For my mom

a
silent
treatment

WRITE THE TRUTH, MY MOM TELLS ME. OTHERWISE
it wouldn't be honest. Or interesting.

THE SECOND OR THIRD DAY (MAYBE)

I FORGET WORDS.

I hold a string with pieces of metal attached to it. The pieces are shaped like cats. I dangle it in front of Chris.

This is—

I pause.

I know I sound like an idiot, I continue, but the name of it. You know.

Wind chime, Chris says.

Did my mom give this to us the Easter she wasn't talking to us?

Chris can't remember, but he also can't remember if she talked to us the past two Easters.

My mom's silences—a few days here, almost six months there, over the five years since she moved in with Chris and me—amount to a year and a half, at least.

A year ago I told her: When you don't talk to me, it's all I can think about. I feel sick constantly.

Next time I do it, she said, yell at me. Tell me to go to hell.

I can't do that, I said.

Sure you can.

I'm not telling you to go to hell.

Why not?

Because. I don't know. Just don't do it again.

But she did it again. Then she did it again, again. And, now (I think), again.

I write *Start to-do list* and immediately cross it off.

Emails, checklists, those I can do.

But any writing beyond that?

About her silence? (Mom: If I didn't want you to write about it, I shouldn't have done it.)

And during her silence? (Mom: You don't need my permission.)

Enduring her silence, what I'm attempting here: to turn a painful distraction from writing into writing.

I'm not so delusional that I fail to register another impulse: to make writing its own distraction, one that prevents me from feeling my pain.

And here's something else I already did: *Start A Silent Treatment*.

But how many times have I done that?

(Mom: It's a good title.)

What if you walk down there? Chris asks.

We're sitting at the dining room table with our coffees and wind chime. He's wearing a gray shirt and boxers. The boxers are patterned with bacon and eggs, even though he's a vegetarian like me. They arrived as part of some underwear subscription service. Last month was unicorns.

Behind him, outside three narrow windows, is my mom's private stairwell. It connects her basement apartment to our shared deck. Behind me, in our dining room's far corner, is a door, probably locked. On the other side is her second set of stairs. During a silence, she climbs those only to deliver letters or holiday gifts while Chris and I sleep. (Mom: *You are such a disappointment to me. Until I can leave here, leave me alone. I want no further contact.*) One Christmas she cracked open the dining room door and tossed up my card. It flew into the room, like a magic trick, and landed on the hardwood floor.

Or we could pretend this isn't happening, I tell him. That's what I did last time, and she stopped doing it after a couple weeks.

But she can go months, he says and stands.

What are you doing?

Closing the drapes.

But she might think that means something, I say.

Why don't I try to talk to her? he says.

No, I tell him. I should do it. She's my mother.

Mother sounds cold. Its coldness feels right. She's being cold.

But *my* attached to *mother* or *mom* suddenly sounds strange. Maybe the possessiveness bothers me.

What else do I call her?

Barb sounds like what it is: a sharp projection near the tip of an arrow or hook, angled away from the main point to make extraction hard.

Barb can also be a hurtful or disparaging remark.

Barbara?

When a childhood friend addressed her mother by name, I was shocked. I still began my letters to Santa, *Dear Mr. Claus*. I expected my friend to be sent underground. (In kindergarten, I announced I was grounding myself—for what, I forget—and went to the basement.)

To you, her mother snapped, I'm Mom.

It sounded like a barb.

(Mom: A book needs conflict.)

Go to hell, I tell the wind chime. To hell with you. Why don't you go to hell?

But what would happen if I said it to her?

I'd cry. That's what I'd do.

What I'm doing.

I google *help me end the silent treatment* and am instructed not to. I am not dealing with a normal person, these online strangers claim.

But if a peer-reviewed psychology study reports that 67 percent of Americans have inflicted silence, that means 67 percent of Americans are not normal.

Well.

Duration, though. The study didn't specify duration.

Until she moved to Baltimore, we spoke on the phone almost every day. Most calls lasted an hour. She usually waited for me to call her. When she called first, she asked: Am I interrupting?

Our calls began shortly after I left Sandusky, Ohio, at eighteen, for a university near Chicago. My dad died a month later. After that, she increasingly talked about how miserable she was.

She hated her job: You know I'd make more at McDonald's than I make at the library?

