

In Providence: A Reindeer on Blackstone Boulevard

“He knows it’s my reindeer. Let him say whatever he wants, but he knows damn well that reindeer is mine.”

I got a tip that there was a custody battle brewing on Blackstone Boulevard between two septuagenarians over a decorative subarctic mammal.

Like something out of Dickens, the story begins in two houses, both facing each other, over 20 years ago at Christmastime.

“I put out the reindeer,” says the resident of one house, who we’ll call Kris. “I always did the big display for the holidays with the lights and the manger and Santa. That year I wanted to have all the reindeer — Vixen, Dasher, Sleepy. I go to Benny’s, and they have this one reindeer — so beautiful. Hand-painted. I say, ‘I’m buying that reindeer.’ My wife wanted to kill me. I don’t want to tell you what that one reindeer cost, but I was supposed to spend that much on 20 of the reindeer, not on just one. I had to make that one reindeer count as 20. He was the centerpiece of the whole yard.”

He shows me photos of that first Christmas with his reindeer.

“What a hit. People would stop their cars.”

It didn’t hurt that the reindeer was the size of a small car.

“You could get on it and ride it like it was real. People used to put their kids on it and take pictures. You couldn’t get my son off at that thing when it was time for dinner. My wife wanted to kill me for bringing it home, but everybody loved it.”

For two years, the reindeer was a point of pride.

Then one year, it went missing.

“You never think something like that is going to happen,” says Kris, still shaking his head at the memory of going downstairs one day to get the morning paper, only to find an empty patch in his front yard where the reindeer used to be. “That somebody would just steal a reindeer right out in front of your house in broad daylight.”

He’s talking to me on the phone, and I hear his wife correct him that they would have stolen it during the night, and then he tells her that she doesn’t know that and they could have taken it in the early hours of the morning, and she points out that, it being winter, it would not have been light outside in the early morning, and he tells her she’s not a weatherman, and she says neither is he, and then I think he forgets I’m still on the phone, because they start talking about cleaning out their fridge, and so I hang up, and call “Nick.”

“Nick” is what I’m calling the neighbor who lives across the street from Kris. The same year the prized reindeer disappeared, another one magically appeared in front of Nick’s house.

“Not true.”

Nick disputes this.

“I had my reindeer from the very beginning. Long before he had his. Mine was at the back of Santa’s sleigh. That’s why nobody saw it. But it was there. He had his reindeer in front of the Nativity, which I disagree with for religious reasons. The point is, we both had the same reindeer, except I got mine at Job Lot and he got his at Benny’s, but it was the same reindeer. I don’t know who took his, but that night, he’s over at my house accusing me of being a thief. I didn’t like that very much.”

It’s true that Nick’s yard has a more Keep-the-Christ-in-Christmas angle, but unlike Kris, he can’t produce any photos to prove that the two reindeer existed at the same time.

“Who takes photos of plastic reindeer? You’d have to be a sicko.”

Kris acknowledges that he went over to Nick’s house when another neighbor tipped him off that there was a reindeer just like his at the back of Santa’s entourage over at Nick’s house.

“He used to do his house up the same way I did mine, and I figured it was jealousy or a prank or something, so I went over there and told him, ‘Very funny, give me back the reindeer.’”

But Nick insisted that he didn’t steal the reindeer.

“Why would I steal a reindeer I could go get at Job Lot? Is his head screwed on straight?”

Kris handled this rebuttal the way any man would.

He stole the reindeer back.

“My wife tells me the reindeer’s gone. The one in the back. I say, ‘Did that #\$\$%# steal my #\$\$%-ing reindeer? You gotta be kidding me.’”

When asked if either man thought about calling the police, I was given a look that would chill the sun. People don’t call the police to deal with things like this. They take matters into their own hands.

“I didn’t say one word about it,” says Nick, “I just waited.”

Nick felt justified in his course of action.

“An eye for eye,” Kris tells me over the phone, as his wife wraps Christmas gifts in the background and yells to ask him where he put the Scotch tape, “You take my reindeer, I’m taking him back.”

I’m not sure that’s how “an eye for an eye” works, but I’m also not a biblical scholar, so what do I know?

Nick made good on his word, and didn’t say anything about the missing reindeer. Christmas that year came and went, and the following year, when Kris put out his reindeer again, it was only in front of his yard for a day before it went missing.

“I look across the street and there it is. Front and center in that @#\$\$%’s yard.”

Nick admits to taking back the reindeer and he even adjusted his views on holiday displays that reflect

the joy and compassion of Christ's birth in favor of one that highlights comeuppance and petty vengeance.

"You don't mess with a man's yard," he tells me. "Everybody knows that."

What followed was a game of cat-and-mouse, if both the cat and mouse were obsessed with festive lawn ornaments and passive aggressive feuding.

One man would display the reindeer, then the other man would walk across the street, pick it up, and take it back to their yard.

During the year, this was never spoken of, and the men seemed to get along just fine otherwise.

"He's not a bad guy," says Nick. "He's stupid, but he wouldn't hurt a fly."

Kris feels a great affection for Nick as well.

"Aside from the fact that he's a lying crook, I don't have any problem with him. He comes to our cookout every year that we do with the shrimp and the clams. Our kids went to school together. We're neighbors. That doesn't mean anything to most people anymore, but it means something to us."

That way of thinking doesn't stop them from petty theft every so often though.

"Personally, I'm getting tired of it," says Kris, as his wife screams at him to go in the garage and find the box of nutcrackers. "One day I'm going to say 'To hell with it' and let him keep the damn thing. Last year, I got stuck with it on Christmas and that meant I had to store it for the rest of the year, and that's a pain in the @#\$. It's like hot potato — that reindeer. Plus, they have these new reindeer now that light up and the heads move? I'm going to buy a few of those. Just don't tell my wife."

Nick is also getting weary of the chase.

"I don't even go all out like I used to," he says. "It's just too much work. My son used to help me put everything up, but now he does his own house, so I just go over there."

This year, the reindeer has remained on Nick's lawn so far, and Kris says he's not sure if he'll get a chance to go steal it back.

"But hey," he says, laughing a little. "At least I know it has a good home."

Nick says this might be his last Christmas in Rhode Island before he and his wife move down south, but he hasn't told Kris that yet.

"If I see him outside getting the paper, I make this face like I've got my eye on him in case he tries to pull a fast one on me. I do the DeNiro thing from that movie with my fingers and my eyes, like 'I'm watching you. I'm watching you.' He likes it, I can tell. Means a lot to him. I'm going to miss this neighborhood. A lot of nice people. We had some real good Christmases here over the years."

Kris still does up his front yard with all the bells and whistles, but he hasn't gotten his wife to agree to those new, expensive reindeer yet.

“She keeps saying maybe Santa will get you a few of them for Christmas,” he tells me, as she yells in the background because he didn’t get the car washed like she asked him to. “I ask her what’s the point of that? A reindeer’s no good after Christmas.”

It’s hard to argue with that.

In Providence: The Academy Avenue Book Club

“There’s a system for the books. I don’t know what it is, but — I look at a book and I know where it belongs — on what shelf. It’s a feeling you get looking at it.”

The books are everywhere. He makes sure I finish my coffee and then makes me another cup while the mug is still warm. I sit on a wooden chair with a tall back and next to me is a stack of novels. The top one is a T.C. Boyle that I haven’t read but always meant to.

“They’ll be here between seven and eight. We’re supposed to start at six, but nobody’s ever on time. Being early is impolite, so I don’t mind. I was taught to always arrive a few minutes late.”

He’s been living in this converted attic apartment for the past two years. The Book Club began when he hosted a birthday party for a friend and people started picking up one of the hundreds of books on the floor and on the kitchen counters and on the sink in his bathroom and asked if they could borrow them.

“I said, ‘No.’ I don’t loan out books. I’m not a library. But I told them they could read whatever they wanted while they were here.”

So that’s what they do. They show up and read for an hour and then they talk about what they read. I’ve never heard of any book club like it. There’s usually quite a bit of discussion, but mostly, they just sit silently around his apartment and read the last Saturday of every month.

