

Upward Facing

When I suggest to my mother that rather than going home for President's Day weekend, we meet at a yoga retreat instead, I do so half-jokingly. Unfiltered to the point of censoriousness, my mother is the sort of person with whom you always have to speak in tones of half-commitment, just in case she disagrees with you. But even through a 144p blur, the bottom half of her face cropped by the screen since she has set me down to grab a Spindrift, I can detect what is genuine approval in her eyes. "That's a great idea," she says.

Over the following weeks, university small talk defaults to everyone's plans for the long weekend. To classmates and acquaintances, I say I am visiting family—not technically a lie—and to my inner circle—or really, inner pentagon, since there's only five of them—I whisper "I'm going to a yoga retreat" quietly enough that they have to ask me to say it again, repeating this two or three times before revealing my deep, dark secret. I will be spending the four-day break at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, the gem of Pittsfield, Massachusetts accessible only by an Amtrak route that from Providence resembles a boomerang.

"That sounds so fun," they all say. None of them understand why my eyes squint with hesitation when I smile, and why I pause before the word "interesting" as my forecast for the weekend.

Always at a loss about how to describe my mother to a stranger, I retreat behind the phrase "it's complicated," and even when I leave things in her words, describing as neutrally as I can the actions she does, the things she wears that are plain, observable fact, somehow I get it all wrong. My mother is the "cool mom," the tiger mom, the almond mom all at once, though she is absolutely not a soccer mom. She wears face-swallowing sunglasses even when it's cloudy and laughs in a way that requires her full attention, so you feel special. But my mother is not a woman who can be summarized by a list of interests and personality traits—if you asked her what her hobbies are, she would tell you "people," and any one characteristic she might exemplify at a given moment will be scrubbed from her personality chart by next Tuesday. She is a philosophy of human contradiction: at once loving and cruel, funny and serious, feminist

except if you're above a size 12, deeply understanding yet careless with your feelings. My mother would do anything for her children, but she'll bitch about having to do it the whole time.

Oh, and there's also the fact that when I am home for breaks, we have started doing yoga together in the morning. Hence why we are going to a yoga retreat.

She's waiting, dressed in all black with a suitcase I've never seen before, by a row of plastic chairs turned to face Pittsfield Station's singular window. She's cut her hair, I can tell from behind, but other than that looks the same. I have spent my whole childhood in a fugue state of confusion, constantly being told how much I resemble my mother—she has jet-black hair to my blonde, inflected green eyes to my grey-blue, an extra four inches of height, and a facial structure that at the corners sharpens instead of curves. We hug, exchange complaints about our recent locomotive experiences (aisle seat, dubious quantity of Amish passengers). Silence quickly falls, and hovering in my throat are all of the anecdotes I had pre-prepared for when the flow of conversation stopped, but I hadn't expected it to happen so soon. I was hoping to ration these stories—the secret society I joined, how my classes are going, the Koto concert I attended Thursday—try to make them last the duration of the weekend. I don't want to waste them now, waiting for the Uber to arrive. Which is why, grasping for something to say, I do the rude thing and ask about the red scab in the center of her forehead. Last I checked, her botox appointment was for November.

“I had skin removed for a biopsy.” She's sat herself down in one of the chairs, and doesn't look up from her phone as she speaks. My mother has a remarkable ability to make you feel boring, even when the topic of conversation is her.

“A biopsy? What, do you have cancer or something?” I laugh, confused.

“Well, I guess it's good we're getting this out of the way early.”

She's looking at me now. There is a long pause.

“Wait. You actually have cancer?” Some sensations are clichés for a reason, because better language for them simply has not been thought up yet. Silence falls. A heart drops. I indulge in the reaction, savor the possibility of some great, uprooting tragedy, because at this moment I don’t really believe she has cancer, I think I am misunderstanding, and she’s about to look at me in that disappointed way when I’ve missed something obvious, and say, ‘No, of course not,’ and I’ll feel stupid but relieved.

“Yes.”

