

## Broad Reach

### No Songs in Harmony

*Dear Jake,*

*My splendid 43-foot Swan will take two more months to put together for my circumnavigation. I am thrilled beyond my wildest dreams. All this has taken a lot longer than anticipated and funds have run low just when I need to make a big outlay. I hope the repairs to the chimney are on the way to being finished. I'll reimburse you, or you can take it out of the tenants' rent and send the balance to me.*

*Wish me luck in my search for a second mate! I am not sure if the last one was insane or if I was insane because of her! As you remember, she had a way of making me rather angry and intolerant. I hope the next one is civilized!*

*Cheers! Robert*

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Sarah remembered the exact day in 1990 that the world shifted for her. She was standing by the bedside table in her Berkeley apartment and had just picked up the phone and dialed. As she crunched the phone between her ear and neck, her pointer finger lightly touched the face of her daughter's photograph. It had been months since Helen had left for college. Sarah's nail file cut into her finger. She reached over and turned the radio dial to her favorite music program, "Beyond the Great Divide."

"Tony," she said, clutching the phone to her ear while she scanned her living room. "What do you do with all your time?" Her desk was piled with bills, the jumbled bookcases spilled onto the floor, and the walls were covered with her own Impressionist acrylic paintings. The guitar was propped up in the corner with one broken string, languishing and collecting dust.

"Hey, you know I'm a workaholic," he said. She waited. "And I have to look after my dad."

Sarah was beginning to wonder if it was only his dad he was looking after. "Well, I'm lonely. Can't we see each other more often?" She studied her hangnail and bit down on it.

"Sarah," he said. "I'm perfectly happy with the way it is."

"But I'm not." She pointed her foot and rotated her ankle. "My daughter's gone..."

"I know, but I can't fill that gap."

Sarah bit her hangnail off and licked the blood. That gap. How had that gap become so wide? She remembered her youthful dreams of freedom, of no rent to pay, no job to hold down, and no car to service. She'd danced, smoked pot, and run along nude

beaches. The songs of Joan Baez and Dylan had echoed from every radio. She played volleyball fully naked, her bare breasts bouncing.

Now her daughter was at college, dancing dizzily, falling in love, shoving away anything that looked like responsibility.

“Tony, this isn’t working for me anymore.”

“We’ve been through all this before. Sorry, Sarah.”

She slowly hung up the phone without more protesting and ran her hands along her arms. The dog had died, the squeaking guinea pigs were at the nursery school, her television was broken, and the old radio crackled.

Sarah turned it off in the middle of *So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You*. She longed for something, but she couldn’t quite place it. She stared at her painting. It wasn’t bad. It wasn’t Cezanne. Painting filled in time but left a void. No matter how she applied the color, mixed it, found the exact place for it on the canvass, it was the same old landscape, or the same old flowers, fruit, wine bottle, wooden salt and peppershakers in her still life paintings. The rose petals floundered around the foot of the vase on her kitchen table. The water in the vase had turned murky. The paint had dried on her larger brush. She walked across the room and tossed it into the garbage can. She wondered about all the great painters. Did they feel this same lack of something, this void? As they felt the sensation of the brush and the oil paint, dabbed their canvasses full of red and yellow, were they fulfilled? Georgia O’Keefe painted big flowers again and again. Sarah knew she was no Georgia O’Keefe. The inside of a flat flower wasn’t what she needed to express.

The deep green leaves of the avocado tree in her back yard fluttered in the breeze. Sarah stared at the blue sky through the window. She grabbed her bag and left the guitar and the paints, the broken television and the phone, and drove for fifteen minutes down to the Berkeley marina.

At the grassy section, she spread out her Scottish blanket and stood facing the San Francisco Bay. She was wearing a dark blue, wool sweater, black yoga tights and outer warm socks. She tightened the band on her blond ponytail and stared out at the Golden Gate Bridge. As she stood on her blanket in ‘mountain pose,’ she drew her hands into prayer position. The morning sun beamed up over the California Mountains and gently warmed her face. She closed her eyes.

The air in the San Francisco Bay was briskly cool as Sarah opened her eyes and moved from one posture to another. The seagulls flapped by, the terns dived for their fish breakfast, and the cormorants’ black bodies sleeked along, skimming the water with their hungry-looking eyes. Across the bay the distant hills of Mount Tamalpias rose up into the sky, and Angel Island, a darker green, anchored the scene under the light blue canopy. The Northern California spring seemed to push life into the cells of her body.

Sarah bent over and touched that flat of her hands on the grass and remembered how Helen had waved good-bye to her in the fall and had flown away to New York to become a freshman. Sarah had driven her to the San Francisco airport and had asked if she remembered to bring her brush, her comb, and her hiking boots.

“Hey, mom, I’m a big girl now. You can retire from motherhood—after you send my boxes!” They both laughed as Sarah paid the bridge toll. Helen had packed two huge suitcases and had left six large boxes for Sarah to send on as soon as Sarah stopped crying.

Before Helen walked onto the plane, Sarah had hugged her and could hardly let her go. She tried to look again at Helen and smile, but the tears shot out of her eyes like someone else was in charge of them.

“Hey, mom, I’ll be back. It’s not like forever!” sniffed Helen.

Sarah was relieved that Helen’s father was meeting Helen again at the Kennedy Airport and settling her into her dorm. At least he had offered to make that effort, as she had paid all her life savings towards the balance of Helen’s tuition for the year.

Sarah had watched the silver plane ascend steeply into the blue sky. She could hardly imagine that her little girl was on it and already so far away in the tiny dot disappearing into the fluffy clouds.

The drive home, she remembered, was stony quiet: no chatter in her ears, no songs in harmony, no alphabet games, just an eerie nothingness. Even the traffic seemed silent.