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Stay with Me

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Susan Steinberg

Stay with me.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I FELT a little more and we went for walks and rides. Me and the one who gave me the kids. That was before and now is here. The yard looks quiet tonight and every night.

A tornado of fireflies spins around my chair and the point at the bottom digs out a message in the dirt. It writes, run away now! I say, they all ran away. But you never go anywhere, it says.

No that's not true. I went to different islands.

Not by yourself, it says. Never on an exclusive voyage.

I don't need an exclusive voyage.

There's a lot going on around here anyway in the yard and over there in the house. The tea kettle goes off in the cold weather and the flower garden grows in the warm. Often I sleep the whole night in the yard.

What a pretty night when the moon hits the patio! We like to be outside me and sometimes a cat from around. Squirrels watch us from a tree. The cat puts its paws up on the chair.

Flutter up under my dress, I tell the fireflies, and tell me what you see. You know I'm lopsided and getting up in years. There is rust on the trees and a flat bicycle tire stuck in the fence. The lawn chair grabs the skin on the backs of my legs.

The newspapers still land in the yard. But I canceled the delivery! Nothing works out the way it should. Cats circle the house. So do squirrels. On cool nights we all do a dance on the patio. On hot nights we sleep hard as cement.

Flutter up around me, I tell the fireflies. I'm the biggest sun and you're the dimmer stars. Take this! with my rolled up newspaper and your wings flutter up in circles like burnt charcoal. I'm the big bright sun. You're the dimmer stars.

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Take this!

The fireflies guide me through the yard. There is not much to see except shadows of a flat wheel and a moon glare on the car. I reach for the garden hose and shake old water out the end.

In my head is a sidewalk café. There is an Eiffel Tower too and I am fluent. Pigeons take bread crumbs from my fingers. The last of the sun beats down on my hair. A storm approaches and I open an umbrella. I notice the cracks in the sidewalk and men smoking thin cigarettes.

You do something wrong you get yelled at. The rest of the time you get ignored. Well except when you are visibly expecting. Then you get treats and you can put your feet up on the table.

There was a time before everything when we went for rides and walks. Me and the one who gave me the kids. There were days that were long and black. There were ones too that were brighter. I felt a little more at times. I felt a little less. I tried to leave the kids somewhere but how attached they could be. I had to keep them it turned out or I would have been chased. I would have been caught. I tried to leave them on the sand. I would not have minded running to another country. And they certainly could have found a better home.

The one who gave me the kids had a gravity force. Lightning bolt eyes. He wandered the beach. He was so thin he could dodge raindrops. He could stay dry in a hurricane. We went for rides in his van. We saw the whole peninsula. In the van his hand was hot on my knee. It felt as if I could be his one. Clouds parted for the sun. Trees lined the streets.

His name still escapes me.

We saw wild horses eating wet grass. Sure I would go with him to the hidden place where the trees made a circle. We ended up on the wet grass because of laziness. We ended up in the shallow water. The clams dug holes in the shape

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of a V and I spread. We ended up in my single bed. I could hear the waves rush up and up. They fell to pieces of foam and shell not far from the window.

What a mess on my white sheets!

I watched him slink around in the shadows. He opened a box and took out my money. And then I fell asleep.

(This is how he tried to murder me in a dream. He pulled down the sun and wore it as a hat. It formed a halo of gold points around his head. He kissed me and the sun poured through my mouth. The heat pushed my skin outward and loose onto the ground. My bones gave in. He left me in a pile of ashes by his feet.)

When he left the room there was a feeling of wait come back. I am certain I said something sad. Was it not mutual? What came out was certainly unexpected. And what a remarkably short goodbye both times. I never had to say a word.

Colorful birds land in the back seat of the car where I have planted a bright flower garden. Weeds grow up out of the springs. I have planted rows of bright flowers in the back seat of the car because surely it gets hotter in the car than on the porch. I take the garden hose to the car and sing to the flowers.

Flutter up around me, I tell the fireflies. The flowers are growing look at that.

A whole year has passed. This is what I said. It took you long enough, is what I should have said. He played a penny whistle and wore no shoes. I broke the whistle into useless pieces. Look at me, I said. Nowhere else. I gave in to his gravity force. We did it on the floor with the boy screaming his head off in a cardboard box. I said the boy belonged to someone else.

(This is how he tried to murder me. He dragged me out to the sand. He pressed his hand to my mouth. He said, a girl on the sand is the first step. A girl on the sand is nothing more than a pebble that needs to be thrown. His eyes

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were cracked with red lines. I think now maybe he was joking. Or else he was mad. I was too tired to scream.)

I fell asleep on the sand. He carried me inside. In my head I attached myself to his legs so he could not walk. The door slammed and I cried out nothing. It would have been worse had he not touched my eyelids before leaving. Hooray I was alive though my money was gone. What a glow I had anyway.

I am certain he feels nothing but old right now.

His name escapes me. The one who gave me the kids. His name escapes me now. Everyone said he was no good. He just walked around and went for rides. All the more reason to pursue. I think I taught him a lesson or more. Or else he would not have come back time number two.

There was a time when I was thin as a hair. I could dodge raindrops. There was a time I was wider. Everyone smirked behind my back. Most said I was too fat with that second one. Some said, you look wonderful, before they turned away smirking. I look like a whole planet, I cried. How could I avoid salt when it was everywhere? It was in the water. And the air.