She hated her house: I wish it'd burn down when the animals and I aren't home. Or I wish the city would buy it off me and turn it into a parking lot.

She missed my dad: What I wouldn't give to have him back.

She missed me: I wish I could live near you. I hate this stinking town. I'm so proud of you for getting out. I was never brave enough or smart enough.

Even our letters referenced our phone calls.

Dear Mom, Not much has happened in the four hours since I hung up with you . . .

Jeannie, Sorry about crying on the phone Sunday night . . .

(I recently found the letters—hers to me, inside a wood box underneath my office daybed, and mine to her, inside folders of official documents that she'd asked me to store—and felt relieved. They confirmed that we did get along.)

After college, I moved to New York, and for about a decade lived in a series of rent-stabilized apartments. My mom loved to visit. She'd never ridden a plane before.

I wish I could move to New York, she said. It's never boring.

She reminded me that if it ever became too expensive, I could move back home.

You wouldn't have to worry about rent or groceries, she said. You could have all day to write.

She stopped mentioning this after Chris and I started dating, but I knew the offer was still there.

After he and I moved to Baltimore for my teaching job, we rented a row house that cost the same as our New York shotgun apartment.

Now we can live in the same city, I said to her, if you still want to do that. Baltimore is so much more affordable than New York.

Then she said what she often said: I just want to be close to you.

Maybe she didn't hear me call down yesterday morning and evening. She's deaf in her left ear. Her dad blew smoke in it when she was a girl, thinking that'd cure her

ear infections. If she can't see who's speaking or what's making noise, she has trouble determining where the sound is coming from, or registering a sound at all.

I turn off the air purifier (*too loud*, allege online reviews), kneel, pluck some cat hair off the area rug, and press my ear against the dining room floor.

A contractor installed insulation to muffle the noise between the first floor and the basement, which, in two months, he transformed from a dingy unfinished space into a bright apartment. My mom says the insulation works, but when Chris and I are in our dining room, we can hear if she's in her living room, watching TV, talking on the phone, or playing fetch with her dog, Max.

Is that packing tape?

Paper crumpling?

I should know the sound of paper crumpling. (Mom: You're the writer. You decide what to include.)

Maybe the *my* of *my mother* sounds strange because she seems strange. I doubted *my* mom would use the silent treatment again. (Mom: I won't do it again.)

Signs she's avoiding or preparing to avoid me:

- I open the door off my dining room, call down, Mom?, and she doesn't answer—even though I

heard her moving around moments ago. I shout Mom? again, and she still doesn't reply.

- She texts two-letter replies, such as *ok* and *no*.
- She locks the door off the dining room.
- She takes out her trash before sunrise.
- She sits hunched on the front steps—not the steps to our porch but the steps closest to the sidewalk (our front lawn is on a small hill)—staring off.
- She stops feeding the squirrels and birds.
- She keeps her lights off.
- She keeps her phone off.
- She stacks cardboard boxes in the laundry room or garage or on the deck. Sometimes she includes a moving checklist with the names of retirement communities hundreds of miles away in Ohio.
- She writes letters. Her cruelest claims, *We never did get along.* Her softest reads, *I love you but I think we do better at a distance.*

She never did this to me when I was a child, not that I recall.

She did it to my dad, though. They used the silent treatment on each other, she explained, because they didn't want to say something they'd regret.

What does she want to say now that she'd regret?

If I focus on one object, one without any sentimental associations, that might calm me.

The radiator, let's start there.

But is it *ray-dee-ate-er* or *rad-ee-ate-er*? I remember the realtor and the contractor pronouncing it *rad* and not *ray*. Or did they call it a *rod-ee-ate-er*? Must be regional.

As a child, I corrected my mom when she said *warsh* instead of *wash*: I warshed all your clothes and Do you need anything warshed?

I still feel horrible about that.

She also told me: I could have gone to Warshington, DC, after high school. I was a good typist. I had an offer to be a secretary, but my dad wouldn't let me. He said I'd get raped there. He said I had to get married or he was kicking me out of the house.

I sit at the dining room table and call her phone. It rings and rings below me. Frank Sinatra croons New York, New York.

I should have lied: It's impossible to make an entire song your ringtone.

When we're together and she chooses not to answer, I sometimes remind her: To make it stop, you press this button.

