

Fleeing Fat Allen

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It's my idea – the solo trip down the coast. I tell my husband he doesn't have to come. But he hears it in my voice – that I don't want him to come. That's not quite it though. Wanting to go alone and not wanting him to come are not really the same thing.

Besides, it's not a pleasure trip, I tell him. It's family stuff. Ed is not keen on my family. It's too large and loud and gossipy, he thinks, though he's only met them a scant few times during our ten-year marriage. He comes by his opinion largely as a result of my own very vocal grievances – the feuding aunts, the one-upsmanship among the cousins, the maddening indifference of my mother. Not that he has much sympathy. He can't understand why I don't just detach myself from them. "You're a grown-up," he says. As if that has anything to do with it.

"It's family stuff," I say again.

"Why don't you fly," he asks.

"Driving helps me think?" I tell him.

He doesn't ask me what I need to think about, just observes, "It's a long drive."

For the first six hours out of Seattle, I hardly think at all. I just drive. I'm a steady sixty-mile-an-hour driver, an unchanging occupant of the slow lane, trying not to be pressured outside of my comfort zone by the velocity around me.

Ed and I had driven this route ten years ago when we were not yet married, and the possibility for marriage was up in the air where I had thrown it that first night when we stopped in Ashland. I thought he would agree with me—that our decision to marry was too sudden, that maybe we should take more time to think about it. "I don't need to think about it," he said, staring hard at me, his eyes showing hurt and disbelief, but also a kind of condescension. The weight of his pronoun, the conceited pitch of that "I," made me livid while fueling my congenital need to please.

I drive past Ashland, not even stopping for gas until crossing into California where I fill up at a gas-mart, first the tank and then my bag of depleted provisions – nuts, granola bars, fruit leather, bananas, Gatorade. I would like to treat myself to dinner, but this is not a pleasure trip I remind myself. Still, when I open the door to my Comfort Inn room to the queen size bed and the TV that will be all mine, I feel a twinge of satisfaction. I eat in bed and watch "The Love Boat."

The second night I bypass the turn-off to Berkeley where we had stayed with a friend of a friend of Ed's – a young philosophy professor who captivated us both with her wacky wit. Maybe it's because we fell in love with her on the spot that we made up with each other – me retracting my retraction and he benevolently accepting my apology for having qualms about marrying.

I stop instead in San Jose, check into a Rodeway, and allow myself the Blue Plate at Denny's.

The next day I finally focus on my destination, a pilgrimage really. I'm driving to see my Aunt Lyla. She lives in a mountain town east of San Diego called Descanso.

It means “rest,” and that’s why my aunt has moved there. To rest. Permanently, she says. It’s really a theatrical gesture on her part, if my mother and my other aunts are to be believed. They say that if she had found a town called Muerte, she would have moved there. What about Death Valley, I suggest. Too obvious, they reply. They’re right. Lyla scorns cliché, not to mention sand and cactus.

My pilgrimage from Seattle has followed the roller coaster precipices of the Pacific Coast Highway down to its trendy beach communities where the smell of coconut oil settles like fog. Because a pilgrimage should be arduous, I stop in San Diego to visit my mother. I ask, “How are you?” and she answers, “Life is a bowl of spaghetti—.” I wait for the rest, for the punch line, the part about the meatball. But I realize she has finished her sentence. There is no meatball for my mother.

She invites me to stay for coffee. She never remembers that I don’t drink coffee, never have. “No, thank you,” I say. I look at my watch as if time is an issue. “I should be on the road,” I say. “Lyla is expecting me,” I add, though she isn’t really, at least not at any particular time. I invite my mother to come along, but she declines. For a moment, I reconsider coffee, but she is already waving goodbye to me.

She will go in a few weeks, when she and my Aunt Milagros head to the Barona Reservation to play the slot machines. Kill two birds with one bone, she calls out with a yawn. One stone, I tell her. I decide not to point out that Barona and Descanso are on different highways.

