

What happens when survival seems to mean closing off one emotional artery after another?

—Adrienne Rich

On the corner of 1st Avenue and 30th Street, behind a spiked wrought-iron fence, the old Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital looms. I study photos of the decaying building as it exists today and listen to my family's stories about what it was like over fifty years ago. Now, dead trees are scattered across the once lush green lawn. Vines crawl up nine stories of brick. The patients from my family's stories, who once drifted through the halls, are gone. Inside, employees of the men's shelter direct the homeless to old beds. Specks of yellow and gray paint peel from the lobby walls and spill onto the filthy tile. A faded map is pinned to a seventh-floor wall, with the words YOU ARE HERE printed on the upper, right corner and an arrow pointing to the center of the page.

At the bottom: PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL. DEPARTMENT OF HOSPITALS. E. 29TH ST. 1ST AVE. E. 30TH ST. EAST RIVER. NEW YORK CITY.

Empty Newport boxes, cigarette butts, and ashes lie in cracked windows. I wonder how long ago some of those butts were abandoned—who left them behind. I

Items to Survive

Caitlin McGill

wonder what survives on those cracked windowsills, wonder if in 1940, 1950, or 1960, my great-great-uncle Herbert stood at his window, gazing down at the people walking along 1st Avenue, tilting his chin up as he

blew smoke and scratched the gray scruff on his clammy neck. Did he press his cigarette into the ledge, watching the light fade from the tip?

I imagine Herbert, nearly fifty years old, pacing up and down the yellow halls. It's 1952, and Claire, who will become my grandmother, arrives at the hospital on a sweaty summer morning with her mother Lillian—Herbert's sister. Claire is twenty-three. Her uncle has been a Bellevue resident for more than a decade. Since his diagnosis, Claire and Lillian have visited every Sunday. Lillian never learned how to drive, so Claire chauffeurs. Despite her mother's offer, Claire never waits in the car. Instead, she wanders the halls, peeking into rooms and opening cabinets when no one's looking. The walls have not begun to shed their paint.

Claire's husband, William, never joins. Today, he's playing golf and smoking cigars and sipping whiskey on the rocks at the country club where his wealthy friends call him "Bunny"—a childhood nickname he never shed.

Claire and Lillian are escorted into an exam room where they sit in metal chairs and wait for Herbert and the doctor. When the men enter, Lillian stands and hastily

embraces her brother, who does not raise his arms from his side. He smells of cigarettes. Everyone sits. Dr. David Wechsler, chief psychologist at Bellevue, wears a beige coat and shiny black shoes. He's nearly bald, and his mustache is graying at the corners, but his brows are still dark and full. Ears long, chin square, cheekbones prominent, he is a Romanian Jew, who, like Herbert and Lillian's Hungarian parents, immigrated to the United States near the turn of the century. He grins, nods his head at Claire, a beautiful young woman.

Nothing about Herbert has changed. His behavior is erratic; his sleeping and eating habits, irregular; his speech, disorganized. When the doctor and Lillian leave to escort Herbert back to his room, Claire remains. She waits for the door to click, for the shuffling of shoes to fade down the hall, and then she slides the doctor's manila file toward her, flips through the pages and reads: *paranoid schizophrenic*. She thinks of her grandfather Charles—Lillian and Herbert's father—who died in a similar institution after years of treatment for depression and who beat his children, as Lillian does. She thinks of her husband, Bunny, who will not beat their children but ignore them instead.

Two years before I began asking about Bellevue, my mother and I sat on the back deck of a coffee shop called Muddy Waters. We had rented a car in Boston and driven to New London, Connecticut, where we were waiting to drive the car onto a ferry that would take us to Orient Point, New York. It was April, fifty degrees. Twelve years since Uncle Neil—my mother's brother—took his life. I was twenty-two. The wind was crisp and cool on my neck, and I was thinking I'd like to live there, in New England. We talked about how good the coffee tasted and closed our eyes, listened to the boats chug in and out of the harbor.

