

Letting Go

By: Susan L. Katz

Sara hadn't been home since graduating high school. To hell with my parents, she'd said at eighteen. It had been decades of no contact: no phone calls, no visits, no family events. At fortyeight, she was returning to New York City. After all this time, she wondered whether she'd feel differently when she saw her mother.

Clutching her woolen winter coat, Sara marched through the terminal at LAX. California's heat couldn't break her stride. Droplets of perspiration slowly dripped from her forehead blurring her vision. Her eyes blinked. Her hair frizzed. Her blouse stuck to her skin.

She turned around to speak to her husband Doug who was rolling her carryon. He was walking fast, trying to keep up. "I hope this isn't a mistake," she called out above the airport's din.

Catching up to her, he softly said, "Well, honey, this wasn't an easy decision." They paused, and he kissed her cheek. "I know we talked about this in the car, but are you sure you don't want me to come? Especially if your stomach acts up again?"

Sara returned his kiss. "I'll call if I need you."

"Okay, but I was also thinking that maybe it's time for me to meet your mother."

Just then kids scooted between them running to a nearby kiosk, shouting that they needed candy for the plane. Their mother apologized; "Kids!" she said with an embarrassed smile.

Catching her balance as she avoided the screaming children, Sara turned

toward Doug and said, “I know, but for now, let’s not complicate things. It’s been so long since I’ve seen her.” She shook her head. “Anyway, this whole situation is really strange.”

They continued walking toward the boarding gate. Sara hooked her arm around his.

“Yeah . . . well, I think it’ll be good for you and your mother to spend some time together,” Doug said. “You’re staying at The Bentley, right? Telephone number on the fridge?”

“Yeah, the number’s on the fridge.”

Sara stopped for a moment and gave him her coat as she quickly swept her hair back into a pony tail. She looked at Doug with his soft smile and felt her shoulders settle and her breathing slow. She reached up and hugged him.

“After all these years,” she murmured into his ear. “I wonder if she’ll even recognize me?” She released her embrace and started to cry.

Doug touched her cheek, wiped away a tear, and whispered, “Maybe this visit can help you. What’s done is done; you know. Just think about what Dr. Langford told you—about feeling empowered in your life now. And, remember, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

They arrived at the security line, and Sara took her coat and carryon. She hugged her husband tight.

After boarding the plane and finding her seat, Sara continued to question her

decision to visit her mother. As she heard a flight attendant talk about safety precautions, she thought back to how unsafe she felt growing up. She became caught in a memory swirl, and her stomach started to flipflop and grumble. She began popping Tums.

As the plane was taking off, she looked out the window and saw her reflection—a mother who would do anything for her daughters and wondered why her own mother had refused to protect her.

Settling in to first class, Sara felt comfortable in her yoga pants and top. She rearranged her hair on the seat's headrest, stretched out her legs, and thought about how she'd handle meeting her mother. *Should I extend my hand? Kiss her? Say, "Hi . . . hello . . . how are you . . . I'm so sorry to hear . . ."* Ugh. She ordered a glass of Chardonnay.

Having spent six hours inhaling stuffy recycled air, Sara welcomed the crisp, cold weather at LaGuardia airport. A bitter breeze glided past her cheek as she felt January's chill. She stood in line waiting for a taxi and was glad to have brought her woolen coat.

Stepping into a taxi, Sara murmured to herself, "Well, there's no turning back now."

She caught the driver's eye and smiled sheepishly. He returned her smile and responded, "Yep. Can't turn back time. What's done is done, at least that's what they say."

Once out of the Midtown Tunnel and riding along Manhattan streets, Sara passed bare elm trees that touched overcast skies. Then she passed Bergdorf's, her mother's favorite store where she had had her own personal shopper. Its display

windows still showed leftover bangles from Christmas and unused sparklers from New Year's Eve.

While driving on the Upper East Side, she thought about her life in New York City: being educated at The Spence School as a young girl, attending The Etiquette School of New York, and dancing at a cotillion ball as a teen.

