The Ice-Cube Moon

LINDSEY CRITTENDEN

"NEVER THROW AWAY a perfectly good box," my mother used to say, and she never did. After her death in October 2000, I found in her closet a towering stack of Brooks Brothers boxes, all empty except for rustling tissue paper. And, after my father died in 2005 and I inherited the contents of every closet and cupboard of my parents' house, I found yet more boxes, these full of stuff. The sentimental and meaningful mixed with the utterly mundane: Fotomat receipts and dud negatives, frayed shoelaces and yellowed recipes, an engraved invitation to my parents' wedding in 1960, an envelope of hair from my brother's first haircut. I made piles: throw away, donate, take home to deal with later. Sorting took months. It wasn't the disarray itself that overwhelmed me but what it revealed of the family disconnect between looking organized and presentable on the outside and feeling all messy inside, between what was allowed to show and what was never, ever, let out.

I got through all the boxes but one. Squat and white and sealed in clear mailing tape, it had been packed up by no one I'd ever known. It had come in the mail in 2002, addressed to my father, who told me when I saw it in a cupboard one day, "It's from my brother. I can't bear to open it. It'll be yours to deal with one day."

I did what I'd been raised to do. I put it unopened in a hall closet where my husband and I keep our luggage and an undersupplied earthquake kit, and I closed the door and walked away.

One morning I start crying on the #10 bus for no other reason than the driver's excruciating caution as she negotiates a busy Market Street. Each stop, each just-missing-the-green-light-before-it-turns-yellow, makes my skin contract and tingle. I clench my hands, grimace at the window, hunch into myself. When I arrive at the office, I text my husband: *Rough bus ride just now.* He replies instantly: *Keep cabs in mind for now*.

Some twenty years ago, when I was 35, I received a diagnosis of Major Depression, Mild. Up until then, throughout childhood and into my twenties and early thirties, I could not—would not—have called myself depressed. The word I used, as I had in second grade when my mother asking why I was moping, was "tired."

I know now that staying in bed doesn't help. Oh, at first it feels good, giving into the lure of warm sheets and not having to face the world. No, not "good." More like a reprieve. For a bit. My husband leaves for work, morning light shifts into full day, the bell at the elementary school across the street clangs, and a delivery truck's rear hatch screeches upward. Inside, nothing moves. Not the books or the framed photos or the orchids potted in bark, sunlight dappling the veins of their petals; not the strands of carpet or the hillock of duvet or my own foot at the end of the bed. I wiggle a toe, just to show that I can.

During my childhood, and well into my adulthood, I knew—without knowing why or recalling how I knew it—that my father had an older brother who lived in Oregon, in a hospital. I never met this uncle or heard his voice. Dad rarely referred to him, and never by name. The first time my paternal grandmother, visiting at Christmastime, referred to "Dick," I had to ask whom she meant. "Your father's brother," my mother told me, and from the way the air tightened in the room I knew to leave it at that.

Dad rarely referred to his childhood, period. He talked about the teacher who'd deemed his eyes "as blue as the waters of Lake Louise" and about Saturday afternoon double features that cost a nickel, but hardly anything about family or friends. Once, my brother asked if Dad had a pet as a boy. Yes, Dad said, a dog. My brother asked its name. Dad didn't remember.

My mother was visiting me in college when she told me that my father's brother had shown up one night at Dad's fraternity at the University of Oregon. "Your father's brother"—that's how she referred to him, and that's how I thought of him, too. "Your father's brother," she went on to say, "so embarrassed your father that he cut off all contact after that. Your father wanted nothing more to do with him."

What had his brother done?

My mother shook her head. "You know your father. He doesn't go into detail."

I did know my father, to a point. He didn't hold a grudge or act vindictively. Yes, he could be dismissive and curt to neighbors or colleagues he didn't like—but this was his *brother*, his only sibling. I had a problem brother, too, my only sibling, by then coming home drunk and stoned and wheedling out of parental consequences with charm and empty promises, which infuriated me. He pushed away my older-sister (and good-girl) advice. Still, I couldn't imagine cutting him off. Dad's brother, I decided, must have done something unspeakable.