In playfully matter-of-fact tones, that of a zookeeper narrating the sea lion show, she explains to me how they caught it early, basically stage zero, except her levity collides with words like basal cell carcinoma and melanocytes, how it’s not just on her forehead but all over her body, and they’re going to have to take a chunk out of her arm, like muscle and everything, and for the next two years she’ll be under routine medical supervision. I make some quip about how it’s not fair, she’s so diligent about using sunscreen, so diligent about her children using sunscreen—she has confessed to me her greatest failure as a mother was when she forgot to remind me to reapply one family beach vacation, and I burned my skin so deeply that freckles formed and never left—and she says the whole reason for this diligence is because she’d feared this kind of cancer her whole life, those damn moles that season her skin.

“You have some too,” she says. “So you’ll have to get your skin checked, at some point.”

Already I am planning the version of this story I will tell my friends. *So*, I’ll say, plate of dining hall chicken and roasted root vegetables before me, the harsh overhead lights exaggerating my eye bags, my despair, *my mom has cancer*. No—too direct. Maybe I’ll start with the forehead scab, or I’ll go back even further, to the sweat-smelling Amish guy leaning over me to peer out the Amtrak window like he’s never seen a field before. This is a game that I’ll continue to play the rest of the weekend. I run experiments: mix the news with different colored solutions until I get something worthy of a reaction. I wonder—no, I know—it’s an attempt to stain the memory, blot out swaths of it with constant recall and revision, to deliberately render it untrustworthy.

“How are you feeling?” Is all I can think to ask her.

“Well, it’s all very annoying.” (My mother’s emotional vocabulary does not include words like “sad” or “depressed.”) “I’m not gonna be allowed to exercise for a few weeks after the surgery, so it’s good we’re doing all this yoga now.” She pauses, looks back at her phone. “Honestly, I’m more upset that Logan got rejected from all the kindergartens we applied him to.”

Our request for an Uber has yet to be answered. The Kripalu website had advised us about this obstacle. Pittsfield, Massachusetts has a population of just over 40,000, and as far as I can tell from the fingerprint-smear window, isn’t exactly hopping. I take a seat next to my mother. We are approached by a man with a thick lisp asking if we know how to get change back from the vending machine, which we do not, and in the corner of the room there is a woman monologuing about how she found a confederate flag in her son’s room that morning.

Twenty minutes later, Emmanuel (White Toyota Camry) comes to our rescue. As we roll our luggage onto the curb, the lisped man is chatting meekly with an employee, who unfortunately cannot retrieve his change but offers him a pack of Sour Patch kids instead.

Emmanuel warns us of his broken English and asks what music we would like to listen to. My mother says what’s currently playing (Spanish rap) works just fine, but he switches to a “2025 Top Hits” playlist anyways.

“I always pick the music I think the guest will enjoy,” he explains, over the apologies of Justin Bieber. “I do not understand what he is saying, but I hope the sound is good.”

My mother, one for making polite if slightly belittling small talk, tries to describe to Emmanuel where we are going, and the sorts of activities we will participate in there. I don’t want to look at my mother and that evil red eye on her forehead, so I stare determinedly out the window, at the brief sprints of white-lined forest that separate rows of vintage shops and old churches, Christmas lights still draped from their awnings. Eventually, at the command of the navigation voice, we pull into the parking lot of what appears to be an elementary school.

“This is books, not yoga!” Emmanuel assesses.

The Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health is indeed three minutes further down the road, despite the GPS’ insistence. Signs that say “Breathe. You’ve Arrived” punctuate the curve of the driveway, illuminated as dusk plays with the settings of the sky. The uneven lighting only accentuates the imposing size of the building. It looks as if a mountain lodge has been plopped in the middle of a slightly elevated field, except the builders ran out of wooden logs after constructing the frame, and opted to fill the rest in with brick.

