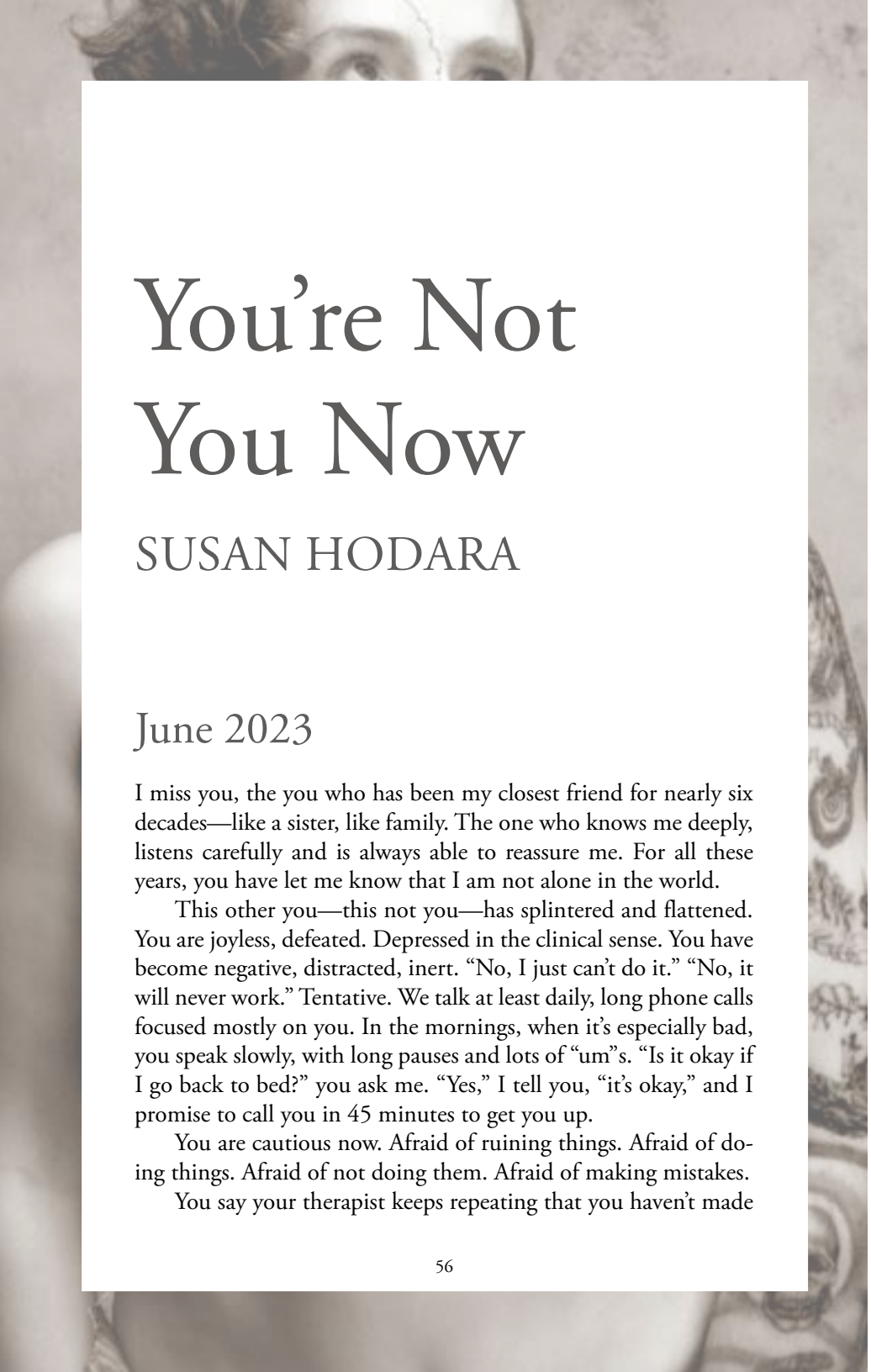

You're Not You Now

SUSAN HODARA

June 2023

I miss you, the you who has been my closest friend for nearly six decades—like a sister, like family. The one who knows me deeply, listens carefully and is always able to reassure me. For all these years, you have let me know that I am not alone in the world.

This other you—this not you—has splintered and flattened. You are joyless, defeated. Depressed in the clinical sense. You have become negative, distracted, inert. "No, I just can't do it." "No, it will never work." Tentative. We talk at least daily, long phone calls focused mostly on you. In the mornings, when it's especially bad, you speak slowly, with long pauses and lots of "um"s. "Is it okay if I go back to bed?" you ask me. "Yes," I tell you, "it's okay," and I promise to call you in 45 minutes to get you up.

You are cautious now. Afraid of ruining things. Afraid of doing things. Afraid of not doing them. Afraid of making mistakes.

You say your therapist keeps repeating that you haven't made

mistakes, you've made choices. I imagine the choices he is referring to are about your renovation—the full gutting and redesign of your apartment in Cambridge, the one that your mother left you, the one that you moved to during the pandemic after you sold your apartment in Brooklyn. The renovation that you undertook to make the apartment your own but that, over months of miscommunications and disappointments and delays, has broken you.

