

Hourglass:
Time, Memory,
Marriage

A Memoir

Dani Shapiro

FROM MY OFFICE WINDOW I see my husband on the driveway below. It's the dead of winter, and he's wearing nothing but a white terry-cloth bathrobe, his feet stuffed into galoshes. A gust of wind lifts the hem of the bathrobe, exposing his pale legs as he stands on a sheet of snow-covered ice. His hair is more salt than pepper. His breath makes vaporous clouds in the cold. Walls of snow are packed against the sides of the driveway, white fields spread out to the woods in the distance. The sky is chalk. A rifle rests easily on his shoulder, pointed at the northernmost corner of our roof.

So. He bought the gun. I take a long sip of coffee. Our two dogs are sleeping on the rug next to my desk chair. The old, demented one is snoring. There's

nothing I can do but watch as M. squeezes the trigger. *Bam!* I start, and the dogs leap up. The windows rattle. The whole house shakes.

The woodpecker had arrived the previous fall. Once he chose our house he seemed quite content, settled in, as if he had every intention of staying awhile. At first, I had no idea where the noise was coming from. *Rat-tat-tat*. From my study, it sounded like a loose shutter banging, though we had no shutters. It was almost a city sound—like a faraway jackhammer—out of place in the quiet of the country. *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat*. Of course, it seemed possible, too, that the infernal banging was entirely in my mind. “My head,” wrote Virginia Woolf, “is a hive of words that won’t settle.” I couldn’t hold a thought. It was as if an internal axis had been jarred and tilted downward; words and images slipped through a chute into a dim, murky pool from which I could not retrieve them.

Finally, I spotted the woodpecker from my son’s bathroom window. Perched on a drainpipe just below the wood-shingled roof, he was a small brown bird with a tiny head and a pointy beak that moved back and forth with astonishing speed as he hammered away at what was already a sizable hole in the side of the house. *Rat-tat-tat*.

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It had been a time of erosion. I’d begun to see in metaphor. We’d lived in the house for twelve years, and things were falling apart. The refrigerator stopped working one day. The banister warped and the spindles on the staircase loosened and clattered to the floor. An old, neglected apple tree on our property split in two, its trunk as hollow as a drum. The house needed painting. The well needed fracking, whatever that meant. The front door was cracked, and on winter days, a sliver of wind could be felt inside.

Late that same fall of the woodpecker, as I sat reading at the kitchen table one afternoon, two large, mangy creatures loped across the meadow. One gray, the other a pale, milky brown, they were otherworldly, terrifying. My spine tingled. I grabbed my phone to take their picture, then texted it to M., who was in the city that day.

Wolves?

No.

Sure?

Yes. Coyotes.

Not coyotes. I know coyotes.

The basement regularly flooded. If the wind blew in a certain way during a heavy rainfall, we could count on a half inch of water in the workshop where M. kept projects in varying states of half-completion. On a long table, he had hundreds of photos cut into

stamp-sized pieces. These, he planned to assemble into a photo collage. A finished one from years earlier hangs in our guest bathroom. I never tire of looking at it: our now-teenaged son as a toddler, hoisted on the shoulders of a friend, a smiling, radiant man whose daughter will later fall to her death from a Brooklyn rooftop; my mother in a hat to cover her bald head, months before she died; my mother-in-law before Alzheimer's set in; the three of us—my little family and I—on the steps of our Brooklyn town house; then older, on the porch of our house in Connecticut. *Alive. Dead. Lost.* Like the names I refuse to cross out in my address book, I catalog those I have loved.

"Honey!" I called downstairs, keeping an eye on the woodpecker, who, if he noticed me, didn't seem to care. "I need you!"

M. peered at the woodpecker through the bathroom window.

"Little fucker."

"I know."

"We're going to have to replace all that siding."

"Let's put it on the list."

The list included pressing items such as painting the house, fixing the front door. We really did need to install a generator, replace the heating system. The list had once included items like redoing the bathrooms, building an addition. I'd stopped keeping a list.