I drive east and as the road winds into the Cuyamaca Mountains, I slow down to look for my turn to Descanso, and the traffic collects behind me. For a moment, I am leading a procession to see my aunt. But then the honking starts. I refuse to pull to the side, refuse to be bullied—as I once was by Lyla, as I felt I was by Ed, as sometimes I am by my own desire to play along, to not rock the boat, to be liked.

I never thought to call what my aunt did to us bullying. But that’s what it was. And despite it all, I used to wonder what it would be like to be her daughter, instead of my mother’s.

On Saturday afternoons, we sat on my grandmother’s front porch because her house faced the street, unlike our own, which sat behind my grandmother’s like a plaything — a little rental, shaped like a box and painted gumball blue. On my grandmother’s porch, my sisters and I could sit side by side and we could watch the people who had places to go drive by in cars, and my Aunt Lyla could call out to the ones without cars strolling past on the sidewalk.

Those she knew and liked she greeted by name; those she didn’t, she gave a name. “Look at that pendejo,” she would say. “Hey, zonzo,” she would call. “Your fly is open.” She said this even when it wasn’t, even when she couldn’t see his fly. My mother would shake her head without looking up from her magazine.

My aunt didn’t even live in the neighborhood. She lived in a better part of town on a tree-lined street with my Uncle Vin and my large-boned twin cousins. Those were my Aunt Lyla’s words, large-boned, and she would cross her slim legs, lean forward on her elbows so that her breasts bunched together in the scoop of her blouse, and sigh, “That’s genetics for you. That’s what happens when you let a big guy with charm and a wallet kiss you.”

Aunt Lyla came almost every Saturday to sit with us on the porch. She always came alone. “It’s my day off from kids,” she would tell us as she blew smoke through puckered lips. My sisters and I who were not large-boned, but skinny as pencils,



stood looking at our toes sticking out of our sandals, not knowing what to do. Then she would hold her cigarette away from her body and beckon to us with her free hand. “Give your Aunt Lyla a kiss.”

I let my sisters go first, and when it was my turn, I lingered at my aunt’s side until she laughed at my shyness and thrust her cheek at me. I smelled her cigarette and lipstick and rose petal perfume, and after I kissed her, I sat as close to her as I dared without eliciting a sharp reprimand from my mother to move away from Lyla’s lit cigarette. “Do you want to get burned?” she would ask. I would scoot away and Lyla would wink at me.

Did I mention that Lyla is not her real name? My mother said her name was Alicia Carmen, but that when she was eighteen she declared herself to be Lyla. Her name had never been legally changed, but that was Aunt Lyla. She could decide something, say it was so, and it was.

So when she said Fat Allen was coming to kiss us, we believed her and we ran for our lives. It wasn’t just that apparently objectionable thing called genetics or the disgraceful consequence of large bones that sent us screaming and scrambling underneath my grandmother’s bed to avoid Fat Allen’s kiss. Mixed with the panic that we felt at an unwelcome kiss from a giant boy whose fist seemed always wrapped around some drippy, smeary snack was another source of confusion.

It was my aunt’s husky laugh as we cringed in the musty dimness that made us jockey for the farthest corner below the bed. “Here comes Fat Allen,” she sang. “He’s coming to kiss you.”

“Really, Lyla,” my mother would scold. Then she called to us, “It’s all right. Come on out now.” She said it as if were our fault that we were scared, as if we should’ve known better in the first place.

Rosalie, since she was the oldest, edged her way out first. We dusted off our knees and straightened each other’s braids, then went out the back door where there was no traffic to count, no passersby to watch, just a circle of dirt where my grandfather’s mean and mangy bulldog Toby ranged on a leash.