Should I tell you that I also think there are other choices you have made throughout your life that you might now feel are mistakes. Like not having children. Not wanting a partner. I worry that you aren't able to embrace these choices the way you did when you made them. But this I know: Even though you don't have children, you do have family who love you so much. Even though you don't have a partner, you have me, who knows your life well. My mind understands that even those defining choices you made are adjustable. Your mind shatters with the possibility that they were "wrong."

With your other friends, you are meek and apologetic. You worry that they are getting sick of you, with all of your burdens. When it comes to yourself, you are harsh. "I'm an idiot," you say. "I am sick of myself."

I am alarmed by what is happening. "Don't say those things," I tell you. I want so much to fix this, to know what to do. Sometimes I get frustrated, and I want to say the thing you hate: Snap out of it. Just stop already. I don't know how to feel what you feel, the overpowering, undermining weight of it.

You call it anxiety. You call it "the thing that has gripped you." That has "taken you over." And finally, your "illness." You, who always chased joy, who wept tears over a towering beech tree or the power of a work of art in a museum—now you can't cry, and I fear you've given up.

And me? I observe myself, working, walking around, picking up tomatoes at the market, and I can't believe how lucky I am. I feel sharp and strong. I am filling my calendar, saying yes to everything. Your present state is making me savor my health and my aliveness.

Right next to that, your present state is a reminder of the

fragility of everything I appreciate now.

Yesterday, on a walk, I played Meghan Trainor through my Airpods, and I couldn't help but bounce to her beat. I thought, Jenny should listen to this music, let this be her backdrop, and it will break through her defeat. But I didn't tell you this, because I remembered that you wouldn't do it, and if you did, you'd shake your head and say, "No, it doesn't work."

1965 to June 2023

Even before I met you, I heard kids talking about you: Jenni, so pretty, long dark hair. You spelled it "Jenni" then, with a heart over the i.

We were 11 years old, sixth grade. The following year, with all the elementary kids coming together, we'd be in the same school, junior high.

You were popular. Best friends with Linda. Sought after, I thought. It's what I wanted to be but knew I wasn't. I scurried behind Patty, Maureen and Lisa, certain that if I didn't keep up, they wouldn't wait for me.

So I couldn't believe it when, in seventh grade, you wanted me to be your friend. There we were, sipping vanilla Cokes at the counter at Brigham's. I sat silently as you told me about Linda. She was your best friend, you said, but I was your "fave" friend. It was our secret.

I spent hours at your house after school and on weekends. I remember the silliness, the wetting our pants with laughter. I remember the marshmallows that we stretched between our fingers to make sticky white taffy, and how, when the yellow wall phone rang in your kitchen, we crumpled into giggles as you tried to grasp the receiver with your elbows to answer it.

I smoked my first cigarette in your driveway, in the chilly October air, during your brother's 15th birthday party. Two years later, I smoked my first joint by the lake at your family's Cape Cod home. A year after that, you sat with me in front of my

house in my parents' blue Chevy Bel Air while I confessed my darkest thoughts. You listened in a way I'd never been listened to as I spewed my inadequacies and self-hatred. You were quiet in the passenger seat. I looked down as I spoke, but I felt your eyes on me. I felt your attentiveness and your concern. I don't remember what you said, but you convinced me that my despair was baseless.

To me, you were the alpha: stronger, savvier, more glamorous, more desirable. Everything about you was better: Your mother was funny and sharp; the two of you were close the way I wasn't with my mother. Your father owned an airplane; one day he flew us to Provincetown, where we went to the beach and then came home. Your brother was so cute I could barely speak when he was around, playing rock-and-roll in his basement bedroom. When your neighbor Dave became your boyfriend, I tagged along with his friend Mike and hoped he might like me. You were always ahead of me, beyond me. A little out of reach. And yet, to my delight, there you always were, inviting me to stand beside you.

We absorbed into our own lives during college. After graduation, I moved to New York and worked in the film industry. You returned to Boston, where you fast-tracked in graphic design, a field I didn't understand. ("It's everywhere," you explained, holding up a menu in a diner where we were eating, showing me the many visual choices of font, layout and logo that I'd never thought about before.) When you traveled to New York on business, you warned me that you might be too busy to visit, although often you ended up finding time.

I decided to make a short documentary about you and your colleagues installing an exhibition of design work. When I arrived at the gallery, somewhere in Manhattan, you were giddy with excitement and full of questions about how to hang the show. In the first scene of the film, you are lying on the floor laughing. "I'm not me now!" you said, so beautiful, so young.

I married before you and became a mother, and you were godmother to my daughters, Sofie and Ariel. You were almost 40 when you married Geoff. He was also a designer, a quiet man; neither of you wanted children. You left your job to become a dancer and a visual artist; Geoff left his job in hopes of a better position,

but no one hired him. Several years later, the two of you moved to San Diego. We talked more frequently then—long cross-country telephone conversations: You hated it there; too much nice weather, you said. Your parents were alone, aging on the East Coast. Geoff wanted to buy a house, while you wanted to leave. Your marriage was falling apart. You called to tell me when it was over. You said you fist-pumped in the bathroom, relieved to be done, but your voice sounded shaken.

