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Why I Might Not Return to the Writers' Workshop Next Year

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I DON'T REALLY LIKE NATURE. MY response to fellow workshopers about why I'm staying at a Holiday Inn along the highway rather than on the well-treed and trailed and cottaged conference grounds.

I don't say dirt and icky bugs because we're all adults here, because such things must surely be holy to this particular crowd. I might mention no wifi, but never, oh, god help me, cabin-mates! But I think it, hard. I certainly don't tell them I'm hopeless at lolling around bonfires. That I'd rather smash my writing hand with a paperweight than participate in a sing-along, how the very thought of those folksongs, the plink-plunking acoustic guitar, squeezes like a wrench at my chest.

I don't like to say these things about myself: whiner, killjoy, doesn't play well with others. But I kind of know them to be true, especially among this group of gentle, white liberals. So what if I, too, am a white liberal, if not so gentle? Never mind that at this very moment in the dusty alcoves of my brain, I'm snarking about the Smurf-blue lake, its sandy beach perfect for sunning (don't forget to pack your stylish straw hat!), for jotting poemlets into the conference-provided journals. I think, precious, and feel pleased with myself because I purchased my own straw hat for a buck at a garage sale. Understand, I think all this quietly, to myself. Then I feel guilty.

Butbynoweveryone'sturnedaway,returned

to the complimentary coffee and cookies. To the getting-reacquainted-with-cabin-mates-from-previous-years portion of the afternoon, so I can't admit how I'll probably skip most of the craft talks, the nightly faculty readings complete with cash bar. Even the village a quick drive away with its darling shops and teahouses notwithstanding, the lone tattoo parlor, which I admit tempts me a little.

And I can't even whisper how—even now, fully committed to middle-age—I'm kind of frightened to walk into the dining hall alone. How I'm terrible at chitchat. How such gatherings as this drag me back to high school with its prep wear and feathered hair and nail-gnawing isolation, so I want to escape to my hotel room with its little bottles of shampoo and wrapped soaps, its maid service, and uncritical quiet. But this is good for me, say my family and friends. Something to do for myself. This is stretching.

Well, my goodness. You mean she doesn't wake up on her own and take herself to school? My daughter was so independent at that age. Judgy-Lady, fellow workshop participant in response to my comment that I hadn't been home to wake Teenager-Celia this morning because I was driving to the conference.

Sometimes the workshops work, friendships

form, inspiration flows like buttery Chardonnay from God in his heaven to brain to fingers to journal. Sometimes, not so much. But the point is, you never know until you go. And, it's good to escape the habitual daughter-schlepping and husband-soothing and dog and cat vomit-patrol. The every-single-morning routine—even if I kind of like it—where I wake too early, where Husband-Steven sometimes brings me coffee, and in turn I wake Daughter-Celia with more coffee, where we talk for a bit before I schlep her to the suburban school, still in my pjs, praying to whichever frazzled deity happens to be paying attention that no breakdowns or accidents occur today, this car ride, that I'll have it more together tomorrow. Amen.

And sometimes it's good to leave behind the scaffolding and yellow cranes of my back-from-the-dead Detroit, its reemerging Downtown and Midtown. My own University District, where every day the moving trucks slog along our wide streets, where they sometimes have to cool their heels as wild turkeys cross the road. Where I gather my courage like shiny river pebbles and haul the boulder that is my suitcase to my car, wave at Neighbor-Dominico as he stands on his porch glaring at his square of lawn, and aim my car north to this yearly conference where I'll yawn and yawn the whole weekend long. Where for the first days, I'll fail utterly at free-writes, clichés will jumble on the paper, snaking into all the margins, and random words will tumble this way and that like half-assed acrobats. And, more coffee, please, 'cause so far it isn't taking. No, not at all. Amen.

He's on my schedule. Because I need time for me. Tough-Love-Lady, discussing her relationship with her son.

Some more reasons I keep coming to the writers' workshop:

BECAUSE it's relatively near to home, and the college where I teach maintains a fund to supplement such faculty endeavors.

BECAUSE I enjoy packing, the toiletries organized over here, the jeans folded there, the single dress, just in case, wedged into the corner next to the blow-dryer, rolled so it doesn't wrinkle. It always wrinkles.

BECAUSE of new words sure to come, despite bugs and trees, despite clichés and social-angst waltzing behind my eyes.