“People are interested in me and I don’t know why. I’m not a social person and I don’t — I can’t say I really like other people. I don’t. But I like having them nearby, I guess? It’s nice to have them here reading and not bothering me.”

When I ask about the birthday party that started it all and how did he end up throwing a birthday party if he dislikes people and engaging with them, he says-

“The girl was my neighbor, but she couldn’t have a party downstairs, because the way it’s set up is all wrong. If you saw it, you’d get what I mean. You can’t throw a party down there. Up here isn’t much better. It’s too small, but it’s designed better. There’s a flow. I told her, ‘I’ll throw you a party.’ I regretted it as soon as I said it, but once I offered, what else could I do? She was very appreciative, so that was okay. I met a lot of people through her, and some of them still come by and read when we have the club.”

Like most book clubs, attendance wanes and grows. People come month after month, and then never

again, with no explanation. Some come to continue reading a book they started the previous month — if they can find it. He swears he doesn't move the books purposefully, but somehow, they make their way around the apartment, although they never go missing.

"I keep a tight inventory. I know exactly what I have and when I get rid of something. I don't get rid of things. It's that simple."

Guests bring the only thing he asks for: white, red or pink. Doesn't matter. They can bring food if they want, but he won't eat it.

"I don't eat in front of other people. I think it's rude."

He won't tell me his age, but if I had to guess, I'd guess he's a little younger than me. Late twenties with a soul that's much, much older.

"When you describe me, don't say I have an old soul. I hate that."

Never mind. He doesn't have an old soul.

"Actually, say whatever you want, it's your piece."

For someone who doesn't enjoy eating in front of others, he has pictures of food all over his walls — apples, mainly apples. And for someone who only reluctantly entertains, he's very hospitable. Quick with a coffee or a non-fiction recommendation.

"Read about food. Writing about food is a skill. If you can write about food and not bore people to death, you can write about anything."

He's never written anything himself, and he doesn't intend to.

"Writers are strange. Don't you find that? Do you find yourself to be strange?"

I do. I often do.

People start to arrive for the Book Club. They grab cushions and sit on the floor. A young woman who looks like she might be 21 or 22 grabs a paperback copy of *The Tipping Point* and takes it into his bedroom where she closes the door, slightly, and sits on his bed reading every third word aloud.

"She's nice, but we don't talk very much. Likes to keep to herself. I can respect that."

He's referring to someone sitting on his bed.

"I have no idea what she does when she's not here. Not a clue. She could be a murderer for all I know."

A soft laugh runs across his throat as he places a freshly refilled mug of coffee in my hands.

"Wouldn't that be interesting?"

In Providence: A Providence Thanksgiving

“This would have been her big Thanksgiving, because she was always saying how, you know, when she was gone, if we all could do the holidays and not ‘eff’ it up, then that would mean she did right by us. She would not have said ‘eff’ it up, by the way, but she would have come right out and said it. That was how she talked. My mother had a mouth like a sailor. My father hated when women used profanity, so she used to do it all the time. I never talk like that, and I’d say, ‘Ma, your language,’ and she used to say, ‘You’re just like your father. I’m a grown woman. I’ll talk how I bleep-ing please. She was a hot ticket, my mother.”

Their family lives in the Mount Pleasant area of Providence, only a short walk away from Mount Pleasant High School and right on the North Providence line. The woman I’m speaking with is the eldest daughter. Her brother is two years younger and lives in Virginia. There’s another brother who lives in California and a younger sister who lives in Newport.

“We got people all over, and when Mom got sick, it happened very suddenly. She fell and from there it was boom boom boom. Couldn’t believe how fast it happened. She was at my — we have a video of her at my Memorial Day barbecue dancing around and acting just like herself, and then, she fell — around the 4th of July. By September, she was gone. A year ago we had our first Thanksgiving without her. I was a zombie. Just — just didn’t want to do it. Thanksgiving. None of it. My daughter called me up and she goes, ‘Ma, we gotta do Thanksgiving.’ I said, ‘I can’t do it. Not this year.’ She goes, ‘Okay, but what if we lose someone else next year and then we didn’t even get a last Thanksgiving with them?’ I said, ‘Oh my god, don’t talk like that,’ but, you know, she had a point. So I got out of bed. I’d never done Thanksgiving before — my mother always did it. This little woman who made food for all these people, and wouldn’t let anybody in her kitchen. It’s a week before Thanksgiving and my brother is calling me going, ‘Is it true you’re doing Thanksgiving?’ and I’m going, ‘Yes, I’m doing it’ and he says, ‘Oh boy, can’t wait to see that.’ He’s a real jerk, my brother. I had to look up on the internet how to do a turkey. I knew nothing. I mean *nothing*.”

Her brothers both flew in the day before the holiday, and her sister drove up and camped out in her basement the night before so the whole family could tackle the feast.

“First thing we start doing is screaming at each other, but that’s how we are. We scream a lot. Typical nutty family. My brother’s telling me how to do the turkey and I’m saying, ‘I looked it up on the internet, you jerk, stay out of it.’ He’s a real jerk. Just standing there laughing because he loves when he gets my goat. I’ve got my hand halfway up a turkey’s ass — no idea what I’m doing — and he’s saying, ‘You should be doing this first.’ I say, ‘Why don’t you make yourself useful and go jump in front of a bus?’ My husband went to see a movie. He said, ‘Call me when this is all over.’ He’s useless, too. All the men in my life are useless. I was standing there with a handful of turkey guts going, ‘My mom’s gone and all the men in my life are idiots. What the hell do I have to be grateful for?’”

Her little sister jumped into action and gave assignments to their two brothers. She was also looking things up on the internet, trying to figure out how to not only accomplish Thanksgiving, but how to make everything the way their mother did.

“We’re looking at recipes going, ‘Ma didn’t do it that way. It says put this in it, but Ma wouldn’t have put this or that in it. I texted my husband and told him to see the movie some other day, because I needed him to go to the market for me. I sent him a list. He brings all the stuff on the list. He’s halfway home and I’m texting him, ‘I think we need this, too.’ He goes back to the market, and it’s the day before Thanksgiving. He comes home. I say, ‘We need Worcestershire sauce.’ He goes ‘What the hell do you need Worcestershire sauce for? There is not one thing you make on Thanksgiving that has Worcestershire sauce in it.’ I tell him that I think Ma used it for the gravy, because we’re tasting the gravy we have on the stove, and it doesn’t taste like Ma’s, and he says if I make him go back to the market one more time, he’s going to divorce me. So I tell him, ‘Go back to the market.’”

So much time and attention was put into the turkey that there was no way it wasn’t going to turn out stellar. Unfortunately, the side dishes were not as lucky.

“The mashed potatoes — Ooooooh. How do you mess up mashed potatoes? My brother from California was in charge of the mashed potatoes, and I guess they don’t have mashed potatoes in California, because I go to put my spoon in them, and the spoon breaks in half. Not really, but they were inedible. You couldn’t eat them. I say to my brother, ‘What did you do to these potatoes?’ He goes, ‘I cooked them. What do you mean what did I do?’ I say, ‘You were supposed to mash them.’ He was so tired — He was still jet-lagged. He takes this spatula from the kitchen and starts whacking the potatoes with a spatula and I start laughing so hard I almost wet my pants. We were all exhausted. I was too tired to even eat, which is a good thing, because other than the turkey, you couldn’t eat any of it.”

The gravy was too runny — and they were wrong about the Worcestershire sauce. The stuffing was too salty. They made another stuffing as a back-up, and it tasted like scrambled eggs — a mystery since nobody remembered putting any eggs in it. It seemed likely that if they actually attempted eating too much of it, they’d be at risk for food poisoning. Thanksgiving that year consisted mainly of turkey sandwiches.

