

Susan Hodara

I am lying in the hammock when my phone rings. I am gazing up, watching the leafy branches of the trees behind our house flutter against a pure blue sky. This is a rare treat: a much-needed break from the writing I have spent the entire day doing in my office upstairs. Fatigue often sweeps over me in the late afternoon, and today I have allowed myself to enjoy the sunshine and the gentle breeze until my energy revives and I can head back to work.

My phone rings beside me, and I reach for it. It's my husband, Paul. "Are you sitting down?" he says.

And there it is: the last moment that my life is the way it has been for the past eleven years. For all that time, Paul left for work each weekday morning, and I had the house to myself. So when he tells me he's been laid off, the first thing I think about is not how we will manage to pay our bills, or what we will do about health insurance, or the prospects of his getting a new job at nearly sixty-four years old. The first thing I think about is that Paul will now be with me in the house. The house where we raised our two daughters. The house where I made my office in one of their bedrooms after they had gone. The house where, for eleven years, I have passed my days alone, working in the silence of the empty space.

I maneuver myself out of the hammock and start walking in circles around the little patio. On the phone, Paul's voice sounds the same – still the same happy lilt; I detect it with a tinge of relief. But I know how devastated he must be. I feel protective and sad, and I also feel a surge of anger toward the company where he devoted so much of his time and commitment, and where he performed admirably. As the person responsible for the computer systems, he was summoned again and again to shut off access to employees about to be let go. Now, with the business facing financial struggles, it is he who is being shut off.

But the house. No longer will I be able to trot down the stairs to make a cup of tea without an awareness that someone else is there. When he is home, Paul's presence is everywhere: in the lights left on in the middle of the day; in the crumbs scattered on the butcher block and the coffee grounds on the counter; in food-caked dishes left in the sink. And as quiet as Paul believes he is, I know how loud his voice becomes when he talks on the phone, moving from room to room. Even if he isn't talking, even if he is sitting quietly and working, there will no longer be that serene stillness that fills a space when no one else is in it.

Not long before this day, a friend asked me how I'd like my life to be in five years time. It didn't take me long to reply: "Just how it is now," I told her. "I love my life. I want nothing to change."

A year and a half later, Paul will have become a two-day-a-week volunteer at a mental institution in Queens, and those two days that he is there will have become precious to me. He will also be working – from home – on a company he started, having conference calls with his two partners and staring at his computer screen. He will settle himself mainly on the living room couch, claiming that

heartwood

But by then I will have adjusted. I will have taken on as many freelance writing assignments as I can handle, and I will have been able to complete them, closing the door to my office when necessary. Paul and I will have figured out how to stagger our trips to the kitchen, and to sidestep each other when we don't. I will have gotten used to turning off lights burning in the daytime. I will have learned to stifle my resentment at the crumbs on the counters and the dishes in the sink.

There will be some lovely changes: an afternoon break on the patio in the sunshine, or a mid-morning walk through the nearby woods. There will be leaks in the basement that Paul will discover and then set about to fix, and many fires burning in the fireplace that lure me from upstairs.

But I will know that something was lost. That there was a beauty to my solitude that propelled ideas and realizations and productive work that made me proud. I will still be proud, but I will also be sad. Because on that afternoon in the hammock, things did change, and I will still yearn for the elusive clarity I once could capture in those empty rooms.

Susan Hodara is a journalist, memoirist and educator. Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Communication Arts*, and more. Her short memoirs have been published in assorted anthologies and literary journals; one was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is a co-author of "Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers" (Big Table Publishing, 2013).

www.susanhodara.com

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