## As If You Were Our Own

Liz Lydic

ara pulled her Nissan Altima to the curb. Gail and Bob stood in the doorway, watched her parallel park. Distracted by the realization that they'd been waiting for her, she bumped her dad's Ford Explorer. Bob would come down now to examine the car. Then a series of questions to follow: how had she executed the maneuver, did she pull up far enough, later let's go to the Safeway parking lot for practice. But Bob remained with Gail at the threshold. Two denim blobs, him appearing, from Cara's distance, taller; her wider. Bob was wearing his reader glasses and a dark belt. That and the tucked shirt were shocks to Cara. Gail's hair was shaggier (how was that possible?), limp with grease. Lighter color? But no, as Cara approached, it revealed itself as gray. Substantial. Cara looked away quickly.

"That's all you brought?" Gail's eyes widened toward the backpack sliding from Cara's shoulder.

"Oh, I also brought wine." All by itself in a full-sized Trader Joe's shopping bag was the Barda Pinot Noir. "I thought it would go well with Thanksgiving food."

Gail put a hand to her mouth, then her fingers rubbed her lips. "We've already eaten."

Cara looked to Bob as if to ask for the time.

He was staring at her, though, with glistening eyes, but his body- particularly his cheeks and neck - remained slackened. The new gravity and fullness to them jolted Cara. So, she did what her body drove her to do: opened her arms and stepped toward him. His response was to lean in a few inches from his upper body only. Feet planted firmly. Cara felt his hands press on her shoulders. "Gail!" he called out, but she was in the kitchen, inane chatter about which sink Cara should use to wash up and where the backpack could be placed. Five minutes later, Cara was settling in at her old kitchen table, wobbling, chipped white legs and all. Artifact from the nineteen-eighties era.

"I like the new laminate floors. Easier to clean, I bet." Cara strained to add noise, dying for a crackle in the air. Gail tilted her head to the left.

"I don't think laminate flooring is all that new, is it Bob? We considered..."

For a quick moment, Cara was sure Gail was showing signs of memory loss, and she (the daughter), too, paused, a blue bowl of roasted veggies heaving in her left hand, her wrist couldn't bend that much; yoga always hurt. Gail was seemingly mesmerized by Cara's scooping, standing next to Bob in front of cabinets stained an anonymous light brown after she (the daughter) graduated from high school.

After puttering with something on the stove, Bob finally sat down. Then Gail did the same. "Oh," she said, watching Cara open and pour a glass of wine. "You open that so easily! Do you do that a lot?" Gail's elbows were on the table, Cara stared at the teeming flesh that had grown softer at the forearms.

"I mean, yeah...no? Do I open wine a lot? Or do I drink a lot?" Cara made a goofy face; she overbit her top teeth into her bottom lip, and sent her eyes to the left (*Who, me? Caught! Whomp, whomp!*). Gail sat still and waited. Show over, zero applause. "Um, well. I taught myself how to open bottles properly. Because I was tired of getting the cork stuck. I watched a guy on YouTube." Cara took one small slice of white meat turkey from a brown serving dish she knew from this holiday. The oval smoothness was a reminder of its age. Of her age. Of her parents' ages. "How's work going for-" she started, but Gail was quick, loud. Overlapped her easily.

"That's all the turkey you want? That's only one slice. You can have more. We've already eaten." Gail looked over at Bob quickly, then back at Cara, fixating on a chunky silver ring Cara wore on her right pointer finger.

Cara paused. "Oh. Probably not. I mean, I'm sure it's great. But I'm actually mostly vegan now." She took a bite of stuffing. Gail put her hands on the table.

"Oh! That's when you don't eat meat or eggs. Is that right?"

"No animal products at all, actually. No dairy, eggs, meat, seafood. Even butter. If it comes from cream."

Bob, all furrowed eyebrows. "How do you... survive, then? I mean. What's left, bread and water?" He attempted a smile, but his lips were tight and framed by lines.

