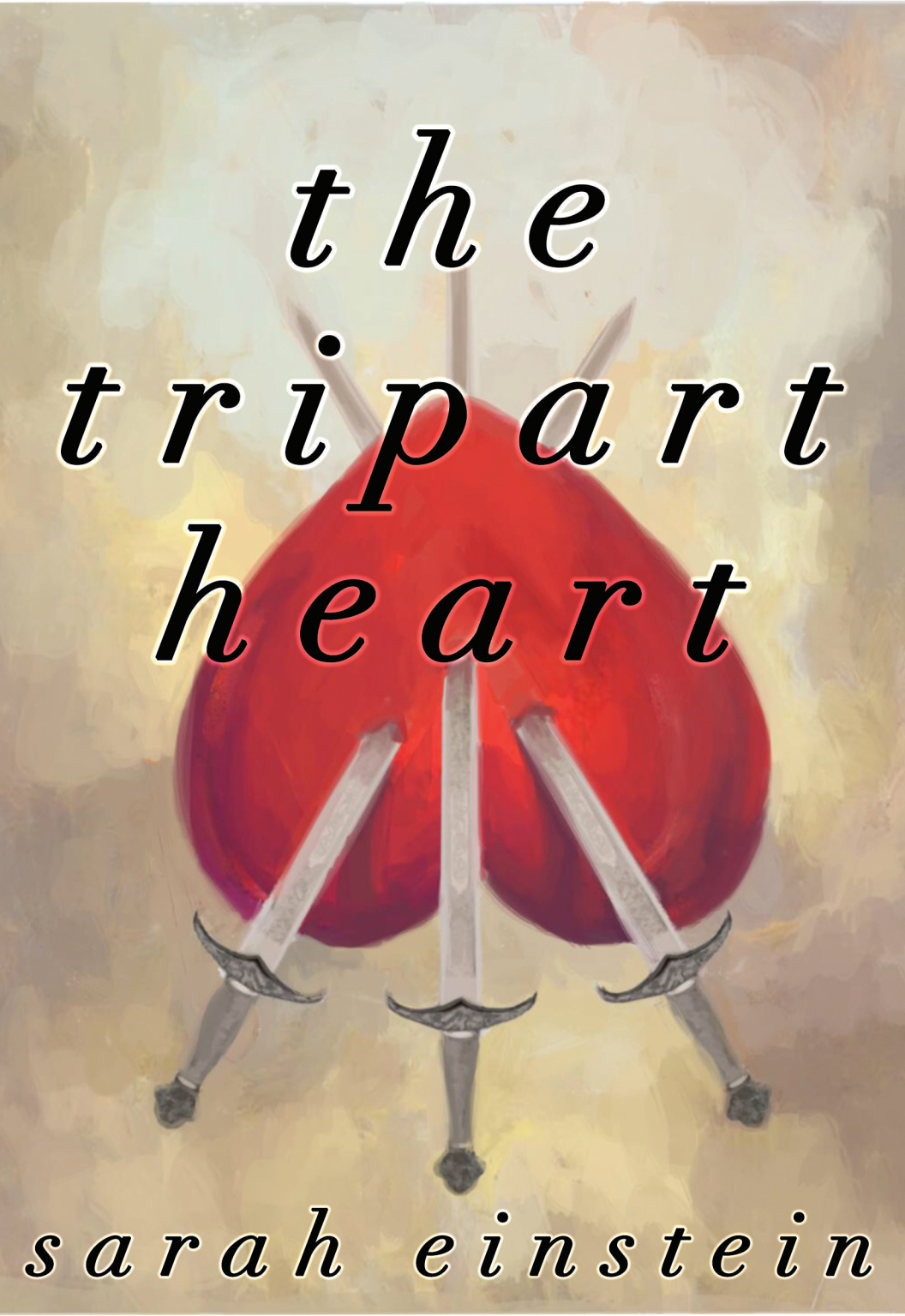
the tripart heart



sarah einstein

The Tripart Heart

Sarah Einstein

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To Dominik, with all three parts of my heart

A Meditation on Love

Mommy Buddha is grousing again, hitching up his skirts and planting his big, black Chuck Taylors into the rutted mud of the road. His backpack rests heavy on my shoulders—he is done with carrying it, he's insisted with a snap of the finger and a waggle of the head that isn't, here in 1987, yet a cultural marker that's moved far beyond the drag community.

"Fucking hippies," he says as we reach the end of Bus Village, where the old naked guy at the hard road had told us we would find Hippie Hollow, the part of the Rainbow Gathering where we intended to camp. "There isn't anything here. It's just a dead end."