As to why he lived in a hospital, the story (this, too, from my mother) went only so far: he'd come home from naval service so spooked by the sound of waves against the ship that he was never the same. "Imagine"—my mother's voice making clear the impossibility—"imagine being disturbed by the sound of waves!"

I didn't respond. By then, I could imagine being disturbed by many things, from childhood anxiety over the first day at a new school or fear of the monster under the bed, both *pooh-pooh*ed by my mother as nothing worth worrying about, to adult insecurities, which I kept to myself.

I found out, too, that when my uncle had sent a baby gift to me, shortly after I was born, my mother threw it away unopened. "I thought it was for the best if you had no contact with him," she told me decades later, as though mental illness could contaminate not only through genetics but through the postal service.

In one way, it did. One dark December evening when I was eight, my parents and brother and I came home to find a package on the doormat where the mailman had left it. Packages at our front door were unusual in 1970, and this one had Dad's name written out in shaky all caps beneath a return address in Oregon.

"Daddy, look, it's for you!"

My father unlocked the door and stepped over the package into the house. How could anyone not want a package so close to Christmas? I don't recall who brought it in and opened it, but I do remember a shiny necktie unlike any I'd seen my father wear, a necktie I never saw again.

At age 55, my estrogen levels have dropped to the single digits. For an ovulating teenaged girl, according to my gynecologist, estrogen reaches as high as 500. My ovaries, the gynecologist continues, are the size of shriveled peas. So why the bleeding? Imaging picks up a cyst in the left ovary, the size of a tennis ball.

Surgery marks the nonnegotiable end to my fertility, the unambiguous fact that for all my fertile years, during which my plump, grape-sized ovaries sprung an egg every month, I chose not to have children. Perhaps not with complete consciousness, but I chose it nonetheless. I met my husband when I was 49, and that ship had sailed.

A couple weeks after the oophorectomy, I go to my every-three-months med check with the doctor who prescribes my Klonopin and Zoloft and Wellbutrin. He asks how I'm doing, and I tell him. He says that some people suffer periodic bouts of depression throughout life. I am likely one of these people. A triggering event brings on a rough patch from which they (we) recover—in time.

Makes sense. I identify past triggers: my mother's death, a nasty breakup, the widening gyre of my brother's addiction, his death. But why, out of the blue, can I barely get up in the morning or ride the bus?

The surgery, the doctor suggests. Right.

That night, I dream of riding a train whose tracks end, just like that, over open space. What's been passed down has been passed down; the family legacy stops here.

In fifth grade, I loved *Alias Smith and Jones,* a TV Western my father and I often watched together. I had a terrific crush on Pete Duel, the actor who played Smith. When Duel shot himself, I clipped the obituary and took it to my room, where I studied it for days until my mother threw it away, telling me, "Happy people don't do things like that."

At eleven, I immersed myself in *Lisa Bright and Dark,* a Scholastic paperback about a bipolar teenager. In 1973, the word "bipolar" wasn't used. Lisa was moody and sensitive, and I could relate—up to the point where she walked through a window. I felt drawn to Lisa's differentness, her inner life that no one understood what to do with. Kids at my school had broken arms or tonsillectomies; Lisa was hospitalized for her feelings.

At seventeen, I read *The Bell Jar* and cut class to look up schizophrenia at the public library, hoping to come across something reassuring, even familiar, in its symptoms. Instead, I left the library feeling rebuffed by the impenetrable clinical language in the books I'd found. I had no idea of what—or whom, other than myself—I might be seeking.

Wherever you go, there you are.

That's what my father would say when I asked his advice, as an adult, about moving or taking a new job. Why couldn't he say, "Whatever you save in rent, you'll pay in a longer commute," or "I'll miss you if you move far away"? In place of the straightforward useful advice I imagined most fathers offered their adult daughters, he gave a koan-like aphorism.