"I've always loved it here," my mother said. "The Northeast, I mean. Even though it's been years since I moved to Florida, I've always felt I belonged here. I miss it."

I didn't say anything, just nodded my head.

We drove the car onto the ferry, and I wondered how the cars didn't get wet on the bottom level of the ship—wondered at my ignorance of this Northeastern way of life. We sat at the very top, where we could see the hilly green edges of Connecticut and New York on every side of us. Halfway there, the houses dotting the landscape faded from view. I wanted to live in one of those houses. A golden retriever played on the deck where my mother and I sat. It was cold, but we didn't move. At Orient Point, we got back in the rental car and drove off the vessel, just like that, and then it was a two-lane road all through Long Island to Southampton—another town with another graduate school that I was considering attending.

"None of this was here when I left," my mother said, pointing to the dozens of wineries we passed.

I wanted to stop for a glass, but I couldn't. She'd been sober five years. I thought of Carlos, the man I'd met when I was sixteen and he was twenty-two, and tried to convince myself that moving with him when I began graduate school, wherever that would be, was the right decision, but the best I could do was try to ignore my thoughts, make them disappear.

But there they were: thoughts of him not long before, punching my car fender, using cocaine, smoking joints, taking pill after pill, and flying into a rage. There he was: asking me to drive him to his friend's house to pick up more weed, not telling me he took some pill that had really thrown him this time. Thrown him so far that when we arrived at his friend's house—a house so far away from the center of Miami that it was surrounded by farmland, by grass so tall you felt you could run through the fields and get lost forever—he was sweating, his temples throbbing, his pulse quickening. There we were: arguing about how far we'd driven and how much money we'd spent and how little we had to spare. There I was: telling him to go ahead and punch me, right there, why not? Telling him that at this point, we had nothing to lose. Wondering if I didn't stick around, who would?

My grandmother, sixteen years old, sits outside my grandfather's parents' house in North Bergen, New Jersey, waiting for him to return from class at New York University. It's 1945. He's twenty-two. With the help of the GI Bill, he's finishing the degree he started at nineteen—before he left for the war in Europe. They have not yet married, but their families assume they will. She studies his dark curls and broad chest as he approaches in his Army uniform. William wrinkles his forehead and tightens his lips into thin lines as she smiles and blushes, smoothing her hands over her pleated skirt and tucking her thick hair behind her ear.

"Beautiful out today, isn't it?" she says. "Maybe we all could head to the city, or Coney Island, or catch a movie, if you'd like."

"Not today," he says, walking past her and into the house, where, as usual, his parents, Sarah and Morris Ressler, argue in the kitchen that smells of garlic and fish. Claire follows. The house is small, the halls narrow, and the bedrooms just large enough for a bed and dresser. William has three sisters and one brother. It's crowded.

"I told you—we have to make it to the synagogue early today!" Sarah says, elbowing Morris out of the kitchen. Her fingers are covered in olive oil. "Get your nice clothes on."

Claire is used to this noise—she's been the best friend of one of William's sisters since she was twelve and spends time here everyday whether her friend is home yet or not. She's an only child, and her mother, Lillian, dominates their household. Claire hates seeing Lillian deride her father; she prefers being here.

Morris has always been quiet, but lately, he barely says a word. It hasn't been long since his brother—an ultra-Orthodox husband and father—took a gun to his head and pulled the trigger after learning that his daughter had run off with and married a Gentile boy.

"Bill," Sarah says, gazing at her son. His dark curls are cut short; his eyebrows are thick and full, nearly meeting at the center. "My Bill." It's almost a whisper. She's still not used to seeing him in the house, in the United States—alive.