I cajole him into moving on, the way one might a small child, with promises of a warm, dry place to pitch our tent and get some sleep. Mommy Buddha is not a small child; he's a six foot three, three hundred pound Philosophy student and a man tough enough to wear housedresses and a blond topknot to class at the University of Alabama. But he's also not not a child, with his tantrums and his quivery lower lip and his life-is-so-unfairing. I don't want to spend the night in the muck of the road, or the swampy dead end of it, and I am able to keep him moving because he is a creature of comforts.

So we trek down the road again, and up another branch off it for a while, Mommy Buddha muttering under his breath. And then, as if there actually was something to this Rainbow Family magic, to this once-a-year-moveable-magic-love-in, I hear a voice I know. And that voice is telling a story I know, the one

about Thanksgiving at his parents' farm, his father grousing at the words we're using on the Scrabble board, words he doesn't know, words like *textual* and *orality* which he says don't sound like good Christian words to him, and talking about don't talk that college talk in my house son, and talking about too big for our britches, and talking about getting above our raising. I know this story because I was there.

So Mommy Buddha and I stop.

And it turns out that the voice belongs to Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed, and he says, "Okay, then, you can sleep in my tent," to Mommy Buddha and, "Here, take this" to me and I do take this, which is a cup of hot tea that turns out to have mushrooms in it, but I don't know that, I think it's just a cup of tea at the end of a long journey.

And then I'm sitting by the fire listening to stories about people I think but am not sure that I knew once, a long time ago, even though I've never met the people who are telling these stories before, and Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed is braiding my hair into a hundred tiny braids down my back, weaving in pieces of embroidery thread and tiny silver bells and vine. And because I don't know that there are mushrooms in the tea, for the next couple of hours I think maybe the warm feeling in my belly, the loveliness of the faces of the familiar strangers around the campfire, the joyful tinkling of the bells in my hair mean that I'm still in love with Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed. That maybe this whole magical Rainbow Gathering moment is meant to show me that he is my soul mate and that I should say *everything is forgiven* and

forgive me and *we should try again*. But right before I make a fool out of myself, I notice that I'm getting tracers off the joint that the familiar strangers are now passing amongst them and I ask, "Was this tea dosed?" "Just 'srhooms," says a girl in a Ramones t-shirt and a The Cat in the Hat hat, and I realize I'm just buzzed, and not still in love with Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed, which is a relief, because the friends who lived through that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed would not be pleased to hear that he was once again Terry-who-is-my-boyfriend. And, really, they'd be right.

Besides, it would have created pretty significant problems with Dogman-who-is-my-boyfriend-now.

In the morning Mommy Buddha and I take our backpacks and find Hippie Hollow proper. We camp among some students from Kent who are here on a sort of combined peace mission/drug run that never fully makes sense to me. Mommy Buddha spends much of the time running into town to buy fast food; he has Crohn's Disease and can't take the whole-grain, raw-vegetable, everything-spiced-with-garlic-and-hot-pepper-sauce food that is served up at the free kitchens around the gathering. So he wakes up, walks the few miles to the car, drives into town, and sits at McDonald's during the heart of the day, and then drives back in the evening. He's already disgusted with the dirt and the lack of queer boys with ponytails who he'd hoped would want to have sex with him.

I spend the days wandering around just staring at stuff: the giant spider webs woven into jungle gyms by the noncompetitive play folk, the painted elephant that the Krishnas

brought from New Vrindaban, the jugglers and giant bubble blowers and dervishes whirling in the dust.

At night I lay in our borrowed tent and listen to the echoing, sing-songy *we love you*s that float through the hills. I call back until Mommy Buddha tells me that if I don't shut the fuck up and let him sleep he's going to show me how much he does not love all this hippie bullshit in his mean voice, and then I just lay there quietly feeling all that echoing love wash over me. Because, although I know it's hokey and more than a little played out, I actually believe in the power of love, organic vegetable curry over brown rice, dreadlocks, and drum circles to change the world. I believe those strangers up in the hills when they holler into the night we love you the way my Christian friends believe Jesus loves them.

I'm twenty-one and have just figured out how alone I really am in the world, that I don't belong to my parents anymore, that I will make it or not based solely on what I can and choose to do. That it is, in fact, possible not to make it, to auger in and fall apart and wind up spending most evenings alone in your apartment eating green beans out of the can and listening to Joni Mitchell before just going the fuck to bed at nine o'clock because there isn't any reason not to and you have to work tomorrow anyway.

