

The Half-Life

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I listen for a cry or moan of a child in a nearby bedroom. I listen for the bang of a horse in the barn out my window. I listen for the dishwasher churning away downstairs. My body cannot let down for listening. I listen for his return—but I know he will not come home tonight. He has gone to drink. He has been gone three days already. I have not relished sleeping in the center of the bed, the way we joked about our husbands' absence during deployment, during the certainty of knowing Clark was gone and making the most of the space. I don't reach into the other half of the bed, but fist my hands between my thighs—roll myself into containment. I struggle between asleep and awake. When morning finally arrives I feel groggy and disoriented. I know physically where I am but I no longer recognize the shape of my life.

The house is quiet—even my old dog's breathing is so subdued I fear she might have died during the night. I don't want to wake her so I watch her sides for movement. Relieved to see the small rise and fall of her rib cage, I shift my gaze to the window. The sun climbs from the far corner, illuminating thin clouds that begin to inflate with color, and then rises to cut through the tree tops on the hill. The light settles on the high point of our hayfield.

The fields are empty. The horses wait in the barn; not even the ever-present turkeys move across our landscape this morning. I have to get up so that my son, the first of the children to awaken, will not go down to a still kitchen. I have to get them to school on time.

None of my ordinary morning smells greet me. The coffee pot sits empty and cold on the counter. I search the utensil drawer for the metal scoop and dish out enough for two cups, one for now and one for later. Pulling out the cookbook, I flip to the pancakes—a recipe he knows by heart. My eyes stick on the pen marks in the margin, his all-capital abbreviations printed in ink,

“TSP.” Turning the griddle to low heat, I lift the burner to check the flame. My impatience sets the burner on high for a quick result. (“You always put the burner up too high,” he would say as I chiseled the first burnt batch off the hot surface.) I shiver and glance at the woodstove. Even though I see no frost out my window, it’s chilly in here. We are in a seasonal transition—the bardo—a distended moment of in-between, no longer winter but not quite thawed. Moving to the woodstove, I stir the coals and push a log in to rouse the fire and warm this one-room floor. Then I switch on some music to stir the children. Nonsensical lyrics from *The Lion King*’s “Circle of Life” blast through the house. Once, I tried looking for the words in my Swahili dictionary, without luck. Still, they are sounds we belt out together in the car.

I flip pancakes as the children climb onto the stools at the island. Anna has turned off the stereo on her way into the kitchen. I would think she would prefer the noise, the distraction. Although he is only six, my son knows by my presence over the pancakes that his father is missing. His two sisters know this too. I turn on the radio and hand them glasses of orange juice and plates filled with cut-up pancakes coated in syrup.

I turn to the calendar to study the arc of the coming days. It’s the third morning I have woken up alone and I probably will tomorrow. Tomorrow, Saturday, I will work at my shop. I consider who I can call to watch the children. Who will I let in on our missing? I glance at the calendar to review the weekend plans: on Sunday, in Lyssa’s large seven-year-old print, “Dad’s B-day” and underneath, “Lyme—picnic?” in my mother-in-law’s tight, slightly shaky print. Her note is an invitation to her home to celebrate her son’s birthday. When the day comes, we will gather without him and without cake.

I eat the remaining bites off the children’s plates before sticking them in the dishwasher. “Five-minute warning,” I call to the kids. “Get socks and shoes,” as I am stuffing lunch boxes into backpacks. “Do you have your homework? Who has library today?” I debate pulling my wind pants over my pajamas but think it may be hard to get away with this in these last warmer days of April. Although I have no plans to get out of the car at the school, in the off chance it happens, appearing in my jammies will not make my nine-year-old happy. I probably don’t need to do that to my kids, maybe on a good day, which clearly this is not. I run up to pull on jeans and zip up a hoodie and am last into my car.

The drive to school is quiet. “I’ll pick you up today, don’t take the bus.” I want to be sure to be there early, which I rarely am and he always is. He swears he does not ever drive the kids if he has been drinking. He has even bought a Breathalyzer to prove it. (“Ever drink in the morning?” the doctor had asked during his interview prior to prescribing drugs to help him with his detox. “Yes,” he replied. My quick inhale drew attention. I had suspected; I had wondered why so much coffee remained in the pot on those mornings I felt him disappear from the bed at three a.m. and found him asleep on the couch, not waking while I hovered, sniffing his snore.)