But when strangers glare, I want to tell them: She and my dad went dancing every Friday before I was born. When he, a longtime New Yorker, walked into the room, the DJ would play this song.

Even though he died twenty years ago, I tell my dad: I'm trying, I really am, but you know how she can be.

I remember him attempting to break her silences. Once he followed her to the basement, and I heard something smash. (Mom: He kept talking and talking. He wouldn't let it go. You wanted to transfer out of Catholic school, and I said absolutely not. So I threw the hot iron against the wall. I just wanted you to have a good education.)

I touch the doorknob the way one does in a fire and quietly test the lock. The knob turns. I open the door slightly and peer down her stairwell. The lights are off.

Mom? I want to say.

But I'm afraid to speak.

THE NEXT DAY

CHRIS AND I ARE SITTING AT THE DINING ROOM table with our morning coffees. The wind chime is still here.

I meant to put it back yesterday, I say, but I don't know when she checks the mail.

I really think we should try to end this, he says.

I turn the air purifier to its highest setting.

Psychologists say you shouldn't try to break the silence, I tell him.

I don't think that's right, he says.

They've done studies.

But not all situations, he says, are the same.

Am I being passive-aggressive if I leave her mail in the mailbox but take ours?

How about we leave the house? he asks. Go for a walk?

She might be walking Max.

So we see her, he says.

A few months ago when Chris and I had COVID, I sat here at the dining room table, and my mom stood at the

top of her outside stairs, and we talked, masked, through the middle window. The first week, she texted every day:

- *How r u feeling?*
- *I put groceries at your back door.*
- *How r Chris and the cats?*
- *Do u need more soup?*

The second week, her texts dwindled to *ok* and *no*. The third week, cardboard boxes from our recycling cans appeared on the deck. Collapsed, they leaned against our wicker sofa. A rock, previously used as garden edging, kept the checklist from blowing away. *Call movers*, it said. And: *Pack*.

I told Chris: Another performance art project by my mom.

Because between *Do u need more soup?* and *Pack*, what mistake could I possibly have made?

Do you think she thinks we're lying about COVID? I asked Chris.

I'm done trying to figure it out, he said.

A few days later, we stopped testing positive, and I texted her. A couple of days after that, she stood at the middle window, asking our cats in their cat tree if they were *seeping*.

I put on an N95 mask and joined her.

How are you and Chris? she asked.

I glanced behind her, where the boxes and checklist used to be.

Better, I said.

I remembered my ultimatum after an earlier silence: If you use the silent treatment again, this living arrangement

ends. I'll sell the house, and you can take the money you put into it.

Next time she does this, I thought, I'll sell the house.

But *next time* was what I thought last time.

Clean the kitchen.

Its narrow galley layout cleans quickly, and the kitchen can't be that dirty. I'm rarely in it. I never did care about cooking or baking. My mom instructed me as a child not to bother with either.

You're not ending up a housewife like me, she said.

Last night I heated a frozen pizza with the cardboard still underneath it.

I would have done the same thing, Chris lied.

(Mom: *You are such a disappointment.*)

With my earbuds in, I play my favorite podcast and start emptying the fridge. The podcast's intro music is overlaid with excerpts from author interviews. A writer says: Artists tend to put their fingers in the wounds in the silences.

Are the wounds in the silences? Or is there a meaningful pause between *wounds* and *in*? As in: Artists tend to put their fingers in wounds and in silences?

I replay the intro.

Sounds like the silences contain wounds.

Half listening to the interview that follows—*struggling with language* and *the inner workings of* and *maybe I wouldn't have written it because*—I sort food according to expired, questionable, and okay.

(Mom: *I never wanted to admit how selfish you are.*) (Mom: Don't talk to me. Don't even look at me.) (Mom: *We never did get along.*) (Mom: *I don't even know who you are anymore.*)

Nina calls.

I'm on the first floor, I whisper.

Your mom? she asks.

Yeah. I'll call you back.

Nina and I met a decade ago in New York, where she still lives. She's writing a memoir about her dad. He died last year.

I call her from my bedroom, and she says: I was actually calling about my mom. But you first.

No, you, I say. Please.

My mom was trying to guilt-trip me again, Nina says. She said, Your friend Jeannie is such a good daughter. She let her mother live with her.

Don't do it, I say.