We are checked in by a bearded man in a blue Hawaiian shirt, who is the highest concentration of testosterone to be seen that evening, and guided through the facilities. We are told that phones, laptops, apple watches, and other devices are not allowed in the “tech free” zones, which happen to be everywhere but our rooms. The photos that banner Kripalu’s website boast open, sleek rooms with tall windows and even sleeker yogis in a perfect dancer’s pose. But the Kripalu we are touring is more college dorm than retreat and far more institutional than luxury. The only differentiation between the low, carpeted hallways and those of my freshman year dorm is that at the end of each one, a golden buddha sits below an overhead stage light. There is a larger, many-armed bronze buddha in the main lounge that sits at the center of a constellation of small tables with half-completed puzzles atop them and bean bags, navajo blankets folded in their laps. Aside from these statues, the only thing at Kripalu that shines is the snow outside the windows.

The Annex, where we’re staying, is the newer, renovated section of the building, or really, an additional building tacked onto the central complex like a bionic tail on a donkey. Unlike the rest of Kripalu, it’s dated in the way of ten years ago rather than twenty, with its bark-like wood paneling and exposed pipework. On the way to our room we pass one woman with an aggressive-looking surgical mask, and my mom makes a tasteless joke about not being the only one with cancer. I guess she’s allowed. The Annex is freezing, except for our room, which is too hot, and also has one of those bathrooms with a glass wall looking into the tub, even though it’s a twin room.

We unpack in silence. At dinner, having loaded our cafeteria trays with a rainbow of vegetables, and—believe it or not—real chicken, I share all of the stories and trivia and updates I had been meaning to make last the weekend; my throat is a broken faucet and chunky streams of words won't stop sputtering out. My mom nods, doesn't ask follow-ups. Instead, when I have finished regaling her with my complaints about the student newspaper which I edit for, she informs me, in low, secret tones, a gamemaster's smile on her face, that she believes she recognizes a woman two tables over.

"I'm pretty sure her name is Thayla, but I really don't know," my mom informs me. "Good thing we all have lanyards. We met at a conference and have, like, a million shared LinkedIn connections."

When maybe-Thayla walks past us to clear her tray, my mom stops her, reboots her face so all traces of tiredness are cleared, and says, "You probably don't remember me, but we met at a conference like, *ages* ago."

The woman pauses. After a few beats—and a sly glance at my mother's lanyard—her expression is jolted by recognition. "Oh my god. Amy, right? We have, like, a million shared LinkedIn connections."

They continue to exchange remarks on the improbability of the present circumstances as I eat today's dessert: banana bread, which my mom deemed too flaxy for her preferences.

"I feel like you're always doing so much," Thayla (because of course my mom was right) says. "It's so impressive what you've accomplished."

She's not wrong. My mother was born in a part of Illinois that, if overlaid onto an anatomical map of the human body, would appropriately align with the bowels. She was the first in her family to go to college, the first to leave Illinois for the West Coast, and later, the East. She walked across her graduation stage pregnant and raised me as a single mother, all while building an impressive career across humanitarian work, nonprofit leadership, and now, education

investment. My mother is the textbook example of a rags-to-riches story: not one for dreaming, she made herself an American Reality.

But when Thayla sighs after finishing this eulogy, tilting her head in mock humility, my mother gives me a coy look.

“Well, my most impressive accomplishment is sitting right in front of me.”

My mother makes a lot of comments like these. I am her golden Ivy League daughter, editor for the school paper and receiver of straight As. While less adept at providing emotional support in times of need, my mother is good about reminding her children that she loves them, and that she is proud of them. My first two years at college, I received texts expressing as much every week, though these mysteriously petered out my junior fall after I declared as an English major. But the words are well-worn, and like a beloved sweater washed one too many times, they don’t have the same texture anymore. I’ve grown an impermeable skin to her affection: always there is the yearning for her to understand me in my entirety rather than the selective parts of which she can be proud.

That night in our dorm—sorry, room—I remember one thing I’d forgotten to share. The necklace she got me for Christmas had gotten tangled that morning, and I spent 45 minutes trying to unravel it, which made me late for class. It’s my roundabout way of telling her, *I care about this thing you got for me. I care about you*. But my mom just says:

“Wow. Your life sounds *so* hard. You know, I actually have cancer, and my son didn’t get into kindergarten.”