Cara pushed her upper body back from the table, a small crack in her wrist as it slid backwards on the surface. "Ok...You guys know...I mean, you must know *someone* else who's vegan, right? Lots of people are these days. I think."

But Bob and Gail shook their heads. Loose skin at their necks wobbled. Cara looked at them and flashed back to times she sat here. In trouble. "Oh, ok. Well. Yeah, it's really good for your health. I guess. Is the main reason."

"Is it common where you...have been, or - ah,

with your...people?" Gail seemed to breathe the question out in starts and stops until the last word resembled a cough.

Cara's tongue met the back of her bottom teeth. She was about to laugh. "Yeah. All my *people*." She did a little dance move with her upper body, shoulders rising and falling.

Gail's mouth agape, and again (again and again) she looked at Cara's dad. "Bob!" She gasped in and then stretched her mouth in a wide cave. "How wonderful!"

"I think...three. Or maybe four of my friends are vegan. No, five. If you count my therapist as a friend." Cara dipped her head down for a small bite of cranberries.

Gail stared. "Therapy? Is that…because, um… Well, that's because-"

"I figured that would be surprising. I'm sorry. But, yeah, I'm in therapy. *Been* in it, actually, for a *while*. I know your whole gener- I mean, sorry. I know that not everyone is comfortable with that." A sip of wine, then another, warm from the car. Sourness bathing Cara's tongue. She took another sip, then a breath.

"Well, no! If that's something you do, then we find that interesting, don't we, Bob?" "Yes," said Bob, lifting his arms, palms to the sky. He smiled and shrugged. "It's...enlightening. We're looking forward to learning about some of your other...Um... Gail? Is it ok to say 'traditions'?"

"I think so, yes."

Now Cara's laugh was uncontained. A burst starting low in her throat, then breathy, then laughing.

"Look, I am *not* trying to hurt you guys. I know it's hard not to feel personally affronted, or, I mean, offended, like my going to therapy signifies my childhood deficiencies or something. But just so you know. It's my right to learn about myself. And yes, my past, my childhood. And *upbringing*." Cara recognized her defensive tone.

Gail looked surprised. Her next words were chosen so, so carefully, it looked like to Cara. "We have never...Yes, we have never quite...under*stood* the value in, what seems like sharing personal information with a paid stranger-"

"Oh my god." Cara shook her head and took another sip of wine. She'd need a refill soon.

"Is that not how it works? I'm so sorry, I'm not...I just don't know *how* it works, and I don't-"

"It doesn't seem like something that would work for us," Bob concluded, and both he and Gail's faces signaled their anxiousness to make amends.

Long and slow, the breath came in through Cara's flared nostrils, at a pace she commanded. "It's ok. I'm not surprised that you guys aren't comfortable with this."

"Oh, no, it's not discomfort-" Gail started.

"Right," said Bob. "No, we're not *un*comfortable with the, um, ritual, we're just very..." Looked over to Gail (of course).

Cara shoveled a layered forkful of stuffing, mashed potatoes, and cranberries into her mouth. "Ok," she said. She scratched her chin with three fingers pushed together like a rake. "Is it better to change the subject? Is that best?" Changing the tone like she was the parent now. And for body language: defiant elbows on the table, fingertips to fingertips in a web below her face. One thing known: Gail hated confrontation. "Hello? Mom?"

Gail's mouth fell open. "Oh, Bob!" Gail's hand went to Bob's forearm. "She called me 'Mom'!"

"I heard!" replied Bob, before he looked to the corner of the kitchen. A dramatic attempt to stifle some sort of emotion. All about him.

Cara put down her fork, and ran a hand through her hair, a sudden visualization rooted in touch that neither of her parents had mentioned the pixie cut. "*What*?" Cara's tone was what Gail would have called 'unacceptably rude, especially toward grown-ups.'