Don't worry. I won't. I told her, It's not really working out. Jeannie and her mom aren't talking. But I didn't realize your mom wasn't talking to you again.

How'd your mom reply?

She said, Oh, okay. But she'll bring it up again. Just because a lot of Indian families do it, she thinks I'm supposed to do it too. I did finally tell her I'm writing a memoir, and she's kind of being nicer. I still get the ungrateful daughter texts, but not as many.

My mom, I say, could care less.

Oh no. Did she write you another letter?

Not yet.

What happened?

Chris's parents were in town last week, and we took them to a restaurant with stairs.

Wait, what?

His dad's knees are bad, and his mom has balance issues, but they knew about the stairs and assured us they'd be fine. They wanted barbecue. Chris and I could order two things: jackfruit and pickles. But you'd think we'd forced his parents to go.

So it's something else, Nina says.

She says she's moving.

Doesn't she say that every time?

She'd move if she could afford it. But she refuses to accept money from me. And she still insists on paying rent. I'm surprised she hasn't moved into a cardboard box underneath the interstate just so she can say, Look where my daughter put me.

I wish our moms could hang out, Nina says. They could complain about us.

They'd enjoy that, I say.

We laugh, and after we hang up, I cry.

Nina and I aren't widowed mothers.

During previous silences, my mom wrote letters claiming she planned to move:

- *I need 2 or 3 suitcases from the attic. I'm calling a moving service to move me as soon as I get an apartment. Then I'll be out of your way.*
- *I need to save some more money and have enough for movers to come and get everything and put it back together. I'll work it out.*
- *I'm trying to find an apartment and the iPad keyboard doesn't work.* (She included her iPad with this letter.)
- *I think I can get a loan to buy a mobile home. I can't find an apartment because of the pets. I'll let you know when I find something.*

Later she'd say: You've been so good to me. I was mad at myself and took it out on you. I don't really want to move.

Maybe:

- She heard *Terry* too much. Chris's dad is named Terry. My dad went by Terry.
- She found spending time with couples too hard.
- The restaurant's stairs are really the reason. Her anger can emerge when she identifies with someone she considers a victim.
- She's angry about her stairs. I've asked her many times now if her stairs bother her, and she's always replied that they're good for her.
- She's angry because we went to a barbecue restaurant. She's a vegetarian.
- I should have taken her to New Orleans.

A few days before his parents arrived, Chris and I traveled to New Orleans. I'd been invited to read from a work in progress.

But you can read something old, the event organizer said.

I'll need to do that, I said.

My mom looked after Kiffawiffick, Catullus, and Hildegard. She texted updates: *Just came down from playing with your cats Hilda I think broke the feather off the wand that was in closet they come running when I go up as soon as max takes a nap I'll go back up they cleaned their plates so I'll feed them again at noon kinda fun to be busy have fun stay safe.*

Chris and I returned to cupcakes on our dining room table. Wrapped next to them was a soap dish shaped like a cat. I opened the door off our dining room, shouted down, Mom?, and she replied, Down here. I brought gifts for her: chocolates and a glass dish shaped like the fleur-de-lis, which appears throughout New Orleans. Her favorite flower is lily of the valley.

This is beautiful, she said of the dish. I love this shade of green. It matches my love seat.

You're the one who did us a favor, I told her. You didn't have to get us anything.

It was nice to have something to do, she said.

We sat in her living room, and she asked about the trip.

That's the longest I've been away from the cats, I told her. It was weird being without them.

I know what you mean, she said. Most of the time, I want to stay here with Max.

She adopted Max—a shaggy, old, one-eyed shih tzu—last year.

She threw a cigar-shaped squeak toy, and he chased after it and carried it back. She laughed and grabbed it.

You're not allowed to smoke, she told him and threw it again.

We talked for another hour. She seemed relaxed and happy, and I felt relaxed and happy. Chris's parents arrived from Indianapolis that afternoon.

Their first day here, she told Chris's parents: When your kids are young, they give you hell. I say now it's time to give it back.

That's not exactly the most mature point of view, I said. Kids are kids after all.

I don't care if it's immature, my mom said. It's what I think.

Her tone was lighthearted. Had she not spent the past five years *giving it back*, I might have said nothing.

Okay, I said.

She seemed okay after I said, Okay.

