

The Shared Patio

It still counts, even though it happened when he was unconscious. It counts doubly because the conscious mind often makes mistakes, falls for the wrong person. But down there in the well, where there is no light and only thousand-year-old water, a man has no reason to make mistakes. God says do it and you do it. Love her and it is so. He is my neighbor. He is of Korean descent. His name is Vincent Chang. He doesn't do hapkido. When you say the word "Korean," some people automatically think of Jackie Chan's South Korean hapkido instructor, Grandmaster Kim Jin Pal; I think of Vincent.

Miranda July

What is the most terrifying thing that has ever happened to you? Did it involve a car? Was it on a boat? Did an animal do it? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then I am not surprised. Cars crash, boats sink, and animals are just scary. Why not do yourself a favor and stay away from these things.

Vincent has a wife named Helena. She is Greek with blond hair. It's dyed. I was going to be polite and not mention that it was dyed, but I really don't think she cares if anyone knows. In fact, I think she is going for the dyed look, with the roots showing. What if she and I were close friends. What if I borrowed her clothes and she said, That looks better on you, you should keep it. What if she called me in tears, and I had to come over and soothe her in the kitchen, and Vincent tried to come into the kitchen and we said, Stay out, this is girl talk! I saw something like that happen on TV; these two women were talking about some stolen underwear and a man came in and they said, Stay out, this is girl talk! One reason Helena and I would never be close friends is that I am about half as tall as she. People tend to stick to their own size group because it's easier on the neck. Unless they are romantically involved, in which case the size difference is sexy. It means: I am willing to go the distance for you.

If you are sad, ask yourself why you are sad. Then pick up the phone and call someone and tell him or her the answer to the question. If you don't know anyone, call the operator and

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tell him or her. Most people don't know that the operator has to listen, it is a law. Also, the postman is not allowed to go inside your house, but you can talk to him on public property for up to four minutes or until he wants to go, whichever comes first.

Vincent was on the shared patio. I'll tell you about this patio. It is shared. If you look at it, you will think it is only Helena and Vincent's patio, because their back door opens on to it. But when I moved in, the landlord said that it was the patio for both the upstairs and downstairs units. I'm upstairs. He said, Don't be shy about using it, because you pay just as much rent as they do. What I don't know for sure is if he told Vincent and Helena that it is a shared patio. I have tried to demonstrate ownership by occasionally leaving something down there, like my shoes, or one time I left an Easter flag. I also try to spend exactly the same amount of time on the patio as they do. That way I know we are each getting our value. Every time I see them out there, I put a little mark on my calendar. The next time the patio is empty, I go sit on it. Then I cross off the mark. Sometimes I lag behind and have to sit out there a lot toward the end of the month to catch up.

Vincent was on the shared patio. I'll tell you about Vincent. He is an example of a New Man. You might have read the article about the New Men in *True* magazine last month. New Men are more in touch with their feelings than even women, and New Men cry. New Men want to have children, they long to give birth, so sometimes when they cry, it

is because they can't do this; there is just nowhere for a baby to come out. New Men just give and give and give. Vincent is like that. Once I saw him give Helena a massage on the shared patio. This is kind of ironic, because it is Vincent who needs the massage. He has a mild form of epilepsy. My landlord told me this when I moved in, as a safety precaution. New Men are often a little frail, and also Vincent's job is art director, and that is very New Man. He told me this one day when we were both leaving the building at the same time. He is the art director of a magazine called *Punt*. This is an unusual coincidence because I am the floor manager of a printer, and we sometimes print magazines. We don't print *Punt*, but we print a magazine with a similar name, *Positive*. It's actually more like a newsletter; it's for people who are HIV-positive.

Are you angry? Punch a pillow. Was it satisfying? Not hardly. These days people are too angry for punching. What you might try is stabbing. Take an old pillow and lay it on the front lawn. Stab it with a big pointy knife. Again and again and again. Stab hard enough for the point of the knife to go into the ground. Stab until the pillow is gone and you are just stabbing the earth again and again, as if you want to kill it for continuing to spin, as if you are getting revenge for having to live on this planet day after day, alone.