"I'm getting a gun."

"I don't want a gun in the house."

"Not a real gun. A pellet gun. Nail the fucker."

I did some research. All the while, the pecking continued. More holes were hammered into the side of our house. A friend recommended a brick of suet, hung from a tree. Another suggested a porcelain owl placed atop our roof. M. is not fond of home remedies. The weather grew colder. Leaves on the trees turned russet, deep yellow, bright burgundy. Families of wild turkeys strutted across the front meadow. My mind was on fire. Each day, I sat in my second-floor office and heard *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat*.

I'll take care of it. M. said. A familiar refrain, one I have always loved and long to believe. This longing—my longing—is part of our marriage. We have been together for nearly two decades. The woodpecker, the mangy creatures, the hive of words. The creaky house, the velocity of time, the accretion of sorrow. The things that can and cannot be fixed. *I'll take care of it.*

M., before I knew him, owned *real* guns. He had been a foreign correspondent working out of Africa, in territory that required bodyguards and weapons. He kept a Kalashnikov stored in a locker in Mogadishu.

On occasion, he wore a bulletproof vest. It hangs on a hook in our coat closet.

Now he is having a tête-à-tête with a woodpecker as I stand holding one quivering dog while petting the other. He hadn't listened to me. When had he snuck a gun into the house? Where had he bought it? Wal-Mart? Bam! The sound echoes off the roof. His hair is standing on end and he looks not unlike Einstein. A small dark speck against the white sky as the bird flies away, and I can almost hear its laughter, a cartoon bubble: *You can't catch me!*

We have recently embarked on a massive housecleaning after reading a popular book about the Japanese art of tidying up. It falls into the department of things we can control. The author instructs readers to empty the contents of every single household drawer and closet and lay them all out: the old sneakers, balled-up workout clothes, tangled necklaces, single earrings, gift soap still in cellophane wrappers. The report cards, papier-mâché art projects, the Baby Björn. The boxes of heating pads from a long-ago bout with sciatica. The pregnancy test displaying the pink line. The electric's mores maker, a housewarming gift, deposited unopened in the back of the coat closet.

I found these old journals of yours. Just yesterday, M. handed me two thin spiral-bound notebooks. One is

red, the other blue. They don't look familiar. I open the red one. Dated June 8, 1997, the entry reads:

Day one. Arrived early in London and bought books at Heathrow (paperback ed. of Angela's Ashes.) Arrived in Paris in the early afternoon (Orly) and took a taxi to the Relais Saint-Germain. D. unpacked. Loved the room, great big bed, fluffy towels. My handwriting looks to me like a letter to my future self, a missile launched forward through time. If you had asked me if I'd kept a journal on our honeymoon, I would have told you with certainty that I had not. And who the hell writes about herself in the third person in her diary?

Today we ventured across the Seine only to discover that the Beaubourg was closed. Went to Agnès B. where M. bought two nice shirts. Walked through the Marais, went to Ma Bourgogne, where a pigeon sat all over the back of M.'s new Agnès B. shirt. D. went upstairs and washed it off in a public restroom.

We weren't all that young when we married. I was thirty-five, M. forty-one. As I read my entries, I feel time collapsing on itself. It is as if I can reach out and tap that blissed-out honeymooning not-so-terribly young woman on the shoulder, point her away from the fluffy towels and cafés and shitting pigeons, and direct her toward another screen, a future screen. As she walks into a shop on the Place Vendôme

(D. finally ended her search for the perfect watch to go with her beautiful new wedding band), I want to suggest to her that life is long. That this is the beginning. And that it may be true, at least in poetic terms, that beginnings are like seeds that contain within them everything that will ever happen.

