute, sullen deadbeats. In this I was luckier than Ann. She learns to smoke alone, but I landed myself an exceptional group of collegiate fellows who understood, as Lionel and Ann do, that college life is often more fun high than not. Tragically, however, those outside our smoke-filled walls were not so empathetic. As it initially does to Thorne Speizer, the notion of a little sensuality for its own sake seemed "terribly wrong, don't you think?" Fearing for my reputation—though it was too late for me to do it much good—I spent most of college resisting classification qua "stoner." Unlike Ann Speizer, I wasn't usually high. Never in class, and only once—and by total fluke—in the presence of a professor on whom I had a raging crush. When I finally came around, some time during my senior year, the shift wasn't in habit but in sensibility: I loved this stuff, I delighted in it. Shedding the haters' notion of what a girl was supposed to be, I decided to accept the truth. I was a pothead.

In college I also turned out to be a religion scholar, and so it should not surprise me that *The Lone Pilgrim*, by far my favorite of Colwin's works, is a deeply religious text. In surprising accordance with the feminist theologians who were her contemporaries, Colwin defends the moral value of pleasure and the necessary virtue of women's self-realization. Life is to be celebrated in its earthly as well

as spiritual aspects, and so it is only appropriate when Ann takes a “life-affirming hit.” Eschewing orthodoxy, these feminists redirect faith to the living and joy to the body. Of course, new virtues mean new vices. Staying high all the time is a crutch, a way to avoid the business of personal development. Despite the hilarity of their musings, Ann and Lionel reveal the dangers of the pleasure principle, whose pursuit allows them to ignore the world instead of engage with it. Like this book’s other heroines, however, Ann’s growth is a process; while she may be high during her own maturation, she comes to know herself, and it is self-awareness, ultimately, which constitutes the happy ending of all of these tales.

The story’s climax, during which Ann finally comes clean to her husband, is a moment of spiritual as well as literal revelation. As Ann has been spending all of her time toking up with Lionel, one of Thorne’s favorite students, Thorne is not unreasonable to accuse his wife of an affair. Ann’s secret happens to be illegal, but the risk she takes in confessing her sins is not of distrust, but disgust: There is nothing more personal than what gets us off, and in coming out, Ann faces a real risk of rejection. She worries that life is a horse that will kick her in the head, or “a pane of glass being carried around by a nervous and incompetent person.” Keeping a secret from her husband had left Ann feeling very free, but it also had left both spouses afraid—Ann, that she would be found out; and Thorne, that his endlessly perplexing wife would up and leave him.

Of course, Thorne is adorably responsive. Indeed, he is “awed.” In fact, he is so awed as to compel me to suggest that, in accepting “this great big gigantic reefer” from his wife, Thorne Speizer receives her grace. Ann, in turn, receives the grace of grace granted, realizing “with a sudden jolt of happiness” that in revealing herself, she has changed her husband’s life for the better, and in turn improved her own. Observing Thorne’s transformation with wonder, Ann muses on verses from Gerard Manley Hopkins, a suspected fellow head: “my heart in hiding/Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery

of the thing!” Her heart stirred by her husband, Ann deems him “victim and beneficiary both” of her own mastery and achievement. Thorne becomes Colwin’s version of a hero, a man willing to subject himself to the corrupting graces of a woman’s weed.

From its “Once upon a time,” to its unorthodox happy ending, this story is a fairy tale, and Ann its fairy princess. She is a hot young pothead who bags a hot young professor, and things go awfully well for her. She never has bloodshot eyes or dry mouth; overzealous bong rips never leave her woozy, passed out in the middle of a party. As Thorne points out, “This is not normal reality.” Yet while fairy tales unfold against the backdrop of almost certain doom, so does all life. We use fantasy to bolster hope: life is terrifying, but it makes us all feel better to hear that somewhere, somehow, someone made it through. So when the drug dealer Uncle Marv speaks of “a human person, a person unafraid to admit that he or she is very nervous,” Colwin is not just talking about lysergic acid. She knows that we are scared, but hers is the business of reassurance.

