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The Bridge

I am a fixed point in stopped time. The crowd on Mission Street operates as one synchronized automaton, advances as though on a conveyor belt, parting around the island of me staring at the screen of my cell phone gone black. A passing bus is thunder in my body. Edges grow razor sharp, colors Disneyland vivid. My neck muscles become taut. I start to choke. Right in front of me, tranquil among skyscrapers in the low profile of its red brick facade, is the Contemporary Jewish Museum. With one hand at my throat, I stagger across the plaza of green lawns and water pools, and straight through the glass doors. Two security guards bring me up short. “Are you all right?” one asks.

I cannot say my mother has committed suicide. What kind of person’s mother does that? They might call for help I don’t want. I am much too afraid to go back outside. I recover some composure. “Fine, thank you.” The other one searches my bag, while I stand—desperate for safety—within the vast, elongated, unadorned lobby. Attached to the far wall, a sleek plank serves as a bench, and I find my way to sit there.

In my pocket is a brand new, soft-hair sable brush. My fingers stroke the sensitive tip as I relive the last few minutes.

#

“The Golden Gate Bridge?” My voice sounded vague. “Danny...Danny...this isn’t...I mean...it’s not possible.”

“They have her purse.” My brother’s calm was as indisputable as the purported fact. “They found it by the

railing.”

An errant briefcase hit my hip. I caught myself mid-stumble. “You’re saying what?”

His tone turned officious. “I’m on my way to the Coroner’s.”

“The Coroner’s?” A stock scene from a TV crime program leapt to mind. Metal drawers. White sheets. Toe tags. “Okay...I’ll meet you.”

“No, better not.” We are not close, but my brother knew: where he was going, I would not do well. “I have to finish this business first. I’ll call you. Just as soon as...” He clicked off.

My older brother, the lawyer. He hardly ever calls. Never in the morning.

The trip to the art supply store took the second bite out of my studio time. The first was the babysitter arriving late.

He was at the clerk of the court’s window. He was supposed to be submitting a brief, but stepped out of line because of what he called to tell me.

I was hurrying along on Mission, having crossed Third, headed north.

I stopped right in the middle of the sidewalk.

I almost didn’t catch the call, due to traffic noise.

The paintbrush was a small reward, for the success of my latest show, a Richeson Extreme Kolinsky Round #0, fine point.

The Golden Gate Bridge?

I was walking up Mission like everything was fine. Having bought the brush.

Her purse? Right there by the railing?

A rock dropped into my stomach.

The ringtone was Danny.

I wish I hadn’t heard it, because it can’t be true.

And I wouldn’t now be waiting for his callback when he

will be screaming bloody murder, because there has been a colossal mistake, it is not our mother, and his day is royally screwed up.

#

One of the security guards is staring. Perhaps he suspects me of loitering. I might be waiting for someone. I go and look out the glass doors to make it seem so.

My mother has been depressed all her adult life. It started when her twin sister committed suicide at thirteen. An older girl supplied amphetamines, for weight loss. She took too many. She had nausea. She had diarrhea. “The flu,” my grandmother said. She had seizures and died.

They were looking forward to their B’nai Mitzvah, sharing the *bimah* and the Torah reading. My mother performed the ceremony alone. She wore her sister’s dress, even though hers was identical. Her grief became a lifelong depression.

From that time on, my mother needed medication. Mostly, it worked well. But ever after, it was impossible for her parents and siblings, and then her children, not to wonder from time to time, especially on her bleak days, whether she, too, would end her life. It seemed remote, but not to be ruled out. We kids never spoke to her of the aunt we never knew.

Lately she had been cheerful. Just Sunday, at her condominium with its view of the Bay, it was brunch as usual. Gil toddled around the glass coffee table, where he left cream cheese fingerprints like water lilies on a transparent pond. When he collapsed into her lap, squeals of grandmother and grandson comingled. Ever since our father died, it has been our Sunday tradition: Danny, his wife, and their three kids, Miles my younger brother, and Paul and Gil and me.