But I should have said nothing.

But she was in a great mood the next few days.

But I still should have said nothing.

Maybe the stairs are it.

The morning after we went to the barbecue restaurant, she was unusually quiet. The five of us were at breakfast.

She insisted on paying for everyone. She pushed the receipt toward me.

You figure out the tip, she said.

That might have been the most she spoke.

Back at her apartment, she told me she needed to skip dinner. She said the food from the previous night upset her.

I'm not used to eating out, she said.

I asked if she needed medicine, and she said she needed sleep.

The next day, I overheard her on her outside stairs, complaining on the phone: Jeannie's got her windows open. Meanwhile, my fingers are freezing.

I waited ten minutes, then called down: Mom, Chris's parents are leaving soon.

Max was chomping on a squeak toy.

Mom? I'm coming down.

She was in her bedroom, feeding her cat, Brooklyn.

I can tell you're in a bad mood, I said.

I'm not, she said.

Well you seem angry, and if it's because of my open windows, I'm sorry. I didn't realize they affected you. I opened them because I'd cleaned the litter boxes.

It's not that, she said and walked away.

What is it then?

She went to her kitchen sink, and I sat on her love seat. With her back to me, she sighed.

I'm sorry I don't know, I said.

She put down her dishrag, sat in the armchair across from me, and said: It was pretty stupid to make Chris's parents climb all those stairs at dinner the other night.

That's why you're mad? They knew about the stairs.

I don't think it was right. They can't walk that well.

Their house has stairs, I reminded her. His dad's office is in their basement. He uses them every day.

I still think it was stupid.

Chris, I said, was extremely thoughtful about their visit. He researched hotels and restaurants and museums to find the most accessible. He reserved them a room next to an elevator. He drove them everywhere. He suggested other restaurants, but they wanted to go to that one. He and I don't even like barbecue.

I'm moving back to Ohio, she said. I'm unhappy here. I'm just existing. I'm calling my brother. I can go live with him in Sandusky while I look for my own place.

I almost said: The brother who banged at your door, high with a gun, and you called me at college, not knowing what to do? The brother cops warned you about? The brother you warned me about? The brother you only recently started talking to after avoiding him for thirty years?

If that's what you want, I told her. I just want you to be happy. Can you come upstairs? His parents want to say goodbye. Then we can talk about moving.

Was I supposed to beg her to stay?

The origins of her silences can seem petty:

– Chris and I went to Home Depot without her.

- I didn't drive her to IKEA as planned because of a tornado watch.
- I called her when Chris and I were driving to dinner. I asked if she could make sure I'd blown out a candle in the dining room.
- Chris and I had COVID for three weeks.

Sometimes if I let a day pass without seeing her—a regular day, not necessarily a meaningful day (my dad's birthday, his deathday, their wedding anniversary)—she slips into a bad mood, especially if the weather is dreary like it's been this week.

I think back to that first example. I remember unloading the plants Chris and I had picked out (clematis, honeysuckle, black-eyed Susan, chrysanthemum), some of which would attract the hummingbirds she enjoyed watching. I'd also bought two birdbaths. I hid those in the garage because they were her Easter gift. I then went inside to call downstairs, but her door was locked.

She must have seen the plants on the deck—maybe when she walked Max or took out her trash—and assumed we'd ignored or forgotten her.

I texted: *We couldn't fit everything in the car in one trip. We still planned to take you today.*

I repeated this in a letter that I left in her private entryway: *I'm sorry I didn't explain our plans first. We still planned to take you to Home Depot.*

Two days later, on Easter, gift baskets sat on the dining room table. (Was that when she gave us the wind chime?) I carried her birdbaths to the yard. I placed her Easter basket next to the letter. Still tightly folded

in thirds, it looked unread. Did it mean nothing to her? Was I supposed to believe it meant nothing to her? That silence lasted three months.

It's easy to say how ridiculous she was being, but it's harder, and almost unutterably heartbreaking, to see Home Depot's significance through her point of view. For Chris and me, it was another errand. She looked forward to the trip all week.

Artists tend to put their fingers in the wounds in the silences.

Or: Artists tend to put their fingers in the wounds, in the silences.

Using my phone, I visit the podcast's website. The episode's transcript doesn't include a comma after *wounds*.