Vincent was on the shared patio. I was already behind in my patio use, so it made me a little anxious to see him there so

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late in the month. Then I had an idea; I could sit there with him. I put on Bermuda shorts and sunglasses and suntan oil. Even though it was October, I still felt summery; I had a summery tableau in mind. In truth, though, it was quite windy, and I had to run back for a sweater. A few minutes later, I ran back for pants. Finally, I sat in a lawn chair beside Vincent on the shared patio and watched the suntan oil soak through the fabric of my khakis. He said he always liked the smell of suntan oil. This was a very graceful way of acknowledging my situation. A man with grace, that's the New Man. I asked him how things were going at *Punt*, and he told me a funny story about a typo. Because we are in the same business, he didn't have to explain that "typo" is short for "typographical error." If Helena had come out, we would have had to stop using our industry lingo so that she could understand us, but she didn't come out because she was still at work. She's a physician's assistant, which may or may not be the same thing as a nurse.

I asked Vincent more questions, and his answers became longer and longer until they hit a kind of cruising altitude and I didn't have to ask, he just orated. It was unexpected, like suddenly finding oneself at work on a weekend. What was I doing here? Where was my Roman Holiday? My American in Paris? This was just more of the same, an American in America. Finally he paused and squinted up at the sky, and I guessed he was constructing the perfect question for me, a fantastic question that I would have to rise up to, drawing from everything I knew about myself and mythology and this black earth. But he was pausing only to emphasize what he

was saying about how the cover design was not actually his fault, and then at last he did ask me something; he asked, Did *I* think it was his fault, you know, based on everything he had just told me? I looked at the sky just to see what it felt like. I pretended I was pausing before telling him about the secret feeling of joy I hide in my chest, waiting, waiting, waiting for someone to notice that I rise each morning, seemingly with nothing to live for, but I do rise, and it is only because of this secret joy, God's love, in my chest. I looked down from the sky and into his eyes and I said, It wasn't your fault. I excused him for the cover and for everything else. For not yet being a New Man. We fell into silence then; he did not ask me any more questions. I was still happy to sit there beside him, but that is only because I have very, very low expectations of most people, and he had now become Most People.

Then he lurched forward. With a sudden motion, he leaned forward at an inhuman angle and stayed there. It was not the behavior of Most People, nor of New Men; it was perhaps something that an old man would do, an elderly man. I said, Vincent. Vincent. I yelled, Vincent Chang! But he only leaned forward silently, his chest almost to his knees. I knelt down and looked into his eyes. They were open, but closed like a store that is closed and looking ghostly with all the lights off. With the lights off, I could now see how luminous he had been the moment before, even in his selfishness. And it struck me that maybe *True* magazine had been wrong. Maybe there are no New Men. Maybe there are only the living and the dead, and all those who are living deserve each other and are equal to each other. I pushed his shoulders

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back so that he was upright in his chair again. I didn't know anything about epilepsy, but I had imagined more shaking. I moved his hair out of his face. I put my hand under his nose and felt gentle, even breaths. I pressed my lips against his ear and whispered again, It's not your fault. Perhaps this was really the only thing I had ever wanted to say to anyone, and be told.

I pulled up my chair and leaned my head against his shoulder. And although I was genuinely scared about this epileptic seizure I was in charge of, I slept. Why did I do this dangerous and inappropriate thing? I'd like to think I didn't do it, that it was in fact done to me. I slept and dreamed that Vincent was slowly sliding his hands up my shirt as we kissed. I could tell my breasts were small from the way his palms were curved. Larger breasts would have required a less acute angle. He held them as if he had wanted to for a long time, and suddenly, I saw things as they really were. He loved me. He was a complex person with layers of percolating emotions, some of them spiritual, some tortured in a more secular way, and he burned for me. This complicated flame of being was mine. I held his hot face and asked him the hard question.