This happened most Saturdays: Fat Allen would appear down the street, my aunt sang her song, we ran for cover, eventually taking refuge in the neglected backyard with Toby. But one Saturday Aunt Lyla didn’t come and it was just me and my sisters on the front porch and my mother and her magazine— my mother who could take a day off from her kids without leaving home. Without my aunt to yell greetings or insults, people just passed by hardly noticing us. I had just lost my turn at jacks and Lucy was next, which meant coaching from Rosalie and extra chances, so I shifted my attention to the street just in time to see Fat Allen round the corner and head our way. I stood, ready to run, more out of habit than from fear this time. Without Aunt Lyla there to sing her song, the threat of Fat Allen seemed removed - improbable even, and this emboldened me. Like a reflex, the song came loud and chanting from my throat, “Here comes Fat Allen.”

Immediately, I was yanked off my feet, my butt slapping the cement step, my head jarring as my mother’s clenched whisper scorched my ear. “No candy money for you today.” Fat Allen passed, a wavering blob through my watery eyes.

“Aunt Lyla says it,” I muttered, not quite to myself.

“You are not Aunt Lyla,” my mother said angrily. “Do you hear me?”

Later to make her point and enforce my punishment, my mother allowed me and my sisters to go to the store at the corner. But while Rosalie and Lucy each had a nickel and a jangle of pennies, my pockets were empty, my mother having confiscated the coins my grandfather had dropped in my hand after his morning at the dog track.

While Rosalie and Lucy browsed the candy counter, I stood near the comic book rack. It was the kind that rotated, but Mr. Felix didn't like us to touch anything unless we were going to buy it. So I circled the rack, hands behind my back, reading the front covers of all the comic books. It was all I could do to keep my hands off the latest issue of *Nancy* to find out what new mischief she had done, and how nice her Aunt Fritzi still was to her. I must have made some involuntary movement toward *Nancy* because as Mr. Felix rang up Rosalie's candy cigarettes and Lucy's Tootsie Pop, he warned in his billy goat's gruff, "No dime, no read."

I held up my hands to show my innocence and began to follow my sisters out the door. Just then the telephone rang in the back of the store and Mr. Felix rushed to answer it. As soon as he was out of sight behind the shelf of dog food, I ran back in just to touch the comic book, to lift it from the rack and tickle its pages and put it back just for the sake of it. I had just completed this quiet act of defiance when I heard my sisters outside, Lucy squealing like a pig and Rosalie letting loose with a "Hi Ho, Silver," and then the sounds of their footsteps in a panicked retreat.

I turned to see Fat Allen in the doorway, his lumpy bulk spreading a wide shadow on the green, tiled floor. There was no escape and nowhere to hide, though I couldn't have moved if there had been. I heard Lyla's singsong in my head. *Here comes Fat Allen*. I longed for the dusty underneath of my grandmother's bed. I wanted my mother to come and save me, or at least to hear her sigh impatiently that "it was all right."

Fat Allen was moving down the aisle where I stood. I was too scared to close my eyes, so I just watched him come nearer. He wore sneakers, untied, with no socks, baggy shorts, and a T-shirt with stripes whose symmetry was distorted by the breadth of his belly. A halfway picked scab hung at one knee, dried beads of orange sherbet traced a path down his right forearm and picked up again on his shin and the toe of his shoe. My heart beat loud in my ears, my throat clogged with unswallowed saliva. He walked right by, looking at me only briefly, the expression in his small brown eyes and slack mouth barely registering a change. I watched him lumber over to the soda pop case, scan the selection, and then reach with both hands, the left seizing a root beer, the right an Orange Crush. As I watched Fat Allen clutch those soda pop bottles so protectively, I began to feel the anger rise in me. At Aunt Lyla for chasing us under the bed with her terrorizing taunt. At my mother and her stupid magazines. At Fat Allen.