So, I really want to believe that these strangers love me. And they want me to believe it, too. I know they do. Which is why I stay away from Krishna Kitchen, even though they have the most reliably potable water. I recognize that I am, at this moment, lonely in a dangerous way. In a maybe-it-wouldn't-be-so-bad-to-move-to-New-Vrindaban-in-spite-of-the-rumors-of-drug-running-and-underaged-sex-scandals way. Well, that, and

there is a persistent rumor that they put saltpeter in their food to help folk avoid the temptations of illicit sex, and I'm pretty okay with giving in to that particular temptation under the right circumstances. Though it might explain why Mommy Buddha is having such a hard time finding pony-tailed boys who want to have sex with him.

We stay through the Om ceremony on the Fourth of July, joining in the chanting of thousands of tie-dyed, shaggy-haired peaceniks in Main Meadow and then erupting into hoots of joy and dancing. Or, at least, I erupt. Mommy Buddha sits with our packed gear and waits for me to get the hell over it so that we can get on the road. On the way to the car, we pass a small booth passing out copies of AllWays Free, a sort of newsletter/crash pad guide put together by the Rainbow Family. High on love, and possibly hash from a brownie handed to me by a passing woman in Main Meadow that tasted like dirt and happiness, I put down my name and my address. "Rainbow family all ways welcomed!" I write underneath.

We pile our dirty selves and our dirty gear into Mommy Buddha's old, broken down Volvo on which we had painted My Car-ma and glued plastic dinosaurs in preparation for our journey. Car drag. I'm dressed in an ugly brown and orange dashiki that I found in a pile of give-aways at one of the kitchens, Mommy Buddha's wearing one of his customary housedresses. So, of course, we get a flat tire. In Alabama. And equally of course, Mommy Buddha doesn't have a jack, though at least he has a spare.

"I'm pretty certain that this is where we get murdered," I say, as we sit by the side of the road. We get flipped off and

honked at, but for a very long time nobody is inclined to stop and help.

"Shut up," says Mommy Buddha. "Just shut the fuck up, okay?"

So I do. We're both scared. The only thing worse than having nobody stop to help would be to have a state trooper stop to help and—because I'm wearing a dashiki and he's wearing a housedress and there are plastic dinosaurs glued to the car which most certainly all add up to probable cause—take a little look-see at what all we have in the car. Which, along with all our smelly gear and a week's worth of fast food wrappers, is a sheet of blotter acid and some mighty fine marijuana. The blotter acid is half the reason I went to the gathering, and all the reason Mommy Buddha agreed to come along. Well, that and the ponytailed queer boy sex I'd promised him that had turned out to be a lot harder to find than the drugs. We would throw it away, but there isn't any place to throw it. No woods. Not even any kudzu. Just a flat expanse of concrete and dry packed clay.

And after about an hour I start praying for the murderer to show up before the southern policeman because I'm pretty sure I'd rather be dead than a Jewish hippie chick locked up in a rural Alabama jail.

Also, I start to wonder how long it takes to die of thirst.

And at pretty much that same moment it occurs to me that maybe I should have looked for Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed before we left and at least said goodbye.

Finally, after we've been sitting in the road dust for a good two and a half hours, a trucker pulls over and changes the tire for us.

Actually, he makes a u-turn and comes back to change our tire, because he'd been driving the other way. He makes it known up front that he didn't want to stop, doesn't really like our kind and thinks we're pretty much fucking idiots, but he also either never figures out that we aren't both girls or he does figure it out and has no idea what to make of Mommy Buddha so just pretends to still think we're both girls, and he says he just couldn't feel right about leaving two young girls stranded by the side of the road. He tells us a little bit about what Jesus means to him, but in a way that's lovely and explains why he stopped, not in a way that makes it seem like he might fix the tire and then murder us for being abominations of nature or something. So, we're grateful.

As he pulls away, he says "Jesus loves you, you know." He brakes to give us one last looksee. "Even people like you," he adds.

And after he's gone, I call out in that sing-songy Rainbow way, "We love you!" Mommy Buddha rolls his eyes and pulls out into traffic.

Shelter

Oh Death! Oh Death! Won't you spare me over to another year?
Please spare me over to another year.
-Traditional

On the day I met Wilbur, the snow was coming down so hard and fast I had to walk to work. My battered old car and its bald tires couldn't be trusted on icy pavement and already the snow lay in drifts as high as the front bumper. I was pulling a double at Bartlett House—8 am to midnight—and figured that even if I could get the car there, I'd have to leave it when my shift was over. The weather report called for another foot or so of snow. So, bundled in my mother's hand-me-down parka, my roommate's too-big snow boots, and the keffiyeh I wore then as both a scarf and a political statement, I walked the few miles between home and the homeless shelter through the beginnings of what would come to be known as The Storm of the Century, The Great Blizzard of 1993.