My heartbeat quickens as I come back up the driveway, alone in the car. Gripping the steering wheel, I try to expand my shallow breath as I ascend the hill through the hayfield, closing the gap to the house. Maybe his car will be in the garage now. I turn the corner to the house and the final approach into the garage. His bay gapes at me. The sickening feeling spreads in my stomach and rises to my throat. My tight legs move me forward, up the steps into the mudroom. The dogs do not hear me open the door and I scan the room to be sure they are alive.

I walk back into the kitchen and take the chicken out of the freezer. Yesterday, a friend went food shopping for me. I have confided in a few friends. They have shopped for me, cooked for me, picked up the children from school or sports over the past several months. This is a small town and although when I moved here I wanted to buy friends with deep confidences to bind them to me, I have learned discretion, moderation. In this moment, I don’t want to talk at all, to stumble through a conversation, to be asked how I am, a question so simple that I don’t know how to answer it. I have learned to let time and actions, not my words, define me. I have learned to wait.

I pour my second cup of coffee. I wrap my hands around the warmth of the mug, drink slowly, and let my lips linger on the rim to allow the bitter smell to fill my nose. I lean my hips to the sink and stare out at the barn. Stall doors all closed, horses inside, waiting for me.

Walking through the empty garage bay, I head down the path to the barn. I move through the community of outbuildings we have built over our six years on the property. Each summer a new structure: a house, a barn, a goat house, a chicken house, an equipment shed, a pony shed. My husband fired me from shingling the chicken house roof because I could not keep a straight line. I hammered in the fence posts and hung the wire for the pen. Now I head

to the chicken house and open the door to release the hens into the pen and listen to a community of clucking as they scatter. Sounds shimmer in my landscape.

At the barn, I pull the door out slightly so it runs smoothly on its tracks. I step in and take in the smell of manure mixed with warm horse body smell and, as a yogi takes in the smell of incense, my shoulders drop and my breath settles into my belly. My mare Rockette reaches her great brown face over her stall wall to me. I know she is searching for food and I respond with touch. I press my hand to the center of her forehead over the double whorl between her eyes below the black wisp of her forelock. I feel the shifting texture where the whorls meet under my palm; I feel her heat. I lean some of my body weight into her broad, brown face. I whisper her name and her large brown ears flicker forward before she steps away.

I dish grain and the noise of impatience increases. I drop the grain into the buckets in their stalls. The old pony is last and as I pour the grain for her I survey if there is more chewing of boards. In one month she did more damage to the barn than in the 12 years we have had barns and horses. I was angry at the damage, but not a lasting anger because someday I want to rebuild this barn. The someday list of my dissatisfaction is quite long. I bought free choice minerals believing her deficient and this would solve the wood-chewing problem. “You better lay off the minerals, they’re expensive,” Clark told me recently, but I order them anyway because they have slowed down the damage and, I figure, it’s cheaper than a barn. I didn’t know we no longer had property insurance or health insurance and that there was a stack of other unpaid propane, electric, and phone bills stashed away at his office. I did not realize the full cost of the minerals. This was before I switched all the utilities into my own name and had them mailed to my business address.

I climb the steep steps to the hayloft. I scan the bales, counting to be sure we have enough to take us to the pastures coming in at the end of May and the first cutting of hay at the end of June. Although the snow has melted, the pasture is still brown, not a hint of green. Ready to throw a bale out of the loft, I push the doors open. I push too hard; this door runs easily on the track, and the wheel drops out the back. I reach out to pull the door up and fumble, swearing, to put it back into its place. This was not the design I wanted. I had pictured Dutch doors so we could close the bottom half to hold in children and open the top for ventilation and throwing out bales. Short on

time, Clark asked his father to build us some doors and he built his ideal door. I made so many compromises on this barn. I throw the bale over the board hammered across the door.

The bale hits the ground 15 feet below and an aura of chaff bellows out around it. The horses are louder now, anticipating that hay, anticipating the release from their stalls. I head back down the ladder, pick up the bale, and head out to the field. The twine digs into my ungloved hands. My left shoulder strains forward, cramping in the muscle. I knock the bale forward each step with my thighs; the coarse sides prick through my jeans. The ground feels spongy underfoot. Moisture presses out around each footfall. Far from the barn, I drop the bale. Knee pressed to the side, I push the hay out of the twine and pick up the flakes to spread into five piles.