He was, I've come to see, largely talking about himself, trying to impart what he'd learned the hard way, acknowledging all he'd tried to leave behind. "I got out as soon as I could," he told me not long before he died—out of Oregon, away from his family, and into army service and a job in San Francisco, where "things were happening in 1955." He found a bank job and put himself through law school at night, married my mother, and got hired by a top-drawer law firm. He was on his way to professional success, and he attained it. And yet, up

until the time of his death, even as he dealt with the loss of his son and his wife, helped friends with their estates, bantered with the best of them at his weekly domino games, he could not open a squat, white box.

During my twenties and early thirties, when I lived in New York City, some 3000 miles from home, my mother phoned me every Saturday morning with "the latest on your brother." I stopped answering her calls, and got the information on my machine. He'd dropped out of community college. He'd gotten pulled over for a broken brake light and arrested for the quarter-gram of cocaine in the glove box. He'd smashed up an apartment on which our father had paid the deposit. He'd tripped alarm wires in our parents' house and stole jewelry from my mother's closet, slipped Dad's wallet out from beneath the pillow while Dad slept.

When I suggested that my mother and father report the break-ins to the police, she told me my father would never allow it. When I suggested she might find someone other than me to talk to, she told me "your father would never go to a therapist." When I phoned my brother, he either wasn't home or didn't pick up. When he did answer, he always had to go. During one memorable conversation over burgers at the Old Town when he visited me in New York, he told me crack was "no big deal" and he could stop using anytime. After that, months went by in which we didn't speak. When friends asked what he was up to, I changed the subject. One night over candlelight at an Italian restaurant, a date asked what my brother did. "Drugs," I said.

"That must be hard," the man said, and the next time he called to ask me out I lied that I was getting back together with an ex.

In my own way, I too cut off my brother. And I also cut off myself, from the fury and heartbreak I couldn't bear to face. I didn't want anyone poking the fragile shell I'd built around myself. During those years, I cried once—during a preview for *Jungle Fever*, in which the brother of a successful architect sucks on a crack pipe. And then, one April morning, I called my brother from a phone booth in the lobby of my office building. When he answered, I screamed that he was wasting his life and hurting the people who loved him and why didn't he save us all a lot of trouble and just take a gun to his head. "Calm down, hon," he said, which made me yell louder. After I hung up, I stepped out of the phone

booth and through the lobby and onto East 50th Street, where I circled the block in a daze. All I'd pushed down had erupted out of me, and I walked back into the building still shaking.

Two days later, he called me collect from jail, sobbing. "You told me what I needed to hear," he said—and from that day forward, we spoke several times a week until the night three years later when he was shot in the head after stealing a vial of crack. He was 26. I was 32.

My father had triggers, too—one of them, Christmas dinner every year at my maternal grandfather's house, where my mother's relatives outnumbered my father's nine to one. Sometime between the cocktails and the pie, after my aunt had denounced the evils of cigarettes (Dad had a three-pack-a-day habit) or my cousin had railed against The Man or another cousin's girlfriend had replied, when asked white meat or dark, that she'd take the bones, my father would push back his chair and stand up, shouting, "Oh, for heaven's sake, I don't have to take this anymore!" He'd stomp out of the room and through the front door, announcing, "I'm walking home!"—home being some thirty miles through a city and over a bridge. My mother would give him a few minutes, saying her goodbyes and gathering my brother and me into the station wagon. By then, Dad would have made it to the end of the block, and she'd pull over. "Jim," she'd say reasonably, "get in." He'd climb in the way-back, sit with his knees to his chin. Usually, by the time we reached the freeway, he'd announce, "I'll drive now." My mother would pull to the curb and scoot over, and he'd take us the rest of the way.

Some two decades later, another trigger: my brother, aged 22, had run off from the drug rehab to which he'd been sent in a straitjacket after throwing a chair at my father during a long-overdue intervention. Driving down the interstate with my mother next to him and me in the backseat, my father lifted his hands from the steering wheel, took his foot off the gas.

In a shaky warble I didn't recognize, he asked, "Where am I? What am I doing?" His voice climbed in panic as the speedometer plummeted from 65 mph to 40 to 30.

"You're driving, Jim," my mother said. "We're on our way home." Her voice

was calm. I took her cue, and together we talked him to an exit and into a gas station, where he slammed the car into Park at the pumps and strode off, leaving the driver's door wide open.