In her room at the back of the house, William's oldest sister, Charlotte, studies. She's already earned her BA in chemistry from NYU, and soon, she'll receive her PhD in synthetic

organic chemistry from Columbia. Between chapters, she pauses, walks to the window, and watches blackbirds chase each other through tulip trees, darting through the yellow leaves, which have begun to fade with the summer. She studies the dull blue-green sheen that coats their bodies as they glide through the once golden blooms of spring. She runs her thin fingers through her wavy brown hair. It's been a year, maybe two, since she last saw the man she hoped she would marry, since her mother and father discovered she was dating an Asian man. Though she'll live to be more than ninety, a scientist who will develop groundbreaking medications, including an epidural for which her boss will be awarded the Nobel Prize, she will never marry. She will never speak of the loss of her love, the misappropriated prize. She will discount these betrayals.

In the living room, William slumps into a single chair. Claire sits on the couch, pulling at its loose threads.

"Let's all eat, and then we'll go to services together," Sarah shouts to any of her children who can hear her. She knows Claire avoids synagogue. Unlike the Resslers, who are Orthodox, Claire's family is not religious, though they are Jewish.

"Not going." Bill snatches the newspaper from the table and reads of the war—can't stop reading of the war.

Sarah ignores him, stacking plates in the cabinet and slamming doors. Sweat slides down her face.

A decade later, when they are married and she's nursing their first child, Ellen, Claire watches her husband pick up *The New York Times* and read of post-war Europe. He does this every evening in the living room of their apartment in Queens, usually while smoking a cigar and always while sipping his whiskey. Claire prefers gin. Black stubble crawls down her husband's cheeks and around his chin. Circles droop beneath his eyes. Their black poodle, Jo-Jo, chews a bone at William's feet. Ellen cries off and on, off and on, from her crib. William flips through issues of *Time*, *The Washington Post*, and even *The Wall Street Journal*. Anything written on the war. He reads of the Germans, the liberated Jews who continue to die, the empty camps where, in William's dreams, smoke still rises.

He cannot stop reading of death because he cannot stop replaying this scene: May 2, 1945. William and his fellow soldiers of the 8th Infantry advance into Northern Germany. A blue patch with a white number 8 and a golden arrow—their insignia, and also the origin of their two nicknames, "The Golden Arrow" and "Pathfinder"—is sewn onto their sleeves. Some have already removed their helmets. It's a typical fifty-degree spring morning at the site of the Wöbbelin concentration camp. They're less than ten miles away from a city called Ludwigslust. The main gate, made of wood and wire that's curved at the top, is partially open. No Germans in sight. Directly beyond the gate is a one-story brick structure with a chimney and several windows. The number 59 has been marked in white on the front-facing side.

Dust: on the ground and in the wind and whipping into their eyes.

William nudges the gate open with his rifle and wonders, *Where are the people?*

There is only the sound of dirt crunching beneath their boots, birds calling through the surrounding trees, and the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division's cooling engines. Along with the 8th Infantry, this Airborne Division searches for survivors.

William steps inside. They find more buildings like the one marked with the number 59, but these structures have different numbers: 62, 60, 57. There appears to be an order. But the Army's focus is elsewhere. Their focus is on the bodies that stagger out of those structures, the bodies that appear to consist only of bone. Bodies with ripped cloth hanging from limbs. Naked bodies. Bodies lying motionless in the dirt. The heavy battles his division fought six months ago in the Hürtgen Forest are trivial compared to this. *Where are the people?* William wonders again.

A few days later, U.S. soldiers force the townspeople of Ludwigslust to bury the remaining corpses. In photos, these people are hunched, digging, some with caps on their heads, all looking down into graves they made with their own hands. The soldiers are standing around the diggers, looking up, away. Wooden crosses lie in the dirt, ready to be placed atop mounds of soil and bodies. I wonder if one of those watchful soldiers in the photographs is my grandfather William, Grandpa Bunny. But I cannot see their faces clearly. I can, though, see the faces of the German civilians in some photographs. They wrinkle their foreheads and pout their lips. Scarves are tied around some of the women's heads, and the men shield their faces with their hands, and I wonder: Is it really the warm May sun that's causing them to furrow their brows and squint, or is there something larger they cannot stand to see? Something so glaring and penetrating and severe that they can barely stand to open their eyes?