I pushed the second one out too soon. The doctors whizzed in fast speed while I crept backwards. Do you ever knock, I said. Get out of my house. I tripped over my blanket. The doctors whizzed through the room wearing miners hats and I paused and let them get me. You got me. No there were no complications. He's the one expecting, I said. I pointed to the wall where he once stood. See look at the way his body curves. He's expecting. I thought his shadow left a print. He was expecting all puffed out like that. It was painful to look at him. He was all buckled out like that. I sensed he was carrying a girl. His face was twice its size.

I said to the wall, you big life maker you. Give *me* a few more good years! I said, I'm going to read the paper now do you mind. I put my feet up.

I said, I would know if I were expecting. It makes you

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feel so different. Some days a goddess and some days a kangaroo.

The doctors said no it was *me* who would be doing all the work. I said, well then knock me out. I was all buckled up. They knocked me out in case there were complications.

We were all together in a small house at the ocean. Once a boy and once a girl with their too soft skin and hair. Imagine how loud in the house. Sure I wanted everyone gone.

We ate crab claws and candy and the boy almost choked. His teeth never grew in right. We all kept late hours. They had terrible colds. Pink eye and rashes I sold a watch. I took the kids to the city. I left an address. The ride to the city was hot as anything even with the windows rolled down.

We've done fine without him, I said to the kids. We're in the big city.

I also said, fireflies don't sting or bite. They just fly slow and light up yellow like that. They look as if they could bite you though. Then I bit the kids on the cheeks for a little scare and nothing felt right again. I bit her a little harder than him. I bit both of them a little harder than I had to but it was only play. Then things changed so much I wanted to bite her whole head off for being such a princess. What distance! As if the entire universe came between us. The fireflies lit up the yard.

The dog that chews the roses off the bush next door. He's your father. This is what I said. He knocked me up with a blink of his eyes.

You're driving me to the madhouse, is what I also said.

Well it could be that I drove them out eventually. Not literally of course since the car has served as a garden for quite some time. Ha. There are flower beds in the back seat.

In the shadow of the Eiffel Tower roses extend. Cigarette ashes float around my hair. Take me away boys, I say. Touch me here. You'll never know how I need it. Let's hold hands and more.

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I bought crystals to make things easier. We all felt good for awhile. I carried the crystals in the pockets of my bathrobe and each one had a different kind of luck. There was luck for big money and luck for fame and luck for true love. There was luck for good health. I wanted luck for true love the most.

I dyed my hair red to be attractive.

The boy stayed in his room the girl in hers.

The crystals fit nicely everywhere. I waved them over the kids' faces until they were too big to let me.

The man who drives the bus is your father. So is the thunder and your precious sun hiding behind a storm. This is what I told the kids. Follow the yellow lines in the road to find him. Ha.

There were some things I said that made changes all around. Stay with me. Then the door slammed shut. Not once but four times. Five if you include when I locked myself in. No six. The cat. Where was it?

There were other things which were not things I said but things I did. Biting the kids' cheeks. It must have scared them quite a bit. Her nightmares must have been terrible. My teeth left toothprints for a good twenty minutes.

What did I want? Nothing but the best for everyone. I kept an eye on them for a few years and then I said, please go. But does anything work out the way it should?

We sat in the dining room together one last time. She had brittle bones and papery skin. He had roopy veins and blood going in fast speed. When did they get so old? The tabletop had grown a black soot. Did anyone like my cooking?

The wind is going to lift our house up and carry it away, I told the kids. We're going somewhere on a cloud. The way they looked at me as if I were no influence. We're going to Oz or something.

The day the boy left for good I saw such a long shadow. I turned the garden hose on the girl to snap her out of her dream. This is as good as anything, I told her. You'll never be number one.

Stay with me.

We've done fine without him. This is what I whispered to the dirty walls.

The wind shakes the leaves out of the trees. And violently. There must be a storm on the way.

The point of the tornado of fireflies says it is my turn to take a journey. I don't need to.

Now the fireflies scatter and cannot decide how to be. The trouble of making a good decision!

We once took a sea voyage to the islands. We took a bus when we got there. And a smaller boat. We saw some tropical birds. There were turtles living on all the rocks.

I turned the kids loose on a quiet beach. I set them up with two shovels and a pail. I put handmade four leaf clovers and small crystals in their pockets for good luck. Drink this sea water babies. It'll split your minds wide open. This is what I said to the kids. I walked backwards. I waved. They looked at me. They were standing still. I walked backwards until they were dots.

I put the crystals in the flower beds to make the plants grow stronger. I found an earthworm in the dirt on the back seat. It seems it was looking for an opening.

In my head there is a path lined with shrubs. The stars are pointed and bright. Men drink out of teacups and smoke thin cigarettes. We hold hands beneath the Eiffel Tower. Sure I will see where they want to take me. Perhaps we can wait for the storm to pass.

There was a time when I felt a little more and I took them to the city. Forget the one who gave me the kids.

There was a night I paused on the sand singing about my sweet baby doll. I have a sweet baby doll. A doll a doll a doll. All of a sudden a doll is what.

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There was a night I pointed up. See that dark dot in the moon? That's your father. He's waving look at that.