Being a young woman is extremely fun, and exceptionally scary. Laurie Colwin knew this before I did, and discovering her was a personal revelation. This book preaches a dangerous religion for women: faith in life’s beauty; in men’s promise; in love; and in ourselves. It is a celebration of all those things which seem foolish, but are necessary, for us to believe in if we are to be saved. When I realized I was doomed to become a writer, the only thing more reassuring than Colwin’s stories themselves became the fact that, being who she was, she wrote them. The thought that somewhere out there was a woman who had dreamed these sorts of dreams, learned these sorts of lessons, and was still positively brimming with such *joie de vivre*, filled me with optimism and glee. In so many ways, Colwin’s fiction legitimized my very existence. Her characters are both bookish and adventurous, women who enjoy themselves and men who love them for it. I wished that Colwin could author my own story, so that I might know for certain it would end well. I think this fear

is common to all women, and I am grateful to Laurie Colwin for her generosity of spirit and her openness with good advice. I feel like one of her characters, sitting on the couch of a trusted older friend, disentangling the confusions of my personal life and hoping for some shred of encouragement. Whenever I need her, Laurie is there to offer it: have faith, have fun, you'll find him. And, when you do, get him really, really high.

A Lifetime Occupation

Sarah Gardner Borden

It's 1993 and I'm sharing a studio apartment in the West Village with my boyfriend, who resembles no one so much as Statler and Waldorf, the balcony hecklers from *The Muppet Show*. I don't know what to do with my new BA in English. Although I have no computer skills and I can't type, I like to write. I like to read and talk about what I'm reading. I like to cook from my mom's copy of *The Silver Palate Cookbook*. I present the results on blue-and-white ceramic plates. It occurs to me that I could learn to type—I could work for a magazine, maybe a fashion magazine. "What do you think?" I ask my boyfriend. We're sharing a pie at Joe's Pizza on 7th Avenue. He glares at me across the table.

He says, "Do you know what my sister does?"

I do. She works at a fitness magazine.

"Yeah," I say. "She's an editor."

"And do you know what she majored in? In college?"

Statler and Waldorf, by the way, jeer and heckle yet attend every show. They have box seats and clearly subscribe.

"English?"

"Magazine! Editing!"

In clogs and a thin blue flowered dress I'm walking in the July heat down 8th Avenue, towards a lumber warehouse off the West Side Highway. I plan to build shelves for an alcove by the fireplace. I

stop in a bookstore to poke around in the back. A row of quirky titles in pastels, all the same author—one Laurie Colwin—appeals to me. I bring two of these books up to the front.

"She just died," the clerk says, sadly. In the black-and-white photo on the back cover a woman with curly dark hair wears a striped crewneck shirt. Somehow she looks simultaneously plain and pretty.

"How old was she?"

"Forty-eight."

Ancient! I think.

I build the shelves. I put the Colwins in them, along with Amy Bloom's *Come to Me*, Jeffery Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*. About a month later, I take down *Happy All the Time* and lie on the bed, reading it. My boyfriend pauses by the door. "What are you reading?"

"Um. It's about these two friends. One of them is a scientist and the other one works for a foundation or something? He marries this really perfect beautiful girl. And the scientist falls in love with this crabby, grouchy girl." This would be Misty Berkowitz, the girlfriend whom Vincent, the scientist, describes, fondly, as a "hostile teenager." She's a linguist who won't participate in small talk; she's a misanthrope with a secretly fervent nature. "They live in New York and..."

But he's lost interest. His nostrils flare. He squints disdainfully.

With gratitude and recognition I read *Family Happiness*, *Another Marvelous Thing*, and *Goodbye Without Leaving*. The protagonists' trajectories are similar and, so far, similar to mine. A broody young woman (upper middle class, East Coast) strays from what's expected of her. She pursues the wrong career; she starts an affair. She is stubborn and contrary and passionate. Her craving for self-exploration and self-actualization far outweighs any sense of

herself as an upstanding citizen and contributor to society. And she lives in New York, of course, in neighborhoods that resemble the Upper and Lower West Sides in the 1970s.