“But you know, we’re all there in the living room. My daughter goes, ‘I want to watch the video of Meema,’ she’s talking about the one we took of her at the barbecue, because we sent it all around, everybody loved it. My mother was a hoot. We put on the video — my nephew hooks up his phone to the tv, I don’t know how he did it. I really didn’t want to see the video, because I thought it was too soon. I couldn’t even look at photos of my mother without crying, and here we were, we’d messed up Thanksgiving. I’m thinking, ‘I’m so sorry, Ma. Turns out we can’t do it without you.’ But then she’s there on the television laughing and dancing, and everybody’s laughing. The whole room. My brothers and their families. My sister. My daughter is there, and she’s holding my new grandson. I was sad and happy at the same time, you know? I think that’s most of how life is — sad and happy. All at the same time. I miss my mom every day. I’m doing Thanksgiving again this year and I still wish she was here to do it for me, but I want my grandson to have the Thanksgivings that I had and not have some sad grandma who can’t get out of bed. My brother says he’s grateful we had her as long as we did, which was a long time. I try to think of it that way. Some days I can, some days I can’t, but I try. Last year my house was full of people all screaming at each other, and a lot of people don’t have any of that, so you have to think of it as: There’s still so much to be happy about and grateful for even when things are bad, and Mom would’ve kicked my butt if all I did was cry about everything. She never stayed in bed a day in her life.”

I ask her if she thinks Thanksgiving will be a little easier this year, and she says-

“As long as my brother doesn’t try making the mashed potatoes again, I think we’ll be all right.”

In Providence: Delivered

“The last guy gave me \$10 on a \$22 order. I told him ‘Thank you, thank you so much.’ He said he used to do the same thing I’m doing. He lives in a big house now. Did you see that house? Imagine living in a house that big.”

He’s been doing this for four hours already tonight, but it’s still early in the evening. Things are just picking up. The weather’s gotten colder, and people are staying in. A big budget Hollywood blockbuster will bomb this weekend. Many businesses will see fewer customers coming in. Tomorrow it might be just as cold, but with no ramifications.

That’s Providence.

Lots of beauty and very little logic.

But none of that is his concern. He’s just trying to deliver some pizzas.

“Been doing this for about two years now. When I started school, it was a good job to have. Good money. Money’s still good, but not as good as it used to be, tell you the truth. I used to do real well. I deliver mainly on the East Side — over by Wickenden — figuring I’ll hit up the rich people. Make more money that way. But the rich don’t tip as well. You get the students? They tip okay or they don’t tip at all. I’ve had that happen a lot.”

He’s 24, tall, with a goatee and a shaved head that he keeps covered with a Red Sox cap. When he laughs, his whole body seems to get into it, and if he’s driving when it happens, he hits the steering wheel a few times. In addition to the pizzas he’s delivering, he has two backpacks in his backseat that both look pretty full. He tells me he’s a good student, but he started school late. After high school, he took a break and moved in with his older brother. The two of them tried selling cars, but they weren’t any good at it. His brother is still trying, but he decided college was a better bet, so he enrolled at CCRI and started delivering pizzas.

“First place I worked for was a mob place, yo. I’m telling you. Yo, I’m telling you, they were mob bosses in there. We’d get a call for a pizza — nobody would do nothing. I’d go, ‘Yo, we gonna make some pizza or what?’ They’d go, ‘What’s your hurry, Sanchez?’ My name ain’t Sanchez, but they always called me that. I think the last guy who worked there was called Sanchez, and they didn’t want to learn a new name.”

The alleged mob bosses only employed him for a few weeks, but then they closed up shop overnight (only furthering his suspicions about them), and he ended up working at two different places at once.

“Some nights, things would get crazy, and I’d have food from both places in my backseat. But I always got it where it was going. I’m a good driver. I don’t speed. Never got a ticket. Got pulled over a lot

though. I know the streets where you gotta watch out for that. My car's a piece of s*** so if they see me comin', I'm getting pulled over, but then they see me with the pizzas and they laugh it off and let me go. I tell all my boys, 'Put some pizza in your car. Tell 'em you do deliveries. Might work for you.'"

When he's not doing deliveries, he's driving around to check on some of his charges. The "boys" he talks about aren't friends, they're kids ranging from ages 11 to 16 who he mentors. A girl he was dating got him interested in it, and he found that he had a knack for looking out. The young men trust men — there's something about him they like. Oftentimes, they'll call him instead of their parents when they need something. I was sitting with him when his phone started going off, because one of them got an A on a test in a class they nearly failed.

"I'm really proud of this one kid. He was like me when I was in school — couldn't tell me nothin'. I didn't fight or s*** like that, but you didn't walk on me. I tell them, 'It's okay to say that people can't treat you bad.' I'm not telling them to take any s***. I'm telling them you worry about yourself and where you're going and you won't even notice how other people treat you. It won't bother you, you see what I'm saying?"

I asked him if he really believes that.

"Not always, but that's what they need to hear. They're too young to get that life's got exceptions for 'em. I can't tell them that. They don't do well hearing things ain't always going to be fair. It makes them want to give up, and that's the biggest problem they'd have — giving up. That's all I say to them, 'Don't give up.' Whatever I gotta say to make that happen, that's what I say. If they find out later I'm a liar, then oh well. At least they'll still be around to say it."

After one of his deliveries, I see him say a prayer as he's getting out of the car, and then one when he gets back, but before he pulls away. I ask him if something happened.

"Just got a bad vibe. Happens sometimes. You get a bad feeling, but then it's all right. Guy was nice. Just didn't like the look of his house. It wasn't messy or nothin', just got a bad feeling as I was pulling up."

This was a house off Gano. The lights were off and it looked like nobody was home. It wasn't a house I would want to hang out at, but it didn't strike fear in my heart.

"You get a bad feeling, and I believe in checking in with yourself when that happens. Then I say a prayer before and after. Ask for my mom to look out for me. So far, no problems."

His phone buzzes and he asks me to look at it for him. It's his girlfriend asking if he's coming by after his last delivery.

"I don't know if I can tonight. I want to stop by a few houses before I head home. Some of the boys had a tough few days, and I want to see how they're doing. They won't talk to me when it's really bad. They go quiet, and I have to go hunt them down. Might not get home until late. Like, late late. Like early morning late. Sucks, but you gotta do it."

I almost point out that he technically doesn't have to, but I get the feeling he would disagree with me on that. I ask him what he tells the boys who are dealing with the hardest problems.

"I say 'Look at me.' I know where they're at. I meet them there, because that's where I'm at, too. Lot of people struggling. Lot of people have a tough time. I got 10 bucks to my name once my bills are paid this month. But like I say, there's no giving up. Now that it's cold outside, maybe some of them will stay home and stay safe. That's what I'm hoping for, but it doesn't always work out that way."

He tells me he looked me up on social media before we agreed to meet, and he knows I'm not a religious person.

"You cool with all the praying I do?"

I tell him I'm fine with it. That I'm not religious, but I'm also not anti-religious.

"Yo, if you ain't against it, you want to pray with me before I drop you off?"

This was at the end of my night, but before the second part of his night began. He'd had text messages flooding in from a few different kids, and I was starting to see his anxiety flare up. At one point, it felt like pies were falling out of his car, because the computer system at the pizza place got backed up, and he had to make triple the deliveries he thought he did going to 12 different houses in a little over half an hour-something I wasn't even sure was possible until I saw him do it.

"But I did it, see? Don't give up. I want to say 'Thank you' now. And thank you for you coming with me, talking about me, writing about me. I appreciate that. I want to say a prayer of thanks. You cool with that? You cool praying with me?"

I said I was.

We sat in his parked car a few blocks from the parlor. His car was empty now, except for the backpacks, and me, and the smell of peppers and tomato sauce. He let the car run while he said a prayer, but he closed his eyes, so I closed mine, too. When he was finished, I looked at him, and he seemed to still be within the prayer. His hands had been on the steering wheel the whole time.

It was as if he was ready to go at any minute, and in absolutely no hurry at all.

In Providence: Twelve Tattoos

"I wasn't young for very long."

She takes me to Glorious West African Cuisine on Elmwood Avenue. We eat fried plantains and dry rice, and she accuses me of picking at my food.

"You finicky? I used to call my son finicky. Then he got older and now he'll eat whatever you put in front of him."

Her son lives in Boston now, which to her might as well be Timbuktu.

"Once he knew what he wanted, that was it," she says, spooning some baked chicken onto my plate. "He was off like a shot."

Two younger daughters live closer. Very close, in fact. One still lives at home, and the other has a place on America Street.