“Well it’s been a tough day for me too,” I say. “I didn’t eat breakfast cause of the necklace thing and I was late to class and panicking because I thought we had a quiz, but we didn’t, so I studied for nothing, and then there were all these loud Amish people on the train, and then—get this—I find out my mom has cancer!”

There's a firework tail of silence, and then we both fall onto our beds laughing. When the moment ends, she explains, in more sobering terms, what the next two years are going to look like for her—surgeries, no movement beyond walking, bi-monthly check-ups. I nod, and knock over the jars on the top shelf of my mind, hoping that when they hit the floor, the right words might spill out of them. They do not, and so all I'm left with are the shattered fragments of sentences: "Oh wow." "That's—" "I can't believe." "I'm sorry."

We shower, read. It takes both of us too long to fall asleep, and neither of us really do. My alarm is set for 6 a.m.—I have opted to participate in Saturday morning's Moderate Yoga, while my mom preferred the timing of 8 a.m. Meditation—and its over-eager birdsong wakes neither of us up.

Jurian, the instructor for Moderate Yoga, is very similar to the sound of my alarm, not only because she is chirpy but because she expects from me too much, too early. Her self-cut bangs flop onto the mat as she kicks her legs up in a headstand, while I remain in a wide-legged forward fold, inhaling the fish stick smell of my yoga mat. We are in the Sunset Room, which has the airiness and layout of a dance studio but with a stage-like platform in the center of the room atop which Jurian can perform. After 75 minutes of hypo- and hyperextension, I understand why there are only three slots of yoga classes each day, with most of the itinerary shaded in with workshops (today's: Tarot Reading, Mindful Eating, and Journaling).

Upon release, I find my mother sunken into a bean bag chair of an obnoxious shade of green, a cup of coffee cradled in her lap. The first thing my mother does every day without fail, even before meditating or yoga, is make herself a cup of coffee.

"They didn't have Splenda," she informs me. "There's only honey. And like, monkfruit extract, or something."

She is the only one in the lounge dressed in all black. Our fellow “companions” at Kripalu, who at dinner last night we divided into four categories—the chronically ill, the soon-to-be divorcés, the Jesus freaks, and the couples here for Valentine’s Day—dress themselves by a methodology that resembles pressing the “randomize clothing” button on a Sim.

It is worth making clear, at this point, that there are two categories of modern wellness, or really two generations. There is the latest wave of high pony-tailed matching sets that get matcha lattes instead of a smoothie after their workout, their sweat odorless save for a trace of new-car smell, and there are the granola grandmas who have been lion breathing and acutherapizing for decades now. Kripalu is definitively the second camp. There is no hot yoga or pilates on the itinerary, though there is a gift shop stocked with exactly what you’re expecting, plus a clearance rack with \$80 leggings graciously slashed by 5 percent. When I asked my mother to describe the color scheme of the central lounge, she said “millennial coworking space.” I will not see a single item of lululemon today, though I inventory, and this is by no means an exhaustive list, three pairs of rainbow leggings, two tassel necklaces, hoodies crowded with contradictory patterns, bandanas, ankle tattoos of butterflies, scarves (indoors), seven bracelets on a single wrist, corduroy bags with spiral notebooks peeking out, and leg warmers.

When my mother slowly detaches herself from the beanbag at the last possible moment before Meditation, she hands me her half-drunk cup of coffee, and says, “Find a trash can for me, will you?”

Breakfast at Kripalu is mandated to be enjoyed in silence, so I don’t feel guilty as I march, mindful of my posture, to the dining hall to eat without her. I pass a wall of post-it notes tacked beneath the prompt: “What is your mountain?” Steaming in metal trays are stewed prunes and quinoa porridge, the health superfoods of a decade prior, since Kripalu hasn’t caught up to the modern wellness canon of spirulina and chia seeds. Rather than encouraging introspective reflection, the silence casts the dining hall with all the ambiance of a prison.

My mother has a second cup of coffee in her hands when I join her at the Tarot reading workshop. “Your hair smells nice,” she says, which is not a compliment because I used her travel shampoo in the shower last night.