But commas appear elsewhere: *There's me and then there's writer guy me, and then there's me working, which is the absence of me.*

Okay, so the wounds are in the silences.

Or: This is an and/or situation.

Artists tend to put their fingers in the wounds, in the silences, and in the wounds in the silences.

I type in my phone's Notes app: *I don't want to touch her silences. To understand her silences, I have to understand her wounds. Her silences are my wounds.*

I'm dramatic. I'm a disappointment.

Pain crowds behind my eyes and spreads to my ears.

I shouldn't have said: I can tell you're in a bad mood.

I should have said: You're right. Chris and I should have taken them to another restaurant.

I defended his judgment over hers. That might be the worst offense.

A few years ago, she said: I think I was jealous of Chris. I know that's not right of me, but I miss when it was just us.

I try the door. It's locked.

THREE DAYS LATER

I'M SITTING ALONE IN OUR CAR IN THE ALLEY behind our house. How is there this much cat hair on our dashboard? And why, in this rearview mirror, do I resemble a Catholic on Ash Wednesday?

A friend calls, asks what I'm doing.

I'm in the car, I tell her.

Oh I'll let you go.

No, no. I'm parked behind the house.

Your house?

When you're in a turn-only lane, is the turn signal necessary? Or is it redundant, like a double negative?

Are you okay?

I feel embarrassed when I'm the only one using my turn signal.

P R N 3-D 2 L

L on the gear shift stands for what exactly?

Letters: too many possibilities for too many words.

When acquaintances ask how my book is coming along, they must assume they're making small talk.

Great! I tell them because I'm sick of unsolicited writing advice:

- What you want to do is keep a spreadsheet with your word count.
- Have you heard of morning pages? There's this book called *The Artist's Way*.
- Try a writing group. Something to hold you accountable.

I slide my phone into the dash mount, open my Voice Memos app, and tap the red circle.

Whatever comes to mind, say it. I can transcribe and shape it later.

My mom's letters: too many possibilities for too many interpretations. (Mom: *I can't believe how much you have changed. I don't even know who you are anymore.*)

Wiping off the circle of dirt from my forehead, I remember what priests said on Ash Wednesday: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

I feel dead.

A therapist might say, Dead isn't a feeling.

Because the dead don't feel, do they? And isn't that what makes losing someone hard? You feel so much for someone who suddenly feels nothing at all.

But if your mother pretends that you don't exist to her and that she doesn't exist to you, how else are you supposed to describe that?

During her silences, weeds spread in our yard. I pull them on my way to somewhere else. I try to get at the root but almost never do.

But I remember, usually, to drop them before entering the car.

And I remember, usually, to wash my hands before touching my face.

I grab the weed, roll down the window.

Am I littering?

Or returning it?

I'm on a car-sized patch of stones in our alley. The weed came from the other side of our fence.

I delicately place the weed on the passenger seat.

With my right thumb, I massage my forehead.

What's wrong with me?

A friend recently told me that there was a debate online among writers. The majority, she said, bashed the present tense because, logistically, the narrator isn't narrating as they go.

I again wipe dirt off my face.

I feel committed to the present because presently I feel tense.

Some writers tell me they find it easier to write about the dead. I found it hard and horrible, no more, no less than this. Stuck in my head the weeds after: *Betrayal* rhymes with *portrayal*.

The *weeks* after.

Weeks after.

Weeks after my dad died, my mom and I were cleaning the garage, choosing which tools of his to donate. Sorting through mason jars of screws and nails, I found a single sheet of paper folded and rolled up. I recognized her cursive.

I bet it's his fault his first marriage ended.

I didn't read much of it, I said and handed it to her.

She skimmed it, said: Throw it away.

I remember thinking, You don't get to take it back.

I thought about the morning pages. I did.

The L on this gear shift, I should know it.

Low, Google answers.

When have I ever used low gear?

Did any engineers dispute its placement on the gear shift? Or was this design unanimous?

Obviously *low* belongs lower than the rest. (Mom: *You always treated me like I was beneath you.*)

I start the car. The MAINT REQD symbol lights up.

She told me to schedule a car inspection.

And wiper fluid, she said we needed wiper fluid.

If I can't perform minor tasks for her, why do I continue attempting a major one?

Nobody needs me, she said—after which silence, I forget.