"It's this big, big house," she tells me, laughing. "I say to her, 'How can you afford a place this big?' She says, 'Oh Ma, one of the girls? Their boyfriend has a lot of money. He pays for it. Pays for everything.' I say 'What kind of man pays for his girlfriend's apartment but doesn't live there with her? What kind of man is this?' She thinks I ask too many questions. As long as she's not getting mixed up in all that, I'll mind my business. I tell her, 'You go in your room and shut the door.' She laughs at me. All she does is laugh at her mother."

The daughter who lives at home is a student at CCRI. She's the one who told me to talk to her mother about what's been occupying her life lately.

"The tattoos," she tells me, already rolling up her sleeve to show me her first. "I got this one with my son for my 57th birthday. He said, 'Ma, come get a tattoo with me.' He thought I wouldn't. I said, 'You buying it for me?' He says, 'I'll buy it for you.' So I went with him and I got my kids — their names — it's in a circle? Isn't it so pretty? The girl did a nice job. I've gone to her a few times now."

Twelve.

That's the number of tattoos she currently has. And she wants more.

"Someone said, a friend said to me, 'You're going to get addicted,' and I thought they were pulling my leg, but after I got the first one, I saw two more I thought I would like, so I got them. It's not cheap, you know! It's very expensive. But the work is good work. I have a neighbor who used to do it, and he says the work is very good, so I'm happy with it."

There's nothing odd about having 12 tattoos, and there's nothing unusual about deciding to get your first ink a bit later on in life.

It's just a matter of how quickly it all took place.

She got the names of her children put on her right arm three years ago. Ever since then, she's either getting tattoos or thinking of the tattoos she could be getting.

There's a beaten-up notepad she takes with her just about everywhere, and she'll write down inspirations whenever they come to her.

I'm allowed to look at a few of them. The handwriting is lovely with great big loops for her cursive Ls and strict adherence to where the letters meet the lines.

Each idea is short and sweet, but I ask for explanations behind a few of them.

Braid

"The way my mother wore her hair. I want it down my back. There's nothing on me yet that reminds me of my mother, because we weren't very close, but I want to do something for her all the same."

Coins

“For luck.”

The Old House

“I have a small photograph of where I grew up. The girl I go to said she could do it for me even though it’s very intricate. I can show it to you.”

Back at her house, she takes out the photo. It’s got the bright colors of the 1970s. A girl — I assume it’s her — is sitting on the steps in front of the house with her arms wrapped around her knees. I ask her if she’s the girl, and she says, “Yes.” I ask her if she wants to be in the tattoo, and she says—

“I don’t think so, no.”

It feels inappropriate to ask where she’s getting the money for the tattoos, but she offers it up on her own.

“My daughter tells me I’m spending too much on it,” she says, “I tell her it’s not like I’m charging her rent to pay for it. I have money from when I was working at the hospital. I saved my money. I’ll spend it how I want. Not like you can take it with you. I say to her, ‘You think you’re getting my money when I die?’ She knows that’s not how it’s going to be. It wasn’t much besides all that, and I finally said, ‘I’ll spend it if I want, *how* I want.’ My son says ‘Good for you, Ma.’ He’s the one that got me into all this so I think he likes it. He’s got a cool mom now. I was never a cool mom. Very strict. Very. I still am, but now I have my tattoos.”

She says I can write about her tattoos, but not about where they are on her — with the exception of where she keeps her children’s names. That she’s fine with, because it’s mostly visible anyway.

Other than that, she has her husband’s name, a rose, two butterflies, a cross, two quotes from the Bible, a hand holding another hand, the moon and one ring on each hand.

“I don’t know why I like the feeling,” she says, looking down at one of the tattoo rings. “That’s the same finger where I had my wedding ring. I couldn’t wear it after my husband passed. Too hard for me. I keep it upstairs in my bedroom. I’m too scared to lose it. This one I won’t lose.”

When I ask her if she’s suffered a lot of loss in her life, she’s still holding the photograph of that young girl sitting in front of a house.

“I told you I wasn’t close with my mother, but my father and I were thick as thieves. He was gone early — too early on for me. That was the worst one until my husband. That one I saw coming, but it still knocked me down hard. I ate and ate — I got so big. I slept. My daughters got me out of it. They’re good girls. My son — he runs around. Makes me laugh. He’s good for that. My girls are my two warriors. They said, ‘Ma, get up out of bed. Enough.’ They did that while they were crying over their father every night, but they didn’t want to lose me, too. Such good girls.”

And are the tattoos a way of remembering?

“My father had his father’s name and the name of a man he fought with when he served. That was how he honored his father and that man — who saved my father’s life. I never thought of honoring anybody

like that, but when they sat me down and asked what I wanted, it came back to me — those names he had on him. I wanted to do that for my kids. They're who I wanted to honor. Then my husband. My parents. I'm older now. I want to say "Thank you" to people. I want to show my gratitude."

She says the old house will be next, and then the braid for her mother.

"My mother would have beat me for getting all these tattoos," she says. "Ever since I got the first one, I tell people she's haunting me. Just making me lose things. Can never find my keys anymore. Never used to have that problem. I'm thinking if I get something for her, she'll leave me be."

A grin escapes across her face.

"If not, it's still pretty," she says. "Very pretty."

She looks down at the photograph of a girl with nothing worth remembering. Then, she folds it in half, and tucks it back into a soft blue shoebox.

"Yes," she says, thinking back on the braid that'll run all the way down her back, "Maybe I'll get that one next."

In Providence: Stuck with Superman

On the second floor of an apartment on Parade Street, there's a man with no shirt standing in front of a window trying not to draw Superman.

"It's hard when something gets inside your head and you feel like you have to get it out, but it's a waste of time. It's a waste of time to just sit here drawing Superman over and over, even though that's what I'd like to do. Some people procrastinate by watching TV; I draw Superman. One year all I did was draw Superman. If I did comic books, that would be one thing, but I don't. I just like superheroes, but that's not something I'm focused on — that's not what I'm trying to focus on right now. Now I'd like to do something different."

It's a Saturday evening, and we're midway through Rhode Island Comic Con — an event that seems to expand every year like conventions identical to it all around the country. It brings an infusion of creativity and fandom to Providence for a few days, but the man on Parade Street isn't aware of it.

"Must be a lot of people downtown then. Let's go for a drink," he says, already scanning what appears to be a pile of rags near his bookcase looking for anything resembling a shirt. "It's good to be around people when you're stuck. You ever get stuck? Go find some people to unstuck you. That's the only way to do it."

We wind up at Trinity Brewhouse where I find out that he's much more social than I am — introducing himself to people, swearing he's met them before, acquiring free drinks from total strangers after only a minute or two of small talk.

“You have to look like you’d be fun to have a beer with,” he says. “That’s how you drink for free and that’s how you get elected. Some tricks work in all kinds of places.”

He strikes up a conversation with two guys attending the Con — one is a screenplay writer and the other is an artist. Once the man from Parade Street realizes he’s in the presence of a colleague, he tells him all about his Superman conundrum.

“What the f— am I supposed to do with Superman?” he asks, and I envy whoever might be eavesdropping on this discussion.

Ten minutes later, after the two men have returned to their hotel, he stabs at the salad he’s ordered with a punctuating insistence, and I admit to him that I’m surprised he didn’t order a burger instead. I confess that he comes across as a carnivore.

“I haven’t eaten meat in 17 years,” he tells me, “Drinking’s the last thing I haven’t given up. I quit smoking two years ago. I don’t miss the meat, but f— if I don’t want a smoke every f—ing day of my life.”

A girl with an “Adventure Time” t-shirt approaches us and introduces herself to him. Then it becomes clear she’s going to have to re-introduce herself, because he doesn’t remember her.

They met at a friend’s wedding last summer on the Cape, and after they talk about what a nice ceremony and reception it was, she goes back to her group on the other side of the bar, and I ask him if anything ... *interesting* happened between them.

“We got high and talked about what a f—ing prick Bill de Blasio is,” he says, jabbing his fork into a cherry tomato. “She used to be from New York, then she moved to — somewhere else. She’s back in New York now. I like her, but I did the long distance thing once, and it never worked out even though things aren’t as far away as they used to be.”