Our tarot instructor, Nancy, walks us through the history of Tarot cards and her own spiritual journey. She is a woman with big hair and even bigger jewelry who makes reference to her Italian heritage every third sentence, in case we forgot. As a scientist of the “healing arts,” Nancy is able to talk to dead people and also rocks. By channeling our intuition, we also just might be able to some day.

Nancy presents us with four cards, and asks us to describe them with one-word adjectives. Most of what is shared are synonyms for “strong,” though one woman bravely offers “sexy” for the King of Cups. I am surprised when my mother engages wholeheartedly in the activity, explaining to the class how she was drawn to the High Priestess for her mysterious intellectualism. She looks thinner than I remember her, her once-back-length black hair cut abruptly at her shoulders, and she is the only one in the room with a full face of make-up. If my mother, who sat me down at nine years old to watch a documentary on evolution after I told her I believed in God, can take this seriously, so can I.

But throughout the rest of the day I remain a skeptic. During Moving with Chakras, I am unable to respond to the instructor’s inquiry, “And how does this pose make you feel?”—I am too preoccupied by the feeling of doubt to notice the more subtle reaction my body might be having. I cannot help but scan the room during Yoga Dance to measure my moves against everyone else’s. When Nancy informed us that you can read for anyone, even your cats—which she personally does on Tuesdays—the effort required to hold back my laugh was painful. In my notebook I jot down every overheard conversation, workshop title, and piece of wall art that strikes me as absurd, knowing it will soon be ground down to writing fodder. I have always maintained an ironic distance between myself and the world. It is a protective strategy—if I stand far above the events and people and emotions of my life, snapping piranhas in a shallow pool, they cannot hurt me.

I used to think I inherited this from my mother. Her cold rationality, an ability to find a formula to solve each of life's problems. Depression + exercise + daily sunlight = cured. (Friendship drama + just ignore them) / (bad test grade + study more next time) = 0/0. But as I study her today, alert as I always am for that one missing variable that might make her solvable, I find an openness that exists in tandem with her judgment. Yes, she is quick to share her opinions and observations of the people around us at lunch, labelling the red-haired woman with the surgical mask "The Invalid," but there is an earnest willingness to try all of the day's activities. "I'm not woo-woo," she'll remind me after lunch. But she also didn't mind when her masseuse "blessed" her cancer.

My mother's serene expression breaks when, upon walking into the Sunrise Room for the evening's Vinyasa Yoga, there is a couple leaning over their mats locked in a frozen kiss, which they hold for the entire duration of time it takes for us to set up our space.

After an unhurried neck stretch, we begin. Asif, a lanky man whose bald spot is fenced by locks of tangled, greasy curls, guides us through one too many rounds of Sun Salutation. He is the first (and only) non-white, non-female instructor who guides us this weekend. Though my arms protest, my vanity forbids me from lowering my knees through each chaturanga, but when Asif starts jumping into Up Dog, I accept defeat. His shaky and ambiguously-aged voice is metaphor-rich—our mats are mycelium, our torso our trunk, and when bent in Forward Fold, we are instructed to pick flowers off the ground. It is a welcome break from words like "delicious" and "terrestrial," which our previous instructors have been fond of. He explains to us the fine border between ego and edge: how to push ourselves without indulging ourselves. I look up, and his feet are wrapping around his neck. Every so often, when Asif lapses into a stretch of quiet, someone in the room lets out a very loud sigh.

We end class with a meditation. Closing my eyes in shrivasana makes me nervous, so I stare (with a softened gaze) at the clusters of ceiling lights scattered like freckles, receiving (not taking) deep inhalations. I manage to clear my mind of all but one thought, and it's a clingy one, with separation anxiety: *My mom has cancer*. For the first time in my life I understand the words, *I'd rather me than her*.

With no programming between the hours of 4 and 5 p.m., my mother wants to read in the lounge, and I resume a deceptively-tricky 300-piece puzzle that someone else has begun for me. After I have fitted together four pieces (forty-five minutes later), The Invalid plops next to me like we've known each other our whole lives. She asks if I'd like help, and there is no civilized way to say no, so she settles beside me, placing her mask on the table despite this being the closest she's been to another person all day.