As I let the horses out, they trot off to pasture. I watch the mustang pony move to see if he is favoring his injured leg. The horses sort themselves out over the hay. They always seem to have to renegotiate their place in the herd with each feeding. I head into the tack room to turn on the radio. The pink insulation sags from the ceiling above the stereo. "Finish the tack room" again adorns my to-do list, a list for the royal we, meaning he, as in when will he finally finish the tack room? An empty tonic bottle sits on the edge of the sink. I unscrew the cap and sniff. I have found them in so many other places: behind the shavings pile in the equipment shed, under the logs in the woodshed. He has watched me pour the vodka from the tonic bottle down the drain: "We will get through this," he tells me. In that moment it's the bright blue of his eyes I see and not the yellow I have come to fixate on. Because this is what I have become: hyper-vigilant, always watching, watching his behavior, always sniffing, when he is awake, when he is asleep.

I know each night the children watch for his headlights to come down the driveway. Not a light on our nightscape, particularly last night, the new moon. I don't hear them cry at night but they might not hear me either. A post-and-beam house has little ability to isolate our emotions from each other. It teaches us to hold in our grief. Grief over the lost potential, mourning the family we were before addiction gutted us. Before we moved into the half-life.

I toss the empty bottle into a grain bag under the sink and head to the stalls with a pitchfork in hand. I swing open the stall door and roll the wheelbarrow across the opening. I hung these doors. We had run out of

money, and the builders had another job waiting so they walked out. The doors leaned against walls, like they were left in a sudden protest. Three children under age five, my husband at work, and I looked at the stalls with no doors and wondered how to contain the life. I hung the doors with a baby on my back. The babysitter held the door while I pushed the Phillips head on the drill into each screw, nine times on each hinge.

The fork moves smoothly through the shavings and across the interlocking rubber mats. It was an extravagance, these mats, but worth it, because the cheap ones shift, then shavings work under and heave the mat up, making it so the fork catches often. I don't have to negotiate the terrain, which makes this a kind of meditation, allowing my mind to roam while my body scoops manure, tosses shavings. Can I manage all these animals in addition to three children and a business? This life we built as two, I know I can handle it as a single parent, but when I think forward in my life, it is a life as a whole family—no one missing.

After mucking stalls, I sweep the aisle, pushing shavings, chaff, horsehair across the rubber tile. "No paving," I had told the contractor, "too dangerous. The aisle is too tight for children and horses, and macadam is too unforgiving." I sweep up a small grade visible only by noticing how the rubber tile climbs up the side of the stall wall. This imperfection is only visible to Clark and me. We put the tile in one weekend. We rented a tamper to pack down the sand of the aisle and then we cut the tile to fit. The thick, hexagon-shaped rubber tiles were slow cutting. When Tuck on a tricycle crashed into the bar at the end of the aisle and hit the surface, "it just paid for itself," Clark said. I push the wall of dirt out the back door of the barn and turn to take in the tidy aisle. Order established in the barn.

The phone on the shelf next to the grain room door rings. I had caller ID installed last week to avoid the bill collectors and the irate clients of my husband trying to track him down because he no longer went to his office. I don't know if I can bear another phone conversation with my mother: "Doesn't he understand he's at risk of losing everything?" Or my in-laws: "We think he needs to go to a residential treatment facility. We've talked with your parents." Or my sister-in-law: "Get a restraining order; you have the power to get him into treatment." I just want the power to muck my stalls, cook the chicken, pick up the kids from school. These calls reduce me further, calling attention to the diminished life I am living.

The number is the director of the alcohol treatment outpatient program. While I was not willing to exercise power and control to insist on residential care, I was willing to give the ultimatum of treatment. He has been in the program a month; it doesn't seem to be working. I thought once in treatment, the burden would shift.