Sitting in the back seat, feeling fidgety, Sara flicked off a loose piece of thread that had become separated from a button on her coat. As they got closer to her hotel, her stomach began retreating into a familiar ache, so she fumbled through her bag and reached for the Tums.

The taxi pulled up in front of the hotel. Sara checked in and changed her clothes. She didn't feel comfortable meeting her mother wearing yoga pants—too casual, too personal. Then she walked the two blocks to her family's duplex penthouse.

These linen pants and silk blouse were the right choice, she thought. The linen held a tight crease that ran right down the center of each pant leg, and the silk showed an elegance as it flowed in soft folds with sleeves that had cavalier cuffs. *I'm dressing for me*, she told herself, *not for her*. Yet Sara knew it was the appropriate outfit to meet her mother's approval. She readjusted her pony tail and touched delicate gold earrings, an anniversary gift from Doug.

A young doorman greeted her and called up to her mother that she had a visitor. Sara took the elevator to the thirtysecond floor. *What will mother look like after so many years? How will she think I look? God, I hope I don't cry.*

Sara stood quietly for a moment, leaned against the hallway's wood paneling, looked at the mirror by the elevators, and forced a smile. Her

facial muscles were stiff. She looked stern like her mother did all those years ago. She opened her eyes wide, hoping to appear calm, casual, laidback. Her hands told the truth. They were gripping the handle of her hand bag.

Sara gathered her courage and rang the doorbell. She heard a fumbling and the unchaining of an inner lock. Pricilla opened the door wearing a classic hunter green Oscar de la Renta twopiece suit—looking fashionable, yet at ease. Her hair was coiffed into a French Roll, and she wore emerald earrings, a gift from her deceased husband Richard.

For a moment Sara froze. As her mother bent forward to hug her, Sara held herself at arm's length. They bookended the opening between them and exchanged selfconscious smiles. Cheeks slid past each other as their kisses floated in the air. Together again.

Then Sara entered the apartment cautiously.

“Hello, my darling. How nice to see you.”

“Hello, mother. You're looking well.”

A draft of silence stilled the space.

Sara hung her overcoat on one of the goldplated hooks in the vestibule. She turned to her mother and said, “It's been a long day; may I use your bathroom?” As Sara walked down the hall to the guest bathroom, she felt her back muscles release. Her psychotherapist, Dr. Langford, would have been proud. There had been no verbal daggers thrown, only an exchange of pleasantries. The initial encounter was over. *So far, so good*, Sara thought.

From the bathroom, Sara heard clanking pots in the kitchen and her mother speaking in a heightened pitch. “Sara, do you remember our making soup from

scratch when you were little? You and Beatrice loved to help me. Remember your favorite was pea soup? Well, I'm making it now." Pricilla paused and then continued, "Did you know your father and uncle died? And Mrs. Dorf? You remember Mrs. Dorf. She was such a good neighbor. She always brought you and your sister candy every Friday. A treat for completing a week of school."

Sara gave no response.

"I know why you're here after all these years," Pricilla didn't skip a beat. "You're here because Beatrice told you I have dementia. She was at my appointment with that neurologist, the one who told me I was losing my mind. Well, I told him, 'As old people get older, it may look like dementia, but it's really all those senior moments tied together.' You wouldn't believe what that crackpot told me . . . Sara, can you hear me? He said my dementia isn't the result of simply aging, and it's rapidly progressing. Can you imagine? Me having dementia? Rapidly progressing? I don't think so!"

And again, no response.

Pricilla raised her voice. "Sara?"

Then Sara heard more commotion in the kitchen, louder clinking and banging. She imagined the peas splattering and the soup spurting. She remained silent in the bathroom trying to focus on what she wanted to say and how to say it.

"Huh," Pricilla kept talking. "Well, I'm fuming at Beatrice. She called a couple of days after that appointment and said, practically demanded as if she were the mother, 'We need a home health aide for you.' Can you believe that? 'Why?' I asked. 'Isn't Lydia good enough? You just don't like how she cleans. But you're

not living here; I am.' Well, you know your sister—Miss Efficiency. She said I needed more help. Someone to pick up after me and make my meals. Really!"