"My name is Brandi," she says, offering a sinewy hand. Unmasked, Brandi is quite pretty, in the dehydrated way of a child actress gone off the rails.

"[NAME]," I say. "I'm here with my mom for the weekend."

My mother, who is using her book as camouflage for her internet-connected Apple Watch, recognizes the SOS.

"Hi, I'm Amy," she says, extracting herself from the couch. "[NAME'S] mom."

We exchange highly-condensed summaries of our life stories. Brandi, a fan of a "spiritual creator" whose name I could not translate into the English phonetic alphabet, already participated in a "life-changing" silent retreat at Kripalu last summer, and is back for more. She takes my notebook without asking to write her number in. Somewhere in my chest, there burns a dull flame of kinship: I recognize her loneliness.

The last workshop of the day, after our dinner of tomato-baked salmon and leaves, is on journaling. We sit in a semi-circle of backjacks, which if you don't know what those are, proceed to google them and purchase one for yourself. Tissue boxes are evenly spaced every three seats. Jennie prompts us: Why journal? Someone says: So we can live life twice.

We write about what we love. We write a letter to our future selves. Jennie ends the class with a plug for her Substack, and my mom and I return to our room in a silence that might just be comfortable.

She has a self-satisfied grin on her face when she gets out of the shower. It's the one she wears when she knows she's about to give a good social performance.

"Have I ever told you about shower-bath?"

"Shower-bath?" I close my book. "Let me guess. You take a shower and close the drain so it fills up, then you take a bath."

"Bingo." My mom isn't deflated by the stolen punchline. "I used to do it all the time when I was a little kid, and completely forgot about it for the entirety of my adult life. Until now."

If there was a hierarchy of emotions that my mother despised, nostalgia would be at the top of the pyramid. I cannot remember the last time she offered a memory from her childhood to me voluntarily, and whenever I ask her for one, she replies in vague generalizations.

"Thank you for, uh, sharing." I don't like that response. I try again, try to offer some of myself, too. "I also used to shower-bath all the time. During the pandemic. I'm sure you remember, because you got mad at me for taking so long."

But my mom isn't listening anymore. She's shared what she wanted to share, and has returned to the bathroom to brush her teeth. For some reason, this does not bother me. Through the curtain we pulled over the frosted glass window, I can still make out her shadow.

When she comes out, grumbling that the room does not come equipped with a hair dryer, she stops at the foot of my bed, and says, almost dismissively, like an afterthought, "I'm really happy we still get to do these kinds of things together. I've really enjoyed watching you grow up, and learning about all these new versions of you."

Only once her breathing decelerates and I think she is asleep do I cry.

At silent breakfast the next morning, I'd estimate the residents of Kripalu at an eighty percent participation rate. I realize that I might not be the only one not taking this retreat completely seriously. My mother and I eat on opposite ends of the hall, but finish at the same time for 9 a.m. Meditation. When I get bored of waiting for Nirvana, I risk a peek at the room, sending a lighthouse beam over a room of abandoned faces. The instructor (Kelly?) is fixing her wedgie, and another man's drool descends toward his shoulder like a spider. We break our meditation with an *ohm*, which drool man holds for ten beats longer than everyone else.

Scheduled from 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. Sunday is something the itinerary calls a Soul Journey. A woman (Karolyn), who I would bet money has an ASMR channel on the side, purrs instructions into a microphone as we lie on our backs, eyes closed, blocks under our knees. We are told to envision our dream garden, where our totem animal (she suggests jaguar) is waiting, ready to guide us down our cave of trauma. The perfectionist that I am, I get caught on the first step, which I am unable to complete to my satisfaction: separating my soul from my body. The guy behind me is muttering something that sounds eerily like "wake up wake up wake up wake up," which (to put it frankly) is distracting. Eventually, I give up, and do my best to give detail to a bamboo forest and jaguar spirit, though when Karolyn asks us to walk past the room of the "incident" (hint: our trauma), my mind ripples with blankness. We are not supposed to choose—our journey's details should rise naturally from the guisers of our subconscious like steam—which is why my "true self" who I encounter in my "mind palace" is a black woman with pink hair, and the "contract" I write with her ends up being the Gettysburg Address.