The last time he tried to love someone, the woman lived in Florida on the edge of Daytona, and the two of them made it work for a year and a half before the battery ran out. He says he’s fine with it, but three beers later, it’s a slightly different story.

“She liked that I was so good with kids, because she had one of her own, and the kid loved me. He really did. His dad was a cop — and I mean that, like — he was a cop *all the time*. Here’s me this big f—ing idiot being an a-hole trying to get the kid to laugh all the time. I taught him how to draw, and I’d bring him with me when I did landscaping. That was how I made a living down there. Now I work at the shop, but back then I liked being outside. The kid really caught on with me, and everything was starting to look like it was going to be a family — me, him, and his mom. Then, I got restless. That’s how I am. I hate it — to tell you the truth. It’s not what I like about myself, but I get that tickle in my gut and I know it’s time to go. I didn’t want to lose them, but I couldn’t see myself sticking around. We thought about a compromise. The plan was I come up here, try New England, set up some stuff, and then they were going to come up and move in with me, but...I don’t know. I think part of me knew that wasn’t how it was going to go. The kid’s dad put up a big stink, and the phone calls just stopped coming so much — from the mom I mean. She liked me, but I don’t think she loved me like I loved her, and that’s a good thing, trust me. I called the kid on his birthday last year, and he didn’t pick up. I figured that was the end of it.”

How does a guy who can't stick around get stuck with Superman in his head and inside all sketchpads and on his walls and in front of everything else he'd like to draw?

"The funny thing is," he says, "I was always a Batman guy. Never really liked Superman. Always thought he was boring. Didn't seem to be much to him."

Later that night when I'm home and in bed, he sends me a photo of a pencil drawing — a woman with an "Adventure Time" t-shirt. The message he sends with it reads-

"How's this?"

I tell him it's not Superman.

And that'll have to do for now.

In Providence: East Side Seance

We were sitting around a circular table trying not to eat the bread.

"You put out food that gives off a nice smell, like fresh-baked bread or soup," said our hostess, a woman in her mid-60s who had invited the group of us to her house for a seance. "It invites the spirits in."

This gathering was not strictly an October occurrence. She does these seances at least once a month, if not more, from her house on the East Side, nestled between Cooke Street and Newman Road.

Sometimes she hosts friends, but most of the time it's strangers, and the notion of having people she's never met before crowding up her first floor doesn't seem to bother her at all.

"People come from all over," she tells me, cutting up some apples. "They say I have a gift. My father was the same way as me. Some people get it from their mother, but I got mine from my father. He got his from his mother, and I don't know about before that. But lots of people have this. Some don't know they have it. That's too bad. It means it's special but so is being like my friend Joe who's good with math. I'm terrible at math. You want an apple?"

The apples are for eating, but the bread isn't. I was not the only one who made the mistake of assuming there would be a full meal before the seance. The owner of the house and the self-described "Communicator" strikes you as the sort of person who would enjoy feeding others, like a Brooklyn mother in a spaghetti commercial. In reality, she barely feeds herself.

Her kitchen is mostly empty aside from a few pizza boxes and a stack of tuna cans near the sink. She tells me that she eats like a college student, and that she has a woman who comes in and cleans on Thursday mornings.

"I told her where to find her grandmother's wedding ring," she says. "It was in a box in the basement of

her aunt's house. Now she cleans my house and won't charge me. People are very grateful when you help them in this way."

Her accent is unplaceable, but it has the effect of making you want to repeat everything she says as soon as she says it. It might be fabricated. So much of her seems meticulously constructed. I suppose it could be the theatermaker in me, but I felt as though as I was in the presence of a performer.

When I mention this to her, she says-

"All of it's performance," and she holds her frail arms out as wide as they'll go. "Most things are. But actors are not my kind. I like dancers though. Good strong legs. That's what you need."

She said that three minutes before she had all six of us, her guests, moving a giant round table from one room to the other.

"It doesn't belong anywhere permanently," she yelled at us, as we sweatily carried what had to be a three-ton table from one living room into another, larger living room. "But I like to keep things moving. Not good to let things sit."

The woman next to me confides that she and her husband met the Communicator at a farmers market, and when she invited them to her house for a seance, they thought it would be a fun little nightly outing they could put on their joint Instagram.

"There's nothing fun in this house though," she bemoans. "I thought she would have a crystal ball or something, but there aren't even that many candles."

In other words, nothing Instagramable.

One of the benefits of writing a Man About Town column is that sometimes people message you and say, "Hey, you need to check out my friend's neighbor. She does seances and she's a #\$\$%-ing character."

Characters are fun, but #\$\$%-ing characters are my sweet spot.

When I contacted her and asked if I could sit in on one of her evenings, she said that would be fine provided I felt I had a strong spiritual center.

"Yup," I lied. "No problem there."

Now here I was holding hands with two strangers, eyes closed, wondering if anything is ever as good as it is in the movies. The proceedings lacked any sense of drama, and even though I wasn't expecting blood to pour out of the walls, I was hoping for the elephantine table to give a little rumble at least. We'd been holding hands for what felt like half an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, while the Communicator repeated short words and phrases over and over again like "Sure" and "That's fine."

If I didn't know I was at a seance, I might have thought I was listening in on a bunch of friends trying to decide between Applebee's and TGIFriday's.

There weren't that many candles, but the three placed in front of us were giving off a lot of light and what felt like a bit of heat as well. In the corner of the room under a window was a radiator that looked

like it might explode if you tried to employ it, so I knew the warmth had to be coming from the dangling flames, but that seemed strange. Unfortunately, that was the only thing that did.

The Communicator made it clear when I arrived at her home earlier that evening that under no circumstances was I to refer to her as a “Medium.” She didn’t explain why she dislikes that term as much as she does, but it was the only condition she had to being featured in this story, so I agreed to respect her wishes.

Now, she was telling me — and five other people — to think of someone we’d like to speak with as we sat there wondering if the soup she’d laid out for the spirits was more of a light chili.

At least, that’s what I was wondering.

One of the guests asked to speak with their brother who had passed away several years ago. As the Communicator began to reach out to the brother, I was reminded of my undying passion for John Edwards when I was a teenager. (The psychic, not the politician, although you could argue that both had their...issues.) I would watch his syndicated show every day after school, convinced that he really could speak with the dead.

As I got older, my atheism began permeating even the toughest parts of my optimistic imagination, and soon I gave into the idea that the living talking to the deceased was just what every skeptic said it was — a parlor trick.

The difference between me and most other cynics is that I don’t particularly find anything wrong with this sort of thing, provided you’re not bilking people out of their money or pretending to heal their eczema.

Here in the Communicator’s little house, nobody had paid an admission. We were not asked for any contributions, and when someone brought up making a donation, they were promptly — and somewhat abruptly — scolded for even suggesting such a thing.

I have no way of knowing how this woman affords to live, but then again, I could say that about 30% of just about everyone I know.

When my focus returned to the room, there was allegedly one more person there as well.

“Your brother didn’t like your father,” she says to the person sitting diagonally to my right. “He was a heavy drinker, but he didn’t die from it.”

This was the part about seances and ouija boards and communing that I always found odd. I get that it’s important to prove yourself, but what’s the point of telling me something I already know?

I want to hear about the Afterlife.

I want to find out how painful death is.

I want to know what Prince is like.

But the person hearing from their brother seemed more than satisfied to engage in what amounted to nothing more than brief chitchat, and truthfully, I doubt they could have handled anything more

substantial anyway. As soon as the Communicator said that the brother's spirit had exited the room, his sibling had a total breakdown. In fact, we had to stop so that they could collect themselves, and when the Communicator excused herself, the Instagram husband piped up with a bit of mutiny.

"I don't buy any of it," he said, seemingly oblivious to the weeping believer still seated at the table. "It's all educated guessing and body language. They did a thing on John Oliver about it. It's harmful. These people do a lot of damage, let me tell you."

His derision didn't seem to affect the rest of the group, especially not the Sibling.