Although not ready to speak to her mother, Sara wanted to see what she was up to. She tiptoed down the hall and saw her mother lower the flame on the stove and then slowly turn towards the hallway. Sara quickly walked back to the bathroom and closed the door. A few seconds later she heard a low knock and knew her mother was on the other side. "Be right with you."

"Okay," Pricilla said. "I'll wait for you in the living room."

The soup's soothing aroma permeated the air as it snaked out of the kitchen.

"I yelled at your sister," Pricilla continued to call out as she sat on a loveseat, "I'll think about it, Beatrice. You know I can still think."

Then Sara heard her mother's voice drop. *Why did she lower her voice? What doesn't she want me to hear?* So, she gently opened the bathroom door again and inched her way toward the living room to secretly listen and watch.

Pricilla whispered, "I do know I can think. I've always depended on my ability to use my mind. Everyone knows how smart I am."

Then Sara saw her mother's demeanor change as she slouched on the couch—as if a vacant interlude visited momentarily.

"This emptiness," Pricilla muttered, shaking her head. "What is it?" She leaned forward as she sat, face in hands, staring at the wooden floor, "What do you think, Richard? Am I being pulled away into some abyss? Oh, my darling . . . could it be that one day I won't know who I am. Richard, I need you to help me be me. You'd have understood my state of mind and would have told me I'm in top form."

Sara saw her mother look around the room: cutglass mirrors hung on walls; elegant gold brocade drapes framed sheer brown window treatments; a couple of Hemingway books laid on the coffee table.

She quietly returned to the bathroom, still not ready to talk, and rumbled through her bag for the Tums.

Raising her voice, Pricilla continued, “Oh, yes, your father stood by my side, and, I might add, loved you girls. You never got to say goodbye to him. Why didn’t you come home for the funeral? Did you come home? I don’t think so . . . did you?”

Sara sat on top of the toilet seat and thought about her father and her decision not to attend his funeral. She remembered his being so cold and distant and knew she couldn’t depend on him to protect her. It was her mother who was the strong parent—making decisions on schools, babysitters, or social engagements. Sara took a deep breath and wondered whether she should call Doug. *No*, she decided, *I’m going to do this for me, without help*. She finished rehearsing what she wanted to say, then stood up, gathered her stuff, and left the bathroom for good.

Silently standing by the entrance to the living room, Sara saw her mother staring at *The Sun Also Rises*. She remembered it was a signed copy that her mother had given her father one year for Christmas.

“Doctors don’t know everything,” Pricilla kept going. “I reminded Beatrice that the doctors told us your father would recover from his stroke. Well, he didn’t. Did you know he had a stroke? He died alone in that ICU. Home health care, nonsense. That doctor is making too much of this minor memory loss, and so is your sister.”

Sara walked into the living room. “Were you saying something?”

“Not important,” Pricilla glanced up; her hands folded in her lap. Then, she looked toward the kitchen. “Come, Sara. Taste the soup. Remember? Like the old days.”

“Yes, mother,” Sara eked out, trying not to be swallowed up by her childhood.

She tentatively followed her mother into the kitchen, walked to the stove, and slowly began to stir the soup. Then she did a perfunctory tastetest, and it brought her back to the times when she and Beatrice had fun with their mother making soup—adding spices, smelling the aromas, feeling like potager chefs as her mother used to call them. She knew her mother loved everything French.

“Nice,” Sara nodded, “the ham is sweet and there’s just enough garlic.”

“While the soup is simmering,” Pricilla smiled, “let’s chat in the living room. Come sit with me.” She took Sara’s hand and returned to the loveseat, walking over the oriental rug that tied the room together—its blue and gold colors muted by age, the dark brown hardwood floor underneath still sturdy.

