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## The Fiction Writer

*The past don't control you  
But the future's like a roulette wheel spinning  
Deep down inside  
You know you need a whole new beginning*

--Bob Dylan, "Ye Shall Be Changed"

EVEN NOW, I SEE her hands and forearms covered with ink—phone numbers, dates, reminders about meetings, words she wanted to remember. And once, sitting at the bar at Smitty McGee's, she swung around on her stool, lifted the hem of her skirt and showed us her leg, covered to mid-thigh with writing: notes about the novel she was working on; a song lyric she'd heard while driving. Another time, over coffee in the morning, I saw words from the day before imprinted on the side of her face. I knew how she slept then, hands tucked under her cheek. I didn't mention that the words were there and later, after she saw herself in the mirror, she said, "Why the hell didn't you tell me? Geez, would you let me run around with my dress stuck in the back of my underwear too?"

"It was barely noticeable," I laughed. The ink had been smudged, like faint bruises.

I'm still not sure why I didn't tell her she had writing on her face—it *is* the kind of thing you'd want your friend to let you know. It seems fitting that I didn't, though, for this is how I'll always remember her: words literally pushed into the pores of her skin.

Writing a story on her body so that her body had a story.

In the end, this was all she was--a story we would tell repeatedly. Each time, we embellished it more, highlighting certain moments, habits, things she used to say or do.

Like stripping an old car for salvageable parts: That's what we would do to her life.

It's what she had done to ours.

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She showed up one rain-drenched autumn Saturday at the monthly meeting for the writers' guild I had started. I was out of town that weekend, but I heard about her the minute I returned. "This woman—Natalie (that's what I'll call her) --is *amazing!*" my friends gushed. "Wait until you hear her writing!" She'd just signed a two-book deal with Random House, had directed The San Diego Writer's Center for two years, had taught with Pam Houston at the Aspen Writers Conference *and...* "She wants to join *our* writers' guild."

"Why?" I laughed. "What's she doing here?" Here: this emptied-out Delaware beach town two and a half hours from DC, with its closed shops and restaurants and "See you Next Summer!" or "Thanks for a Great Season," signs taped in dusty windows.

Her mother had a house one town over, Natalie was going through a divorce, she had revisions due on her novel, and the beach in the winter seemed the perfect place to write.

Years before, I had moved here for a similar reason, my then-husband out of a job, our marriage disintegrating, the excitement of publishing my first novel with a major publisher dissolving into the reality of book sales and numbers, none of which were good. I walked the gray beaches for hours that first winter, slowly coming to terms with the end of my marriage and feeling my way back to the novel I would finally sell a few weeks before Natalie came into my life.

I met her for the first time in the local bookstore. She was sitting in an armchair by the fireplace, laptop balanced on her knees. I had pictured someone thin and pretty; a woman in jeans and a turtleneck and sexy reading glasses; a cosmopolitan, *writerly*-looking woman. But Natalie was overweight and sloppy, and though it was late November and cold, she wore wrinkled Bermuda shorts and running shoes, a man's flannel shirt. Close to forty, the same age that I was. Her wild curly hair uncombed. No make up. Words in black ink written on the backs of her hands.

Relief washed over me. *I'm thinner*, I remember thinking. *Prettier*. But it was small consolation. I felt unsettled by this woman, and scared. I'd gone out of town for one weekend—*one!*--and returned to find myself if not replaced, then set aside—or so that's how I felt. It is my single greatest fear, and though I'm not sure where this fear comes from or why, I do know that because of it I have worked incredibly hard in my friendships and marriages and as a teacher to make myself indispensable: If I'm not, no one will need me. And if no one needs me, no one will want me.

I could disappear one day and no one would notice.

I think of those entertainers who twist balloons into myriad shapes: a dog, a lion, a flower. It is what I have done with my life, twisting myself into whatever shape I needed to be, giving myself away like a party favor to make someone else happy. There is nothing normal about this, nothing even remotely okay, and yet it is the very quality, I believe, that has allowed me to succeed as a fiction writer. I am good at cannibalizing my life for the sake of the characters' lives; good at disappearing completely into whoever I need to become so that *they* might step from the pages more real, it often seems, than I ever was. And yes, of course, it is a double-edged sword. So quick am I to step into another's shoes, to intuit someone else's needs or desires, that I have no clue about my own. For years, when my therapist asked what I felt, what *I* wanted, I would panic. I don't know, I would tell her, aware only of what *she* wanted: which was that I felt *something*.

Natalie's appearance deceived me that first day. Had she looked more like me physically, would I have known how similar she and I actually were? Could I have foreseen the lengths to which we'd go in our efforts to become indispensable to each other? Could I have understood that all those months when I was looking at her, I was looking in a mirror?

She too was terrified of disappearing.

Until one day she did.

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Within a month of her arrival, our writing group was meeting weekly instead of monthly. Natalie's idea. She and I took turns facilitating the sessions. She was a wonderful teacher. She began each meeting by reading the "Guidelines of Writing Practice" from *A Writers' Book of Days*, by Judy Reeves, the woman with whom Natalie had run the San Diego Writers' Center. *Trust your pen*, the rules advised. *Go with the first image that appears*. It has been over five years now since Natalie disappeared and I still read these "Guidelines" at the start of each class: *Be willing to go to the scary places that make your hand tremble and your handwriting get a little out of control*.