"I'm thrilled," Gail's mouth saying the words as her hands went up and then back down, then her fingers settling, intertwined on the table in front of her. A closed mouth smile turned into a full grin, exposing the silver top molar that had frightened and embarrassed Cara as a child.

"Well, ok. I'm glad you're thrilled, and I guess let's just drop the-"

"I asked Judith if there was a chance this would happen, and she said only slightly. But I had a feeling."

"Judith?" Pause.

Gail cocked her head. "*Judith*." She nodded her chin down on the name. Bob couldn't take over. He was frozen, staring at Cara. "You *know* Judith."

Cara flashed through the faces of Gail's limited number of friends. Women from ages ago. She could not match a Judith. She tried a smile, to see if it would conjure any of the mothers of her own childhood friends. Mrs. This, Mrs. That. Deb, Fran, Nora, Donna, Marsha, Chris, Jan, Janice, Janis, Jane, Susan, Sue, Suzanne. No Judith. Judith was someone Gail thought Cara knew? Someone Gail ran into at the supermarket? Not likely, for Bob had said they still weren't going out. Instacart and other 1099 employee types delivered their vittles. So much joy in clicking things on a screen. Tracking 'them' to the house on an app. Online sessions to rate the masked, dispatched twentysomethings (except the one older gentleman: *Where could he possibly have gone wrong to end up an Amazon driver at his age*? The topic fueled Bob and Gail for weeks).

Finally, it came: a hint of impatience in Gail's eyes. Familiar from Cara's youth, often unpredictable. She knew, even at an early age, unjustified. So much wasted emotion. Why not just get a hobby? Yet, in the years after youth, Cara would struggle, too: judgements, victimhood, everyone a disappointment.

Gail breathed out, more in control than Cara had seen before. "Judith Ziegler, from ACD." Silence from Cara. "The program coordinator." Cara = intentional statue. "Judith! She arranged for you to be here, dear."

Cara's left hand, previously suspended at her clavicle, now began to pinch and gouge the skin there. In the silence, with Cara pulling at herself and Gail a mix of displeasure and new curiosity,

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Bob remained an extra, poised but unable to referee. The misunderstandings from pre-teen years, through high school, then post-college, were the backdrops, joined now by a fresh coat of pandemic paint. Oh, and Cara's mid-life-ness. "What are you talking about?" Her late-thirties voice was sotto.

Gail returned agitation with several blinks. "Oh, poor thing. It's been a long day."

"It's been a *regular* day. What the *fuck* does 'arranged for me to be here' mean?" The last time Cara had used that word (*that* one) in front of her mother, she was grounded for a month.

Now Gail smirked. "Oh, you know that word! I'm not proud of our culture's influences!" She attempted the kind of laugh that indicates a shared joke.

*"Our* culture? The fuck, Mom?" Cara's hands went quickly to the table. Bob looked nervously at the wine glass. "Don't worry about that, Dad. Don't worry about dumb stuff when *real* things are happening. Jesus!" There was a beat, Cara's breathing the only audible thing.

"Would you like to rest, dear? We can show you to your room." Gail's head cocked to the left.

Cara's nostrils flared. She suddenly pushed her chair back, an obviousness in her body before it was in her brain. "Yes. Yes! My room. Let me go to my room, where hopefully things will make some sense." She strode down the hall. Bob and Gail slow to get out of their chairs, but soon enough, trailing her, calling out directions and describing the bedroom door. Inside, nothing was recognizable. White walls now blue. Twin bed replaced by crafting tables and a computer desk. Even the light through the window was foreign: brighter than any of Cara's summer days. An air mattress sat center, bound in its tote.

"Do you like it?" Gail was cautious. Or maybe it was polite (doubtful).

"No, I don't. Actually." Her mother's flinch punctuated the last syllable of Cara's last word. "I mean. I know...I knew you were going to do whatever you wanted. It's been a long time, of course, since I was last...But not even one thing of mine? Where's all my *stuff*?" Bob handed over her backpack (he had picked it up) along with a muffled word. "No! Where's my stuff? My things? Papers, photo albums, whatever."