What about Helena?

It's okay, because she's in the medical profession. They have to do whatever is the best for health.

That's right, the Hippocratic oath.

She'll be sad, but she won't interfere with us because of the oath.

Will you move your things up to my apartment?

Miranda July

No, I have to keep living with Helena because of our vows.

Your vows? What about the oath?

It'll be okay. All that is nothing compared to our thing.

Did you ever really love her?

Not really, no.

But me?

Yes.

Even though I have no pizzazz?

What are you talking about, you perfect thing.

You can see that I'm perfect?

It's in each thing that you do. I watch you when you hang your bottom over the side of the bathtub to wash it before bed.

You can see me do this?

Every night.

It's just in case.

I know. But no one will ever enter you in your sleep.

How can you promise that?

Because I'm watching you.

I thought I would have to wait until I died for this.

From now on I am yours.

No matter what? Even when you are with Helena and I am just the short woman upstairs, am I still yours then?

Yes, it is a fact between us, even if we never speak of it again.

I can't believe this is really happening.

And then Helena was there, shaking us both. But Vincent kept sleeping, and I wondered if he was dead and, if so, had

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he said the things in the dream before or after he passed away, and which was more authentic. Also, was I a criminal? Would I be arrested for negligence? I looked up at Helena; she was a swarm of action in her physician's-assistant clothes. All the motion made me dizzy; I shut my eyes again and was about to reenter the dream when Helena yelled, When did the seizure start? And, Why the fuck were you sleeping? But she was checking his vital signs with professional flourish, and the next time she looked at me, I knew I would not have to answer these questions because I had somehow become her assistant, the physician's assistant's assistant. She told me to run into their apartment for a plastic bag that would be on top of the refrigerator. I ran inside gratefully and shut the door.

Their apartment was very quiet. I tiptoed across the kitchen and pressed my face against the freezer, breathing in the complex smells of their life. They had pictures of children on their refrigerator. They had friends, and these friends had given birth to more friends. I had never seen anything as intimate as the pictures of these children. I wanted to reach up and grab the plastic bag from the top of the refrigerator, but I also wanted to look at each child. One was named Trevor, and he was having a birthday party this Saturday. *Please come!* the invitation said. *We'll have a whale of a time!* and there was a picture of a whale. It was a real whale, a photograph of a real whale. I looked into its tiny wise eye and wondered where that eye was now. Was it alive and swimming, or had it died long ago, or was it dying now, right this second? When a whale dies, it falls down through the ocean slowly, over the course of a day. All the other fish see it fall,

like a giant statue, like a building, but slowly, slowly. I focused my attention on the eye; I tried to reach down inside of it, toward the real whale, the dying whale, and I whispered, It's not your fault.

Helena slammed through the back door. She briefly pressed her breasts against my back as she reached over me to grab the bag, and then she ran back outside. I turned and watched her through the window. She was giving Vincent a shot. He was waking up. She was kissing Vincent, and he was rubbing his neck. I wondered what he remembered. She was sitting on his lap now, and she had her arms wrapped around his head. They did not look up when I walked past.

The interesting thing about *Positive* is that it never mentions HIV. If it weren't for the advertisements—Retrovir, Sustiva, Viramune—you would think it was a magazine about staying positive, as in upbeat. For this reason it is my favorite magazine. All the other ones build you up just to knock you down, but the editors at *Positive* understand that you have already been knocked down, again and again, and at this point you really don't need to fail a quiz called "Are You So Sexy or Just So-So?" *Positive* prints lists of ways to feel better, kind of like "Hints from Heloise." They seem easy to write, but that's the illusion of all good advice. Common sense and the truth should feel authorless, writ by time itself. It is actually hard to write something that will make a terminally ill person feel better. And *Positive* has rules, you can't just lift your guidance from the Bible or a book about Zen;

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they want original material. So far none of my submissions has been accepted, but I think I'm getting closer.