*Be willing to tell your secrets.*

Natalie suggested, too, that we read poetry, and she'd start each class by reading out loud a poem. It is another thing that, five years after her disappearance, we continue to do.

"I would never have started writing poetry if it wasn't for Natalie," my friend, Gail, told me recently. "I almost emailed her the other day to thank her."

Something in me constricted. How can you even *think* of emailing Natalie after what she did? I wanted to ask. But I thought of how our writers meetings, which had never attracted more than a dozen members, swelled to twenty, then twenty-five after Natalie joined us. The bookstore where we met wasn't big enough. Natalie suggested we have two writing groups a week, then four.

More people kept joining. Most were retired. They had lived entire other lives, had careers as administrators, lawyers, schoolteachers, secretaries. They'd owned companies, raised families. Finally, though, they were doing what they'd always wanted to. Gus began writing about his experiences in Vietnam for the first time. Sherry started the memoir she'd been yearning to write for years. Daniel, who had never written before, never thought he could, wrote about the last time he saw his father. Daniel's voice wobbled as he read, his hands shook. The writing was beautiful.

When he finished, Natalie nodded, said thank you, turned to the next person. She didn't offer praise or criticism or encouragement. That wasn't the point.

All that mattered was the writing and the reading, the telling of the story or poem or paragraph. Everyone had a story, Natalie believed, and every story was important, and she taught the rest of us to believe this too. The participants in the writing group stopped apologizing for their work, and when they read it out loud, they slowed down, stopped covering their mouths with their hands. You could see their confidence in the flourish of a metaphor, in the way their faces softened when everyone sighed with amazement and recognition as they read a paragraph that was so true the entire group seemed to feel the words physically in their own throats. It was as if Natalie's belief that they were *real* writers somehow allowed them to be.

And isn't that what writing, friendship, *love*, is about in the end? *Belief*?

Throughout that fall and winter, Natalie taught classes for free. She volunteered to bartend at our holiday party. She organized a literary reading for Valentine's Day. We drank "Emily Dickinson cosmo's" and "Raymond Carver martini's" and Natalie read from her forthcoming novel about a woman teaching writing in a small beach town. Snow fell past the windows into the water of the bay. Our candlelit reflections wavered in the dark glass. People flocked around Natalie, wanted to know when her novel was coming out. We decided to hold a reading every month. She helped me organize the two-day writing conference our writers' guild held each year; she started a book club. Our membership continued to increase.

*Indispensable.* The two of us met every morning in coffee shops to work on the novel revisions we both had due; we ran the writing groups together, went to Smitty McGees every Thursday night to hear Randy Lee Ashcraft, in his jeans and cowboy boots, with his great voice and sexy smile, sing Johnny Cash and Jimmy Buffet songs. Natalie and I sat at the bar and talked: about

our Catholic-school upbringing, our divorces, the characters in our novels, people in the writers' guild. I laughed often during those months, laughed more than I had in a long time, maybe since graduate school nearly two decades before. Until I became friends with Natalie, I don't think I realized how alone I'd become. How serious. The year I met her, my seven-year-old nephew Sam had recently died of a genetic disease that would also take the life of his older brother, Zachary, before the year was over; my third--*third*--divorce had just been finalized; I was living in a rented garage converted to an efficiency apartment; and a part of me I could barely acknowledge, much less feel, was reeling with shame and disbelief because this wasn't how I'd wanted my life to be. Natalie just rolled her eyes, jokingly referred to me as "grief girl," ordered us another shot and plunged forward into the next plan: an idea for a class, another novel, a guy she thought I should date. She made me feel normal again. And fun. Alive in a way I hadn't been.

We talked too, about my friend, Kent, with whom Natalie had begun to fall in love. Kent was a contractor who played music in the local bars and was working on a CD. Natalie told me about the night they sat on the deck of a newly-built house that Kent was trying to sell. There was no electricity yet. He'd brought peanut butter for her, her favorite kind, which she ate by the spoonfuls as they sat in the dark listening to the rain and taking turns naming songs with the word *rain* in the title. She told me about the night he sat on a curb in the darkness and cried, told her things about himself he'd never told anyone. They had two and three-hour phone conversations, talking until their phone batteries died or until one of them fell asleep listening to the other's voice.

Although they seemed perfect, I was surprised. Kent is sort of rock-star good-looking--thick brown hair, sharp chiseled features, tanned muscled arms--and there was Natalie, disheveled and overweight in her frumpy khaki shorts and flannel shirts. I loved that Kent could see beyond the superficial, though, loved that he loved Natalie for the reasons that mattered: She was smart, talented, and fun.

That they were such an unlikely couple only made their story seem that much more real, somehow. Twice Kent had been engaged to gorgeous, talented women; twice he'd broken off the engagements. It made an odd kind of sense, then, that it would be someone like Natalie, someone who didn't fit any of Kent's expectations, with whom he would finally fall in love, falling hard in a way that sometimes scared me. I didn't want her to hurt him, and I feared she would. The sale of her novel had been huge: "Let's just say there are a lot of zero's in the number," she would laugh when talking about her book advance; her agent was one of the top agents in the field; her editor worked with writers who were already anthologized in literature texts. Natalie would outgrow Kent, I thought. She wouldn't need him as much as he needed her.