"My brother was here," they said to whoever looked at them, an uncontrollable smile on their face, and tears that cut their skin like wax. *"My brother was here."*

All of this was starting to seem a little perverse. A little manipulative. I chastised myself for going down this road just so I could have a column that lined up with Halloween. Nothing about this was scary. It was just a dinner party with no dinner, and three candles — two of which looked as though they were purchased from Bed, Bath, and Beyond with the labels removed.

When the Communicator came back into the room, I thought about excusing myself, but I wanted to give her a chance to talk with me once the seance was done so I could voice some of these concerns.

As if sensing my discomfort, or maybe because she felt I needed a direct connect to give the piece I was writing a little oomph, she looked right at me and said—

"There's someone here who wants to talk to you."

The point of this column isn't — and never was — to make you believe in anything other than that life is infinitely more interesting out of your house than in it.

I'm not trying to protect my own privacy when I refrain from telling you what the Communicator told me while claiming she was speaking with someone no longer of this earthly plane, but I feel that maybe by omitting specific details, it'll steer you away from trying to play a guessing game with yourself that you're bound to lose either way.

Here's what I'll say instead:

She spoke for exactly seven minutes, and I know this, because my eyes were open at this point, and I just happened to look up at the clock to her right when she began to speak.

She told me about someone I can't claim to have lost, because they were never really mine to begin with in any way whatsoever. That's just my way of saying they were someone I cared about but never met.

Someone I admired, but was also intimidated by.

Someone I spoke with less than seven times over the course of five years who died nearly five years ago at the same age I am now.

She told me things about him I knew, things I didn't know, things I believe, things I didn't believe as she was saying them but later bore out, and things that were wildly off-base. Laughable, even.

If you're the kind of person who thinks that even one wrong detail given to me by this woman would indicate that I was being conned by someone who perhaps just enjoys the attention that comes from having a group of people over her house once a month, I would argue that most of us — if forced to convey who someone was to another person when they were alive — would make a few big mistakes as well, even if they had access to the dead person's point of view.

People who are alive often get things wrong about themselves. Why should the dead be any different?

Admittedly, I also felt a performance take hold during certain moments. I could sense her filling in gaps that weren't hers to fill in, and making reasonable assumptions that only led her further away from the spirit she was trying to keep in the room.

Does she simply do this because she's lonely and wants the company, some of you may be wondering. That's a good guess, but she doesn't seem to like people all that much, although she isn't cold to them either. She's welcoming, but not hospitable. It makes these evenings a mystery not just because of their content, but because of their sheer existence.

The last thing I'll say in regard to my own supernatural contact while sitting at her table is that while it may have been my mind playing tricks on me, there was a moment where I would swear I smelled a kind of cologne that hadn't been there a second earlier, and at that very same moment, the heat coming off the candles seemed to disappear.

There was no denying that I had some kind of experience in that room. Whether it was surreal or simply theatrical is hard to say, but it landed somewhere in the back of my rib-cage and has been stuck there ever since.

Now I wonder — just what was all that for?

What needed to be communicated to me?

What message could be so dire that someone who's been gone for five years would drop back into the physical world just to relay it to me?

Nothing.

Nothing much anyway.

Not according to the woman who fed me apple slices, and who, after the seance was over, told me I could ask her anything only to find out that I had nothing to ask. I think she was as surprised about it as I was, and you journalists out there probably want to wring my neck, but remember, I'm not a journalist.

I am, however, still a skeptic.

Yet it's funny how you can disbelieve something and still be affected by it.

I guess that's why we still go to movies — especially the scary ones.

According to the Communicator, the spirit that came into that room only wanted to wish me well. That was all. And tell me that it missed me, that he missed me, or rather, missed our talks. Asked about a play I

gave up on years ago that only he would know I had even begun. Told me to go back to it. That it was a good play.

Is all that spooky enough for you?

I, myself, found it very touching.

Funny how you think that the best thing that could possibly come out of a seance would be levitation or the location of a buried family treasure, and what ends up affecting you the most is something as simple as "Every time you think of me, I'm there."

That wasn't a sentiment that was expressed verbally, but it was what I took with me when I left. The idea that it isn't so crazy to assume someone can summon the energy that used to exist in a living form just by requesting its presence. Maybe the crazy thing is assuming that it takes three candles, six strangers holding hands, and a loaf of rye bread to do it. Maybe a seance and a prayer aren't all that far apart, if all you want to know is that your brother didn't like your father very much, but that he loved you and still does, and he wishes you'd quit smoking and finally take that trip to Italy instead of just saying you will.

Or that a writer you admired thought your work showed potential, and he wishes you'd stop being so damn afraid and really make a go of it.

Or, as the doubting Instagram husband found out before we wrapped for the night, that his father would like it if he visited his mother more often, because he's worried about her being alone so much.

If I believe that dead people were in that room with me, then it seems like their only mission was to say, *"Hey assholes, you're still alive. Act like it."*

To lightly reprimand us for not living the life we want to live.

To point out that we don't have as much time as we think we do, and it's silly to spend it in the past when even the ghosts have moved on.

The Communicator told me that one time a man asked to speak with his dead wife who'd been gone for almost 10 years, and when she came through, all she wanted to say was that she hated his new couch.

Apparently, death doesn't make you all that profound.

"No big surprises here," the Communicator says, as I put on my coat and made my way down her front steps. "Just what you already know."

She gave me some apple slices for the road.

I think she wanted to make sure that no matter what I left believing, I could still take something with me.

In Providence: A Life Imagined

She works in a small office on the line where Providence meets North Providence, where she does medical billing and tries not to fall asleep.

"I bartend at night, and when I first started, I could juggle all these things," she tells me over coffee near her house. "I'm getting older now so that's not as easy."

Feeling old and feeling old-*er* — it's a distinction with which I can identify.

Her mid-30s aren't what she thought they would be, and when I ask her what she imagined her life was going to be like at this point, she laughs.

"I thought I'd be living on an island somewhere in the Bahamas serving drinks and just — I didn't think of myself as having a serious life. I never wanted that. It sounds immature, but I wanted to just have fun and, you know, if I burned out? So be it."

Growing up, her parents were both laidback and involved at the same time. They gave her a lot of freedom, and when she told them one day that she wanted to try getting high, they set some boundaries and told her to go ahead.

"My mother hated hypocrites, and with everything she'd done in her life, she felt like there wasn't a lot she could tell me not to do that wouldn't make her a hypocrite, so... She just wanted to make sure I was careful. That I felt supported and that my life was in order so that no matter what I did, I could come back to safety, and to my family. To love, I guess."

Her parents think she's doing pretty well now, even though she finds her apartment near PC and her 9 to 5pm job to be lackluster.

"That's why I go out so much. More than I should, to tell you the truth."

She works most nights at a bar downtown, but even on her nights off, she finds herself out in the city getting drinks with friends or drinking alone in whatever corner she can make for herself in dim lighting and subdued conversation.

"I like hotel bars. Feels kind of dirty, right? But, to me, it feels like the movies. Woman sitting at the bar. Having a drink. And we have some—they're nice. The bars in hotels. Clean. Nobody bothers you. You feel safe."

When she got to college, she found herself pulling back from people, and she couldn't explain why. College is a major lifestyle change even for those who come from liberal backgrounds, where your parents don't give you a curfew and talk to you openly about things like drugs and sex, but there's something about that life that rattled her.

"I got in. I got out. Started bartending. Took the job I have now. Been there ever since. Been in my apartment for years. A few years now. I keep waiting for something to happen. I don't know why I think something is, but ... I keep waiting."

Sometimes she'll meet people at those hotel bars, or at other bars. Never her own. She doesn't fraternize with customers, but when she's on her own, she's all smiles and light laughter.

"It's about letting people know you like them. I always want everybody to know I like them, even if I don't. I figure if I like them, they'll like me."

Her nights are late, but while some people might not like that Providence nightlife ends at 1am on most nights even in the wildest of circumstances, it's one of the reasons why she likes living here.

"Oh, I worry about how I would do if- It's good for me that I'm not somewhere that's always got something going on. You know, it's good to live in a place where it's like-Okay, the night's over." She laughs that light laugh. "Time to go home, because there's no place else to go."