Bartlett House was new then, with only a handful of dormitory rooms, a large communal area for watching television and serving meals, an industrial kitchen, and three offices. The shelter had a men's room and a women's room, each with two toilets and two showers, and another half bath behind the locked door of the general staff office. We had room on the bed assignment sheet for forty people. By the time I got to work that morning, forty-seven people had checked in for the day.

"Police are bringing everybody in," said Rich, who had

worked the overnight. "Not just the guys off the riverbank, either. I mean everybody." He gestured to the hallway packed with people just milling around, pointing to one guy in particular. Melvin. We'd kicked him out of the shelter a few months before when, after the other residents had complained of a terrible smell coming from his bunk, we'd discovered several decomposing squirrel carcasses and a hunting knife tucked inside his rucksack. He'd refused to give up either, saying the food we served was full of poison and he preferred to eat what he could kill on his own. Even the police were a little wary of Melvin, who was rumored now to be living off feral cats and road kill in a sewer pipe near the Wal-Mart.

"Did they take his knife away?" I asked.

"Said they did," Rich answered, in a way that suggested there was a good chance they hadn't.

"The cops said we couldn't turn anybody away until the weather breaks." Rich handed me the bed assignment sheet and the cordless phone, our only link to outside help in an emergency. "I ran out of blankets. I've been giving out the towels and extra mattress pads, but we're almost out of those, too. There's maybe a little room left on the floors in rooms four and five, but other than that, we're past full."

Rich left, and I gathered a small corps of long-term residents and, together, we worked out a strategy for dealing with the demands of the sudden influx of so many people. Traveling Jack and Cat-Eyes sat guard near the door in exchange for the privilege of coming back into the shelter after a few beers later that night. They escorted the people who came in throughout the day back to the kitchen so I could find them a place to sleep and write their names in the margins of the bed assignment sheet.

Rita and Star peeled fifty pounds of potatoes, Errol boiled them off in batches, and a woman called Granny Lynn mashed them with commodity butter and tins of evaporated milk. Carthelius helped me pull pounds and pounds of ground venison out of the freezers and defrost it in the microwave. Granny Lynn mixed it with powdered eggs, dehydrated onions, ketchup, and cornflakes, making four giant meatloaves in five-gallon metal steam-table trays. Everyone in the kitchen was sworn to secrecy. The venison was the only thing we had enough of to feed this crowd, but it turns out beggars can be choosers. It'd been languishing in the freezers for months, because when we told the residents what it was, most of them refused to eat it.

Just before dinner Cat-Eyes walked in with a sick, gray-haired man wearing a light jacket, torn sneakers with no laces, and carrying a sheaf of paperwork in a wet brown paper bag. There was a bloodied bandage at his throat, and his eyes were rheumy. "Cop said they found him sitting at the bus stop in front of the hospital. Says his name is Wilbur, but other than that he don't talk much." He put a hand under the old man's elbow to steady him. "Don't look so good, either." Wilbur swayed a little and then fell back into Cat-Eyes' arms.

Wilbur spent the night on the floor of the office, wrapped in the least worn mattress pad I could find and my mother's old parka. He seemed too frail to put in the hallway with the other late-comers, who were restless with drink or delusion and hadn't wanted to come in at all. I didn't sleep but sat perched in the desk chair after light's out, listening to him breathe. It seemed possible that, at some point in the night, his breathing would stop. The bag of papers turned out to be prescriptions and

discharge orders, and the bloody bandage covered the place where he'd had a feeding tube until just that morning. There was a tumor the size of a bread loaf hanging over the belt of his pants. Stomach cancer, he told me. "Probably won't live till spring," he'd said during the intake process, as if it were just another piece of information for the form. "But the medical card only pays for so many days in the hospital, and I guess my days must have run out this morning." He smiled and then turned his hands up in a gesture of helplessness.

Wilbur either never had been, or always was, homeless, depending on how you feel about private property. He lived in the same tar-paper shack he'd been raised in, but he didn't own it. His family had been squatting on unused coal company land for three generations. He'd worked odd jobs and done some jack-leg coal mining, but mostly he lived off what he could grow, hunt, and—since his sixty-fifth birthday a few months before—buy with his meager Social Security check. He was country poor, and this was before Oxycontin and crystal meth destroyed what dignity came with that. He drank some but wasn't a drunk. He didn't read well but had never needed to learn. He wasn't much of a church-going man, because the church was a long walk from his home and he'd never owned a working car, but he said his prayers and figured he was mostly right with God. His was a simple life but one well enough lived to suit him. Or it had been, until the cancer forced him into town.