We were at a restaurant down the street from our house, just the two of us. Our table was against a big window, and she was staring at the flat, empty surface between us.

I'm old, she said. My life is behind me. Your dad is gone. You're doing well, and I'm happy for that. But I have nothing to offer anyone. I feel like I don't have a purpose.

Would a book give you purpose? I asked. A book I'd write for you. About you.

But I'm not interesting.

You are interesting. To do it, though, I'd need your help.

Would you interview me?

Would that be okay?

Yes, she said. I'd like that.

Do you think there's any relationship between your silences and your abusive childhood? Your abusive first marriage? What's your day-to-day experience when using the silent treatment? What are you feeling right now? What can I do to prevent this from happening again?

(Mom: You didn't do anything wrong. I didn't have to behave the way I did. I take full responsibility for my actions.)

In my rearview mirror, our busybody neighbor approaches. The first week Chris and I lived here, somebody tried to break into our house. She blamed our lack of drapes.

I press my phone against my ear.

She knocks on the passenger window. I point at my phone.

What's that? I say into the phone.

She motions for me to roll down my window.

I continue: Oh that's terrible.

She knocks again.

Hold on, I tell the phone.

I roll down the window.

You have to bag things, she says, before throwing them in your trash can.

I do, I tell her.

You don't always, she says. There was a pillow in there that wasn't bagged.

I don't know where that came from. Maybe somebody walking by.

With a pillow? she says.

I really have to get back to this call. I'm very sorry. I don't mean to be rude.

What's that? she asks, looking at the weed.

A weed, I tell her and roll up the window.

I slip the phone back into the dash mount.

You're on speaker.

Should I have started, as I once did, with one of my earliest memories? In it, I'm handing my mom a small paper cup of dandelions.

They're beautiful, she says.

When did I learn they were weeds?

There was a daisy print on the paper cup holding the dandelions. I remember only because I swished water from these disposable cups every day after brushing my teeth.

Or maybe there were no daisies.

I suppose it doesn't matter.

What matters is her happiness about the dandelions.

What matters is her happiness about this book.

I need to remember: She knows about this project, its title and premise—has known its title and premise for almost two years now, and in that time how many times have I asked her for permission? (Mom: You don't need to keep asking. You're the writer. You write what you need to write.)

Months ago I published an essay about her silent treatment. I asked her many times to read the essay before it moved too far along in the editorial process.

If you read it, I said, and don't want me to publish it, I won't.

I want to be surprised, she told me.

But it's about your silent treatment, I said.

I think you should write about it, she said. And anyway, it's the truth.

After the essay reached layout, she spoke to a fact-checker.

She told me: I said to the fact-checker, Whatever my daughter wrote is the truth.

After the essay was published, she said: Seeing it in print, I realize it was kind of stupid what I did.

Some negative comments arrived. Their general critique: How dare I write about her silent treatment, and why didn't I help her get involved in the community?

I told her about these comments.

Tell them that you did try to help me, she said.

It's better not to engage, I said.

But they've got it all wrong, she said.

Secretly, I felt pleased. She felt protective of me. This allowed her to embrace the role of a mother.

Maybe:

- She's trying to help me because she believes, as I do, that her silences can help me understand her life, and her life can help me understand her silences, and this tension can answer the questions most repeated in my notebooks: *Book about my mom? Book for my mom? How do I write a book for and about my mom?* (Mom: You can't just write about my life. You need something else.)
- She thinks *A Silent Treatment* needs a new silent treatment. (Mom: It's a good title.)
- She's not angry at me. (Mom: I was mad at myself and took it out on you.)
- She's angry at me because I've spent more time writing about her than I've spent with her. (Mom: *I was never too busy when you needed something.*)
- She's angry at me because I've spent more time with Chris than with her. (Mom: I know that's not right of me, but I miss when it was just us.)

Should I have started, as I once did, with her first memory? Her great-grandfather's fingers stiffened around her, and her great-grandmother said: Somebody grab Barbara.

He died holding her.

Should I write about her life before I was born? Because that's how her silence makes me feel: as if I don't exist.

If the daughter reconstructed the first forty-one years of her mother's life—before the daughter existed—this would also be a book about the daughter, because the mother's silence makes the daughter feel as if she, the daughter, does not exist, as if she might never, as if she never should have.