Geraldine, the narrator of *Goodbye Without Leaving*, pursues a condition she calls “marginal.” In graduate school at the University of Chicago she begins a dissertation on Jane Austen. When she realizes she does “not want to write about this or any other thing” and is offered the position of token white backup singer for the Shakettes, she drops out to go on tour. She realizes that her career as a singer is “not a lifetime occupation.” Like Austen’s characters she will “some-day have to figure out my rightful place in society.” And when the Shakettes hit the big time Geraldine loses her job.

The man in the picture is a lawyer named Johnny, and she marries him, we understand, partly because she’s not sure what to do next. She ties her marginal self to a mainstream man and takes a marginal, low-paying job, which she eventually quits to have a baby. “Maybe you’re ashamed of me,” she says to Johnny, “because all the other boys in your firm have wives with babies and big jobs, too. Maybe you’re embarrassed because I’m just nobody.” (Johnny says, “You aren’t just nobody.”) She finds a mommy-friend who wears animal prints and a green streak in her hair. She finds another marginal job and meets a European, Leo, with whom she has an affair. She discusses her long-gone singing career with him: “Nothing came of it.... Maybe I’m one of those meandering types and being in the music business was a form of meandering.” Leo answers, “Meandering types are often very interesting to know.”

Geraldine is asked to sing and dance at her son’s school. She’s reluctant at first but finally agrees, thinking: “It was an undeniable fact of my life that long ago I had been a singer and a dancer, and, in the end, it was certainly something I still knew how to do.”

I break up with Statler and Waldorf. I meet and marry someone else. This new person, my husband, John, doesn’t make faces when I talk about what I’m reading. He appreciates me; he seems to adore

me. I find him droll and sensible. He finds me complicated but charming. Yet somewhere, in some remote corner, he disapproves of me—I can feel it, hear it, like a faucet running somewhere in the house. Somehow I find this attitude appealing—inviting, as it does, my defiance.

Like Johnny in *Goodbye Without Leaving*, John is a master diplomat. He is nice to everyone and likes people it’s useful for him to like. He is “sociologically interesting” to me—as Misty is to Vincent in *Happy All the Time*, and as I am to John. Colwin’s heroines are assimilated Jews married to Protestants who don’t attend church. I am an assimilated Episcopalian married to a Jew who doesn’t bother with temple. I love him, or at least I feel like I do, and I reckon the feeling to be inseparable from the condition.

Our differences, however, while sometimes constructive, are mainly taxing. Like the Solo-Millers in *Family Happiness*, his family possesses certain solid and honorable ideas about behavior, values, and so forth. In the face of this I feel shifty and insincere.

“But why do we have to go to her bar mitzvah? We barely know the kid.”

“*Bat* mitzvah. We have to go because she’s family. We have to go because we should.”

I carelessly, cheerfully follow him to New Haven. Leaving New York, with its obsessions and overachieving, is its own form of defiance. For a while I find New Haven full of offbeat charm. Our apartment has a built-in china cabinet, lovely crown moldings, and a blue-tiled bathroom. The houses on our street are painted whimsical colors and in December lights are strung up around doors and porches. I drive to Home Depot and once again build a set of shelves, this time in the kitchen. I fill them with cookbooks and ceramic jars and a wire basket in the shape of a hen.

I discover Colwin’s cooking essays: *Home Cooking* and *More Home Cooking*. I make Perfect Chicken Salad, Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Baked Pears, Gingerbread in Cake Form, and Extremely

Easy Old-Fashioned Beef Stew.

Barely two years later, though, I'm filled with doubt. I stay up late reading *Shine On, Bright and Dangerous Object*, Colwin's first book and my favorite. I'm twenty-six. Olly is twenty-seven when her thirty-year-old husband dies in a sailing accident. She moves to the West Village, one block east of where I used to live. I imagine her apartment looking exactly like the studio I used to share with Statler and Waldorf. She cries in the shower. She puts on a suede skirt and goes out for drinks. She sleeps around. I experience guilty surges of longing.

"Maybe we should move to New York," I say.

"But we decided to live here."

"But..." What would speak to him? "I'm not happy here."

"Happiness is not geography."