I'd heard a lot of tragic stories in my year at Bartlett House, and I knew that almost everyone who ended up there could have avoided it if jobs doing manual labor were easier to find. If we hadn't stopped building low-income housing. If we still believed it was the obligation of the middle class to offer a

hand up to the impoverished. If we'd followed up on the promise to build full-service Community Mental Health Centers after we released the people who'd been held prisoner in our system of asylums and state hospitals. But I also knew the parts of their stories that made the reasons for their homelessness more than just the inevitable result of a failing social welfare system: the women who used the shelter to get away from one abusive man only to leave a few weeks later with another, the old men who had to drink just to get by, the young men and women who were mentally ill and augmented their craziness with street drugs but didn't take the pills that would have made them better. The people who lived here had difficult lives and complicated stories. My job was just to feed them, assign them chores and beds, and keep what passed for peace among them as best I could.

Wilbur's story wasn't complicated. He was a single man from the country who'd gotten by until cancer made him too weak to hunt or farm. He hadn't ended up at Bartlett House because he'd drunk himself there, squandered his money, or been caught cheating on a disability claim. No, Wilbur had ended up at Bartlett House because he'd never married or had children, and kin was how a man like Wilbur got through his dying years. And because I, too, am from around here, I know that when there is no kin, neighbors are supposed to step up and help so it wasn't hard to decide to offer Wilbur a place to live.

I'd been, since my late teens, the sort of hippie who tries to save the world by doing bong hits and going to Rainbow Gatherings. Before coming to Morgantown, I'd lived for a while on something that was almost a commune—though, because we all kept day jobs or took classes, and so also had in-town homes, not

really much of one— in rural Wayne County, West Virginia. We had electricity but no running water; we showered by dribbling lukewarm water out of a bucket on a hook; woke up freezing in the early morning hours to add logs to the woodstove; tried and failed to feed ourselves on what we could grow on the one small patch of bottomland near the well. It's been fun, but the world stayed the same in spite of us.

I was trying, then, in my late twenties, to be the sort of hippie who changes the world by being actively engaged with my community. I put "Think Globally/Act Locally" and "Who Is Your Farmer" bumper stickers on my car. I stopped shopping at grocery stores in favor of the local co-op, bought clothes only in thrift stores, and traded my Grateful Dead bootlegs for demo tapes from local bands. And still, the world was as it had been.

It was only after I got the job at the shelter that any of what I was doing had clear and immediate results. I knew, when I cut off the boots Cat-Eyes had duct taped together and soaked his feet in warm water with Epsom salts on the night of the blizzard, that at least one person wouldn't lose a toe to frostbite. That when I sat down with Mary to fill out her application for HUD housing, a mother and two young children were one step closer to having a home of their own. Even the dinners I cooked, lousy as they often were, meant that forty or so folk wouldn't be hungry that night. And suddenly the world stopped going on as if nothing I did mattered, even if the things I did only mattered in the smallest of ways to a very few people. That was, finally, enough for me.

And so, when a man dying of cancer showed up one snowy night in a thin jacket and with no place to go, it didn't take much thought to decide he should move into the empty

apartment. The doctors said he had weeks to live, and how much of a burden are a few weeks when one is presented with the opportunity to do something so wholly and obviously good? I was young—younger than I should have been at 27—and it seemed a simple thing to do.

It took surprisingly little convincing to get the social worker, then the Executive Director, and finally the woman who administered our primary grant at the state capital, to let me break every rule about client/staff interaction and take Wilbur home with me. We moved him into the empty basement apartment in my house less than two weeks after he'd been brought to the shelter by the police. Even people with long careers in social services, and the disillusionment that goes with them, understood that Wilbur's story shouldn't end at Bartlett House, and that if we allowed the rules to stop us from making sure it didn't, then we were not the good people we held ourselves out to be. My parents would have been harder to convince, and so I didn't tell them. I can't remember when they found out, but by then, Wilbur had settled in and there was nothing to discuss.

The basement apartment was a dump, even compared to the rest of my ramshackle little house. When I'd first bought the place, which had no central heating and had cost less than a new car, I had rented the apartment out to a local writer, who had thought it was romantically disgusting, for a hundred dollars a month. After he moved out, I'd left it empty with the vague plan, but neither the skill nor the money, to fix it up. The floors of the apartment were concrete poured directly on dirt, the walls crumbling drywall or exposed cinder block. The bathroom had only a toilet and a miner's shower: a shower head attached