Sara glanced at the paintings, the furniture, the showcase of Waterford crystal. They sat for a moment. Then Pricilla picked up a family portrait taken at Sara’s high school graduation; a picture that was part of a familial grouping displayed on the coffee table.

“I was eighteen when this picture was taken,” Sara commented, remembering that day. She saw herself with sad eyes and stooped shoulders, as if to say, “Don’t look at me.” Pricilla seemed confused as she tried to grasp the memory: the place, the event, the time.

“I guess . . . look how young you were . . . time passes so quickly. I remember when I was eighteen, getting ready to marry your father. My parents loved him. They knew he was going to provide for me in a style that was befitting their daughter.”

Pricilla continued to talk about her younger life: not needing to work, having domestic help, her brother Henry being such a ladies’ man. “Those were wonderful times,” she reminisced. “Beatrice tells me you’re married and have children. How marvelous. Always good to have family. Perhaps I could meet them?”

“Perhaps.”

Sara looked at her mother’s mouth moving—red lips running—trying to make up for lost time. *Why did she even have children?* Sara wondered. *It must have been the thing to do, to be a normal, respectable family.*

She reached up to center her pony tail and then rubbed a finger nail to buff its orange polish to a shine. Nails, hairstyle, outfit. She knew her mother would only believe she was happy if she looked good, and she wanted her mother to know she was happy, had been happy all these years without her.

Turning over the portrait that laid on her lap, Pricilla, at seventythree, looked into her daughter’s eyes and asked, “Why? I can’t remember if you came home once you left for college . . . Your father and I gave you so much. We were hurt when you didn’t come home for the holidays? You didn’t come home, did you?”

“Why?” Sara repeated, the room closing in around her. She felt her heart beating, heat flushing her neck and arms. Her stomach began to ache again.

“How long have you been away, my darling? It’s been many years, hasn’t it? We’re all getting older . . . your father . . . your uncle. I know I’m next.”

For a moment Sara looked beyond her mother and out the window; snow began to fall in large clumps and the wind was beginning to pick up, reminding her of the last time she sat on this very couch watching a blizzard as it stormed through the night. It was right before she left home for college, and it silently brought her back to her younger years.

Twelveyearsold, yellow dress with stitched white flowers. Parents in tailored tweed and linen outfits.

“Be good girls and listen to your uncle,” her mother would say. “Your father and I will pick you two up after the party. Isn’t it nice to have family?”

Twelve, thirteen, fourteenyearsold.

During those visits Sara drank a little scotch, just a little, that Uncle Henry gave her. “Medicine to relax,” he’d said. At first, she didn’t want any alcohol, but then she thought it might help her get through the evening. It did.

Sara hid Beatrice behind her as she sat on the edge of her uncle’s sunken sofa, pushing her younger sister down into the cushions, telling her to go to sleep and whispering, “I’m sorry.”

She had to sit next to her uncle who had glassy eyes and smelly breath as they watched his favorite porn again and again, and she cringed while he masturbated.

“C’mon Sara. Don’t be a prude. You’re growing up. Teenagers like to play with themselves as they watch these special movies.”

“I don’t think so, Uncle Henry. Mother wouldn’t like this.”

“Well, your mother’s not here. It’ll be our secret. All families have secrets.”

Sara, who didn’t want to keep a secret, tried talking to her mother about her uncle.

“Mooooom. Please listen to me,” Sara pleaded. Tears. Clammy hands. “But Henry’s so respectful and loving,” Pricilla reacted. “Watching pornography . . . masturbating? You must be misinterpreting his gestures.”

“I’m not misinterpreting anything!” Sara yelled.

“Sweetheart, be good,” Pricilla responded.

“But, mother,” Sara cried.

“Oh, Sara. As long as he doesn’t touch you. I’m sure he doesn’t. Does he? He wouldn’t do that.” Pricilla asked and answered.

At the time, Sara overheard her mother tell her father that Henry was a little strange, but not so bad that he would harm their girls. “Henry always sang a tune to his own song,” Pricilla said. “And Sara was making a todo over nothing.” Sara saw her father nod his head in agreement.