"I suppose you'll have new things soon." Gail's smile was soft; the very shape Cara had yearned for for so long. Not fair that right now Cara lacked the command to prevent the rage from liquifying to

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grief.

"What does that mean?" Cara asked.

"It means you'll make nice memories here, I'm sure." Bob made an accessorizing 'mmm' sound from his place on the sideline. "We're delighted you've come to stay with us, and we can't wait to get to know you and learn about what your life is like where you come from."

"Mom, I'm sorry, but that sounds psychotic. I'm here; you *do* know me. I'm your daughter, for fuck's sake!"

Now Gail smiled wide enough to flash the silver. "You are my host daughter, dear. That's what Judith taught us to say. We're your host *parents*!" Gail's hands went up: 'Ta-da'! There was a pause as Cara breathed through her nose, until Gail continued. "You were just right. You look so much like our biological daughter," Cara opened her mouth, but Gail didn't stop. "And somehow, *somehow*, the same name!" Bob made a noise of agreement, Gail's perfectly timed sound effect. When Cara said nothing, Gail smiled broader. "She said you might react this way." Here, Bob breathed out audibly. "So, let me get the handbook out."

The tips of Cara's front and bottom teeth glued together and pressed until the pressure

spread to her gums, as she watched Gail shuffle to a generic computer desk and rifle through a red folder, a label too far away for Cara to see, and this both infuriated and relieved her. Gail was humming, a gloat about something Cara did not understand any more than she understood anything. They were mocking her.

Gail returned to her post in the small circle the trio had made around the air mattress. The air mattress, keeping them apart. The air mattress, on the floor, far from their faces and useless. The air mattress, to be worshipped in this bizzarro bonfire configuration. The air mattress that, once opened, meant capitulation to this madness.

"See this?" The familiar bossy tone reminiscent of Cara's youth returned to Gail's voice. She didn't let Cara see the packet of papers, stapled in the upper left corner, but instead, flipped through them, looking for something specific. She found it after a minute of cocking her head and thumbing. Bob didn't move. "Host children, programmed to emulate your biological child to the highest degree, may react defensively and aggressively during the transition stage. Our team recommends utilizing the Three Pillars of Patience for your host child if this arises: Tone, Time, and Talk." Gail looked up, a goofy smile advertising her pride in having committed to the Pillars so far, and glanced at Bob. Cara saw her raise her eyebrows to him and flashed to disgust for the suggestion of flirtation. "So. Let's talk!"

Hand to her mouth, finger and thumb each on a cheekbone, Cara thought: *Slowly...Take everything slowly*. Her mother's limp hair and goofy smile - teeth yellowing; so many lines on the soft face - jabbed at Cara with embarrassment. "Ok...Ok. All right. So, why did you want...what, a *robot* kid, is that what you think-is that what I am? Why?"

"Well, it's easy. We *could*!" Gail beamed. No one said anything. "I mean, this new...*option* came about. We watched the videos, talked to Judith at Alternative Children Dynamics about the application process, and here we are. We did it!"

"No! I don't give a shit about how you did it, big whoop, you went online and filled something out, thinking you were getting some scam robot kid, whatever. *Why* did you? I am so fucking confused. Why the *fuck* would you want-"

"Cara- our Cara...she seemed..." Bob cut in. "She's far away from us. Not physically. She only lives a few hours away from here. But she doesn't... We aren't close. We don't understand her. There are things that were different about her than when she was a child. It can be hard for us." Cara frowned. "They say the teenage years are the hardest, but, ha! I think the later ones...We don't see, or...."

"Aren't you proud of who she is? I mean, also...You do know that kids are different than their-"

Bob and Gail looked at one another. Cara began to sob.

"We're just so excited to have you here," Gail interrupted, before she stooped to unzip the air mattress.