

Mother Lode

*Confessions of a
Reluctant Caregiver*

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Dedicated to my mother—the bravest person I know.

And to my father—we did our best.

“By faith we travel to a land we’ve never seen by a road we don’t know.”

~Peggy Haymes

“Well, in that direction lives the March Hare. He’s mad.
And in that direction lives the Mad Hatter. He’s mad.”

“But I don’t want to go among mad people.”

“Oh, but you can’t help it, we’re all mad here.”

~The Cheshire Cat & Alice

Coming Home

As I prepare to leave for grocery shopping, Mama asks me to pick up some ground sirloin. “Be sure it’s sirloin, I don’t want ground round,” she says, which I already know because she’s told me a hundred times in the three months since I started cooking for her. “I like to have some in the freezer because I might want homemade pasta sauce. I don’t like what comes in a jar. It’s too salty.”

“Did you like the sauce we had last night?” I ask.

“It was missing something,” she says, after a moment of silence, as if trying to think what might be the right answer. “Did you make it or was it from a jar?”

“I made it,” I say. “What was it missing do you think?”

“Salt,” she says.

She can’t see my eyes roll.

Chapter One

July

Arrival

I cross White Pass from central Washington’s fertile Yakima Valley, Mt. Rainier rising to meet me, and roll through Packwood, Randle, Morton, Mossyrock, Cinebar, Onalaska—the names of the tiny towns a little too familiar. I don’t head for Interstate 5 at Mary’s Corner; I’m in no hurry to arrive at my destination. I drive across Jackson Prairie and text Rebecca from Chehalis, Centralia’s sister town and high school athletic rival —“Swamp Swamptown, rah, rah!”—to update my arrival time. “Be there in fifteen minutes,” I say. I’m five minutes away, but I’m driving slower and slower.

I slink into town past the “Welcome to Centralia: Population 16,731” sign, a block from the elementary school where I was a sixth grader when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I gulp. *Good Lord, what have I done?* “Centralia: Population 16,732.” I am returning to childhood: the small town, the people who never left, the house, my old bedroom, and my mother’s need to mother. I let my doubts go on the open road; now I’m terrified.

Smudge, my twelve-year-old diabetic cat who had settled down and slept most of the way across the country, is on high alert, sitting on her haunches in the dog crate behind the front seats of my fourteen-year-old Honda CRV, looking out the windshield. She is oddly silent as we drive down the potholed street through the neighborhood at the foot of the forested hill I grew up on. Transformation has not reached this part of town on the other side of the tracks, and the houses are more dilapidated than ever. The tennis courts with their sagging nets near the site of the original elementary school—damaged irreparably in an earthquake two years before I was born—have grass growing in the cracks. The empty lot, where all that remains of the school are the cement steps, is a tangle of pink-and-purple sweet peas.

My younger sister Rebecca's upscale gift boutique is two blocks beyond, across the train tracks on the town side of the renovated historic railroad station, out of place among the overload of antique stores. At least the sleazy taverns are gone; most of them anyway. The city has made strides in improving the few blocks in the center of town: flower baskets hang from reproduction street lights lining the main street, intersections have been bricked and beautified. The cosmetic attention helps, but still businesses come and go in the historic buildings, and there are always empty storefronts as shoppers stick to the outlet mall and the Walmart shopping center at the Centralia I-5 interchanges two miles west on the other edge of town.

I turn right at the former lumberyard where I used to go with my father, the faded orange building a motorcycle sales and repair shop now with Harleys parked along the curb. The house on the corner has a sofa on the front porch and icicle Christmas lights hanging from the eaves in midsummer. Smudge moans behind me, echoing my fear. *Danger ahead; go back, go back.* But there's no going back now. My stomach clenches.

I head up Seminary Hill toward my old new home, the excitement of adventure gone. I will the car and time to slow down as I pass the National Guard Armory where a Methodist seminary sat before my time and gave the hill its name; where I caught the school bus half a mile from home when I missed its early arrival at the end our long driveway. Across the road is the hill where I went sledding every winter. I wonder if the town's children still gather there. It doesn't snow as much now. Climate change.

After passing a couple dozen houses around the armory, the road climbs to a nonresidential stretch of maple and fir forest, curving upward toward my destination, three-quarters of a mile up the hill from town. Unlike the hill above the hospital on the other side of town, this one never met its potential, which suits me fine, though it means few neighbors and friends. No one will be out walking in the morning, no one sitting on porches chatting up evening walkers. Not that I ever had that, but I dreamed it for my future. I'm stepping into someone else's life instead.

I had wanted to come back to Washington nearly since I left, but I didn't expect to come alone, and I surely never intended to live in this town again. Another wave of nausea passes over me. *Small town girl triumphantly escapes with husband to new life; quietly returns alone, tail between legs.* All I need is the dead of night.