She became angry at her parents, especially her mother who knew about her uncle’s creepiness. By fourteen Sara had had enough. She heard her classmates talk about being left alone when their parents went out for an evening. No one needed a sitter. If her friends could stay alone without an adult for a few hours, so could she.

One Saturday night Sara flatly refused to go to Uncle Henry’s, telling her parents, “I’m old enough to be alone for the evening, just like my friends, and I can take care of Beatrice. We’ll watch TV and eat snacks. And besides, you know what happens at Uncle Henry’s.” Sara’s voice quivered as she doubled over with stomach cramps.

“Sara, don’t be so dramatic,” Pricilla raised her voice. “Okay, stay by yourselves, but no more complaints. Henry tells me you have a good time watching movies he thinks are educational. Maybe you just don’t want to learn, Sara. Well, I don’t want any more stress. Now, no more whining. Henry will be disappointed, but that’s just the way it is. And, I’m disappointed; close ties in a family are everything. Believe me. These misunderstandings happen in all families. Let’s just move on.”

Not so easy to just move on, Sara thought as she was brought back to the present by a rattle of tree branches against the living room window. She picked up another photograph, a portrait of Pricilla and Henry at some gala event, looking elegant and laughing.

Growing up, Sara kept the Uncle Henry secret to herself. She knew if she had talked about it to friends or a school counselor, her parents would find out and accuse her of twisting the truth and betraying the family.

So even though there were no more evenings alone with Uncle Henry, Sara had four more years, until eighteen, stuck with her mother’s disappointment and her father’s indifference. Then she left for college.

Pricilla changed her position on the couch to face Sara. “You have two girls, Beatrice tells me, so I have granddaughters . . . and, she tells me, you have a wonderful husband. How lucky you are to have a special man in your life.”

“We’re happy.” Sara thought about Doug and smiled.

She met Doug in a psych course, junior year college. Their relationship began as study partners, each talking about their own childhoods. When Sara described how she had to sit next to Uncle Henry while he masturbated watching porn, the acrid

smells of sweat and vomit from back then surfaced, and Sara would gag. Doug held her each time.

“Henry was a pedophile,” Doug had said, trying to help her put that experience in perspective, “and I understand why you didn’t trust your parents. They never protected you and worse, they denied reality.”

“Yes, it’s been a long time.” Pricilla stretched her legs and crossed her feet, her soft black leather pumps resting on the antique rug. “Well, you’re here now. Soup’s on the stove, ready to warm bodies and open hearts. Remember we used to say that?”

Sara heard another loud rattle. The wind whistled and swooshed through the snowfall. Tiny icicles formed on glass panes. She just wanted to howl at her mother: *Warm bodies and open hearts! Let me tell you how it’s been—how I’ve had to live with the past when a sick memory would surface out of nowhere: simply shopping at a supermarket or driving home from work, when my insides would scramble leaving me in a state of anguish. So, try saying something new, like “I’m sorry you suffered. We should have been better parents.”*

Sitting on the loveseat, Sara turned toward her mother and quietly said, “Mother, do you remember how I felt when I left for college? I was in a lot of emotional and physical pain . . . Uncle Henry . . . doublingover in stomach cramps . . . remember? All those doctor visits?” Sara hoped her mother would at least recall her diagnosis of IBS. Then she stopped, relieved to have at least brought up the family’s dirty past, even if her mother couldn’t remember.

Pricilla looked out the window. Then catching Sara's eyes, she said "The snow's falling . . . Did I tell you . . . this morning I made soup from scratch, just like I used to. I remembered the recipe as if it were yesterday. Those were good times."

Sara tried to stay calm. "Yes, those Saturday mornings making soup were fun . . . BUT."

Pricilla lowered her head and reached for Sara's hand. She gingerly touched her daughter's fingers.

"But . . . I don't know," Pricilla said. "So many things happened back then. Sometimes I can't remember, and your father's not here to help me. Just know I love you, darling. I . . . I . . . I can't think of what else to say."