And what does she do once she gets there?

"I put on some music. I open my bedroom window if it's nice out and I light a cigarette. I like that feeling like everybody's asleep. Like I'm the only one up."

What about those nights when she knows she has to be up early the next day?

"There are two me's. There's the one who knows that this can't go on forever. It's not a destructive life, but it's not...It's not long-term. It can't be. I'm just not made for-None of us are. Made to be the bartender and the receptionist. Not at the same time."

I ask her why she doesn't consider giving up being the receptionist. It doesn't seem to bring her any happiness and she could probably make enough money just bartending.

"For a few more years maybe, and then what? I don't want to be a 70-year-old woman behind a bar. I don't even want to be a 70-year-old woman at a bar. That-what I told you about my fantasy future-I wasn't thinking very far ahead. I didn't have a future past-I've lived past the future I dreamed of for myself. Can I do better than where I'm at now? Maybe. But I'm not ready to be boring yet, you know? Not boring. That sounds mean. You can do what I do at my job and have a great life. But-I'm not ready to be sad yet. I know how sad I'll be and I'm not ready to be that yet."

She's going out tonight and she's excited about it, because it's one of her best friend's birthdays and she knows she's going to see some people she's been missing.

"People don't go out as much as they used to," she says, "and we're all getting older, so that's only going to get worse. I keep waiting for the day I go out somewhere and I show up and it's just me waiting on everybody else to show up. I'll just be sitting there waiting all night with a drink in my hand. That won't happen tonight, but it's not far off. It's really not."

She smiles when she says this, like the thought of getting to that point will be a relief. Not because it won't be sad, but because it will be. It'll be the sadness she's been trying to run away from for a very long time.

In Providence: The Drop

I sometimes wonder if I survived the drop.

It's a drop that never happened, but could have-

Maybe it did.

Years ago, I was standing on a rooftop in downtown Providence on a date that was going poorly, and the guy suggested we go out onto the roof, which seemed like a romantic strategy for salvaging the evening.

We walked out onto the roof through a window, which was a relief since he was basically squatting in an abandoned apartment on Washington Street, and as we were walking around, I heard him say, "Watch out."

I looked down and there was a huge space in the middle of the roof that went two stories down.

When I looked back up at him, I had the strange sensation that I had already taken the step. That I had gotten lucky and that I was falling-all at the same time.

From that point on, every time something bad would happen-and a lot of bad stuff has happened since then-I would think to myself...

Maybe I took that step after all.

Maybe all this is because of the drop.

Last week, a 20-year-old woman and I were sitting in her dorm room on the East Side. She was introduced to me through a friend on social media, and she asked if we could talk about something that had happened to her at the end of last year.

The only time we could both agree on was later in the evening, and that's how I found myself seated at her desk while she sat on her bed across from me, listening to her tell me about the night she dropped.

She'd gone to a birthday party at a friend's house. Just a few people there. No strangers. Not even any drinking aside from a glass of wine the host was nursing. Little red and white streamers throughout the living room and a red velvet cake covered with candles.

"My friend wanted all the candles," she tells me, holding onto a faded orange stuffed giraffe. "I remember they set off the smoke detector. We all laughed."

The party went on late into the night. All she drank was water, because she'd decided to go into summer with a healthier lifestyle. She remembers feeling fine when she left the party. Nobody even suggested she stay because of how late it was, because she was fine.

Because fine is sober, right?

Fine is you can walk a straight line and your words aren't slurred and you're only going outside to wait for your Lyft.

"You can see the windows into my friend's apartment from the street," she said. "And it was late, but it was really nice out, so there were still people walking around and out and I felt-Yeah, I felt fine."

Then the Lyft doesn't show up.

"It just disappeared off my phone. That's what I remember. I know I got one, but then-it just wasn't there, and, um, it was really nice out, and I only live a few blocks from my friend, and so-it was really stupid of me, but I think-*Oh, I'm just going to walk home.*"

She starts to walk home and right away, she gets the feeling that somebody is following her.

"I've taken self-defense classes. I'm very aware of my-um-my surroundings? I was holding my keys between my hands in that way where if somebody comes up to you, you just-I know what to do is what I'm saying. Not that it always protects you, but I wasn't just, like, stumbling through the streets unprepared. And so maybe I was just freaking myself out because it was late, but I swear I heard somebody behind me, and I kept turning around, and nobody was there, but as soon as I kept walking, I felt it."

Her first instinct is to get someone on the phone, assuming-as most of us probably would-that somebody isn't going to attack you if they hear you talking to someone.

"And I know this is where it all starts to sound like a horror story," she says, "But I look at my phone, and it's just dead. Not like-my battery was charged. I was charging it in the kitchen of my friend's house, and the battery was fully charged when I left. I checked it again when I saw that the Lyft had cancelled. But now I'm looking at my phone, and it's just-nothing's happening. That really freaks me out, and, um, I just start running. I'm not even going to lie to you-I just run. I ran all the way home."

At least, that's what she thinks happened.

"I remember breaking into a run, and just-wind. I remember the wind got really bad all of a sudden. It wasn't windy. It was a really calm night. Then it was just-it got in my ears. Maybe because I was running, but it felt-I felt like I was pushing against it. The next thing I remember is waking up in bed the next morning. My phone is in bed with me. It's charged. I hadn't plugged it in, but all of a sudden, it's working just fine. I'm not wearing what I wore to the party. I'm-I've got on, like, a t-shirt and these jeans-and why would I put on jeans when I came home?"

There are more questions.

She's got multiple windows open on her laptop and she knows only her email was up when she left that night. Her room is usually neat, and when she wakes up, it's been practically ransacked. The windows are closed, but her curtains are parted, and she never leaves them that way. A mug from her high school that she only brought with her to school for sentimental reasons is next to her bed and it's overflowing with coffee.

When did she make coffee?

And why?

I told her that even though I'm not a journalist, I had to talk to her friends to verify some of this. That I couldn't just write about it if it turned out that she had been drinking or that she was acting erratically that night or if she had a habit of making stuff up. I didn't feel comfortable accusing her of any of this, but the story was wild.

Then again, so is remembering a fall that never happened.

So is everything these days.

The surreal has never been more believable.

She gave me a list of people at the party, and I contacted each one. All of them said the same thing.

No, she hadn't been drinking or taking drugs.

She was there almost the entire time and was behaving normally.

Almost all of them have confirmed that she had been charging her phone in the kitchen.

They told me they've known her for awhile and she's never been known to make up stories or lie about anything at all.

The woman whose birthday it was told me that she called her the next day to make sure she got home okay, and that's when she heard the story I was listening to sitting in that dorm room.

All the details lined up.

Her story has stayed the same every time she's told it, including to another group of friends at another party at the beginning of the school year.

But it was what she said happened after that night that always strikes people the hardest.

It's the epilogue that made one of her friends think of me after listening to me talk about the drop at an open mic night.

It was how we both talked about the feeling of dodging a bullet only to feel the shot over time that made someone think to connect us.

We're sitting a foot away from each other, and she tells me that she tried to brush that night aside. It seemed like the logical thing to do.

She wasn't hurt.

She hadn't been followed.

Nothing had been taken from her room.

"I thought maybe I had a breakdown," she said. "Like, a mental break or something. I did some research. Nothing else could explain it. Why all that happened. I even went to a doctor, because I was so worried that something had happened to me—that I'd been drugged or something—I just didn't want to leave anything to chance. But everything checked out, and so—I thought, I just have to forget this. It

was just a crazy night. People would laugh when I told them about it. It seemed funny to people.”

Then her brother got into a serious car accident on his way to visit his girlfriend in New Hampshire.

Her mother suffered a stroke.

Two days later, her best friend from childhood committed suicide.

Then two more friends from her high school died.

Her cousin developed a mysterious illness that couldn't be diagnosed, and still isn't to this day.

There's more, but she asked me not to go too far into it, so I won't.

This was all in the span of a few months.

“I know it sounds really egocentric of me,” she says. “But to have that night, and then, all this—everything—it just feels like it can't be a coincidence. What if what I felt that night was everything that was about to happen? Because throughout all of this, I've been okay. I mean, I'm not okay, because, like, my mom and my brother and—But what if this is all just a continuation of whatever it was that night that I felt walking behind me?”