This is true, I think. Isn't it? And the things I miss—suede skirts, sleeping around, West Village bars—they're all so superficial, aren't they?

I consider teaching high school. I do marginal fact-checking for a local newspaper. I don't have an affair. I don't know that I would, even if the opportunity presented itself. I'd feel bad. Colwin's characters don't feel bad. For them infidelity is beside the point: The affair is part of their ardent pursuit of self-actualization.

I have a baby, then another. I don't find a friend with a green streak in her hair, though one afternoon I swing my younger daughter on the baby swings for an hour longer than I'd planned, hoping two young moms, both with green streaks, also swinging toddlers on baby swings, will come over and talk to me. But though about my age, they're clearly grad students or wives of—Europeans, transients. They're not interested in forming alliances in a place they'll only occupy for a short time.

Most women I meet are the pearl-wearing, tennis-playing, three-or-four-children type; or the brilliant, high-achieving, serious academic type. They are earnest and sincere and polite. They are

responsible, caring, and right-minded. Adults to the core. No meanderers, no hostile teenagers here. Feeling out of place and out of sorts, I disengage from my daily routine, as if in mourning, though I don't know what for.

My initial bohemian aspirations have led me into a gigantic suburban cliché: the big house, the big yard, the au pair. Of course I shouldn't complain. Of course I am fortunate. Of course I like the help: I like stealing away to write or exercise or do anything I choose without tripping over a small clinging person. But my domestic life, which once gave me such pleasure, has become a demanding and bloated creature, consuming vast attention and energy, unsatisfied by small efforts and carpentry projects. The sight of unfolded laundry, of a full dishwasher, of dust bunnies and shower mold and scattered puzzle pieces fills me with despair.

Our social life consists of weekend play dates, family night at the club, and the occasional benefit, usually involving the Omni Hotel, lettuce and shaved-fennel salads with identical dressings. One evening I sit next to a woman who's disappointed that her youngest child, a daughter, hasn't gotten into Harvard. Her two older sons are currently attending. The younger son's childhood friend has asked him how he got into Harvard. "If you'd had my mother, you would have gotten into Harvard too," the son has answered. My dining companion looks at me sternly.

I can barely get my kids to preschool on time. I will certainly not be getting them into Harvard. I feel truly terrible about this. I poke at my lettuce-and-fennel salad. I recall Leo's remark to Geraldine about meandering types. I tell myself that I am interesting to know, that even if they don't go to Harvard, my girls will be too. The Harvard mom has turned to the man on her left, a Yale professor.

At the end of the dinner she turns back to me. "We were especially disappointed," she says, wistfully, "because of all three of them, she's the most complicated—the most interesting. So ... well, we just thought Harvard would recognize that."

I go on miserably for quite a while. I can't see Olly or Geraldine or Misty living my life, and it doesn't seem to fit me either. And of course, my life is not actually a Laurie Colwin novel. My husband is not a fictional character, not solely a means of challenging and defining my essential self. He has his own complex narrative. He is bewildered by my obscure motivations and tired of life with the hostile teenager. He finds me complicated and no longer charming. He asks for a divorce. I am startled, then upset, then devastated, then accepting, then relieved.

At thirty-seven, forty-eight no longer seems so ancient to me. I'm saddened that this warm, generous, curious, and exuberant person, Laurie Colwin, should die so young. I skim through the novels, which for eight years have remained pretty much undisturbed on the top shelf of the study. I am again reassured and excited by the jackets in muted colors, the plain and pretty photo, the frank statements, the surprising insights. My new, oddball little house has a bathtub in the back courtyard, as did my West Village studio. I've hung onto the blue and white plates and my mom's *Silver Palate*. And suddenly, in spite of its upheavals, my life seems to have righted itself. I am marginal once more, no longer participating in the great central drama of marriage and acquisition and success.

I even look up Statler and Waldorf. We have dinner, and he's much nicer than I remember him being. And I'm reminded, again, of our conversation at Joe's Pizza, reminded of my tendency to give up easily, to run away. Even these failings seem not so horrible. Like Geraldine, I have other talents. Some people even find me interesting to know.