Do you have doubts about life? Are you unsure if it is worth the trouble? Look at the sky: that is for you. Look at each person's face as you pass on the street: those faces are for you. And the street itself, and the ground under the street, and the ball of fire underneath the ground: all these things are for you. They are as much for you as they are for other people. Remember this when you wake up in the morning and think you have nothing. Stand up and face the east. Now praise the sky and praise the light within each person under the sky. It's okay to be unsure. But praise, praise, praise.

The Swim Team

This is the story I wouldn't tell you when I was your girlfriend. You kept asking and asking, and your guesses were so lurid and specific. Was I a kept woman? Was Belvedere like Nevada, where prostitution is legal? Was I naked for the entire year? The reality began to seem barren. And in time I realized that if the truth felt empty, then I probably would not be your girlfriend much longer.

I hadn't wanted to live in Belvedere, but I couldn't bear to ask my parents for money to move. Every morning I was shocked to remember I lived alone in this town that wasn't even a town, it was so small. It was just houses near a gas station, and then about a mile down, there was a store and that was it. I didn't have a car, I didn't have a phone, I was twenty-two, and I wrote my parents every week and told them stories about working for a program called R.E.A.D. We read to at-risk youth. It was a state-funded, pilot program. I never decided what the letters R.E.A.D. stood for, but every time I wrote "pilot program," I kind of marveled at my ability to come up with these phrases. "Early intervention" was another good one.

This story won't be very long, because the amazing thing about that year was that almost nothing happened. The citizens of Belvedere thought my name was Maria. I never said it was Maria, but somehow this got started, and I was overwhelmed by the task of telling all three people my real name. These three people were named Elizabeth, Kelda, and Jack Jack. I don't know why Jack twice, and I am not completely sure about the name Kelda, but that's what it sounded like, and that's the sound I made when I called her name. I knew these people because I gave them swimming lessons. This is the real meat of my story because of course there are no bodies of water near Belvedere and no pools. They were talking about this in the store one day, and Jack Jack, who must be dead by now because he was really old, said it didn't matter anyways because he and Kelda couldn't swim, so they'd be liable to drown themselves. Elizabeth was Kelda's cousin, I think. And

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Kelda was Jack Jack's wife. They were all in their eighties, at least. Elizabeth said that she had swum many times one summer as a girl while visiting a cousin (obviously not cousin Kelda). The only reason I joined the conversation was that Elizabeth claimed you had to breathe underwater to swim.

That's not true, I yelled. These were the first words I'd spoken out loud in weeks. My heart was pounding like I was asking someone out on a date. You just hold your breath.

Elizabeth looked angry and then said she'd been kidding.

Kelda said she'd be too scared to hold her breath because she'd had an uncle who died from holding his breath too long in a Hold-Your-Breath contest.

Jack Jack asked if she actually believed this, and Kelda said, Yes, yes I do, and Jack Jack said, Your uncle died of a stroke, I don't know where you get these stories from, Kelda.

Then we all stood there for a little while in silence. I was really enjoying the companionship and hoped it would continue, which it did because Jack Jack said: So you've swum.

I told them about how I'd been on a swim team in high school, and even competed at the state level, but had been defeated early on by Bishop O'Dowd, a Catholic school. They seemed really, really interested in my story. I hadn't even thought of it as a story before this, but now I could see that it was actually a very exciting story, full of drama and chlorine and other things that Elizabeth and Kelda and Jack Jack didn't have firsthand knowledge of. It was Kelda who said she wished there was a pool in Belvedere, because they were obviously very lucky to have a swim coach living in town. I hadn't said I was a swim coach, but I knew what she meant. It was a shame.

Then a strange thing happened. I was looking down at my shoes on the brown linoleum floor and I was thinking about how I bet this floor hadn't been washed in a million years and I suddenly felt like I was going to die. But instead of dying, I said: I can teach you how to swim. And we don't need a pool.