I didn't want to make time for counseling: "It's his problem." My life was too full to wedge in another thing, my anger too great to make room for healing. Yet I go with him on Monday nights for couples group. This past Monday, he got caught, tested positive for alcohol. The treatment center issued its own ultimatum: he had to go on Antabuse—a pill with the power to make him violently ill at the smallest taste of alcohol—if he wanted to stay in the program. According to clinic protocol Antabuse must be administered by someone else, someone like me, giving me power over him. Clark wants to conquer his addiction with his own will; I don't want to be in charge of administering the pill. I don't want responsibility for his sobriety. Perhaps it was the finality of the pill that put him on the run.

"Have you heard anything?" the clinic director asks. It's the third day he has asked me this.

"No," I reply. He does not want to be found. I think there must be some clue to where he is or if he is safe, something only I would know. Walking out of the barn, I push the baby swings away. Why haven't I taken them down? I am no longer pushing kids in swings and singing Old MacDonald as I muck the stalls. They're in school.

"How long are you going to wait until you call the police?" His voice insists.

"It's his choice to run. It's not my job to track him down." I pace around the barn entrance.

Each absence has been a bit longer than the last. Each time that I thought we had reached bottom proved to be merely a low.

Sitting on the mounting block outside the barn in the sun and in the company of dogs and chickens, I absorb the mild warmth of April. The chickens scratch the earth in their pen as if this is a regular day. The trees have a touch of green, a green so strong it is on the brink of unfurling its power into a larger leaf when it will diffuse into a lighter color. The house looms over me, casting a shadow towards the barn. The peak aims like an arrow towards where I sit.

“He loves you.” The words shake me out of a kind of trance; it is hard for me to believe in words so different from action. I am not really listening. The director of the clinic is not asking me why I stay. He is not family telling me I have the power to make him stop drinking. But he is pushing me to cross a line, one I am unwilling to cross, moving into his recovery, a threshold Clark has been unable to cross.

“I don’t know.” I look at the broken fence post and the partially eaten rails. I am saddened by the stuff that’s falling apart. I pull at the seam of my jeans. I again weigh what I did in high school. I am pleased because my twentieth reunion is in six weeks.

Later, after I have reported him missing, when I talk to the police officer to ask if he will patrol the motels (“a welfare check”), he tells me he once had a call like this: “The guy was missing for a week and then he just drove right to rehab.” This sounds too good to be true but I am relieved he did not dismiss me as some kind of nagging wife tracking down an errant but happy husband. He also asked if he could be with another woman. I didn’t think so. There is no space between him and his addiction. I don’t know how many secrets are stashed away.

I have told the children I don’t know where their father is or when he will be home. “What do you do when you have a problem? How do you ask for help?” I ask the children. “When you feel unhappy, what do you do with those feelings?”

They offer me solutions: “I tell a friend.” “I write in my journal.” “I talk with my teacher.”

“Daddy is not solving his troubles in a healthy way. He drinks alcohol. His body is allergic to the alcohol. He behaves badly. He leaves. He’s safe and he loves you and he will come home when he is ready.” Trying to break it down as if any of us understand what is happening.

“What is it you want from him?” the clinic director asked last week in a counseling session. “Reliability,” I responded. He laughed as if he could not believe this response. I know he expected love or trust or intimacy but what are any of these without showing up?

“He loves you,” insists the clinic director in a wavering pitch of emotion that catches me unfamiliar. A tremor of authenticity sounds and some kind of feeling is stirred like a lifeline that will lead me into this new territory of how to report my husband missing. Why I am reporting him if he doesn’t want to

be found? Am I calling him home or am I increasing the divide? He wouldn't want me to call the police. He probably does not consider himself missing. I have to stop thinking like a couple.

Nobody has mentioned he could be dead, but it is a thought that pushes at me the way the bulbs planted around me on this mounting block push at the soil, a truth unearthing, pushing to be free. I think I must know if he is dead. He may be out there dying alone. "Daddy is safe." I have told the children. "He'll come home when he is ready." I say this to chase the images from my mind.

"Will you make the call?" comes the voice over the phone line. It does not occur to me that while I have told my close friends, the report on the police scanner will tell everyone else. When I walk into the general store tomorrow, I will not be greeted with a friendly smile but with downcast eyes. I notice the change immediately but it is not until I hear the static blast of the scanner that I fumble with my change and remember there are no secrets in a small town. Humility comes with a police scanner. It's the scanner that informs the bully who shouts at my daughter on the bus: "Well at least my dad is not a drunk!"