From his recliner, William slaps the newspaper on the coffee table. He never speaks of what he's read—what he's seen. "Come here, Jo," he says, lurching forward. "C'mon, Jo-Jo. Gimme that damn bone."

Jo-Jo continues chewing, the treat now soft and wet. William lunges at the dog, grabs the bone without getting bitten—Jo's notorious for biting—and throws it across the apartment. It lands beside the table where Claire sits, painting her nails. Her silk bathrobe slides down her shoulder. Her skin is speckled with sunspots. She yanks the robe back on with her free hand. Ellen continues to cry.

"You just gonna sit there?" William says, throwing his hands up.

Claire doesn't look at him.

He plods to the room where Ellen lies in her crib and scoops her up. With his baby in his arms, he approaches the window, looks down on the empty street below their apartment, and wonders what a world like this can offer his new child.

My mother, Ellen, thirteen years old, watches her parents' glasses empty and waits for their eyes to close for the night. When they finally do, she heads to the kitchen and sips from a bottle of wine. One morning, her father tells her mother, *I don't want to be married to*

you anymore, and heads out the door to work. Soon, she and her little brother, Neil, will move with their mother from Queens to Long Island. They must leave their friends, their playgrounds, their schools, behind.

When Claire packs, she thinks only of necessities: furniture, clothing, items to survive. She fills boxes with everything else—my mother's favorite dolls, class pictures, paintings she drew in art class—and races down the hall to the trash chute, where she opens the bin and throws everything inside. When it all reaches the bottom, my mother hears it: the sound of the incinerator, of her belongings burning, the door closing, everything gone.

Just the way my grandmother, Claire, likes it: the past suddenly, simply, and inconceivably gone.

In Long Island, Neil smokes weed, and Ellen fades. Both of them grow their thick black hair long. It's 1970. They live in a new house with a new stepfather, the winding road leading up to it hedged with laurel bushes, white and pink blooms popping out of the shrubbery. Neil has a learning disability that no one seems to notice, and the only thing Ellen likes about school is French class. She's failing math and doesn't care (neither does her mother), but in French, she's translating entire books and chatting with her teacher after class. Neil knows he's going to drop out. He hides behind his leather jacket and good looks; Ellen, behind her art. She paints abstract images of flowers and water in muted tones and long, wispy strokes. Ellen is too lost in the ends of those long strokes to imagine that her little brother is not coming back from this. She's too caught in the fact that her mother is still drinking gin, this time with her new husband, and that her father is still sipping whiskey at the club with his girlfriends while she cries off and on, off and on, in her new bedroom.

Something makes me think that despite my grandmother's long-held need to stifle her past, she likes to tell our family's stories. Something makes me think that, like me, she has a stomach for them, and the more and more we pull at these stories, the more the yarn continues to unravel, all of the threads forever connected, unending, the distinction between where one story begins and another ends—who caused what and why—impossible to discern.

When I was twenty years old, I sat with my grandmother at my cousin's bar mitzvah and talked with the older relatives: my mother's cousins, my late Grandpa Bunny's sisters—Helene, Gertrude, and Charlotte—and a distant cousin named Eli. Eli was almost eighty, bald and hunched, but he was still tall enough to dance with. Gray hair curved around his long ears. The top of his head shined as we swayed. I told him about my first year of college and, as I often did, avoided questions about my boyfriend, Carlos. We smiled through the silence.

When I returned to sit beside my grandmother, Claire, she leaned in and whispered, "Can you believe the story about that man's father?"

I shook my head. “What story? What about his father?”