I waited for him to walk back down the aisle toward the cash register. He turned around to face me, any emotion hidden in the pudge of his cheeks. And that's what struck me – the innocent blankness of his face behind the sticky residue of chocolate and raisins. Yet it didn't move me to sympathy. As soon as his thick, fleshy, impenetrable self was within inches of me, I stuck my foot out to trap a loose shoe lace. It was enough to throw him off balance, to send him sprawling to the floor. His soda bottles shattered with the impact, and Orange Crush and root beer ran and puddled around him. It was the broken glass and spilled liquid, so irretrievable, that

scared me and maybe Fat Allen, too, because he began to cry. I stood staring at the big blubbering bulk of him.

Mr. Felix came running out of the back room. “What are you doing? What have you done?”

“He fell down.” I said. “He made a big mess.” I pointed.

Mr. Felix shooed me with his apron. “Go on, get out of here.”

I ran. As hard as when I used to flee Fat Allen. When I got home, Rosalie and Lucy were sitting safely on our little front porch, not our grandmother’s that was exposed to the street, but our own, tucked away from the world. They were eating their candy.

“What happened?” Rosalie asked, a candy cigarette dangling from her lips.

Lucy removed the Tootsie Pop from her mouth. “Did Fat Allen kiss you?” There was fear and excitement in her eyes.

“Really, Lucy,” I said, imitating my mother. And then I added, “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m telling,” Rosalie said, and I knew she would.

My mother’s magazine lay on the porch and I stepped on it as I ran inside and scooted under my own bed to hide. I was safe. Free of Fat Allen, I told myself, though even then I knew it wasn’t true.

The next Saturday Aunt Lyla didn’t come or any other Saturdays after that. We learned that she left my Uncle Vin and moved to Las Vegas where she loved the neon glitter amid the desolation of the desert. Sometimes as we sat on my grandmother’s porch, Fat Allen would pass by. My mother might look up from her magazine for a moment, my sisters would exchange glances, but I would always turn away, my aunt’s cruel, merry singsong in my head.

When I arrive at the crumbling, red A-frame, Henry, Lyla’s third husband nods me in with a finger to his lips. Lyla is napping on the couch and Henry leads me past her scraping snores to the kitchen. He pours a glass of lemonade and jiggles cookies from a box onto a plate, as if I were Lyla’s seven rather than thirty-seven-year-old niece. “Make yourself comfortable,” he says, and I lounge against the counter to simulate an easeful pose, but only feel tight and slouchy. Henry stands in the middle of the kitchen, popping his knuckles. “Would you mind,” he says, slowly, each word coming with a pop, “staying with Lyla while I run some errands.” He points to her in the adjoining room, and we both look, like visitors at a museum display.

When Henry has driven off in the direction in which I imagine lies the nearest tavern, I ignore the lemonade and cookies, this after-school snack for a child, and I stand in the living room. I watch Aunt Lyla huddled in sleep, her patchy hair smashed flat in places, snarled and spiked in others, her flowered shift caught between her knees, exposing legs to match the kindling that I passed in the yard outside, and I remember what she was like for me then, when I *was* a child of seven. I remember Saturday afternoons on the front porch when she painted her toenails, afterwards stretching her long, dancer legs down the steps so we could all admire the effect – all of us except my mother who was absorbed in *True Detective*, *True Romance*, or some other genuine, factual piece of fiction.

Now in her mountain cabin, my worn-out aunt stirs, makes a smacking sound with her lips to loosen the gummed saliva in her mouth. I get up to make some tea

and by the time I return with two cups of chamomile, one with a squirt of lemon, the other with a drop of whiskey, my aunt is sitting up, her knees apart for balance, her rough bare feet on the rough wood floor.

She's smiling, not at all surprised to see me. "I've been wondering when you'd be dropping by," she says, as if her California mountain hideout was a leisurely walk from my Seattle neighborhood.

"Come here," she says. "Give your Aunt Lyla a kiss."

I set the tea tray on the table next to the couch and lean down to peck her cheek, careful not to inhale. The smell of her enters my nostrils anyway, and I try not to react to the moldy bread odor that comes from her breath, her hair, her skin. She laughs the way she used to when I would kiss her faintly out of shyness.