What happened to contractions? The forced profundity of *does not*.

The forced profundity, period.

There are too many possibilities, and I need to choose one.

I don't always know what's a weed.

Think of manageable tasks.

The MAINT REQD light probably means the car needs an oil change. I drive to a Jiffy Lube, and a mechanic says it will be done *in a jiffy*. He asks for my name. (Mom: I wish your father hadn't named you after me. He thought

he was doing something sweet. He looked hurt when I told him I wished he hadn't done that. So I left the birth certificate as it was. But I insisted we call you Jeannie like we'd planned.)

Barbara, I tell him.

How do you spell that?

B-a-r-b—

A barbed wire tattoo wraps around his neck.

Don't know how to spell your name? he asks and laughs. I'm just teasing.

I go by Jeannie. I figure you need my legal name.

You're complicated, he says.

He tells me he's listing an address for me in Texas.

This is to protect you, he explains.

Oh, okay.

I sit in the waiting area. Barb/barbed. A barbed wire is used for protection. My mom's silence, like barbed wire, keeps me out, protects her. Does she believe it protects me from her, from words she might regret? But then, there are her letters to consider. (Mom: *We never did get along.*)

When the mechanic hands me my keys, I almost ask: Why Texas?

But I like the mystery.

I park in the alley behind our house. My mom usually walks Max around this time. I drive around the block and park in front of our house. But if she assumes I'm

parked in the alley, where I normally park, she'll use our front gate to avoid me. I drive back to the alley and park.

I open the car door.

I close the car door.

I google *what do you do if your mother shows you the silent treatment?*

Someone suggests *enjoy the peace and quiet.*

I'm not a mother, have no desire to be a mother, but I feel offended on behalf of mothers.

(Mom: I always wanted a daughter.)

A year after she moved in, I asked Chris if he wanted children.

The question, he said, is do you want children?

A kid would give my mom something to do. A sense of purpose.

That is not a reason, he said, to have children.

(Mom: I used to get so jealous of women who had daughters.)

Only when I was a child pushing a plastic baby in a plastic stroller did I want to be a mother. I circled pictures of cribs in catalogues, listed names I'd choose: Josephina, Gabriella, Isabella, Aurora. (I assumed I'd have girls.)

When I stopped playing with dolls, I stopped wanting children. But I've wanted, for as long as I can remember, to be a good daughter.

After my dad died, I began writing a book to demonstrate my love for him. I finished it a decade later, then told my mom I'd write another book, a book for her, and she said: You have to do things for yourself.

Before the book was published, she asked if there'd be a dedication page.

The book is the dedication, I said. It starts as a book for Dad but turns into a book for you.

Oh okay, she said quietly.

I didn't tell her that when I asked my publisher for a dedication page, it was too late.

I bought this house hoping she'd see our new arrangement as a greater dedication of love. But I hadn't thought through all the responsibilities and expectations: hers and mine. Since she moved in, I've felt pressured to demonstrate my love every day. If a day passes without my spending time with her, I consider myself a terrible daughter.

The reason I'm not a mother: I've thought through the responsibilities and expectations, and I doubt I could fulfill them. Daughtering is hard enough.

I dash from the car, through the yard, to the back door, through the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, and up to my office. I stare at the photo framed on my desk.

It shows my mom and me on a park bench in downtown Sandusky the day of my second ballet recital. I'm holding a sign with JEANNIE stenciled on it, and she's smiling wide. I'm five years old. I'm wearing a yellow camisole and tutu dress with gold-sequined trim, white tights, white ballet slippers, and white feathers in my brown hair. She's wearing small hoop earrings, a matching gold necklace, jeans, and a white V-neck top with sleeves that come to her elbows. Her hair, thick and ash blonde, is parted to the side and falls at her shoulders. Her big sunglasses hide her blue eyes. Her right arm is wrapped around me, holding me close. My jacket is on her lap. She's beautiful.

I remember that day: my mom applying my lipstick, or maybe just tinted lip balm, and powdering my skin. I remember my dad brushing my hair and securing it into a bun. I remember carefully stenciling my name on the sign and adding glitter to each letter. I didn't yet know that my real name was Barbara Jean, the same as hers. I didn't yet know that he'd die, and she'd stop speaking to me—and that her silence, like his death, would cause me to question what kind of daughter I was.