directly to a pipe in the ceiling over a drain in the floor. But Wilbur's shack had neither running water nor electricity, and the apartment had its own street-level entrance with a wide porch shaded by an apple tree and a row of forsythia separating it from the road, both of which seemed to bloom almost the instant the snows from the storm had melted. "I like to sit out on the porch of an evening and have me a sip of beer," Wilbur'd said upon seeing the place. I understood that to mean that he would take it. Wilbur was fastidious about his apartment. He spent his Social Security check on new curtains and a slipcover for the old sleeper sofa in the living room, big bottles of bleach, and boxes of steel wool. The social worker from the shelter found him dishes, sheets, a half-busted vacuum cleaner, and a television. The grants director from the state sent him two ferns as a housewarming gift. Virgil Peterson, one of my English professors, produced a mattress and box spring he said were used and just laying around his house, but still smelled like the plastic wrappings in which they had been packaged. Rich, the overnight shelter worker, borrowed a truck and drove Wilbur deep into Preston County to retrieve what he wanted from the tar paper shack, and, less than a month after he'd been released from the hospital, Wilbur was as much on his feet as he had ever been.

He was also fastidious about his appearance. He wore his thick white hair in a pomaded pompadour and favored Western shirts and jeans, both of which he kept ironed, large brass belt buckles that he shined, and white leather tennis shoes that he polished. "Man doesn't want people to treat him like a bum, he can't look like one," he said. And he didn't look like a bum. He looked like an aging country music star. The kind who had a storied past who'd grown temperate and dignified with age.

The cancer didn't kill him by spring of that year, or the next. For as long as I lived in the little house on Hite Street, he did, too. He was rarely any trouble. Once in a while, he'd go downtown and forget that, since the cancer, he couldn't tolerate more than two beers. He'd have four or five, and then start the walk home only to discover he was too tired to make it. The police would find him asleep on a bench in the courthouse square. When they woke him, he'd say, "Call my daughter, Sarah." And the police, who knew I wasn't his child, would call and say jokingly, "We need you to come and get your father." When I'd arrive to pick him up from the station, he'd hug me and wink, as if he thought we'd really pulled one over on the man. The police winked, too, as if we'd just pulled one over on old Wilbur. And I would smile, because for one of the few times in my life, I knew nobody was getting the raw end of this deal.

On Wednesdays, when I was working at Bartlett House, he let himself in to use the ringer washer in my kitchen and hung his clothes to dry on a line he'd strung from the apple tree to the side of the house. When the washing machine broke down, which it did every few months, he fixed it. He was handy, and often came upstairs to tinker with the plumbing, the old Warm Morning heaters, the fuse box. He said he'd never owned a car, but he kept my oil changed. And although he couldn't push the lawnmower, he kept the blades sharp and made sure it was full of gas so that I could.

Every Saturday, I brought him his groceries: twenty-one cans of chocolate Ensure, two Hershey's chocolate bars, and seven forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor. We'd sit on the porch for a while, or in winter stand in the kitchen, and gossip about

the goings-on at the shelter. The folk who cycled in and out were as close as he had to friends since moving into town. Two or three times a week, he'd go to the soup kitchen for a lunch he couldn't eat, just for the company. He would warn me when Traveling Jack was on a drinking binge and ought to be put out at night, when Pamela was off her meds and needed looking after, when there was someone new in town that he thought was up to no good and warranted a little extra scrutiny. He knew, without being told, that he shouldn't bring these friends back to the house. If they gave him grief about this, he never let on, though I imagine they did. Apartments were communal among the frequently homeless. It was bad form to have a place and not let other folk crash there. This was part of why it was so hard for them to hold on to apartments once they had them.

During courses of chemo, I would take Wilbur to the hospital twice a week to have the little pump he wore in a fanny pack refilled. Because he got the poison so slowly, he said it never made him ill, but he refused radiation treatment after the first course. Given the odds, he didn't think the sickness it caused was worth it. "If I was a dog, it wouldn't be time to put me down, but there wouldn't be no use in taking me to the vet, neither," he used to joke. He was proud of outlasting his prognosis. He refused pain medication because the doctor told him he couldn't drink while taking it and that offended his sense of autonomy. Most nights, he said, he fell asleep while the bottle was still mostly full and dumped out the rest in the morning, but it was the principle of the thing. "Ain't nobody," he'd say, "should tell an old man he can't have himself a beer at night excepting his wife, and I never wanted me no wife."

Wilbur was accustomed to solitude. He didn't ask much

and preferred to tinker with the car or the washing machine when I wasn't home, so early on I gave him a key to my door and an extra set of keys to the car. It never occurred to me to wonder about the wisdom of this. Because he couldn't write well, he left artifacts instead of notes: empty oil cans, the busted belt he'd replaced on the washer, sometimes in spring a bouquet of wildflowers wrapped in a paper towel on my kitchen table. That he asked so little, and was so completely trustworthy, made it easy to have him there. Very soon, we began simply to think of ourselves as neighbors, though the helpful and concerned sort that even then seemed something of an anachronism. A blessing, really.