Something announces my mother’s presence behind me. I whip around. A gray-haired woman in a flowing skirt

and colorful shawl stands to greet another who has just entered. Exuberant hellos fly between them. I head for the ticket counter.

From behind the counter, the young girl with three gold hoops in one nostril regards me as if I have a blank look on my face. Has she said something I didn't hear? It is the first Tuesday of the month and free. With a flutter of her arm, I am waived the fee. Somehow it doesn't seem right I should get a free pass on the day my mother—. Maybe if it were natural causes, it would seem right. What am I thinking? It is not my mother. Another woman, one who... who must have stolen my mother's purse. That is the only plausible explanation.

Bad enough I have run off from my brothers. But Danny is already taking charge. Miles may head for my studio. They will do the necessary first things. I am less embarrassed in my absence than I would be in my uselessness. How could she have? That's what people will say about me. Her mother committed suicide and she went to the museum. What people? Who will know? Should I go home to be with Gil? But it is better Gil does not see his mother in such a state, whatever this state might be. Which now feels—only nothing.

The bridge? Flinging oneself over the edge, into the air, toward such a hard landing? Does one die from the impact alone? Or afterwards, by drowning? I don't understand. There's no reason for people to do that.

But you would not, not, not do that, would you, Mom? Because people love you, your children and grandchildren especially, love you. And your friends. And yoga buddies. Book club. And Botanical Garden Society board members.

I pin the plastic button on my collar, the one that says I belong here. The gift shop is too glittery and bright. I head for the closest dark space, the entrance to an exhibit. I

will look at anything to avoid seeing her poised on the red railing. Most suicides from the Golden Gate Bridge jump from the side facing the Bay and the city, not from the side facing the infinite Pacific Ocean. Why does this fact pop into my head? Do I want to know which side? Would it make a difference? No, she has left Gil without his Bubbe. Robbed.

But yes. I am someone who needs to know everything.

The subdued light of the exhibit's tunneled entryway draws me. I take refuge in solitude there. A large gray poster board is mounted on a charcoal gray wall. Printed on it is a long introduction, lit just enough to read.

#

Charlotte Salomon...born in 1917...German-Jewish family in Berlin...happy childhood ...Berlin Art Academy...enrollment annulled...1938 escapes Berlin... sanctuary with her grandparents in the South of France...captured by the Nazis...four months pregnant...gassed in Auschwitz in October, 1943.

I can barely concentrate and then am able to read the whole of one sentence:

There between 1940 and 1942 she painted her life story. *Life? Or Theatre?: A Play with Music*. A staggering body of over 1300 gouache paintings and tracings, on which she mixes intensely colored images, dialogue, narrative, and musical references that together tell the story of the legacy of her family tragedies set against coming of age in Nazi Berlin.

A guard looks in. I must move from this spot. Circling the first gallery is an unbroken line of paintings—all around ten by thirteen—hung at the same height. In the

first one, a sad-faced figure moves through city streets just before dawn when lamps still pierce the dark. Her brown dress is drawn in the barest lines. Swinging her arms in flight, she enters a park and turns toward... a bridge? I look closer: no, a boat. It is red. She assumes a reclining posture and slips into the water. The caption reads: "1913, One November day, Charlotte Knarre left her parents' home and threw herself into the water." She was eighteen. This was the artist's namesake, her aunt, her mother's sister.

How is it I am in front of a painting of a suicide by drowning?

#

I want to flee. The drum of collapsed time beats soundlessly, fixing me to the spot.

Is it more tragic that Charlotte's aunt committed suicide at such a young age? What is wrong with me, that I am comparing suicides?