I didn't share these fears with Natalie as we sat in various cafés or at the bar at Smitty McGee's. Mostly, we talked about the books we were writing and reading. Natalie had a story forthcoming in *Redbook*; an essay to be published in the Modern Love column of the Sunday *New York Times*. She encouraged me to send work to these same places, told me to use her name as a recommendation. She knew everyone, it seemed, in part because of her work at the San Diego Writers Center, in part because of her longtime friendship with X, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, whose first book had been on the *New York Times* best seller list for almost as long as the *DaVinci Code* and whose second book seemed destined to stay there just as long. Natalie often spent weekends with X in New York, had accompanied him to the National Book Awards in November wearing a six-hundred-dollar yellow bra—her first splurge with the book advance from Random House. The next day she showed us X's picture in the *New York Times*, pointed to a place just outside the frame: "I can't believe they cut me out of the shot!" She described how she'd hoped to talk to Joan Didion, but could only say hello before Joan was whisked away. Joan's book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, had won the non-fiction award, so of course every one wanted a piece of her.

In January, X's editor, while having lunch with Natalie and X and listening to Natalie's descriptions of life in our off-season resort town, suggested she write an essay for *The New Yorker* and call it, "Letter from the Beach." Natalie did, subtitling it, "Searching for Bob Dylan in the Land of Jimmy Buffet." The essay was both beautiful and sad—because that's what beach towns are in the off-season. She talked about how here, in this place where she couldn't find a good jukebox and none of the local musicians knew any Bob Dylan songs; here, where everybody was married to--or dating--someone else's ex and most of the stores and cafes that *did* open mid-week were closed by three or four in the afternoon—*here*, she wrote, I found *a place that felt more like home than so many places I'd lived*.

By this time, she was talking about buying a small house on the beach with some of the book advance. It became a campaign of sorts among members of the writers' guild to get her to promise that she'd stay. She never did, and I wonder now if it's because she knew she couldn't.

She read a section of the "Letter from the Beach" at another of our literary readings, and again I watched as people flocked to her, asking when the piece would be published, and could they have a copy of it now? We were excited. *Our* little town was going to be in *The New Yorker*. *We* were going to be in *The New Yorker*.

She sent it to X's editor, who loved it.

Loved it enough to agree to a second essay, this one about searching for Dylan in New Orleans, where Dylan was playing during Jazz Fest.

It has been over five years since Natalie left, and still some days as I'm driving to work or sitting in a café as I am now and a Dylan song comes on the radio--*How does it feel to be without a home/like a complete unknown*--I find myself trying to once again pinpoint the moment when I started questioning Natalie's good luck. It's not that I didn't believe her—that she was friends with X and



had a two-book deal with Random House and was writing for *The New Yorker* and *Redbook* and *The New York Times*. I believed every bit of this. I'd seen her teach; I'd read her writing. I had no reason to *not* believe her.

*And isn't that what writing, friendship, love, is about in the end? Belief?*

Still, I began to doubt. Not that Natalie was lying, but exaggerating maybe. Had X's *New Yorker* editor really *asked* her to write "The Letter from the Beach"? Or was she simply confident, believing so much in herself that the rest of us couldn't help but believe in her too? All I knew was that John Updike and Margaret Atwood and Calvin Trillin had written for *The New Yorker*, and it didn't make sense that the editor, even if he *was* her friend X's editor, would not only commission one essay by an unknown writer, but would also, before that essay was completed, commission a second, agreeing, as well, to cover Natalie's expenses in New Orleans. I wondered, too, about the fact that her novel was due out at the same time as mine, yet she hadn't gotten the galley proofs to edit. When I asked her, though, she was nonchalant. "For what they're paying me, I imagine they're just taking extra time with the whole thing. Hell, I would."

It sounded reasonable. And Kent and I had heard her on the phone with both her agent and her editor, discussing revisions, laughing, at one point arguing about something one of them wanted Natalie to revise and which she refused to. "Why did they pay me so much if they were just going to change everything?" she said after she hung up. She was quiet for a long time.

And so I dismissed the tiny pricks of doubt I increasingly felt. Why *wasn't* it possible that the editor at *The New Yorker* was willing to take a chance on an unknown? Why *wasn't* it possible that she was friends with X, that she'd met Joan Didion at the National Book Awards or sold her first novel for nearly a million dollars? "Isn't that the reason we become writers?" Richard Russo says in the epilogue of Jennifer Finney Boylan's *She's Not There*. "Our understanding that all sorts of implausible things turn out to be true?"

I thought about the writer, Donna Tartt, selling her first book, written when she was still in college, for a million dollars. Or my friend Marisa's first novel selling in twenty countries and being optioned for a movie with Sarah Jessica Parker. The divorced mother living on welfare who wrote *Harry Potter*. A good friend from graduate school getting a phone call on April Fool's Day--from Oprah, who was phoning to say that she'd just chosen my friend's second novel for her book club. April Fool's Day, for god's sake.