"You tell me you love me." Sara couldn't help herself. "But what happened when I needed your love and protection back then?"

Pricilla began whimpering, sinking into the couch, looking up at her daughter, who sat at the edge of the loveseat. She turned away and looked towards the window, the snow outside picking up speed, each flake disappearing before touching ground. After a moment, she calmly said, "My life is like the snow—so real and then it vanishes."

Sara knew she had waited too long to have any meaningful discussion about the past. Maybe her mother remembered and maybe she didn't. Her stomach tightened as if trapped in a vise ready to explode. But then she felt her mother's fear. *Let this go*, Sara thought, and after a pause, she sighed, "I forgive you."

Pricilla looked bewildered and said, "What for?"

Sara's eyes widened. "What for!"

Pricilla continued in a low voice as if sharing a secret, “You know I did my best. So long ago, so much going on; you were lost and so was I.”

“Oh, mother. Lost? I wasn’t lost. I was always frightened when you made us visit Uncle Henry. You knew what was happening, but you and father refused to do anything about it. You said you didn’t believe me. Home wasn’t safe.”

“Yes, you’re right . . . it’s so hard to feel safe.”

Sara closed her eyes for a moment. She felt emotionally drained. She threaded her fingers through her hair, repositioning her pony tail once again, and then looked into her mother’s empty, bluegray eyes.

“Mother, I have a confession.

“Confession is good for the soul. Isn’t that what they say?”

“Well . . . when I left for college and after I graduated, I stayed away because I wanted to punish you and father. You both were so stuck in your fantasy—wanting us to look like a Norman Rockwell painting so your friends would see a happy family. You really didn’t care that I was suffering.” At that moment Sara felt those familiar feelings from childhood. “I protected Beatrice as much as I could, but you didn’t even try to protect me. After I left, I wanted to punish you in the only way I knew how—having no contact with you and father was my way of hurting you both.”

Pricilla gazed up at Sara and muttered, “We missed you.”

Sara felt a tear travel down her cheek. “Well, I now know that staying away was my mistake. Without realizing it, I also damaged my own family. They never met you or father, only their Aunt Beatrice.” Sara reached for tissues on the coffee table, glancing at the family portrait.

She sank back into the couch cushions alongside her mother. “Whenever you reached out to me, I didn’t respond; I only wanted to make you suffer, retribution for how I suffered. When my kids asked about you and father, I told them you had both died.” Sara suddenly stopped talking. Then she muttered as if talking to herself, “This whole thing really did take on a life of its own: Doug, my girls, Beatrice, even me.”

Pricilla looked at her daughter, intently, blankly.

Sara peered into her mother’s face and saw an old lady who was desperately trying to catch unhitched pieces of the past. Then, she looked at her mother’s withered hand mapped by age with protruding veins, large liver spots, and paperthin skin.

She felt split between feeling an old rage at her mother from childhood and now feeling pity for her mother who struggled between almost remembering something and then realizing the memory is lost.

“Well, I don’t hate you anymore.” Sara reached for another tissue on the coffee table. “And, I want to stop hurting everyone.” She felt the soft velvet cushion underneath her.

After a minute of silence, not knowing what else to say, Sara got up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. After a slow drink, she returned to the living room, placing her glass on the coffee table next to the photographs. Sitting down on the couch, Sara looked at her mother, the person she was now, and felt her own loss as she realized both parents were gone.

“So now you know.” She saw her mother’s blank expression and teared up again.

“And the world goes round and round,” Pricilla reached for Sara’s hand, slowly interlacing her daughter’s fingers with her own.

Then she smiled and leaned over to hug Sara who only felt sad—a sadness that surprisingly didn’t cause her stomach to double up in pain.

“Soup’s ready,” Pricilla announced. “Don’t you agree that soup on a snowy day is perfect? It brings such a coziness to being at home.”

“Yes, it warms bodies and opens hearts,” Sara said, settling into the sadness.