“Oh, gee,” she said and looked away. “It’s just terrible. Really terrible. Grandpa Bunny’s mother, Sarah—well, she had a brother.”

She looked at me, shifted in her seat.

“Sarah’s brother had been in and out of a facility for depression, and when he finally came home to his wife and kids, he overdosed on his meds and died. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe not.” She raised her eyebrows. “The whole family said it was a heart attack. Nobody said a word about an overdose. Nobody ever said the word *suicide*. Eli was a little boy. That was his father.”

“Now—you can’t forget,” she added, looking over her shoulder. The DJ played the Black Eyed Peas, and my cousin’s thirteen-year-old friends stomped across the dance floor. No one could hear us. “Sarah was married to Morris. And Morris’s brother killed himself, too, over his daughter who married a non-Jew. They were dealing with that, too.”

She shook her head. “Why do you think Charlotte never married that Asian man? It’s just ridiculous. But anyway, no one says a word to Eli still, because who knows what he knows. He’s a grown man, a smart man, but you believe what you’re told when you’re a kid. Who wants to tell a kid that his father might’ve committed suicide?”

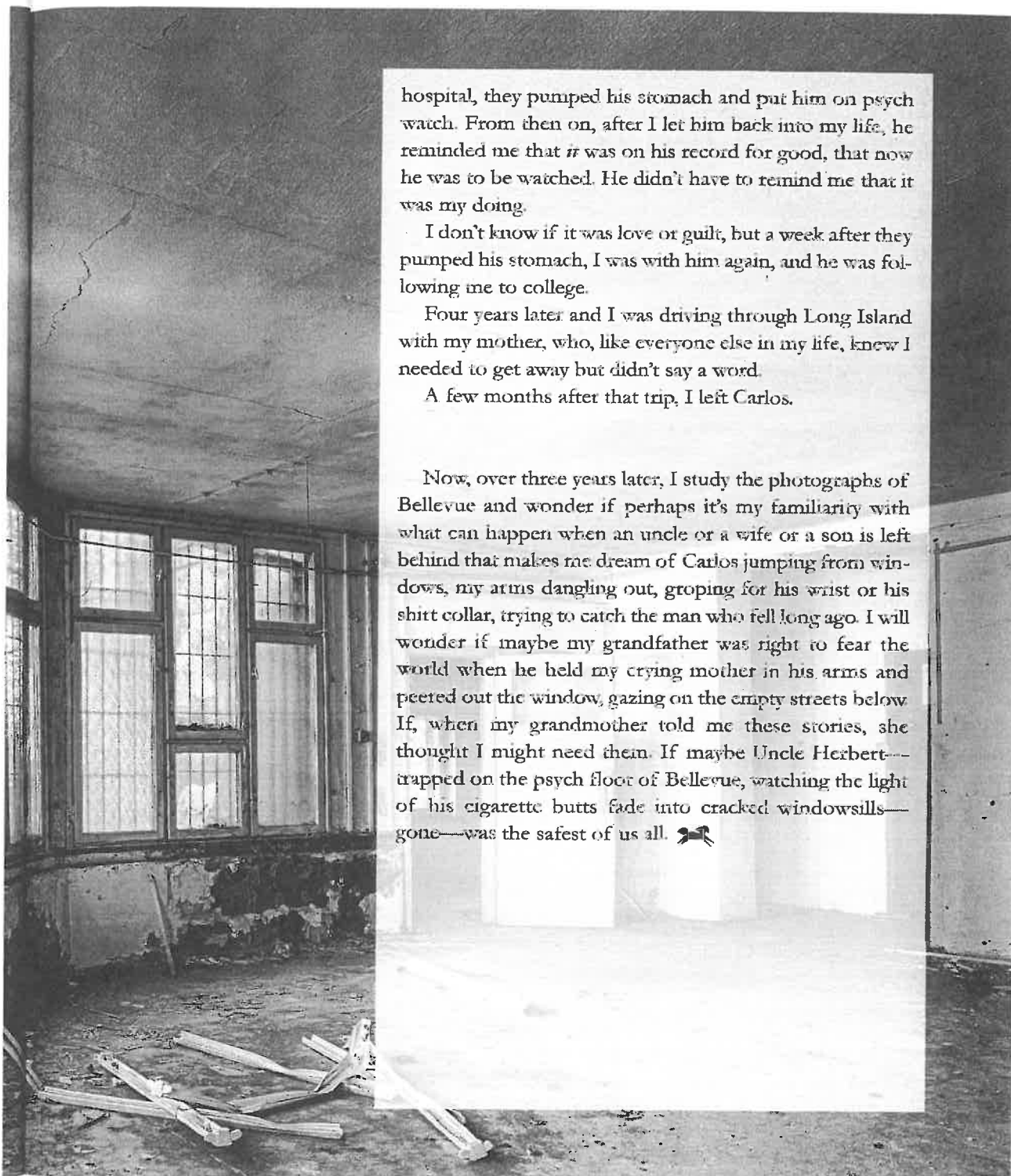
I placed my hand on my grandmother’s shoulder and felt the shoulder pads beneath her dress. She’d worn them since I was a kid, always longing for broad shoulders and young skin, for her youth.