Weren't these things as much a part of the fiction writers' life as the solitary hours staring at the computer, struggling to find words? Wasn't this normal, in a way? We not only created dreams; we believed in them. How else to keep doing what we did?

Kent accompanied Natalie to Jazz Fest for *The New Yorker* article. They missed their connection in Houston and ended up driving the six hours to New Orleans. Near midnight, she phoned from the SUV they'd rented. "We're looking for a truck stop," she laughed. "It's fucking perfect, isn't it?" And it was, and right then, I knew where her *New Yorker* piece would begin; in a truck stop in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night on the way to find Bob Dylan.

"It was magical," she kept saying when she described that trip to us. *Magical*. Her face shone when she talked about it, whenever she wrote about it. And she did. Constantly. She wrote about listening to a Lucinda Williams CD as she and Kent drove past the ruined homes that had been damaged in Hurricane Katrina, about the symbols spray-painted on doors: a mark to indicate the house had been inspected; another to indicate that a body had been found. She wrote about driving to Jackson, Mississippi, and on the way back, stopping at the crossroads, where Highway 61 meets highway 49, where the great blues legend, Robert Johnson, supposedly met the devil and sold his soul in exchange for the ability to play guitar.

*Sold his soul.*

The words echo.

Natalie worked on her “Searching-for-Dylan” essays all spring. She read paragraphs of them to the writing groups, emailed or read them over the phone to me and Kent. Randy Lee started playing Dylan songs for Natalie, ending the nights with “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” or “Lay Lady Lay.” People brought her articles about Dylan, someone brought her a copy of Martin Scorsese’s “No Direction Home.” She teased me mercilessly for saying “A hard rain *is going* to fall,” instead of “a hard rain’s *a gonna* fall. “You’re kidding me, right?” she said. “Please tell me you didn’t say *is going to*.” She made me practice. “A *gonna*,” she’d laugh. “Repeat after me: A *gonna*.”

One night that spring, Natalie, Kent, and I drove to a small town on the Maryland-Delaware border to meet Randy Lee for dinner. On the drive, we listened to a bootlegged Dylan CD from 1970. Dylan and Johnny Cash. The windows of Kent’s van were open, and it was a perfect May night, the sky pink over acres and acres of green-gold farmland. I watched as Kent caught Natalie’s eye. Her dark curly hair was blowing across her face. She was smiling. She looked beautiful.

We stayed out until the bars closed, talking with Randy Lee about books and music, about what it meant to make a living as a writer or a musician. It wasn’t easy, we agreed, but we loved our lives, loved that we spent our days doing what made us happy.

It’s a memory I come back to often. The four of us talking about how we loved our lives.

“I don’t think she expected it,” Randy said after Natalie disappeared. “How happy she would be here.”

Although Kent and I lived next to one another, I no longer saw him much, and when I did, Natalie was there. I never saw them hold hands or kiss, but they’d glance at each other across a room or a table, and this shimmering look would flash between them, as if they had a thousand secrets. They

were planning to live in New Orleans the following winter, Natalie had confided. He was going to accompany her on the book tour. She suggested I meet them in different cities. “You can read with me,” she offered. She often invited me to join them, but I felt ill-at-ease, and more and more, I began to decline.

The discomfort was more than just the feeling of being a third wheel, though like so many things about Natalie, it wasn’t anything I could name, exactly.

“Kent told me not to tell you this,” she confided once as we sat at Smitty McGee’s “but Kate’s getting John Irving to blurb my book.” Kate was her editor. The *John Irving* barely registered.

“Why would Kent tell you not to tell *me*?” A tight feeling in my throat.

“Oh, he just worries that it’s hard for you, all this attention *my* book is getting.” She paused. “I mean, before I came here, *you* were the big-deal published author and I know I’ve stolen some of the lime light.” She laughed. “But I told Kent you were the least jealous person I’d ever met.”

Gratitude to her. A feeling of betrayal from him.

Another time she told me, “Gus wrote the most amazing thing today.” She paused. “I told him to show it to you, but he said he wasn’t comfortable...” Natalie would see in my eyes or on my face whatever it was--hurt? fear? confusion?-- and she’d punch my arm and say, “Oh, don’t worry, he sang *your* praises too.”

“People are always confusing us,” she said another day when we took a break from writing. “I swear, you could show up at my writing class and if you just gained a few pounds, they’d think you were me.” She inhaled sharply on her cigarette, then blew out a long stream of smoke. “Hell, let’s just merge our names.” She laughed. “Marinat. What do you think?”

Some days, it seemed not that we were the same, but that she had actually *become* me--only better: more fun, more talented, more successful. Her book had sold for nearly a million dollars;

Random House was planning a huge thirty-city book tour. And *she* was running the guild now; *her* classes were the ones everyone wanted to take. My closest friend was now the love of *her* life.

In retrospect, I realize that I should have felt frightened at her suggestion that we merge names, but I remember being flattered. The equation seemed so simple: People loved Natalie, I was like Natalie; therefore, people would love me too. I would not disappear.

How could I have known that already I was beginning to?

I forget the details of the argument, but I questioned Natalie in front of one of the writers' group participants about something she had forgotten to do that she had promised she would. It wasn't a rebuke so much as a nudging, and so I was unprepared for her reaction. "How *dare* you question me in public?"