BECAUSE of driving five hours alone, which I kind of look forward to. Until I reach the center of the state and every NPR or rock station on the radio morphs into God-music or New Country until it all changes to static rising like sand to fill the car and I can't breathe so well, so I dig for CDs under the seat, the dead rock gods of my youth, and I wail along to Bowie and Prince and Freddy Mercury, to the dead grunge boys of my Seattle days, Cobain and Scott Weiland and Layne Staley and Mark Lanegan—never mind he's not dead yet. Never mind I'm a middle-aged woman who probably isn't supposed to do such things.

BECAUSE of loss, death of all sorts. The world disappearing spark by spark. Which hurts like a motherfucker. Which collects over years till it's all a great clutter that needs sorting. So I switch CDs, to Chris Cornell in Soundgarden, then Audioslave, and replay "I Am the Highway"

over and over and over, weeping the entire time, so I'm driving with one hand on the wheel while wiping my face with the other.

BECAUSE of Cornell's last concert in Detroit.

BECAUSE he couldn't bear it, not one more moment, which is all it took.

BECAUSE of time passing, perhaps, or shadows that lengthen on the walls as the night goes on.

BECAUSE I don't know why, but he was my age and so damn gifted he burned from the inside out.

Thank God for this conference! Emotive-Lady, to all of us at the lunch table.

So for the fourth year now I've returned to this well-beloved conference, one of dozens sprung up 'cross country, all of them catering to our human desire to immortalize ourselves with written words. Where we wanna-bes pay our fees (except for the college students here on scholarship) and travel to the pretty pretty college towns and rural hamlets and summer resorts. Where we sign up to study with nationally recognized poets and novelists and essayists who offer us gentle praise and minimal criticism. And if the old white guys who organize these events lament the lack of passionate young people participating year after year, if they spend their free time chatting up the few nubile girls they recruited to come—well, they have to suck it up. Because to survive, such conferences require dollars, and such dollars invariably come from LoCA, the Ladies-of-a-Certain-Age.

Of course it's about Privilege, the kind with a capital P. And let's not forget the pink elephants in the room, the Ladies-of-a-Certain-Age. Conference-Buddy-Kora, in a whispered conversation about writers' workshops and who attends them.

I want to know more about the ladies. ***And what certain age is that exactly?*** I ask Kora as we relax in our cushy chairs in the main room.

Between 40s and late 60s. Sometimes 70s.

At least I'm on the lowish end of that spectrum, sort of, which makes me unaccountably happy. I tell this to Kora who's younger than me by a decade, but she shakes her head.

No, she says. ***You don't fit. Your pain's the wrong sort.***

And what's the right sort, for Ladies-of-a-Certain-Age?

The childhood agonies you build shrines to. That you write over and over again. You know what I mean, writing as therapy, as purging . . .

Not that anything's wrong with that, I say quickly.

No, of course not, says Kora just as fast, like we have to get this out of the way before we can continue our hushed conversation. ***All to finally complete the single, un-ironic memoir that's been percolating for decades***, says Kora, finishing her thought. ***Or the novel, the slim collection of poems. It's all the same. Anyway, you don't write about gardening or dead pets. Or Grandma's benign racism.***

I understand what she means, how could I not? The sometimes florid, always reverential and earnest prose produced in every writers' workshop I've attended since leaving grad

school with my shiny MFA. Then I feel guilty for the thought; after all, I'm hardly a wonder-kid who published her masterpiece with Knopf at twenty-five. About a subject that matters, deeply, that changes lives and will last across generations. Maybe that author-girl has a right to judge, but I probably don't. I look at Kora messing with her fingernails, then down at my own well-gnawed cuticles. And in that moment it's mighty easy to classify reality into degrees of failure.

Hey now, I say when the silence stretches too long. **I'm pretty sure I've mentioned my dead grandfather's rose garden in an essay or two.**

Eh, that's not so terrible, Kora replies, trying to be kind.

She certainly has an interesting wardrobe. Yes, she's quite a character. Judgy-Lady, in response to Lisa M's clothing selections.

But she's such a free spirit, of course. Sugar-Lady, in response to the fact that our workshop leader sometimes swears.

This year I, along with a gaggle of LoCA, one retired gentleman, and one obligatory college student, are assigned to work with Lisa M in our workshop sessions. Lisa is perfect, a delightful essayist from that prestigious college out east, where during the fall and winter semesters she, along with the other well-published and reviewed workshop leaders, instructs children of privilege. But come summer they all hop aboard the conference circuit. Which makes sense—Liberal Arts professors, even these wonder-kid writers, are woefully underpaid, and these summer infusions of cash must be handy. I, too, teach creative writing at a local

college. But it's small and unimportant. I, too, am relatively unimportant. The truth sucks.