"What was that?" I asked, my hands trembling.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that," my mother said. "I've always tried to protect you and your brother from these episodes."

Episodes? I thought of those long-ago Christmas dinners, of Dad's eruption after I once spilled a glass of orange juice on the living-room rug, of his muttering at a long bank line or red light. What I'd just witnessed went far beyond a short fuse or impatience. In another year or two, I'd learn about *fugue state*, a rare dissociative psychiatric disorder characterized by reversible amnesia, but at the time I had no language for what I'd just witnessed, for my father seeming to lose his mind.

"It happens when he's under pressure, Lindsey. He'll be all right. He always is. He'll be all right, I promise."

And he was, walking back to the car and filling the tank as though we'd pulled over for that purpose. I offered to do the driving and he said, in his regular voice, "No, thanks."

During Christmas break my freshman year in college, not long after my Sylvia Plath period, my mother was driving herself and me home from the supermarket when she mentioned "that time I found your father in the garage." My chest tightened. *That time,* as though I knew what she meant, as though she'd told me before.

She didn't use the word "suicide." She just told me what he'd done: sat in the car with the garage door shut and turned on the engine. She'd found him in time.

I sat stunned. So many questions, and all I could muster was *When?*, as though such a desperate and devastating act would, if pinned to a particular age or event, make sense.

That day, it didn't, even when my mother answered that Dad had recently left the law firm and was under enormous pressure to make a go of his own practice. 1971, 1972, somewhere in there. Not until decades later, not until now, do I realize that was the period when he and I watched *Alias Smith and Jones* every week, the year I read Pete Duel's obituary over and over.

In the aftermath of my brother's death in 1994, my parents and I cinched closer together. Having moved back to California by then, I spent most weekends at their house. We spoke about grief and loss—up to a point. My emotional vocabulary had grown beyond "tired," and yet I struggled to find the words to talk to them about despair. When I tried, my mother gave an anguished cry: "How do you think that makes me feel?"

My stomach curdled with guilt, my chest sunk with hopelessness. Hadn't I learned by then not to confess my darker feelings to her?

My father, on the other hand, didn't take my despair personally. He listened. He said, "I'm sorry, honey." And after my mother died, in 2000, and I slipped into a black place again, he fed me turkey sandwiches and lentil soup and Ensure smoothies. One night at dinner, he said, as if asking for the salt, "You know, I've been wondering how my passivity as a parent might have contributed to your depression."

I looked at him. Was this the same father I'd heard scoff at "navel-gazing"? Grief and retirement had softened him. And time—he had a lot of time on his hands. He spent it with books, CNN, his domino buddies, and his thoughts. He began to see a therapist. He spoke to me of the stress and pressure he'd felt as a young attorney, when my brother and I were children. He admitted a fantasy he'd held onto, of moving to a quiet central valley town—"can you imagine your mother, agreeing to that?"—with a law-office shingle hanging outside a Gold Rush building off the main square. One night, when we were talking about my brother, gone by then some eight years, he said, "I failed that boy."

I reached for his hand.

What a gift, those five years my father and I had together. We never used the word "healing," but that's what those summer evenings at the dining table, the light slowly dimming through the sliding glass doors, felt like. One such night, I put down my fork. The time had come to ask what I'd never dared. The question that had felt so taboo, so prohibited, so wrapped in banishment and loss, now felt allowed, OK, safe.

"Dad," I asked, and took a breath. "What happened to your brother?"

My father met my gaze, spoke in the volume and tone he'd been speaking

all evening. "In those days, they didn't understand mental illness as well as they do now," he said. "We live in a kinder era now, but in 1955, there were fewer options. My brother was put away."

Put away. So final. Detached. Impersonal. Terrifying.

"With—with what diagnosis?"

"Paranoid schizophrenia."

I wasn't surprised—the man had been hospitalized for almost fifty years, after all.

"When did you know that something was wrong?" I asked.

"He was in his early twenties. He managed to graduate from Lewis and Clark." My father paused, rubbed the corner of his placemat, spoke as if adding an afterthought. "He chased me with a hatchet once when we were boys, but that was, you know, kid stuff."