We were in the bookstore. Customers glanced warily at us, then moved quickly away.

"All I meant--" I started to say, but she whirled on me, eyes blazing with tears. Immediately, I felt awful. She was right: I shouldn't have said anything in front of someone else, shouldn't have said anything, period. "I didn't--" I began again, but she wouldn't let me finish. "Bullshit, Maribeth." She was shoving books into a canvas bag and when she turned to face me, she was literally quivering with rage. I had no sense of boundaries, she said. I was inappropriate, unprofessional, filled with negative energy, and so jealous it was pitiful. And everyone knew it.

"But I *brag* about you," I said. And I did. "I'm proud of you, Natalie." I still was then.

"Believe that if you want." Her lip trembled. "But I don't need *you*--" She spat the word. "To be *proud* of me." She walked out.

Her words unsettled me. I thought of those pinpricks of doubt I'd tried to push away. Maybe I *was* jealous. And everyone knew? Which meant what? That they were talking about me? *Pitying* me? I felt like a fool. But I was also frightened. The writers' guild was my job, and I needed it. I

didn't have a huge book advance, not even close. And the people in the guild—they were *my* friends, weren't they?

Of course, I apologized to Natalie. Repeatedly. But she refused to listen. It made no sense. Shouldn't this have been a minor disagreement? I kept assuming that eventually we'd move on, but we never did, not completely, for in questioning Natalie, no matter how inconsequential my question might have seemed, I had unknowingly betrayed her, broken an unspoken pact.

In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner talks about the “suspension of disbelief,” the term Coleridge used to describe the reader's willingness to believe--no matter how improbable the events and characters might be—that the story is real. To do this, the writer must continually provide the reader with accurate and precise details that act as a kind of proof, while at the same time, the writer must tell the tale with such confidence and authority that it seems crazy *not* to believe her. And anything—a discrepancy in time, a detail that doesn't ring true, a scene that lacks the precise description needed in order to see it--anything that breaks this “suspension of disbelief” has the possible effect of making the reader suspicious of the story--or worse, putting the book down, no longer willing to believe its premise at all. Like waking from a dream. No matter how hard you try to get back to it, you can't, some part of your mind aware now that it isn't real, that it never was.

It's easy to see now. In rebuking Natalie for whatever task she had not completed, I broke my own suspension of disbelief: For that single instant she was *not* the famous novelist with the million-dollar book deal, but an ordinary person who had made a mistake. By criticizing her publicly, I had undermined her. Worse, though I didn't yet understand this, I had exposed her.

She began sending email after email, ten, fifteen, a day, written at six in the morning, at two in the afternoon, ten at night, one in the morning. She recounted mistake after mistake that I had made and that she had “forgiven.” “If you're honest with yourself,” she wrote, “you'll admit that

you are threatened by me.” And “Your jealousy is painful for *everyone*.” No longer sure what was real—I *had* been threatened by her at first, hadn’t I? I *had* doubted her—I kept apologizing.

*Groveling* is the word I would use months later when I described those weeks to Kent.

My voice felt strained, my skin stretched too tight across my face, my smile fake. Because I didn’t understand exactly what I had done wrong, I had no idea how to make it right. I worked even harder. To please her. To please the other guild members. *Your jealousy is painful for everyone*. My conversations with Kent grew awkward. I noticed that some of the writers group members no longer looked me in the eye. I felt sick inside. Shattered. The grief I had never allowed myself to feel about my nephew’s death came pouring out. I found myself falling apart for no reason, sobbing uncontrollably once when a flight was delayed.

In June, Natalie started a class, “The Year We Become Artists; the Year We Become Ourselves.” *This summer become the writer you are, tell the story that needs to be told, become yourself*, she wrote in the course description. The class filled. We had a waiting list. Natalie mentioned teaching it again in the autumn, but for the first time since she had arrived in our town, something in me sank at the prospect that she would still be here.

*Tell the story that needs to be told, become yourself*.

I had no idea what this meant except that more and more it seemed to me that ever since Natalie had come into my life, I was losing that life, that she was literally stealing it away. It made no sense, though. How could I even suggest that I didn’t trust this woman who *donated* her teaching stipends back to the guild? I didn’t trust this woman who *volunteered* hours each week to the writing workshops we held? I didn’t trust this women whom so many people wanted to be around, this woman with whom Kent had fallen in love?

It sounded laughable, even to me. Natalie had everything I could possibly want: a successful writing career, important friends, students who idolized her, a man who was in love with her. Why

would she want *my* life? Jesus. She didn't need me. *I* needed her. Of course, I couldn't see then that I'd had many of these things long before Natalie came to town--which is the irony of trying to make yourself indispensable, of transforming yourself into what you intuit someone else needs you to be: It is the other person who actually becomes indispensable to *you*, for you've given yourself away so completely that without that other person, there is no *you* left. As poet Carl Phillips writes in "The Messenger," *What happens, I think, is we betray /Ourselves first—our better selves, I'd have said once—/And the others after...*

Natalie still hadn't received her book galleys. The essay due to appear in the *New York Times* was pushed back to another date. The library where Natalie was leading a book discussion asked for her resume. A simple request, but Natalie was livid, again writing two and three-page emails about how she refused to work for any institution that wanted to censor her, they were violating her freedom of speech, on and on. I began to suspect that maybe she didn't have a resume because maybe nothing about her was true.