I get a job teaching writing and reading to college students. Some of them are upstanding citizens; some are hecklers; some are meanderers. Many are hostile teenagers. I get to write and read and talk about what I've read. And this, at least, is something I still know how to do.

Mother

Rosa Jurjevics

"Do you remember?" My father asks me.

"No," I reply.

He steepled his hands, looking at me charmingly.

"Well," he begins, as he does when he is about to relate something humorous, "you were about seven..."

I groan.

But he continues. "It's true. You used to go up to your mother at her desk and peer over her shoulder while she was working. She'd tell you 'I'm typing.' Then you'd whine, of course, and ask how much longer she'd be busy, and she'd say until she was done. You'd look at her petulantly and tell her, 'Well, type faster!'"

I shake my head. "What a brat."

"No," he says, taking a sip of his coffee. "It was sweet."

We are sitting across from each other in a cafe in San Diego, where I now live. My father has traveled from New York to see me and, over lattes and chais, we have fallen into a conversation about my childhood. This particular moment he has mentioned I absolutely cannot recall.

I bite my lip.

"I just don't remember," I tell him.

He nods. He knows.

There are many lost memories. They are just gone, misplaced somewhere in my transition to adulthood, never to be recovered. I sigh heavily into my cup. Would I be able to call them to mind if she were alive, I wonder. Would I feel the same need to remember these moments? If she could just be there in front of me, in the flesh, would they hold the same weight? I ponder this a second, then decide, No, probably not.

Probably not.

What I remember about my mother—something I am often asked—is not an entire picture. Assembling her is, for me, a little bit

like sifting through the finds of an archeological dig; things must be examined and then fitted together to make the whole. There is, first, her physical self: the long sleeves of her sweater pushed up to her elbow; the Chinese gold hoops she wore in her ears, so pure I could bend them in my toddler's fingers; the loops of her hair, held back with combs; her feet, often tinged blue-black by her flat-soled shoes. Then there is the feel of her, both tangible, like the soft, slight oiliness of her cheek against mine, and intangible, like her presence at my elbow as we mixed batter side by side.

In the mirror, I see her, at odd, startling moments that send me running for my camera. I can isolate the part of my face that resembles hers, capture it for a moment in order to study it. Sometimes it's my mouth, which turns up at one end when I smile; sometimes it's my eyes, though they are lighter than hers and don't hold the almost haughty cast hers do in photographs taken when she was around my age.

It scares me, our resemblance does, when it decides to appear. It can overwhelm others as well, particularly old friends of hers, who see our likeness more than most. After looking deeply into my face for some time, one mused, "It's like looking at a ghost I haven't seen in forty years."

I don't have the memories these people have. They are the ones who give me the pieces I need to assemble her, the stories that give her shape. They tell me of her fantastic dinners, multiple-course affairs full of wine and laughter; of her favorite phrases, like "morally bankrupt" and "out to lunch"; and the quirky songs she used to make up to entertain me as a small child.

There are her cookbooks, which I have read cover to cover, that serve as chronicles of our life together. Although written for the public, they are invaluable to me privately, a blueprint of sorts for what things were like back then. They weren't written for this purpose, as my mother had no knowledge of her impending death. She couldn't know that my sense of her would have to rely so heavily on

her essays and stories, that her words would take on more than she ever intended. For me, her cookbooks are not the product of her as a writer. Instead, they are one of the biggest parts of her that I still have. In them, she is purely my mother.

In many ways, I am like her. I have navigated parts of her life she has not been here to share with me. I've read the same books she did during her childhood, antiquated and fanciful stories of adventurous families and plucky children, of cats that walked by themselves and magical babysitters living in upside-down houses. During a particularly angst-ridden time, I played her old Beatles records, learning every skip, every crackle. I live now in a small, one-room apartment as she did, making my meals in a toaster oven. I have a cat, too, will probably always have a cat, her favorite animal, no matter how beastly hers could be. Our deepest dreams even coincide, her desire to sing backup in a Motown girl group meeting my longing to do the same in a rock band.

And I, too, am a writer.