Now, I imagine her face when my mother called to tell her that my Uncle Neil—her son—had put a gun to his head. I remember when my mother looked at me and my sister—ten and twelve years old—and said, “Uncle Neil passed away. Suicide—yes, yes, it was a gun.” I think about the fact that my mother told me the truth, and I’m glad, but I still wonder what that truth has done to me. I still wonder: if I’d never heard about the gun, would I have ever conjured that image of Carlos raising one to *his* head?

As my mother and I drove through Long Island, I wondered if it was the foliage of the wineries that reminded me of Carlos punching my car fender and taking pills—of those endless grassy fields—and then I thought of the first time I actually tried to break free. I was eighteen, and we’d been together for two years. High school graduation was six months away. I didn’t want him to follow me to college. When I told him, *I can’t do this anymore*, he told me I didn’t know what I was saying and he’d be waiting for me to realize my mistake. A week later, he popped a few painkillers. And then, he popped a few more. And a few more. And maybe several more after that. When I told him over the phone that he needed to stop, go to the hospital, get help, he refused. When I told the police over the phone that my ex-boyfriend was taking pills, and, no, I didn’t know how many or what kind or if he was okay, they picked him up from his friend’s house and forced him into an ambulance. At the



Photo Credit: Marusz Niedzwiedzki

A black and white photograph of a dilapidated room. The walls are cracked and peeling, and the floor is covered in debris, including wooden planks. A large window with multiple panes is visible on the left side of the room. The overall atmosphere is one of decay and abandonment.

hospital, they pumped his stomach and put him on psych watch. From then on, after I let him back into my life, he reminded me that *it* was on his record for good, that now he was to be watched. He didn't have to remind me that it was my doing.

I don't know if it was love or guilt, but a week after they pumped his stomach, I was with him again, and he was following me to college.

Four years later and I was driving through Long Island with my mother, who, like everyone else in my life, knew I needed to get away but didn't say a word.

A few months after that trip, I left Carlos.

Now, over three years later, I study the photographs of Bellevue and wonder if perhaps it's my familiarity with what can happen when an uncle or a wife or a son is left behind that makes me dream of Carlos jumping from windows, my arms dangling out, groping for his wrist or his shirt collar, trying to catch the man who fell long ago. I will wonder if maybe my grandfather was right to fear the world when he held my crying mother in his arms and peered out the window, gazing on the empty streets below. If, when my grandmother told me these stories, she thought I might need them. If maybe Uncle Herbert—trapped on the psych floor of Bellevue, watching the light of his cigarette butts fade into cracked windowsills—gone—was the safest of us all. ✍️