I learned from a friend of Kent's that Natalie had "lost" her credit cards en route to the New Orleans Jazz Festival, that Kent had charged everything on his cards—the-two-hundred-dollar-a-day SUV with the GPS system, the five-star hotels. Months later, he would tell me how, when he tried to convince Natalie that they didn't really need a *five*-star hotel, she rolled her eyes and told him, "I hardly think we're breaking *The New Yorker's* budget." Three months later, he still hadn't been reimbursed and now, *now*, *The New Yorker* was "footing the bill" for her to go to Europe to catch Dylan in concert over there—for the final essay in the "Searching for Dylan" trilogy.

*Trilogy?*

And then Bob Dylan phoned Natalie, in response to a letter she'd sent him about *The New Yorker* articles. Immediately Natalie phoned Kent. "You're not going to believe who just called."



Her voice was shaking, Kent said. He had been in Lowes buying appliances. *Lowes*, for god's sake. And Natalie was talking on the phone to Bob Dylan? Bob *fuckin*g Dylan?

When Kent hung up, he told the appliance guy, "Bob Dylan just called a friend of mine."

The appliance guy looked at him. "*That* Bob Dylan?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, *that* Bob Dylan," Kent said.

The phone call led to another, then another. Apparently, Dylan invited Natalie to New York to sit in on a recording session, sent a limo to pick her up. She ran into Bono in the hallway. And then apparently, Dylan and Natalie were friends, and sometimes while Natalie was at Kent's, Dylan would phone her, and Natalie would "talk to him" for ten, twenty minutes. "I stood right there, listening to her," Kent told us after Natalie was gone. "I *smoked* Kent's once," Dylan apparently said on one of these occasions. "And I still could if I had to."

"Bob Dylan was jealous of *me*?" Kent would laugh when he told the story later.

Of course, people would laugh at *us* after Natalie left. How could we have believed this? How could we have been so stupid? *Bob Dylan*? Calling Natalie on the phone? A million dollar book deal? *The New Yorker*? Hell, there wasn't even a word for *that* level of gullibility.

None of this, though, was what finally tipped Kent off, he told me. It was that Natalie would ask him out to dinner, then realize she'd forgotten her money--again. It was the four-page email she sent from a friend's *blackberry* while hiking the Appalachian trail—thirty-eight miles *in one day*. She talked about surfing but never had any sun on her face. The stories got too improbable. She and Bob--it was just Bob now, not Bob Dylan or even Dylan, but *Bob*-- were going to meet in Europe—did Kent want to come?

I wonder now if the stories became so outrageous because she was exhausted by them, by trying to juggle so many lives/lies. Did she want to be found out?

“We invent ourselves through our stories,” her “friend,” the writer Pam Houston, wrote in *Cowboys Are My Weakness*, “and in a similar way, the stories we tell put walls around our lives.”

Two days before Natalie and Kent left for their “*New Yorker*-paid trip to Europe,” he phoned. “I need to talk to you.” He hesitated. “If I’m out of my fucking mind, tell me.”

“It’s about Natalie, isn’t it?” .

He exhaled a long breath, then blurted, “I think she’s a pathological liar. Or crazy. I don’t think anything about her is real.”

The minute he said it, I knew it was true.

Kent had been up all night, he said, debating whether or not to talk to me, had stood with his forehead pressed to his window, trying to see if any lights were on in my apartment. A part of him had been relieved, he said, that there weren’t. What would he possibly say? What if he was wrong about Natalie? He knew nothing of my own doubts. He still thought she was my best friend.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you too,” I told him. “But what if *I* was wrong? You were *in love* with her.” It struck me then how painful this must be for him. I thought of all their plans—to live in New Orleans the following winter, to go on book tour together. I thought of that night on the deck of his house when he fed her spoonfuls of peanut butter and they thought up songs about rain.

“Wait, wait, I was *what*?” he said.

“You were in love. Everybody--”

“That’s a lie,” he exploded. “It’s a huge fucking lie.”

“But you--you were always together and on the phone and--”

“We were friends. *Friends*. Who else thinks this?”

“People in the writers’ guild and...*everyone*, Kent.” It was a small town.

He told me about her “friendship” with Dylan then, about how Natalie had sent Dylan a copy of Kent’s CD and Dylan thought it was good, had offered to let Kent use his studio out in LA. “I fucking believed her,” he said. I nodded. She had offered me dreams as well: *Redbook*, the *New York Times*. “Make sure to use my name when you send them your work.” I had. I thought, too, of how her editor—her famous editor—had told Natalie that she’d be willing to read my next manuscript. How she wanted Natalie and me to write a text on fiction writing.

The morning felt like those games where you search a picture for the objects hidden within it: a toothbrush in a tree branch, a pencil in the umbrella spoke, a shoe masquerading as a flower. The objects are there all along, but until you understand what you are searching for, you can’t possibly see them. So it was that day. The picture of who Natalie was dissolved, and all I could see were the broken truths and half-lies that had been there all along.