After I finished college, in the summer that I was twenty-nine—long after Wilbur should have been dead, according to his doctor—I sold the house and moved to Alabama. I felt guilty leaving Wilbur behind, with nobody to drive him to chemotherapy or do his shopping.

"Do you want to come with me?" I'd asked, once the decision was made. "You can. And it's always warm there, which would be easier on you." We were standing in his kitchen, both in aprons. I was making pies for a bake sale, and he was teaching me to make the crust with lard, the way his mother had.

"Nah," he said, cutting the lard into the flour with two knives. "I like it here just fine, and I can get along. The ladies from Christian Help will carry me to the doctor, and I'm sure I can get someone to do the shopping." He passed me the mixing bowl. "Here you go. I can mix it, but I ain't never been any good at rolling it out. Always tear it up."

He didn't seem sick, just worn out. He'd never really

seemed sick after that first night in the shelter.

"I feel like I'm running out on you, though. Maybe I shouldn't go?"

"Now you're just talking crazy," he said, taking off his apron. "Well, my part's done. You gotta finish them pies yourself. I'm gonna go lie down for a nap. Just let yourself out when you're done." He ducked out of the kitchen without even saying goodbye, and, just like that, the matter was settled.

I knocked five thousand dollars off the price of the house and sold it to some friends with the understanding that Wilbur could stay there, rent free, for as long as he lived. They promised to be kind to him, though not to take him to doctor's appointments or do his shopping. But it was okay, because he'd arranged for "the charity ladies" to do those things. I called to check on him as soon as I'd moved into my new place. The friends who bought the house carried their cordless phone down to him. "You just get on with your life," he'd said. "I've got everything under control over here. Now quit bothering me, and these nice people, and get you some rest. Alabama is a long drive."

Wilbur died two weeks later, sitting in an old armchair that he'd found in a neighbor's trash and moved onto the porch just that afternoon. It was a quiet, easy death. He had a pauper's burial. The social worker at Bartlett House filled out the forms, even though it had been years since he was her responsibility. There was no service. No headstone. Just a small prayer before lunch at the soup kitchen on the day he was interred and a three line obituary in the local paper. It would have been enough for Wilbur, though, I think. He wasn't much for ceremony or making a fuss.

The basement of my current home is empty except for boxes of books and a washing machine. What little world-changing I do happens in the college classroom, although I like to think that—as at the homeless shelter—what few changes I can help bring about make some small difference. As I write this, the winter storms are receding and the forsythia has gone to bud. I have my own chair on my own porch now, beside my husband's, where we too like to sit of an evening and have a beer. Sometimes, I raise my bottle to the memory of Wilbur. Mostly, though, I just get on with my life, as Wilbur said I should.

Striking the Match

My husband gets up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. In the moonlight, his long blond hair looks almost white, his skin glows. I lie quietly and stare at the small of his back, the curve of his ass, the delicate taper of his thighs. This is a kind of looking that, until I married him, I knew only how to receive, not to give; a looking that is full of desire for the other, not as a whole being, but as an object of beauty.

This is not how he looks at me. I'm on the cusp of fifty and look it. He's on the cusp of forty and doesn't. My body has aged hard, and I've not treated it well. Even in my youth, I was plain, perhaps pretty for a year or two in my early twenties and maybe again a little elegant during a stretch of good months in my thirties, but being beautiful has always been beyond me. If people find me so, it's only after they've come to know me. I have never turned heads. I minded this quite a lot in my teens, when it seemed that only beautiful people mattered, that it was a prerequisite for a good life. But it isn't, and it didn't take too many years out in the world to realize that it's more important to be interesting than beautiful, and interesting is something I can manage.

I once dated a woman so beautiful that she glided through life on the desire of others. A man she didn't sleep with paid her rent and, although she wasn't an artist, called himself her patron. Another man she didn't sleep with had given her a car. *Someone needs to take care of you*, he'd said to her, though the car itself

proved she was savvier about the way of the world than he was. *Someone like you needs looking after*. Bartenders covered her tab, drug dealers never asked for their money, policemen always let her go with a warning.

I tried to look at her then the way I look at my husband now, but her beauty nettled me. The way she wielded it discomfited me. I'd seen how she treated the people who desired her, and I didn't want to make myself that sort of fool. It's a dangerous way to look at someone who does not love you.

My husband is honest enough to say that he has never found my body particularly desirable, but still he asked me out on our first date three years ago because he found my way of being in the world, my sense of humor, and my intelligence sexy. *That matters more*, he says, and *makes you beautiful to me*. Sometimes that breaks my heart a little bit; sometimes it makes me feel loved.