We met twice a week in my apartment. When they arrived, I had three bowls of warm tap water lined up on the floor, and then a fourth bowl in front of those, the coach's bowl. I added salt to the water because it's supposed to be healthy to snort warm salt water, and I figured they would be snorting accidentally. I showed them how to put their noses and mouths in the water and how to take a breath to the side. Then we added the legs, and then the arms. I admitted these were not perfect conditions for learning to swim, but, I pointed out, this was how Olympic swimmers trained when there wasn't a pool nearby. Yes yes yes, this was a lie, but we needed it because we were four people lying on the kitchen floor, kicking it loudly as if angry, as if furious, as if disappointed and frustrated and not afraid to show it. The connection to swimming had to be enforced with strong words. It took Kelda several weeks to learn how to put her face in the water. That's okay, that's okay! I said. We'll start you out with a kickboard. I handed her a book. That's totally normal to resist the bowl, Kelda. It's the body telling you it doesn't want to die. It doesn't, she said.

I taught them all the strokes I knew. The butterfly was just incredible, like nothing you've ever seen. I thought the kitchen floor would give in and turn liquid and away they would go, with Jack Jack in the lead. He was precocious, to

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say the least. He actually moved across the floor, bowl of salt water and all. He'd come pounding back into the kitchen from a bedroom lap, covered with sweat and dust, and Kelda would look up at him, holding her book in both hands, and just beam. Swim to me, he'd say, but she was too scared, and it actually takes a huge amount of upper-body strength to swim on land.

I was the kind of coach who stands by the side of the pool instead of getting in, but I was busy every moment. If I can say this without being immodest, I was *instead* of the water. I kept everything going. I was talking constantly, like an aerobics instructor, and I blew the whistle in exact intervals, marking off the sides of the pool. They would spin around in unison and go the other way. When Elizabeth forgot to use her arms, I'd call out: Elizabeth! Your feet are up, but your head is going down! And she'd madly start stroking, quickly leveling out. With my meticulous, hands-on coaching method, all dives began with perfect form, poised on my desktop, and ended in a belly flop onto the bed. But that was just for safety. It was still diving, it was still letting go of mammalian pride and embracing gravity. Elizabeth added a rule that we all had to make a noise when we fell. This was a little creative for my taste, but I was open to innovation. I wanted to be the kind of teacher who learned from her students. Kelda would make the sound of a tree falling, if that tree were female. Elizabeth would make "spontaneous noises" that always sounded exactly the same, and Jack Jack would say, Bombs away! At the end of the lesson, we would all towel off and Jack Jack would shake my hand and either Kelda or

Elizabeth would leave me with a warm dish, like a casserole or spaghetti. This was the exchange, and it made it so that I didn't really have to get another job.

It was just two hours a week, but all the other hours were in support of those two. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, I'd wake up and think: Swim Practice. On the other mornings, I'd wake up and think: No Swim Practice. When I saw one of my students around town, say at the gas station or the store, I'd say something like: Have you been practicing that needle-nose dive? And they would respond: I'm working on it, Coach!

I know it's hard for you to imagine me as someone called "Coach." I had a very different identity in Belvedere, that's why it was so difficult to talk about it with you. I never had a boyfriend there; I didn't make art, I wasn't artistic at all. I was kind of a jock. I was totally a jock—I was the coach of a swim team. If I had thought this would be at all interesting to you I would have told you earlier, and maybe we would still be going out. It's been three hours since I ran into you at the bookstore with the woman in the white coat. What a fabulous white coat. You are obviously completely happy and fulfilled already, even though we only broke up two weeks ago. I wasn't even totally sure we were broken up until I saw you with her. You seem incredibly faraway to me, like someone on the other side of a lake. A dot so small that it isn't male or female or young or old; it is just smiling. Who I miss now, tonight? is Elizabeth, Kelda, and Jack Jack. They are dead, of this I can be sure. What a tremendously sad feeling. I must be the saddest swim coach in all of history.