The phone call from Kent was followed by a string of phone calls: To her “agent,” who had never heard of her. At Random House, where she had been offered that “*sexy book deal--let’s just say there are a lot of zero’s in the number,*” there was no mention of her in their data base. Her “editor,” had never heard of her. Kent emailed X. He’d never heard of her either.

We didn’t bother contacting Dylan.

I was shaking when I made the first phone call to her agent, terrified even then that Kent and I were wrong and the agent would demand to know who I was and would later tell Natalie, who would never forgive me. There had to be a mistake, I kept thinking. Why would Natalie do this?

When I hung up the phone after the last call, my heart was still racing. I grabbed my keys and headed for the beach, not caring that it would be packed with tourists, not caring that parking would be impossible, not caring about anything except the fact that I needed to move, to walk, to think. The world felt unknowable and alien that afternoon in a way that even my nephew’s death a

year earlier hadn't made it. I thought of how Natalie had shown up at Smitty's with a cake and candles on what would have been my nephew's ninth birthday, and I wondered now if this too had just been another part of the lie, the elaborate game? Had she used even this-- a child's death? I didn't know what was real. Had she ever been my friend?

I wanted to feel angry, even hurt, but mostly I felt a kind of stunned disbelief. The part of me that ran the writers guild knew that she was teaching classes under false premises, that people believed they were taking a writing workshop with a published author. I would need to cancel her class, reimburse the participants, but what would I say to them? To her? Later, I would phone my brother, who was a lawyer, unsure if there were legal issues. Everything Natalie had done for the guild had been as a volunteer though, and I now suspected even this was part of her scheme: We'd been so busy being grateful that we'd never asked for a resume, for proof that she was who she said she was. I stared at the waves crashing onto the beach, then pulling back, the constant give and take, and I felt bewildered all over again. I thought of all Natalie had done for the writers guild, of all the people she had helped. *Why?* I kept wondering. But the word was like the waves, endlessly repetitive, one *why* leading to another and another after that. By the time I finished walking hours later, I knew *why* didn't really matter. Perhaps Natalie was mentally ill in some way or maybe just so insecure that she couldn't fathom being loved simply for who she was, but either way, the whole charade seemed pointless and awful all at once, in part because of my own complicity in it. I wondered if we *would* have loved her without the big promises and big plans and I suspected maybe we wouldn't have, and I didn't know what that said about me. About Kent.

At some point in the afternoon, Natalie phoned to tell me that Kent had cancelled the trip to Europe. She was crying." I don't understand," she sobbed. "I just--Oh, Maribeth, why would he do this?" There was nothing fake about the pain I heard in her voice, and I wondered if she really had convinced herself that they were in love. I felt mean, pretending to be her friend when I knew the

truth. It *was* like letting her walk around with her underwear tucked in her dress. But she pleaded with me to go to Smitty's. "Just us, I just want to talk girl crap."

I told her I would. I wasn't ready to confront her yet. I didn't know what I'd say. I didn't know how I felt.

At the bar, she tried to talk about other things besides Kent, though now and then her eyes filled and she'd say quietly, "I don't understand." And then she'd get angry. "It's just so...so unprofessional to cancel at the last minute." She talked about her agent, the one who had never heard of her, about how everyone at Random House was really excited about the revisions she'd just completed. She kept looking at her phone. "I'm waiting for X to call," she said.

I found myself believing her, forgetting that I'd talked to "her agent," who had never heard of her, and there was no editor, no friendship with X, no novel, no seven-figure deal, no *New Yorker*. Not even a college degree. The university she'd attended had no record of her either.

"What is description after all/ but encoded desire?" Mark Doty asks in one of his poems. I understood that Natalie was describing not the life she had, but the life she desired, and she was describing it so well that even though I knew it was all a fabrication, I continued to believe that world existed. In a way, as long she kept describing it, it did.

Which is what fiction writing is all about.

When I think of that last night that Natalie was in my life, I think of how when reading a book that I love, a book whose story I can't bear to have end, I read more and more slowly, trying to draw it out, trying to make it last. This is what I did with Natalie's story: Even after I knew the truth, a part of me didn't want it to be over.

\*

I told Natalie what I had learned about her on a bright July morning in the upstairs room of the local library, where she had just finished leading the weekly writing group. She had begun the class as she always did, by reading the guidelines from Judy Reeve's *A Writers' Book of Days*:

*Tell the truth.*

*Be willing to tell your secrets.*

I waited until everyone left, then nervously said something about how grateful I was for all she'd done for the writers guild, and how I hated that we had to have this conversation. Finally, I just blurted it out: "I talked to your agent, to your publisher, to X."

As I spoke, her lips quivered as if she were about to cry, but before I could finish the sentence, she disappeared. I don't know how else to describe it. She was still standing there, but her eyes went blank, her pupils dilated, her face turned pale and expressionless. It was like watching someone sinking underwater, her features becoming blurry, almost indistinct, her movements mechanical. I kept talking to her. "I wouldn't have cared if you didn't have a novel published. No one would. God, Natalie, people loved you." Was this true? I wanted it to be. But it didn't matter. She was already gone. When she spoke her voice was small, squeezed into a tight fist. "Okay," she kept saying. "Okay." I kept talking, though I'm not sure what I wanted: an explanation, maybe? An apology? Perhaps just a sense of who Natalie really was underneath all the lies. But she just kept repeating "okay" in that same robotic voice, not looking at me, not looking at anything.