"Dad! My god! That is *not* kid stuff!"

"You know how cruel children can be."

I thought of the episode at the frat house, how much worse it must have been to scar my father so. Yes, there would have been the stigma of a "crazy" brother to cost him standing with his fraternity brothers—but it wasn't just for social and professional reasons that my father got out "as soon as I could." He was fleeing trauma.

Except, of course, that wherever you go, there you are.

That night, I didn't ask for more. Dad had given no signal that we'd said too much, and yet as we got up to clear the dishes, what had been said seemed plenty. It was more than he'd ever told me, more than I'd ever asked, and the moment felt special, almost sacred, in the enormity of what now seemed possible. My father seemed emotionally so open and naked, newly revealed. There was more to ask, and plenty of time to talk further. As it happened, my father died suddenly a few years after that conversation. The only other time we had talked about his brother was the day I asked about the white box in the cupboard and he told me he couldn't bear to open it.

It's been ten years since my father died, five years since I was married, nine months since I had surgery to remove an ovary, three months since I starting riding the bus without crying.

One afternoon, I come home from the supermarket. I unlock the front door and climb the stairs. I put down the groceries and head straight for the hall closet. I reach past the luggage and lift the white box, still untouched after all this time and no heavier than the groceries. I place the box on the rug, and kneel before it. *Yours to deal with one day*.

I slice through the tape with a putty knife and turn back the cardboard flaps. A note sits on top of bunched-up newspapers. I unfold it. The letterhead bears the name of a VA hospital in White City, Oregon. This is the first I've heard of the name or the town. *Richard is at peace now,* the note reads, *he was a gentle, quiet man but boy did he love those cigarettes.*

I set the newspaper aside and lift out a brown leather scrapbook. Its soft cover flops open to reveal my grandmother's spidery cursive. *Dick and Jimmy,* beneath a photo showing two boys leaning against a wooden fence, a foot or two apart, their upper bodies angling away from each other. The caption gives no date. My father—his body boyish and pudgy, his stance awkward, his smile forced—looks about eleven; the taller boy—rangy and slim with sharp facial features, his hip cocked after Cagney or Robinson—seems fourteen or fifteen.

I uncover more memorabilia, all Dick's, in non-chronological order. Was Dick, the older son, the favored one, or—as is often the case with the first-born—did my grandmother merely have more time and energy to document his early years? By the time my father was born, she would have had her hands full. Simple crayoned drawings (a house, a horse, a tree) seem raw and rough, as if the boy drawing them was interrupted from his task. Am I looking for signs of trouble only because I know what was to come? A report card indicates no future problems. Don't all 14-year-olds scowl into the camera?

I put aside the scrapbook and take out a tooled leather belt, a Native American bracelet, a diploma from Lewis and Clark University showing a BA awarded to Richard Hunt Crittenden in 1951, a red-covered spiral-bound composition book. These objects could have belonged to anyone, sane or not. Their ordinariness reassures and disturbs me, because it's so out of scale with the dread that surrounded this box—and this man.

Here he is, in a photo: grizzled in a hat and bolo tie, seated at a picnic table. I can't make out the color of his eyes—blue like Lake Louise?—or if his nose has a bump of bone, like Dad's and mine.

Opening the composition book, I flinch. Pages dark and dense with ink;

cramped words push their imprint through to the next sheet. I've written with that kind of force, stabbing the page of my journal: *I hurt! I hurt! I hurt!* I flip past those dark pages as if they spark voltage.

I stop at white space, a neatly written sentence in the center of an otherwise blank sheet: *The moon is an ice cube in the sky.* A kind of permission opens up inside me at the inexactness of the metaphor. The moon, so far away, waxes and wanes; an ice cube gets only smaller as it melts. The two things seem nothing alike, and yet—

Like me, my uncle had a flair for metaphor, a trait I've never noticed in another family member. Like me, he made observations that didn't always, on the surface, make sense. I recall my mother's comment about my uncle's "unimaginable" fear of the sound of waves against a ship. I think of my fierce struggle to hold onto what I was told had no reason to exist. I feel a tug of connection to my uncle, a skewing of previous notions of kinship.