I'm also six-tenths people-pleaser—on the outside anyway. So when Lisa M tells us that we'll spend the weekend writing through the prism of our obsessions, then sets us to listing them in our journals, I go at it like gangbusters. And since most of my obsessions are actually fears of one sort or another, I settle in to write my anxieties from benign down through terrible, primordial stew—the muck, the sludge—of terror.

Abbreviated list of my current fears:

1. Finding myself naked on a high school stage with all the popular kids in the audience, all of them laughing their asses off. Note: it's never happened, but still.

2. That time is nonlinear, thus I might be reborn into a new life sometime in the past where I will have to endure childbirth without an epidural.

3. Anything with an exoskeleton, or more than four legs.

4. That I'll never be able to afford plastic surgery.

5. Daughter-Celia leaving for college

Sugar-Lady: **Now don't you go calling it empty nest syndrome. You'll still be living in your nest, after all.**

Me: Okay. I won't.

6. Really terrible reviews. Alternatively, that no one will ever bother reviewing anything I've written.

7. Celia suffering in any way, whatsoever.

8. Steven dying first.

9. Loss. Just loss. Always.

10. Pain. Is this cliché?

11. Also, live burial.

Oh, teenagers! By the time your girl's gone, you'll be thrilled to see the back of her. Tough-Love-Lady in response to my comment that I'm fretting over my daughter's soon-to-come departure for college.

I shouldn't have admitted it, of course. Shouldn't have bared my spongy, uncooked soul so quickly into the workshop. Save it, I'd reminded myself earlier, for a couple days hence, when things are prone to get weepy. But as ever, my timing's woefully off kilter. I tell myself next time I'll invent better words, or just shut the hell up. And maybe, when we're reading aloud from the free-writes scrawled in our journals—our responses to clever prompts assigned by Lisa M—I'll simply keep my gibberish about rat-babies and daughter-anxiety and dead rock stars to myself. I'll just say, **Pass**, as the circle comes around to me. But probably not.

Have you noticed how parents are giving their children such pretentious names these days? Judgy-Lady to the rest of the group, immediately after I mention my daughter's full name in conversation.

Really? asks Daughter-Celia when she hears me telling this story to her dad over the phone.

But did you explain to her what it means? Does she understand now why you chose it?

You can't school stupid, says Steven.

No way, says Friend-Vera on the phone. Vera usually accompanies me to conferences, but circumstances kept her home this year. **She**

didn't! Vera's silent for a moment, then, **And what did the others say, when she made that comment?**

Tough-Love-Lady mentioned three Elijahs and two Chloes in her last Composition class. Someone else said Kai is the new, hot name for both boys and girls. That's it. It felt like one of my high school dreams where I'm naked and the cool kids poke at me with frozen fish and dissect all my flaws.

So basically, it was Mean Girls for the middle-to-late-aged set?

Yep. Exactly. Mean Girls with wrinkles. And lots more bosoms. Oh, and more pain, of course.

Oh. Taciturn-Lady, in response to me telling her I enjoyed her free-write.

And then she just turned away? asks Friend-Vera when I mention this later in our phone conversation. **It's usually so friendly there, at that particular conference.**

Friend-Kora agrees. It's after the morning workshop, before lunch, and we're ensconced in the big, plushy chairs in the main hall. Nearby, in other squishy chairs, on couches by the fireplace, other participants are tap-tapping at laptops or jotting in journals. Some of them mill through the pop-up bookshop in the back room or wait for the latest vat of coffee to finish brewing.

Actually, I find this a pretty safe environment, says Kora, her gaze encompassing the wide room. **Not like other conferences I've been to where there's hierarchy and backbiting like you wouldn't believe.**

So why go?

Eh. To get away. And because why not?

Because of self-loathing, maybe. She looks around, then leans in closer, lowers her voice even further, so I have to strain to hear, **Last night, I made a point of starting a conversation with a woman I despise. Because I feel guilty for despising her.**

I get that, I say.

Then the timer sounds, and I jump up like a well-trained dog to pour myself more coffee. Since arriving a few days earlier, I've been perpetually sleepy, napping away my evenings in my hotel room so as to maintain the usual stare-down with my computer screen into the night—never mind I always blink first. So I can curse my empty sack of words, and yawn and yawn until my neck creaks like an old stair. And though the caffeine never once kicks in, though it never shrinks me smaller (the better to hide, or maybe to eavesdrop) or grows me taller a-la-Alice, I keep drinking and drinking in hope of such brilliant magic to come.