"He knows that in order to come back to the clinic, he will have to go on Antabuse." The clinic director offers this promise, but is it hope? The pill I have to administer, like a keeper. The pill that becomes a lifeline, please give me my pill, my husband before me like forgiveness, opening his mouth to accept the pill. There is no cheeking the pill on his part, the way a dog avoids swallowing, but there is label checking to be sure there is no alcohol in the salad dressing or the shampoo—so great is the fear of the power of the pill. He stands before me, please give me the pill, and I dig it out of its revolving hiding place so that he cannot switch the pills for something benign. It no longer feels like control or desperation but it's not hope either. It is what we do to acknowledge our powerlessness. This pill is when the tightness begins to leave my body.

"He loves you." The clinic director's voice gains pitch. I cannot feel anything, but I hear this. Am I making this call for me, for him, for the children, for the other people on the road? I feel the shattered place of abandonment. What is terrorizing him so that he cannot come home? Will he survive? I don't want the responsibility for another's life, or death.

"I want to go for a ride before I have to pick up the children," I tell him and hang up the phone.

I just want to be carried on my horse. I catch Jazz out in the field and bring him into the barn aisle. I brush swaths of winter hair loose from his coat. It falls to the floor of the aisle, “For the birds, to make their nests,” I like to tell the children. I stretch up on my toes to brush over the top of his rump, one hand to his side for balance. I swing the saddle high to his back. I know the motion, the height to swing the saddle, in a single move. I slowly do up the girth; his body clenches if I pull it tight too quickly. He opens his mouth to take the bit and I lead him out of the barn.

I climb the steps of the mounting block and face the saddle. One hand holds the reins on the wither, the other reaches for the stirrup leather. I give a little tug on the leather, *here I come, no surprises*. I suck in a breath and then take this step of faith. I weight the stirrup and begin the transfer of my body onto his back. In this moment of transition, he could spin or bolt and I could be dragged by my foot in the stirrup, leaving my children with no parents. The fingers on my left hand lace into the mane to assist the pull up onto his back and I swing my leg over. He does not flinch; his ears slack forward. I let out my breath the moment my seat settles in the saddle and my foot seeks the offside stirrup. I am a light load for him to carry. I mutter “good boy,” a kind of prayer of thanks, and press my hands to his neck before I gather a contact with the reins. I sit up tall, pull my shoulders back, lift my heart up to the sun, and press my legs to his sides to ask him to move forward.

I want to run out of this moment, but I begin in a walk. We turn away from the barn. Unlike his mother, he steps willingly away from the herd, towards the trail. I let go of the reins and lay my upper body on his neck, clasping my hands under his neck for security. His mane scratches my cheek; I breathe in his earthy, sweet smell. In his quiet company, I have a respite from having to explain to the children what is shattering our family, a relief from the vigilance. I turn my body over to his footfalls. I drop into this rhythm, steady and reliable. We move elegantly, evenly, without question, over the rutted earth. We ride through the landscape, this land with green forcing its way out of the stark branches, leaves rotting into soil, bulbs working their way out of the ground. I sway from side to side. I feel a whole body under my fractured heart. In this moment I feel grace. And I think if we ever move through this, my husband had better make amends to my horse.

Fifty yards down the trail I straighten up and gather the contact on the reins. My breath expands with each step. My shoulders sag slightly as the

weight of the family slides off them. I kick to a trot and we ascend the rise to the sand ring. This is where I like to ride when the children are home, so I can be close to the house and they can play in the sand, but today the children are at school, and I want to go far. My eyes look across the ring to the far pasture and to the woods beyond, looking to the opening, the trail away from the house.

In looking ahead, I do not see what is underfoot. It is not for three days that I will see the car tracks in the sand ring. The imprint of the tires having driven straight through the far gate each night after dark, to stop and park in the middle, facing the house, behind the screen of trees. On this day, Jazz's large hooves step right over the car tracks, steady and regular, as I look ahead to the gap in the woods, to the trail away from the house. Leaving behind the evidence of him. The spot where he will sit again tonight, in his car, watching the lights of the house, watching the movements of our lives, the other half of his, as I tuck children into bed, on another night of missing.