I turn off the road into the driveway and stop the car, leaning my head back onto the headrest. This had seemed like a good idea. *What the hell was I thinking?*

Inhaling a deep breath and sitting up tall, I put my foot back on the accelerator. *It's going to be okay*, I tell myself. *Meroow*, Smudge says from the back; in confirmation or dissent, I'm not sure. We curve up the driveway past the first neighbor's house toward the second house, then make the left turn down the last stretch toward my mother's home hidden in the trees. I roll slowly past the apple trees in the neighbor's orchard, laden with green apples. The fence around the meadow on my mother's side of the driveway is weatherworn, as is the small chalet-style barn that once housed our pinto mare, Scout. The trail behind the barn is gone now, the land clear-cut by a nonresident owner after I left home. The acres are forested again; I could rebuild the trail, create something of my own. I get a jolt of excitement, briefly replacing my queasiness.

I slowly round the last curve to the sprawling mid-century modern house sitting below the level of the driveway, the narrow lush green valley farther below visible over the flat roof. Mama, Rebecca, my daughter Emma—who moved to Seattle after two years in the Peace Corps following college—and her girlfriend, Wynne, are in the driveway jumping up and down, blowing kisses in joyous greeting. I notice that Emma, who whacked off her beautiful curly hair in Africa, is sporting a new faux-hawk. At nearly six feet tall, Wynne towers above my tiny mother who is waving her outdoor walking stick—an old broom handle, her only concession to the instability of ninety-six years. Like Mama, Rebecca is tiny but mighty. I'm letting my short hair grow out, and it's the same jaw-length bob now as Rebecca's. She colors hers though, while mine is au naturel—nearly white by the time I turned forty, though not yet as snowy as Mama's. It may be by the time this gig is over.

They have all made a place for themselves here, and I don't know where I'll fit in. People confuse me for my sister. Even though she is half a foot shorter, we both look more like our mother than our father, and sort of like each other. Everyone in Centralia knows her. I was somebody in North Carolina, but here I will be Rebecca's sister and Stellajoe's daughter. I've left my Self on the other side of the country.

I stick my sunburned left arm out the window and wave, which strains the shoulder I injured when I fell at a crossroad's grocery store in Bumfuck, Arkansas, a

week ago. Turning away from them, I pull into the carport and sit looking out into the woods for a long moment, my hands unable to release their death grip on the wheel. I thank my old car for getting me safely here—in spite of a lost bolt resulting in a screeching belt coming down a mountain in the midst of a dust storm on a godforsaken stretch of Wyoming highway—then take a deep breath, open the car door, and step out to greet my family and this new adventure.

Chapter Two

July

Leaving Home

“Did she ask you to come?” friends asked when I told them my plan to leave my independent life in the city— my beloved house, my job, my friends, my first grandchild —and move across the country to support my mother, still living in our family home. No, she did not ask. Neither did Rebecca, who had made her own cross-country return years earlier and was doing more than her share as our mother slowly declined. My wild Pacific Northwest roots were calling and I was ready to go. A year living with Mama—who had been pushing my buttons since adolescence—in the rural, conservative hometown I couldn’t wait to leave thirty-six years earlier, was my rock to land on, briefly.

I hadn’t made the decision to come home impulsively. I started plotting my return five years earlier, after the end of a second “forever” partnership. I had left a twenty-year marriage over a decade before when, astonishingly, I fell in love with a woman. Ten years later we separated too. I had promised “till death do us part”; divorce—legal or emotional—was not in my life plan.

As if to fill the gap of midlife singleness, I had the best friends I’d ever had and a good job as an administrative assistant in a midsize church. I was living by myself for the first time in my life, and I loved it. I liked my adopted city of Raleigh, just not anything around it. I yearned for hills and valleys and someplace to go on Saturdays to get out of town and into nature for a few hours. I missed fir trees and rain, mountains and the wild coastline. I hated hot summers and looking out for copperheads and poison ivy in the garden.

One night, swaying in the swing on the porch of my tiny, rented house, the knowing slipped through me like the warm summer evening breeze: *I don’t have to live*

out my life in central North Carolina. I could return to my familiar, to where the air smelled damp and fresh. I could go in five years, I daydreamed, when I turned sixty. The idea was comforting, and it was a long time off. I could stop agonizing about it.

I bought a renovated craftsman-style house I loved. I grew confident caring for it and restoring the old garden. I visited my son and his family, including my grandson, when I could; though they rarely made the 250-mile trip across the state from Asheville to Raleigh. I briefly considered staying put. But as my birthday loomed into view, I revisited my promise to myself. I was getting itchy for a change. Maybe leaving is who I am. I like new challenges. Maybe it was time to see what was around the next curve in the trail.