On the next page of the composition book: a stick drawing of a tree and a sketch of a woman in a grass skirt with faintly penciled breasts. Controlled penmanship describes a special gift of a "bisycle" one Christmas during the Depression and of traveling "the length of California at age fourteen by means of my thumb."

I give writing prompts to my adult students, not so different from the prompts I now imagine—a favorite gift, a big trip—offered by hospital staff as therapy, like weaving or finger-painting. How would I respond to my uncle as a student? *Powerful image,* about that ice-cube moon; *follow it further?* And that hitchhiking reference: had he, at the age of the Cagney scowl, fled what my father, some twelve years later, escaped? Or had Dick merely traced his thumb down the page of an atlas, imagining a freedom he never found? A daydreamer like me, like my dad.

I keep going. An honorable discharge from the United States Army; a folded page from the University of Oregon newspaper; a *San Francisco Chronicle* clipping.

Wait a minute. Wasn't my uncle in the navy?

And then I see my father's name on the discharge. Scanning the Oregon page, I read about the Ducks trouncing their visitors in a home football game in 2002. Fifty years earlier, my father had played for the Oregon team. I unfold the yellowed *Chronicle* clipping, feeling queasy.

Here's my father in 1972, his photo beneath a headline announcing his new position at Del Monte Foods. The calm, competent gaze and steady familiar eyes: this is the Daddy I adored, who went off in the morning in his suit and pressed shirt and came home that way at night, who made pancakes every Saturday morning. Given the date, it's also the Daddy who decided he didn't want to run his own practice after all, who went back to work for a large corporation. That Daddy belonged to me, to my mother, to my brother. What's he doing here?

And yet, of course my father belonged to his brother—as a football player, an Army lieutenant, an accomplished professional with a wife and children. It was to this successful attorney, after all, that the shiny tie had been sent. A tie that my uncle had shopped for and chosen and wrapped in a package on which he'd written *304 Golden Gate Avenue*. Whatever delusions had haunted him, he'd known (or been able to get) our address, just as he had for the baby gift sent in 1961. However tenuous his grasp on reality, however dulled by antipsychotic medication, he would have known that he never heard back.

What might have changed if he had? Or if my mother, instead of fearing psychological cooties, had kept the baby gift sent to me (had opened the package!) and added it to the silver cups and piggy bank and receiving blankets, telling me at some point that it had come from an uncle whom Daddy didn't get along with, an uncle who lived in a hospital because he needed taking care of, an uncle whom I might never meet but who thought my birth worthy of commemoration? What if she had insisted, the way she did with thank-you notes to friends and (other) relatives, that I send my uncle a drawing on his birthday or Christmas? What if, on the family road trip we took to Oregon in 1973, we'd stopped in White City? Or not even stopped? What if my dad had just made the mildest and briefest of statements as we passed the exit: "My brother lives over there," say, and "He's too sick for company" or "We don't have time for a visit." What might have opened up in him, in all of us, if emotional brokenness and human pain had been unveiled, revealed, demystified, named?

I've reached the bottom of the box. My uncle's belongings lie in a semi-circle in front of me, a display of yearning and memory and association as messy and complex as any of ours. I have more of him than ever before, and nowhere near enough.

I don't think about what I do next. I gather the items into a Hefty bag, break down the white cardboard, carry it all to the trash. I tip the bag into the filthy plastic city-provided bin, and I shudder. I'm banishing my uncle all over again.

My father's face rises before me, his blue eyes as kind and steady as the day he told me, "You will feel better, I promise." I am doing this for him, I see now, trying to protect him. I'm doing this out of a kind of loyalty to the beliefs and fears that shaped me. I haven't eradicated that part of who I am. And perhaps I never will.

In the days to come, I'll wish I'd kept the picnic-table photo or the tooled leather belt or a fragment of my uncle's writing. And one sunny afternoon after a week of rain, when I glance up at the clean blue sky, I'll spot the moon hanging there. Nothing like an ice cube. And yet, from now on, that's what it will always be for me.