On the highest shelf in my office closet, five boxes filled with reams of pages are stacked along with several cloth-covered volumes from the years I kept journals. Keeping journals was a practice for me, a way of ordering my life. It was an attempt to separate the interior from the exterior. To keep all my trash—this is the way I thought of it—in one place. Into the journals I poured every thought, each uncomfortable desire. Every petty resentment, seething insecurity, unexpressed envy that would be boring to all the world except—perhaps—to me. I continued the journal practice for years after becoming a writer, because I thought of the journals as the place where the detritus would be discarded, leaving only the essential—somehow the process itself would determine which was which—for my *real* work. I never imagined that a soul would read the journals. I would have been horrified, mortified if anyone had seen them. So why are they still on a shelf in my closet? Why have I kept them?

The red and blue notebooks are, I believe, the last

journals in which I wrote. After we returned from our honeymoon, that practice, which had accompanied me all through my teens and twenties and into my thirties, disappeared. It was disappearing even as I wrote in them, *I* becoming *she*. Interspersed in those thin notebooks were other things: lists, thoughts, ideas. But that still doesn't explain why I haven't burned them. They aren't there for posterity. Nor for reference. I don't believe the young woman who wrote them has anything to teach me. What does she know? She hasn't lived my life.

After breakfast we drove to Maussane, home of the best olive oil in France. Picked up three bottles. Then left Saint Rémy and took off for the Côte d'Azur. While in the car, D. ended up getting bitten by a nasty unidentified flying insect and jumped into the backseat where she remained crouching until the car stopped. After determining that the insect was not a bee and D. would live, we detoured to Aix-en-Provence for lunch (M.'s idea).

Some facts: at the moment I write this, I am fifty-two. M. is fifty-nine. Both ages seem unlikely to me, as if perhaps I'm making this up. But here we are. We have been married for almost eighteen years. Our son is nearly sixteen. We have two dogs, one large, one small. We have attended twelve weddings, nine bar

or bat mitzvahs, six graduations, five funerals. We have set foot in twenty-two states, seven countries, two continents. We have flown one hundred forty-six thousand miles and easily driven twice that. My car alone is about to hit two hundred thousand miles on the odometer. We have held each other's hands while waiting for biopsy results. We have had a baby and came very close to losing that baby. We have had three fights bordering on violent. A handful of terrible arguments after which we have limped, stunned and wordless, into our own corners. *Eighteen years.* My father has been dead nearly thirty years (car accident). My mother, thirteen (lung cancer). M.'s parents are still living. His mother has Alzheimer's. His father can hardly see and strains to hear. He stopped driving only when his license was revoked. Up until then, it worked like this: my mother-in-law, blessed with perfect eyesight but lacking in memory, would let my father-in-law know when a stop sign was coming up and read him street names. Together, they drove that car.

I flip through the second notebook M. found. The blue one. It is largely empty except for just a few entries and random scribbled notes from a time during which M. and I were in the process of buying a Federal town house in a Brooklyn neighborhood where a young woman on her way home from work had just been

murdered. The notes are evidence that I had done some research: *On St. Marks this summer there was a body dumped from a car between Carlton and Vandeventer. She has a whistle and carries it in her fist. Two blocks down, rock thru plate-glass door. The location is in your favor. Feel completely safe.*

Also contained within these pages are lists for the movers (*pack casters with crib, leave changing table contents for Monday*) and notes from interviews with babysitters. Apparently I met with someone named Joan and listed her positive and negative attributes later. *Positive: Washed hands. Knows babies. Lives nearby. Negative: Evasive. No CPR.*

We lived in that town house for a scant three years before we sold it for what seemed a tidy profit—it is now in one of the most in-demand neighborhoods in New York's most in-demand borough—and decamped for the wilds of Connecticut. By the time we were settled in our new home, my mother was dying. Our son was in preschool. I was turning forty. For my fortieth birthday party—held at the Manhattan loft of my much-older half sister—I had bought what I then considered to be an outfit befitting a forty-year-old: a black silk knee-length skirt and a black cashmere camisole. It seemed life was divided into chapters. In the narrative as I understood it, we were in the early middle.