Though Mama wouldn't admit it, she needed me; for sure Rebecca did. When Rebecca returned seven years after our father died of a heart attack the day after my forty-third birthday, Mama was still strong. Though past the midpoint of her eighties when Rebecca arrived, she had been capably, if obsessively, micro-managing a cadre of helpers to care for the aging 3200-square-foot house and four acres. She didn't need much personal help other than to get to her many out-of-town doctors' appointments after voluntarily giving up driving due to her failing vision. In her mind, she was doing her youngest child a favor by giving her a place to live. When Rebecca moved to town and into the back of the building she was renovating for her retail business, Mama was alone again.

But the tide was shifting as I drew near my decade birthday. Mama was approaching the need for a housing transition herself, a fact she turned a blind eye to. Rebecca was juggling her business while continuing to eat dinner with Mama, sharing the cooking. Our elder sister, Jo Ann, also living on the eastern seaboard with her husband and his career, was not going to help. Did I feel an obligation, or did I just want an excuse to return to Washington? I couldn't work out the answer.

For the next few weeks, I vacillated between excitement and panic. How could I leave my son and his family—a second baby on the way? How could I leave my friends? How would I make a living, save for my own old age? How would I live again in the small conservative town? And the biggest question, how would I live with my mother when I could barely get through a phone call of her complaints about her health and her

constant advice and worry about me—a holdover from her conviction that I had destroyed both my life and my children’s when I divorced. Living three thousand miles apart, it had been easy not to have a real relationship with her; but now I was going to live with her? The questions nagged at me in the middle of the night, while by day I thought of mountains and fir trees and cooler summers.

I would stay with Mama for one year, I decided; twelve months of relatively expense-free transition time. Rebecca and I would get our mother settled in a new home, the house ready to sell, and then I would find a job and go back to my own life in some pleasing Pacific Northwest town—one I hadn’t grown up in, one I could call my own.

With a good dose of terror, I offered to return. It was my ticket to Washington; it was going to be fine. Wasn’t it? Rebecca was ecstatic. Maybe she sensed a return to her own life. “Don’t let me get stuck there,” I made her pinky swear. It was only much later I realized my mother’s response had been less than enthusiastic.

I committed to one year of a life interrupted—an older version of a gap year—and hoped I could stay in touch with my sanity long enough to fulfill my promise.

Two weeks before I pulled into the driveway, I loaded my small SUV with a few clothes, a cooler with food for me and insulin for Smudge, the oil painting a friend made of my beloved house that I didn’t trust to the movers, a used Rand McNally atlas with a tentative route marked, and my newly upgraded AAA Gold Plus membership card. The day after friends and co-workers threw me a party for my sixtieth birthday, I drove out of the city that had been my home for twenty-four years. Smudge—a black-and-white tuxedo cat shaped like a bowling ball—was none too happy in her crate, and we howled in harmony. Everything I owned was in a moving van heading across the country. The house I loved belonged to someone else. It was too late to change my mind.

Rebecca was at the other end of my journey, clearing her leftover things from the two rooms she moved out of five years ago in the basement of my mother’s house, readying the space for me. Beyond that there was nothing to prepare me for what I was getting myself into. As the miles rolled away, though, I slowly let go of my grip on what I

thought my life would be as I turned sixty and began to look through the windshield rather than the rearview mirror. I was ready for adventure.

I stopped for a few days in Asheville to visit Nicholas, Kristy, and six-year-old Max, and to welcome my three-week-old grandson, Ethan, to the world. I wondered if Nicholas felt like I was choosing his sister over him. His father and I divorced when he was an adolescent, and he withdrew from me, blaming me for the family disruption, at least in my imagination. While his father and I shared residential care of Emma equally, it didn't work for Nicholas, and he lived solely with his father, widening the gulf between us. With his marriage and a child of his own, our once-strained relationship had become cordial, if not close. Would my move crumble our fragile reconciliation? And these little boys. Have I have lost them? My heart ached.

On the morning I left, I put Smudge back in her crate and turned to open the driver's side door as Max barreled toward me from the garage where they were waiting to wave good-bye, throwing himself into my arms for one more hug. "I love you, Gigi," he said, as I fought back tears. I drove down their long driveway to the road and waved back up the hill to him, standing alone, his parents and baby brother back in the house. When I was out of sight, I pulled off the road and wept.

A water glass toppled into my laptop before I left Asheville, and it sat in a box of rice in the back of the car, my intention to blog across the country closed up with it. My basic cell phone was for emergencies only, so I didn't text. I was alone on the open road in the middle of the country, my old life behind me, my new life not yet reached. I reveled in the adventure, the slow transition, and the off-the-grid silence before arriving in western Washington to begin life with my mother.

Like a pentimento—a trace of an earlier painting visible under one layered on top—I had layered several lives on top of my childhood. Scraping off the richness of those intervening years, I am home.