I left as she was gathering her books. It was the last time I would see Natalie for three years--when I would literally run into her on a bitter March night outside one of the bars, and she'd grab me hard and whisper over and over into my hair, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

I almost believed her. Until a few weeks later, when a private investigator contacted me: Did I know a woman named Natalie? A famous writer? She had apparently just gotten a publishing contract for 1.7 million dollars....

Another two years would go by and now her name is Laura and again, there is a forthcoming novel that sold for a huge amount and numerous articles soon to be published. Now and then, someone new to the writers' guild asks, "Do you know Laura \_? She lives in town, and she's published all kind of articles in magazines like..." and they'll rattle off the list of national publications. I nod and say I knew her years ago, which is also a lie, because of course I didn't know her at all.

And yet, in an odd way, I understood her.

As a fiction writer, I know how to create entire lives from mere words. I think of how I too have taken, stolen, appropriated details from my life, from my family and friends--and given them to a character. It sounds benign, for these are just details, after all, but what else are our lives made of? I know how easily fact can become fiction. I know that what never happened often lives a ghost life alongside what did and sometimes seems more real because it is imagined so fully, each detail exact. "Is the true story the story that is made or the story that is forgotten?" Helen Humphries asks in *After Image*.

I no longer know.

I see "Laura" now and then in the Starbucks, writing on her laptop, and it occurs to me anew what an odd profession fiction writing is, this sitting alone day after day, creating lives and worlds out of bits and scraps of other lives. It's not just creating, though, which again, sounds so benign. We start to care about these fictional characters, perhaps we fall in love with them a little, we worry about them and wonder what will happen to their lives. We see them more clearly sometimes, understand them so much better, than we do our own selves or the people we love. What does it mean, I wonder, to feel so intensely about something, someone, that isn't real, while around us, people are dying in wars, losing jobs and homes, burying, as my sister did, a child? What does it mean to care about, to invest in--for months and years at a time- what doesn't even exist? And how,

if it is okay to do this--and I find ways to justify the writing of fiction every day, for it is what I do, what I teach others to do--can I feel such irritation with Natalie? Is what she did all that different, in the end? She appropriated bits and scraps of our lives, of my life specifically, and she created a character that became real not only to her, but to the rest of us. That character, fiction or not, affected people, changed people, in many ways for the better.

And when the story ended, she moved on and invented another.

I want to find this sad. I want to be angry. I remind myself that Natalie cost me friendships, that she betrayed Kent and stole the thousands of dollars he had spent in New Orleans, those dollars "that *The New Yorker* would reimburse." Many days I do feel these things. But I also know that when someone asks me, "Do you know that writer, Laura\_?" I also feel, albeit begrudgingly, a kind of admiration.

Because for the nine months that Natalie was in our lives, she *was* a big-time author whose life was about to change in wonderful, dramatic ways. She *was* a wonderful teacher and Kent *was* in love with her and she *was*, as Randy Lee said, happy. And I *was* a woman who was fun and spontaneous. *Fun*. A word that had been gone from my life, until Natalie brought it back to me. During those nine months, Kent believed that Bob Dylan had listened to his music and liked it, and because Kent believed, he became confident in ways he'd never been, played music better than he ever had before. The members of the writers' guild began to see themselves as writers, began to believe that their stories mattered. And so they did. And I can't help it: I find something beautiful in this capacity to believe so fervently in the stories we fabricate that we *become* what we dream.

This is not to say that Kent and I don't berate ourselves for being so gullible. Even after five years, we still wonder, how, *how*, we could have believed she was writing for *The New Yorker* and John Irving was going to blurb her book and she was good friends with Dylan, Bob Dylan? But the real question, the one we are perhaps afraid to ask, is why Kent and I betrayed each other by



believing the things Natalie said about *us*, and why, despite the growing improbability of her stories, did we dismiss our own gut feelings, and betray ourselves?

“You know the saddest lies/are the ones we tell ourselves,” Lucile Clifton writes in her poem, “1994.” But what, I still sometimes wonder, is the difference between a lie and a story? And I think of how, despite my three divorces, I still believe in love, and despite the fact that nearly 200,000 books are published in the US each year, I still believe my novels will not only get published, but *noticed*. Mostly, I think of how, against all logic, I believed, truly believed for nearly a decade, that my nephew, born with a *terminal* illness, would not die. Were--*are*--these lies I was telling myself?

Or stories?

*Stories*, the only thing that allowed Sheherazod to survive for 1001 nights.

*Stories*, the only thing that allows *anyone* to survive loving someone she will one day lose.

It's in this--in my own belief in the improbable--that I feel closest to Natalie now. I know what it is to want so much for something to be true that you literally try to will it into existence.

The suspension of disbelief.

This is the job of the novelist. To make the fictional world seem so real that for awhile we believe it is.

*Belief.*

What else is writing but this?

What else is love?