I am eager to debrief all this nonsense with my mother after Karolyn's maracas reunite our soul and body. But for the second time this weekend I am met with an expression I do not recognize. My mother is writing thoughtfully on a piece of paper, and I spy the words "grandchildren" (uh oh) and "Logan" (my brother, thank god). I ask how her journey was.

“Oh I just had a full cinematic experience,” she says, in a voice flickering between ironic and sincere. “I rode my jaguar. I forgave my grandparents. That was great.”

I’m left to wonder: am I the only one refusing to commit? Sure, there was the guy at the tea station yesterday with a “Silent Retreat” lanyard who broke his vow to recommend me his favorite, but you still have to believe in something first before you betray it. I feel left out, and at the same time, acutely aware that what I am being left out of would overlap significantly on a Venn diagram with “cult.”

We leave the Sunset Room, and my mom finds her usual couch in the lounge to descend into, sending me off to fetch her water bottle from our room in what I know is her dismissing me to have a moment alone.

Water bottle acquired, I run into Brandi, unmasked, outside the bathroom before lunch, and make the mistake of announcing that’s where I’m heading.

“Oh! Can I join you guys?”

“Of course,” I hope I say quickly enough. “Just come find us when you’re done.”

I find my mother at a table beneath a baroque large portrait of an abstract buddha, and inform her of the grave mistake I have just made. But she doesn’t seem annoyed. “Why not,” she says. “I’m sure she’s lonely.”

When we spy Brandi at the salad bar, my mother jokes, “Let’s hope she doesn’t see us,” which she immediately undermines by waving her over. Brandi perks up like a groundhog.

“Hiiii guys,” she trills. “How was your morning?”

But before we can answer the question, she says, “Oh, and you guys keep talking. I’m just going to pray real quick.”

Having mistakenly taken the words ‘real quick’ at face value, my mother and I wait for her to finish before resuming our chat. When two minutes pass, my mother returns to making comments on the food (overcooked, and sweet-potato forward, which Brandi would not know, because half of her plate is dense with steamed kale, and the other loaded with sprouts). After another two minutes, Brandi finishes her prayer, and my mother and I have almost finished our meals.

If my mother has one talent, it is alchemy: making something from nothing. Turning an empty fridge into “girl dinner,” a forgotten sock into an argument, but most generously, silence into conversation. She asks Brandi questions that, if you were to unwrap them, would be as empty as the decorative presents under display Christmas trees, but that seem interested regardless. What was the drive like here? Have you tried the jasmine tea?

I feel at once a jealousy of and pity for Brandi, her face lit under the illumination of my mother’s attention, knowing the moment she leaves my mother is going to make a joke about the sprouts, but also wishing that my mother would at least try to ask me questions, however unsubstantive.

The afternoon passes like honey through a pinprick. I lounge in the Sun Room, not to be confused with the Sunrise Room, Sunset Room, Moon Room, Asteroid Room, or Primordial Black Hole Room, and retain nothing from the book I read. My mother and I reunite for Gentle Yoga at 4. I had initially planned to do Moderate, but the lagging roll of the afternoon hasn’t given me enough momentum.

What if I tried slowing down, just once?

Gentle Yoga is in the Main Hall, which I have not seen yet. It is gorgeous. Three-storied windows, a delicate criss-cross of wooden beams connecting them. Thick-leafed potted plants sit beneath them, as well as Japanese curtains hiding tangles of cords. *So this is where the budget*

went, I think. And then the thoughts stop. Somehow, after two days of doing nothing, I am exhausted. I move through bird-dogs and shoulder stretches without care for what comes after them. In tree pose, the room wobbles, and Natalia, the instructor jokes, “Quite a strong breeze in the room.”

She asks us, in each pose: If you had to stay here for the next twenty minutes, what would you do differently?