It took us a while to arrive at this understanding. It was only once I thought to ask, *do you not find my body sexy*? instead of simply, *don't you find me sexy*? that he could articulate the difference. These weren't conversations we wanted to have, but they were necessary. And I know that it's our ability to talk about the hard things that is really the strength of our marriage, that this matters far more than who reaches for whom in the night.

Still, it's taken some getting used to, this being the one who desires rather than the one who is desired. Being the one to say, *I want you*. The one to extend the goodnight kiss beyond sleep well and into let me touch you. The one who mutters in the middle of it, *my god, you are beautiful*. The one who sometimes whispers, *thank you*. The one who afterwards makes up the outside part of the spoon.

It would be a lie to say that I never miss the flash of longing in a lover's eye, the low growl of desire near my ear during lovemaking, the thrill of being wanted, urgently, by someone. The opportunity to say *yes* instead of to ask, *would you*? The quiet pleasure of acquiescence to someone else's need.

A man I know only a little sits next to me in our local coffeehouse. He looks at the title of the book I'm reading, which just happens to be Jack Halberstam's Female Masculinity, and says in a low voice, *I never can figure out if you academics make everything sexy, or if you take all the sexiness out of everything*. By the way he leans in further than he needs to when he speaks and holds my eyes after he's done, I recognize that he's making a pass. It occurs to me that he may not know that I'm married; he's only the friend of a friend, and I've stopped wearing my ring because I tend to fidget with it in a way that gets on even my nerves. So I smile and say, *It's probably a little bit of both* in my flirty voice and lean in for just a moment to enjoy the sparkle in his eye, the way he's looking at me. But then I lean away again and say, *But, really, it's probably more of the latter* because I am married, happily so, and have gotten everything I want from this encounter.

In our early days, before my husband could articulate the ways in which he both did, and did not, feel desire for me, we sometimes fought about our sex life. *I'm tired of always having to be the one who makes the first move,* I'd say, and *do you think I'm ugly*, and of course *are you sure you love me*? And he would say *I'll try to be better about that* and *of course not* and *more than anything, because you're my person*. And we'd make love that night because he'd reach for me, and then not again—sometimes for weeks—until I

reached for him.

In my mid-twenties, I had an affair with a man who had just turned sixty. He was not a handsome man, but he was kind and funny. When we were in bed together, he would marvel at the smoothness of my skin, the tautness of my muscles, the rise of my breasts, and the tiny swell of my belly. He could lie beside me for hours at a time, just tracing the length of my spine with his fingers and whispering, *you are spring come to sweeten my old age*. And although I didn't find his body sexy, I craved his touch and the way he looked at me, amazed, as if my body were a gift I brought to him each time we lay together. It was a good love, and for many years we were happy until life took me to places where he couldn't follow.

I tell my husband, *I'm writing an essay about what it's like to be a person who is older and plain married to a person who is younger and beautiful. About what it's like to be married to someone who doesn't find my body sexy*. Part of me wants him to say, *Don't be ridiculous, you are beautiful and of course I think you're sexy* but instead he says*, I love you*. I read him the paragraphs that were hardest to write and say*, does this sound fair to you*? He says *yes* when some part of me had been wishing he would say *no*. On another day, it might scare me that we are so free to say these things, that they feel so immutably part of how we are together. Today, though, it's a relief. I have seen other women turn over their lives to hiding the truth of their aging, chasing the desire of a man, and I have neither the time nor the inclination for that. This is my body, and I live in it more happily than I would endure the awful things I'd need to do to make it appear young

again: the plastic surgeries and starvation diets, the trips to the salon and the cosmetic dentistry. Where the years weigh heavily on me, it is because they were good years lived well, and I have no desire to make my history invisible.

The afternoon sun filters through the blinds and illuminates my husband where he lies in our bed after our lovemaking. His fine long legs and his delicate hands stick out from the tangle of our blankets, and he rests his head on my shoulder. *I love you*, he says, and I trust this. *I love you*, *too*, I say, and wrap my arms around his shoulders. And, although this is not the passion I am used to, it's still passion, and the heat of it is not diminished simply because I was the one who struck the match.

About the Author

Sarah Einstein is the author of *Mot: A Memoir* (University of Georgia Press 2015), *Remnants of Passion* (Shebooks 2014). Her essays and short stories have appeared in *The Sun, Ninth Letter, PANK,* and other journals. Her work has been awarded a Pushcart Prize, a Best of the Net, and the AWP Prize in Creative Nonfiction. She teaches creative writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

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