So sorry. I'm meeting friends. Gotta run now.

Too-Cool-For-Me-Lady, on why she couldn't join me for the trek down to the dining hall.

I probably shouldn't have told them how I once wrote a poem about walking Jesus through my neighborhood. I probably shouldn't have mentioned the leash. Me to Friend-Kora, in response to why I didn't click with the other participants from this year's workshop.

At least I passed when it came time to read my creature free-write. The one about the baby riding a rat, I say to Kora.

Eh, Kora shrugs. **You can't please everybody.**

Then she thinks about it some more. **Yes. That was probably a good idea.**

At least I spared them the baby's bitterness, I tell Friend-Vera on the phone.

There is that, she replies.

This workshop has been an emotional journey.

Sugar-Lady, at the conclusion of the conference.

I'm such a crier. Judgy-Lady, as she wails into a Kleenex.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Pretty-Lady-Who-Sits-Across-From-Me, as she sobs in response to my Chris Cornell free-write.

As predicted, over the course of four days the workshop melts into a weepy sort of gathering. And though I depleted my own tears on the car ride up, several of my fellow workshopers—the LoaCA, the single elderly gentleman with his fine diction, the college student—are overcome as the weekend goes on. So there's much tissue-passing and cooing to be heard. Much commiserating and soothing—because of childhood pain, which everyone can relate to. The sort that, in spite of our best efforts, keeps burbling like crude oil to the earth's surface, so we're just ambling along minding our business when we slip in the stuff—so we land hard and break a hip.

Because Buddha said life is suffering, which sucks, but there you have it. Never mind Buddha was a guy, so he was all about meditating through it. No messy waterworks for him, no unattractive, puffy eyes or red nose.

I take a moment to reflect on previous workshops I've attended. On how those led

by male writers never once dissolved into sob-fests, which is both a blessing and a curse, like everything in the world. But never mind. Because, really, we're all doing the best we can at any given moment: the former high school jock with three hairs left on his spotty head, the MFA student with her big hopes, the rock star who tells himself, Just one more hit, then I'll get clean. The LoaCA who decides this is the year to finally finish the poem cycle, the novella, to make Grandma live again. And because I'm feeling magnanimous in the moment, I decide to forgive Judgy-Lady for wearing her aggression on the outside, rather than pressing it into a little nubbin in her throat like the rest of us do. Not that she wants it, my forgiveness that is, not that she'd probably care. But still. Then I tell the ghost of Chris Cornell—the slice of him that's been haunting me for weeks now—to rest in peace. And cliché or no, I totally mean it.

I certainly learned quite a lot about women this weekend, Retired-Gentleman, after listening to the workshop gals chatter over four days.

I don't stay for the participant readings—what's to do with a measly three minutes on stage in any case? And I miss Steven and Celia and the pukey dog and cat, so I aim my car south and drive the five hours to my slightly-feral city, to the foxes who battle the raccoons for rooting-rights through my garbage, to the deer who share digs with the wild turkeys on the golf course back of my house, the coyotes—those recently arrived immigrants to the city—some of them

squatting in the local graveyard where my vet says they're mating with abandoned mutts and breeding us coydogs to dine on our eighty-thousand squirrels, on this one block.

I tell you it's good to be back. Home to Detroit where Neighbor-Dominico is edging his lawn as I pass, who calls out, **Welcome home, Young Lady,** because he can't remember my name after being my neighbor for fifteen years.

Come to Jesus moments would be a lot more efficient if I could keep Him on a leash. Friend-Kora via email, discussing our post-workshop writing progress.

And I lug my suitcase inside to discover Steven and Celia eating dinner at the cluttered table. And I begin to weep because they didn't make me any.

I'm just tired, just tired, I say, so that Celia coos and Steven asks if I need coffee, then he holds me for a while as my shoulders shake. And when I pull myself together, he cooks me an omelet, so that's all right.

That night I sleep fitfully, the troughs of coffee I drank over the weekend catching up to me at last. And once I finally slip into a dream, it's of Steven who comes to me and tells me that, all things considered, he prefers his first wife to me.

She has a better turn of phrase, admits Dream-Steven. **She really knows how to work a crowd. She attends all the wine parties after every faculty reading.**

But when, in the morning, I confess the dream to him, Steven looks up from the teaching plan he's working on and says, **Baby, you've got nothing to worry about.** So that's okay too. ❖