My answer is almost always: less. Even though the categorization of class difficulty at Kripalu does not exceed ‘Moderate,’ and the most exciting pose I have held is plow, it has been a two-day fight against the urge to push myself. To show off, at the very least, my originality when the instructor gives us free reign to “do whatever would feel good for you right now.” Knocking knees and child’s pose are too conventional; I must take a Happy Baby variation or shoulder release. In each meditation and workshop I have waited for the “aha” moment, the click of seatbelt into lock so I can begin my journey to enlightenment. But Natalia tells us, “You’ve done enough transformation today. What if you just tried to feel good in your body?”

At one point I look over at my mother, who has shirked the instructed pose for a reverent bow. In supine twist, a lower rung of my back I’ve been trying to crack this entire weekend releases, the first time I am not forcing the pose. If I had to live this one day over and over again for the next twenty years, what would I do differently?

The question continues to ping-pong across my mind during that evening’s gratitude workshop. We make lists, and go around the room to share. My mother, in a voice like she is challenging the room, says “Vaccines.” I share “art.” Other answers include cats, mornings, Jesus (Brandi is here too), free will, music, electricity, coffee, and Heated Rivalry (Brandi frowns at this one).

I look around at the back-jack-supported women of this room and try to see them beyond what they are wearing, or the bohemian impulse that brought them to Kripalu. I look at my mother and try to see her as more than the sum of the difficulties in this life she has overcome, minus all the ways in this life that she has hurt me. I stop looking at her like she is an equation to solve.

We rise early on Monday for 6:30 a.m. Moderate Yoga. My mother takes her coffee into the room this time and steals sips between forward folds. In supta baddha konasana, we are told to open and close our mouth to release tension (because the mouth and groin developed together in the womb), and in every pose, to slow down (because we are human beings, not human doings). My fascia thoroughly “unspooled,” I am ready for our last programmed activity at Kripalu: a nature walk.

Nancy is back, and after we are equipped with snow spikes and ski poles, we begin the gentle descent toward the Grandmother Tree. On our way, we spy a number of Kripalu residents scattered across the white lawn, unmoving, staring into fixed points in the distance. My mother concludes it must be some sort of workshop.

She is stunning, the tree. Gnarled elegance. So ethereal the snow lining her branches seems almost to be hovering in reverent, respectful distance. We form a circle around her and enjoy a short meditation, before Nancy mandates the rest of the walk be held in silence.

The walk is anything but. I learn all the different ways that snow can crunch underfoot, some deflating, some sound like howling. There is the jingling of the snow pikes on our feet and the panting of the dogs that occasionally run past us, their owners still specks in the distance. The white ground is textured with pockets of sunken pine cones, suspiciously neat animal tracks, and the brown evidence of dogs that have been walked here. Eventually, we reach the lake, which is frozen over except at the edges and in the midday sun, is so bright you have to squint to look at it. Clusters of colorful ice fishers interrupt the yawning white and I realize I have never seen such a thing outside of movies.

There is a pine tree that Nancy requests we feel (after asking it for permission), and when I bring my fingers to my nose, they smell like an old friend’s perfume. Nancy gives us five loosely timed minutes to enjoy the scenery.

My mom is quick to snipe one of two available benches. I choose to walk out on the ice, to kick it with my heel in an audacious test of fate. I sweep the horizon and feel as if I have forgotten my own secret. When the scene becomes too blinding, I go to sit on the bench my mom has claimed, and though I leave a foot of space between us, my mom immediately scoots over to close the distance. She puts her arm around me, and I lean my head against her shoulder. We do this sort of thing from time to time, showing affection, and never for very long. But both of us are determined to stay in this position several seconds past comfortable, and then several minutes, long enough that our heartbeats fall out of sync, and I am already writing the moment in my head, wondering if here is where I will end this piece, but no, I want to include what comes after, the text she will send me an hour later, on her way to Albany, on my way to Boston, “You keep getting further away,” or a week later, when I call her after her surgery and she’s wearing a stylish wrap around her forehead, but I don’t know about any of this now and so none of it matters, it can’t matter, there is only this moment, my mother and I.