But I am also not like her. I cannot cook, a failing many will attest to. I do not dress in her "uniform" of black skirts and striped shirts, opting instead for sweatshirts and shorts. My limbs are long; hers were short. At five foot six, I would be half a foot taller than my mother, and would have to stoop to hug her, to whisper something silly in her ear the way I used to.

I think of her often. She is always there, a presence even in death. The oddities that once peppered her desk now hold special places of honor in my tiny home; the red-and-black-speckled fountain pen, the trinkets box, the little yellow clay cat she made and shellacked. The books she wrote sit on my shelf. I can be driving down the endless California freeway, sitting on my surfboard in the middle of the ocean or walking down my cracked neighborhood sidewalk and there she'll be, at the forefront of my mind. Mom.

And I'll wonder what she wanted for me, what life she imagined I'd have. Would she ever have thought I'd settle three thousand

miles from the home we once shared? That the eight-year-old girl would grow into a writer, a (terrible) surfer, a girlfriend, a runner, a drummer, a computer nerd?

Would she, too, look over my shoulder as I work away at my computer, pushing my hair away from my face to tell me, tongue-in-cheek, to “type faster?”

I don't know. I like to think she would have.

Lonely Girl 18, 28, 38

Eva Geertz

I sit at my kitchen desk writing this, a sleeping baby in the next room. I'm thinking: This is a scene Laurie Colwin would recognize. I compare my life to the lives of Colwin's characters. Besides being crammed with multiple editions of all her works, my bookshelves are heavily influenced by Colwin. Every novel I read gets compared to Laurie Colwin: Is it as good? Do I want to cherish this person's work the way I cherish Colwin's? I'm in love with Laurie Colwin's books, I always have been, and I probably always will be. I am, also, obviously somewhat in love with the image of Colwin I have in my head, which is probably wildly inaccurate. That's how these things go.

This is all sort of pathetic. Not necessarily crazy, but definitely pathetic. On the other hand, I'd rather be a Colwinite than a compulsive reader of *Star Trek* novels.

Do people sing Colwin's praises the way she deserves? Book reviewers were often full of praise and affection for Colwin's books; sometimes they were dismissive and condescending. But as far as I'm aware, Colwin has garnered little scholarly attention, which is a shame and probably a mistake, given her influence on American writing since the 1970s. “Guilty Pleasures,” Amy Richlin's 1991 essay about the pleasures of reading Colwin, is the only piece of academic writing I know about Colwin's fiction. Richlin raises questions I've asked myself many times, which I've never discussed with anyone because I've never met anyone else who cared. She acknowledges

problematic aspects of Colwin's fiction, but confesses her love remains strong nonetheless. It may be good that Colwin's work isn't being dissected by PhD candidates, all titling their dissertations *Toward a Scarcity of Needs*. Scholarly criticism can kill fiction. What used to be fun to read suddenly becomes just ... homework. Maybe the best way to preserve Colwin's work is to do as I've done all these years: recommend it compulsively to anyone who will listen, and hope that the books remain in print.

I was introduced to Laurie Colwin's work in 1988, when I was a miserable college freshman in Vermont. A bookseller friend in New Haven had my mother mail me a copy of *Happy All the Time*. My friend told my mother that I would love it. She was right. I read it over and over again. At the beginning of my senior year (resigned to Vermont, making the best of it), I happened on a copy of *Goodbye Without Leaving*. I had just realized that I didn't want to go to graduate school, but I was determined to finish my overwrought thesis on Dorothy Parker. It was an uphill battle: The college wanted me to focus on Jane Austen instead. My advisor, whose name was Geraldine, caught me reading Colwin's novel, and instead of scolding me for not focusing on the chapter I was supposed to be writing (about Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, and garden imagery), she hugged me, telling me that she loved Colwin, too.

That was a turning point. Reading that book—and I read it at least a dozen times that semester—I learned so much. Or I realized so much. Whatever. The point is—and I know this is going to sound maudlin and stupid—this was life-changing stuff for me. The characters, the cultural references, the style: Every word was speaking to me. I never expected to react to a book that way. I really did fall in love with *Goodbye Without Leaving*. Incredibly, and best of all, the book seemed to love me back.