My mother had a loving husband for forty-five years. She complained sometimes. "I have made nothing of myself." She was an intelligent woman, well educated. A spate of bad spells hounded her after Dad's death. Understandable, but when she burrowed into the gloom, we kids would counter. Danny has the build of a football player. After arranging himself into a proud stance, he would say, "Look at us. We all turned out well."

"This is quite an accomplishment and we all love you so much," Miles would add, the gay son who never hesitates to sidle up to her on the sofa, fling his arm around her shoulders, and pull her toward him. He is the baby, her favorite—we don't mind—ours, too.

"And what about your grandchildren?" I would chime in, pointing to the gaggle of little ones, hunting for each other in a game of hide-and-seek, behind the damask drapes and under the dining table's long tails of linen.

"You are pointing to yourselves and your children.

I have made nothing of myself,” she would repeat, tapping a fist to her breastbone, “nothing of me. Me.” Her despair would not yield. The best we could do was share a meal together. And she managed the bagels, cream cheese, and lox, the rounds of ripe red tomatoes and crisp purple onions overlapping in two columns along the length of her silver platter. Always on Sundays, despite the worst. Thinking of all those brunches, how we talked to josh her out of it and then just sat down and ate, makes me want to vomit now.

#

I am gliding past frame after frame, a storyboard narrative of Charlotte Salomon’s life. It is like no other work of art I have seen. She starts before she was born. Her mother becomes a nurse in the army medical corps and then gives it up to marry. Charlotte paints bright, cheerful pictures of her own birth and delightful childhood: trips to the Bavarian mountains when they were dotted with yellow wildflowers, long tables of children at merry birthday parties, a glowing Christmas tree, classic symbol of the assimilated German Jew, and herself skating figure-eights around a snowman, her blue scarf to the wind. The urge is so strong to rip these paintings off the wall, with all my will I back away.

#

Before I was born, my mother...

Was her hair in its bun, or unpinned and out of control, plastering her face in the ferocious winds that whip both ways across the bridge?

#

My grandparents owned a small grocery and ran it together. They had given all they had for my mother to study English at Bryn Mawr and still she had needed a scholarship. She had wanted to go on for graduate work. “You can apply, certainly,” the school counselor told her. “But know that it is rare for a fellowship to be granted to a

woman.” She always said she didn’t care. She had met our father, a Jewish doctor (what more could her parents ask?), and fallen in love. And she was free—free that is, when not raising three children—to read as she wished, go back and read for pleasure—Dickens, Austen, Eliot—what she had had to read critically for four years, and world literature, too, like Tolstoy, Flaubert, Mann, Proust, and Lady Murasaki. She had started a book club, even before Danny was born, and it went on to this day.

What is it like to suffer a failure of the use of intelligence and creativity and have to pretend that your life is just perfect? Like being put under anesthesia that fails to kill the pain and at the same time paralyzes the ability to cry out?

#

I take a detour to watch the video, hoping for seven minutes riveted to Not Me. I can only half focus. Little shallow breaths puff forth and surprise me that I have a body. It is wrong for me to be here, sitting in a museum when my mother—

The narrator’s voice is round: “Charlotte Salomon’s mother died when she was eight. Young Charlotte was told it was influenza, but the truth is that she threw herself out a window.”

My bones freeze.

First her aunt, and then her mother?

I return to where I left off, and there it is. Her mother saying, “I cannot bear it any longer. I’m always so alone.” Married to the surgeon who invented breast radiology, which will save millions of women’s lives, she was an educated woman with nothing much to do. She stares out the window—melancholy, distant, and still.

My mother stood by her window. But why wouldn’t she, with its fabulous view of the Bay? ...and the bridge.

I see my mother moving along the bridge walkway

in her quilted jacket, arms folded around her against the cold. Winds tracking opposing paths slice at each other like swords, heave their crushing gusts upon her. So much air she can hardly breathe. She is looking up and down the expanse and back and forth across the bridge, tearing the strings of hair away from her watery eyes and out of her mouth, then pulling herself up onto the railing. Looking out? Looking down? Between the suffocation of the soul by neglect and the pleura by drowning is a thin line...ever more imperceptible...finally nonexistent.