I want to cover her bare feet. Too much of her is exposed. Too much of her is lost.

"Bring me my slippers," she says, reading my mind. She points to a pair of fluffy brown moccasins that look like small animals. I retrieve them and bend down to fit them to her wrinkled feet, my hand guiding her veiny ankles. When I stand up, she is already reaching for the tea, and soon sipping from the cup meant for me.

I take the other cup, the one with the lemon.

She pats a spot on the sofa next to her, but instead I take the nearby chair, though it's rickety in all respects. "So I can see you better," I say.

She snorts into her tea, looks around. "Where's Henry?"

I sip my tea, tepid now, and strongly citrus. "Errands," I tell her.

"Of course," she says.

Lyla gulps her toddy down, and before she can ask for another, I launch into an admiring monologue about the house, its rustic quality (I don't say charm), the faded rugs that give a lived-in feeling, the sunlight that slants across the floors and makes a nimbus above its splintery boards.

Lyla points to the living room window. "It's pretty out here, isn't it?" She asks the question as if she wants to be convinced.

"Yes," I tell her, because everything *is* pretty except the ugly house, which intrudes upon the pine and dogwood like something deviant and tumorous.

"It's quiet," I say. I wonder how she tolerates it, with no one around to gossip with, no one to admire her, no one to jeer at or tease. Except Henry.

"Restful," she agrees, and I remember why she has chosen to live in Descanso, and I remember, too, the skepticism of my mother and my other aunts.

She slumps into the couch, the slippers slide from her heels and dangle from her toes. Her eyes are closed and the line of her once perfectly pouty mouth is limp and uneven. Her hands are open to the sloped ceiling. She stays like that for several minutes.

Finally, I say, "Can I get you anything?"

She doesn't answer, so I rise from my rickety chair, wishing Henry were back, in case there is something medical that has to be done – pills to be administered, a syringe full of painkiller to be injected. I lean toward her, see the damage of the years up close. I study her neck for the shiver of a pulse, but the skin is slack and concealing. I have to take her wrist. I reach for it, her palm cooperative, already turned upward and resting on the couch. I touch two fingers to her puckered skin which elicits a terrible shriek from Lyla's seared lungs, and I scream in reply. I am

shaken at the sound of my fright, the way it smacks the air and knocks me off balance, so it is a minute before I realize Lyla is laughing. She has slipped to the floor in her hilarity and is gasping for breath. I sit back down, wrap my hands around the worn, wobbly arms of the chair, and wait for her to recover.

At last, she wheezes, "Gotcha."

We have another cup of tea, this time at the table, this time with whiskey in both our cups. Lyla is garrulous, her speech throaty and aggressive as she recalls old times. "Remember how I used to visit on Saturdays? Remember the store at the corner?" She is precise in her details, though some are surely made up. I wait for her to mention Fat Allen, but she never does. Perhaps she truly has forgotten. She is done talking now. She rests her hands in her lap.

Henry's truck pulls up and we are both relieved.

The next day I'm at my mother's again, sitting beside her on her little, one-step cement porch. We're sipping ice tea, unsweetened. I think she would like to know about my visit with Lyla, but I don't tell her.

I want to ask her, "Do you remember Fat Allen." I almost do. But instead I say, out of nowhere, it seems, "You still read those magazines?" I point at the slick pages in her hand.

Now she points at me with the rolled-up magazine. "Are you criticizing me?"

"No," I say, truthfully.

She opens the magazine on her lap, licks her fingertip to turn a page. "I'm still your mother, you know," she says, without looking up.

Later, after I've pulled out of her driveway, my tires squeal a little as I shift gears too suddenly and when I hit the freeway, I accelerate hard to reach the speed limit and then some. It's a long way back. This time I will stop in Berkeley, and then I will stop in Ashland. But not for long. Ed will be waiting. Ed will be wondering.