She's digging her fingernails into the giraffe, and I can see how upset she is, so I tell her about my night on the roof, and the boy telling me to watch my step, and the drop.

And how after that night, nothing ever felt right again.

There have been good things. Enjoyable things. Moments of joy.

But the bad stuff weighs heavy, and it feels oppressive in a way that almost defies reality.

“I talk to people about the walk home and what came after and they tell me that's just life. That's just getting older. Death and people getting hurt—it piles up as you get older. That's just how it is. But why would it start all of the sudden and why so much of it all at once so that now I feel like I'm drowning in it? It can't go on like this, but it does. It just doesn't stop. Something else happens every day. And if it's not in my life—if it's not personal to me—it's the world. What's happening out there. There's no break from it. People keep telling me it's bad luck. But doesn't that feel—it just feels insulting. Bad luck? I'm okay. Nothing's happening to me. But all around me. It's all around me. What kind of bad luck is that?”

Maybe there's a place where I dropped, but the world is a little bit better.

“I don't remember putting my key in the lock.”

That's not as dark as it sounds. I don't mean it in terms of—The world would be better off without me. I mean it as—Maybe that was what needed to happen in order for other stuff not to happen. Isn't that just how the Universe works? The Butterfly Effect? Cause and effect? Parallel realities?

Somewhere I'm not here, but someone else is.

A loved one.

A celebrity.

A stranger.

“Maybe I didn’t make it back here that night—and this is all something else.”

But what else would it be?

I tell her about the drop and everything that came after it.

I tell her about the phone calls where your hearing drops out and the images on the television and emails you wake up to and the ways you find out about people who aren’t here anymore and visits to hospitals and waking up from a nightmare that feels more like the truth than anything you’ve lived up to now.

We’re sitting in a small room lit only by a lamp on the desk. She’s on the bed. I’m at the desk. The curtains cover the windows. The coffee mug is nowhere in sight. But everything is neat. Everything is where it should be.

I ask her how she feels.

How she feels now.

“Scared and not scared,” she says. “Scared because I don’t know what’s coming next, and...and not scared because...I’m not sure it matters.”

I try to remember whether or not I stepped onto the space that wasn’t there. The landing that didn’t exist. The spot where my foot would go first and then the rest of me.

Can you have two sets of memories?

One for what makes sense and one for what lines up with the way your life is now.

Are memories meant to be directions for how we wound up where we are?

A young woman sits on a bed hugging a giraffe, and the light from the lamp on her desk stays on all night and into the next day.

She tells me that’s how she likes it.

She tells me that she’ll never turn it off.

In Providence: A Piano in South Providence

He played me something on his piano.

"That's not my best," he says, "but it's the one I like the most."

His house is on the South Side across from a little neighborhood convenience store where he shops every day.

"I get the paper. I talk to the woman at the register. Sometimes she's the only person I talk to all day."

We first spoke via email when he contacted me about wanting to sell his piano.

I have a theater and he thought maybe I'd need one.

The truth was, everybody needs a piano, but I needed a story more. I told him I was working on a Man About Town column.

"I'm not your guy," the response read. "I barely ever leave my house."

I asked him why.

"You sure you don't want this piano?"

The story goes like this.

"The piano was my mother's. Back when people used to have prized possessions. My mother was a piano teacher and she taught me how to play the piano. She was a good teacher. Taught lots of kids. Kids who could afford it and some who couldn't. And she didn't mess around. You took it seriously. I remember her telling me I could be a professional if I stuck to it. Kept practicing. I practiced, but only because she wanted me to. Never really had me as a real passion. I had other interests, but some things you don't forget."

He cuts up some apple slices as he's telling me this story and we go out on his porch. It's September, but lately that's just 30 more days of August.

Two kids go by on bikes. It's early evening on a Sunday. Some of the houses on his street have their lights on. Some have windows open. I wish there was music playing, because it would enhance the sensory details of this story, but I'm tied to non-fiction, so I'll stick to what's true as much as I can.

The only place he's gone in the past three weeks has been the convenience store.

To him, Providence is a state of mind.

"Losing Mom was tough," he says. "Sent me into a — a dark place. A place I really fought against for most of my life. She struggled with it, and that got passed down to me. She'd go into her bedroom and be in there for days. I'd practice the piano. Students would come by. I'd make up excuses for her. We didn't have the words back then for what she had. We didn't know what it was. Just that it was like being sick. It was sick. It was a sickness. And it was worse, because people told her to knock it off, like it was that simple. I knew it wasn't. Maybe because I knew I had it too. She used to say, 'Are you a fighter?' I used to say, 'Yeah, Ma. I'm a fighter.' And she'd go, 'Good. Because you got a fight coming.' She knew. She knew what was coming for me. I think ... I think she felt guilty she couldn't do nothing about it."

Kids would come to the house that I was at now. The same heavy red curtains covering up the living room windows. The same untouched china in the cabinet all along the dining room wall.

The piano that stands out like something timeless in a place otherwise surrendered to time. The entire house built around this one thing.

"It was her father's piano," he says. "I don't know if it goes back further than that, but it might. She could play it right up until the end. Believe it or not, she was teaching right up to the end. I would come by and she'd have a student here with her. I'd wait my turn like I always did, and then she'd have me sit down — a 48-year-old man — and play. That's the god's honest truth. Every time I'd come by."

I asked him how often he visited.

"Not a lot," he replied, then stopped himself before continuing. "We had — Things weren't always so good between us. Things — things were said when I was younger. Harsh things. On both sides. Her and me. I blamed her for a lot. For a lot of what was wrong with me. Then I moved on over to where I was until recently. This place — well, two places — one was on Charles Street and the other was this really nice place on Gano. I liked the place on Gano a lot. But then, one day, my aunt calls me, and she says, 'You need to go see your mother.' That's when I knew all this was going to happen. That I was going to wind up back here."

Suddenly, it's dark, but we don't go back inside. From one section of the porch, you can see a little bit of what looks like downtown, but I could be mistaken. To put him and his past in the shadow of the city would be enticing, but I can't do it if it's not accurate. If it's not real. It has to be just the way it is.

"She fought me," he says. "She fought me every step of the way. Had a lot of pride in her. Too much pride to let anybody take care of her. But I had to do it, and — and pretty soon she understood that, and parts of her started to just ... go away. But the piano helped, I think. She would sit down and play even on her worst days. And I liked listening to her play. Meant she was still in there somewhere, like they say. A little part of her. That fighter. That teacher. Still there."

I asked him what it would be like when he finally sold the piano.

"First the piano, then the house, then I'm getting the hell out of here. I don't know where I'm going to go, but probably not too far. I like it here. And I think I can get a good price for everything and — and really make a life for myself finally. Really do something with myself. Right now I'm just biding my time, because I thought losing Mom would hurt like hell, but I didn't think it would throw me for a loop, so of course, that's exactly what it did. It knocked me out. Now I have to get back to — to taking care of myself again. That's what I haven't been doing. That's why I don't go very far. But once I get things in order, that's all going to change. I have some things I'd like to do. Some things I want to give myself to look forward to."

When I ask him how he's making money now to keep himself going in the meantime, he gets a little sheepish, then seems to realize just how good of an ending he's about to give me.

"I teach lessons," he says. "I started when she first got sick. Crazy, right? But that's what made the most sense."

About 10 minutes later, we'll go in the house, and he'll play me his favorite song. The one he's not the

best at, but the one he likes the most.

While he plays, he leans forward, the way I've seen really brilliant pianists do. His eyes close. His mouth opens just a little. His hands seem to be pulling the music out of the giant instrument in a way that's sacred and malevolent at the same time.

At the very end, he leaves his hands elevated above the keys for just a moment, and his entire body freezes.

I want to ask him to teach me how to write about what I just saw. And what I can see him feeling right in front of me. About what it means to sit down at a piano owned by family you've never met, and cared for by someone you could never get close to.

But you can't ask someone to teach you something like that.

Some things you have to learn on your own.