I have been on that walk. I have seen the water below, glossy and calm on a tranquil day, choppy and churned up on a turbulent one. I have stood there and imagined a body falling downward, not my own. A truly disturbed and despairing person's. Certainly not my mother's.

They always say *jump. She jumped.* He jumped. But might she not have sat on the railing with her back to the water and tumbled backwards? Or straddled the railing first, then swung her other leg over, and looking down, slid down? Or seated, simply leaned farther and farther forward face first, until gravity took her into a graceless dive? Maybe she had stood on the barrier and actually jumped, the way people say, feet first. Does it matter?

Yes. Everything matters. Which is why suicide is impossible.

So why would she do this? Didn't she love me? She did before Gil was born. Maybe she thought her daughter stopped loving her, that she had only just so much love and it was all for Gil and Paul. I should call Paul. But he has a full schedule of lectures to deliver today. Not knowing yet, no reason to be alarmist now.

I'm doing what everyone does, blaming myself when it wasn't me. And, of course, she had to know I love her. Ours is a love that cannot be undone. Unless, maybe, it goes unexpressed? I will tell her. Show her. I will make

sure beyond any doubt she knows. I will take her to hear Joyce Carol Oates at the Herbst Theater and wear something without one single splatter of paint.

She has not. I know she has not.

I feel like quicksand is being poured into my body, filling my feet solid, rising up my legs, into my trunk. Before I keel over from the weight of it, I sit down on a bench. Out from my periphery, night creeps toward me, sending dizziness. I put my head down for a minute between my legs until everything is normal again, normal, that is, in the way that nothing has been normal since Danny's call.

#

Somehow I have moved through another gallery. I file past an unbelievable number of paintings: her father re-marrying, Charlotte leaving school to take drawing lessons, adjustments in her family life due to Nuremberg Laws, acceptance into The Berlin Art Academy, a friendship, her only one. Life goes on. It does, doesn't it? Even though I see without seeing, life goes on.

Amadeus enters. He is more than twice her age and a voice teacher. He has a theory about the voice based on his experience of being buried alive under the bodies of not-yet-dead soldiers on the Western Front, where he served during the Great War. What he had heard broke him, those human pitches and tones, the stifled sounds of agony. His philosophizing intrigues her. He is Faustian. They can talk about the real Nietzsche, not the one the Nazis are appropriating. She seeks his opinion of her art. Most important, he thinks she has talent.

#

It is my mother who believes in my art. Who will come to my studio and admire my paintings in progress? She attends my shows and has made a scrapbook of reviews, but only the good ones. She once said, "I wish I had become a painter. It seems to make you so happy." I had

wanted to say, “But you have your poetry,” except that my mother did not know I knew she wrote poetry. When I was a teenager and my mother was at one of her book groups, I found a journal in a kitchen cabinet, in the mix-master. Inside were pages of poems in her elegant hand. Who knows whether she continued to write?

I have sometimes been embarrassed in her presence, for having a public life as a painter. Had she sacrificed this, as well, beyond all the regular things good mothers do, this, the essence of her creativity, for her daughter’s art? And discovered too late that the sacrifice was too great, so she...

#

In my pocket my phone vibrates. Danny. By the time I get out of here the call will have gone to voicemail. Do I want to know? Yes—that it was not she. Then I can be relieved, go to the studio for a little time before I have to return to Gil. If I’m so sure, why have I waited to hear from Danny? Why haven’t I called her?

“Hello, Mom? It’s me.”

“I’m in a state, darling. I lost my purse. In the top of a shopping cart, I’m pretty sure. Idiot that I am. But it hasn’t been turned in at the grocery.”

“I know, Mom. We’ve been worried. Danny got a call from the police.”

“Oh, they’ve found it! It’s a miracle. Where?”

“Kind of horrible, if you want to know.”

“I do.”

“They found it on the Golden Gate Bridge. At a spot where a woman jumped early this morning.”

“My God, that is horrible. How did she get it, I wonder.”

“We may never know. But Danny will bring it back to you.”

“Hopefully everything’s still as it was.”

#

Charlotte Salomon will have to join her grandparents on the Côte d'Azur, safe from what threatens the Jews. Before she leaves Berlin, Charlotte steals away to Amadeus's stark quarters. They float, lying horizontal, merged as one orangey, olive-green-streaked shape. Red and brown lines barely distinguish the two bodies, two heads. Afterwards, she kneels before him. His words are: "In order to love life completely, perhaps it is necessary to embrace and comprehend the other side: death." Next—again as one, in the blackness of clothing and bodies—she is still kneeling, and he continues, "May you never forget that I believe in you." Like a king's seal, his faith in her makes an authoritative imprint upon her soul.

Then, frame races after frame—packing suitcases, the streets of Berlin, the train platform, others rushing to embark, while the family huddles together in tearful goodbyes. Finally, from inside her car, Charlotte sits alone, hands braced upon the windowsill, leaning forward, looking out at her loved ones, about to be wrenched from her. No one can grasp the meaning of forever.

She sometimes leaves a sliver or spot of paper unpainted—stark white, blank.

#

Danny has called. I have to get out of here. Back in the lobby, I check my cell. The missed call from Danny is on the display, but no voicemail. I hate that, when people don't leave a message, having to second-guess, chase them down. I have a policy: I only return calls when a message is left. At least he could have said that it is not she. But Danny is not the type to give reassurance. I hate him for that. I hate him for being him. I won't call back.

I...I am...unable.

I feel weak and shaky and have to go to the bathroom. A guard says, "Down that hall on the right." Inside it is complicated. It shouldn't be, going to the bathroom.

My need is urgent, and going happens of its own accord, but everything else—locking the stall, unzipping, zipping, flushing, out to the sink—takes great effort. I stand in front of the mirror. My face is pale, clammy. It feels sinful to even take note of it. How to wash up baffles me. I put my hands together under the faucet and wait for something to happen. I hate this kind of faucet you can't control. Water gushes forth, abruptly stops. It is never enough.

#

Suddenly the paintings are light-colored and full of purpose and meaning. It is the South of France. Grandfather wants her to become a housemaid. Grandmother thinks she needs a man. In white blouse and blue pinafore, Charlotte's figure repeats: walking along the shore, painting by the sea, and sitting in a field of flowers with her drawing board. "What makes you shape and reshape yourselves so brightly from so much pain and suffering? Who gave you the right? Dream, speak to me—."

Dark frames again. September, 1939, France and Britain declare war on Germany. Grandmother hears it over the radio.

And then tries to hang herself.

Charlotte sits by her grandmother's bedside, persuading her to live with happy thoughts. Look, the shining sun. The flowers. People dance and sing. There is a sacred realm into which we can go and find joy.

Finally, her grandfather breaks the silence. The frames that follow are all alike: multiple images of his face, with its long white beard and light blue eyes, float among a sea of words painted directly on the page, words that speak the family's secrets. All related to her grandmother. One, by one, he lists each family member who succeeded.

#

Nine suicides in one family, including all the women? Hysteria seizes my throat, my breath. Sharp cries erupt

in staccato. A guard shushes me. This cannot be a true story. But it is. I have to sit down.

My mother has never tried to kill herself. If she did, I would do everything to prevent her from trying again.

#

Charlotte is in shock, the effect of all revealed. She remembers Amadeus's statement about death and suffering and life. As she cooks breakfast for her grandmother, these words are scripted in large dark red letters across the entire blue and white kitchen: "How beautiful life is, I believe in life! I will live for them all!"

Charlotte finds the bed empty, the window open. Her grandmother has jumped. Number Ten. This is unbelievable and at the same time predictable. The way truth often is.

In the next frame Charlotte is a crumpled heap on the floor. Red tears pool around her head. Behind her is the figure of her Amadeus, saying: "I believe in you."

The love from whom she has been torn still lives within her and so is saving her. The story should end here, where comfort arrives out of the awful moment. This picture soothes my nerves. Still, my heart starts to pound.

#

Yet it goes on. Charlotte sits in a room of flaming orange and yellow, as though the whole space were on fire. Inscribed in red across the conflagration, "Dear God, don't let me go mad." And balanced on her lap, blended as an appendage of her body, is her drawing board.

If my mother took her life, I could never paint again.

Then, *Mai 1940*. The German invasion of France. Charlotte and her grandfather crouch in a railway car packed with thousands of ragged others on their way to the labor camp at Gurs in the Pyrenees. Upon release, from the mountains of western France they must walk back to Nice,

caked with the mud of the camp, nothing whatsoever in the way of money or extra clothing, or even a morsel of food. The bitter old man wants to sleep with her and—another shock—exhorts her, “kill yourself already and get it over with.”

Things can get worse than they are, than you think they could, than you can ever imagine them to become. This young woman’s life is over and gone—transformed by story into a work of art, a saga, a monumental series of paintings, *a magnum opus*. Over 1300 frames, created in two years. The effort of it boggles the mind. The scale alone uplifts, makes her profound suffering bearable to the viewer, as painting must have made it to her.

#

Just outside this exhibit, the inescapable lurks, patient beyond measure and indifferent to fantasy, wishful thinking, or the most profound yearning. My throat catches. My body wants to subvert what the mind must grasp.

#

Charlotte remained separate from the circle of suffering, contemplating the signpost of her family legacy, pointing—emphatic, insistent, prophetic, inevitable—toward suicide...until she knew she had to “make every sacrifice in order to create her world anew out of the depths.”

#

I stand in front of the final picture of Charlotte sitting on her heels in the sand, back to the viewer, facing the water, with brush in her hand and board on her lap. I want to stay here forever. To disappear into the painting and into her and become her while remaining me, in mystical unity by the sea, with my own board and paints.

And in the next moment I do all of that, first breathing in her loneliness, suffering and trauma, knowing survival. I stare deeply into the painting and try to let go of my hyper-awareness of pigment and paper. My gaze penetrates the picture. My whole being follows, into her fully trans-

parent body through which the blue sea shines. I locate courage and determination. In a painting? No, in her, who is both a figure in the painting and an embodiment of spirit left behind, just as the brush, completing its stroke, lifted from the paper's surface.

I stand, unaware. And then I see I am standing, here, no longer there.

She is in me, as my inspiration and protector, not the Charlotte Salomon who lived, for I will never know her, she who walked pregnant into the gas chamber. The one she left for me, the painter by the sea, her I have made my own.

I have reached an outer limit, with reluctance turn to leave. My leaden steps feel the whole length of life—Charlotte's, mine, my mother's—in rewind, as I return to the entrance.

#

I see a woman walking the great red span. *Mom, Mom, Mom—Bridges are for crossing.*

#

In the lobby, I stare out into the maws of the wild gray day. There is a voicemail from Danny. "We need to see you. Miles has been to your studio. Please call immediately." I hate it when people don't leave a real message. Why not just say.

Something is coming at me: a coiled twister, wound of chaos.

In the deep pocket of my coat I feel my new paintbrush. I will use it to apply tiny, crisp white marks onto the under-layers of color on my current canvas. The impression will be of fresh snow falling, making a stark winter scene less bleak.

I lean on the thick glass door, its sluggish pneumatics at first resisting, then taking my weight in increments. I am eased out of the sanctuary of the museum, the dream-trance of Charlotte's story, across the limen, and beamed towards, but not quite launched into, the unclaimed day.