Your next move was to a condo in Brooklyn, a commuter train ride to our house in Westchester County. It was then that you melded into our family. Melted, I could say. You had become softer, more vulnerable. Paul and I introduced you to our friends and included you in our travels. You were my sister, we said, or Paul's and my third daughter. And always, we were best friends.

You were spending the weekend with us when COVID shut down the city, and instead of going back to Brooklyn, you stayed. You stayed four months. Our guestroom became "your" room; you set up my sewing machine and transformed worn, yellowed fabric into frames for the drawings you made.

The more that was canceled, the happier you were. You had "your" coffee cup, "your" seat at the dining table. It was "your" job to stack the dishwasher and then empty it in the morning when the dishes were clean. You said you looked forward to it when you woke up.

I believe it was the pandemic that started to unroot you. It unrooted us all, of course, our lives misted in fear and caution. Nevertheless, the three of us had fun: We ate more dinners together in the dining room than Paul and I normally did (nothing too spicy for you). We lugged the big TV up from the basement and planted it in the living room, where we plowed through "Episodes" and "Schitt's Creek" and "Succession" (nothing too violent or scary for you). We walked for miles, around our neighborhood and in nearby preserves we'd never explored before, and often past the beech tree down the street that reminded you of your mother's love of the species.

We developed our separate Zoom routines—me teaching my classes and meeting with clients; Paul hosting virtual gatherings for the organization where he was volunteering; you joining regular calls with your extended family. I didn't mind you being there, and because you were there, I didn't mind the lockdown as much as I might have. And I believed—I still believe—that you felt the same.

Now, though, I can see that you were untethering in a way that Paul and I weren't. We were in our own home; you had abandoned yours and all your possessions. When you finally left us, you went to Maine, then to Cambridge, never back to Brooklyn. The bi-monthly magazine column you'd written since 1984 was suddenly eliminated for financial reasons. It seemed fortuitous at the time because you were about to begin your renovation. Instead of intriguing investigations of design and creativity, floorplans and functionality became your focus. Faucets and tiles became your obsession. Missteps and holdups and unforeseen impediments became your bane.

Months passed. It was late in the summer of 2022 when you first told your doctor about your anxiety and she prescribed an antidepressant. It was December, when we were all together for the holidays, when you upped the dosage. As winter progressed, I heard your speech slow; I heard the gaps between your words. I heard your desperation grow, and I worried. There was so much wrong with the apartment, you said. The mornings were particularly hard, you said. "Is it okay for me to tell you the worst?" you asked, and I said of course.

Paul called you, too. He kept telling you to come and stay with us. One day, after checking in on you, Sofie said you didn't sound good, and Paul insisted you buy a ticket to New York.

The next day, we pick you up at the train station and welcome you back to "your" room.

June 2023

Endpoints give me comfort. Put a finish time on a party invitation. Tell me how long a movie is before I begin watching. Give me an idea of the length of a traffic delay and I will wait it out

more calmly.

When you arrive, there is no endpoint to your visit. A one-way ticket—no return date set.

The days creep on. When I make Paul's fruit smoothie in the mornings, I make you one, too. When I prepare my avocado toast with cottage cheese, I prepare a slice for you, too. I buy a larger container of milk. Instead of calling my mother or listening to music when I go for a walk, I invite you to join me, and we talk about you. Instead of grabbing lunch and sometimes dinner and eating in front of my computer, the three of us have sit-down meals. You set the table. You stack the dishwasher. But you are sick, and as well-intentioned as you are, there are often crumbs left behind.

I don't know what I thought. Maybe that if you lived with us, you'd be happy again. You'd forget the renovation. We'd be like we were during COVID, carefree and together in a safe bubble.

But there is no bubble. I have my clients and am teaching on Zoom; I don't cancel anything. And you? You aren't well.

"How are you?" I ask each morning. There we stand, in the hallway between your room and my office, in the gray light leaking in from the windows. You wear what you'd been wearing since you arrived: Sofie's oversized green hoodie from high school and gray athletic pants that I'd tossed aside years before. You are reed-like, frail; you have lost more weight. Your hair is white; you used to worry that your pink scalp was too visible, but now you don't care. Your fingers tremble uncontrollably. You wring your hands, one into the other. When you stand, I see you press your toes up and down against the floor, curling them under the soles of your feet, over and over again.

Besides the trembling and the compulsion of your toes, there are other symptoms. Med-caused constipation. Med-caused fog and fatigue. You aren't sleeping, but you don't want to nap: "It's always worse when I wake up," you explain. And your ears: They are plugged, you tell us. It's like you are underwater. You can hear us, but we sound far away. You pinch your nostrils, squeeze, shut your eyes and push, but it doesn't help. Paul drives you to Urgent Care, where they find nothing and refer you to an ENT. Paul drives you there, too, and again, they say nothing is physically wrong.

Days pass with no improvement. Each morning when I ask you how you are, you shake your head and say, "The same." After your remote therapy sessions, I ask you how they went, and your replies are unenthusiastic: "Okay, I guess," or, "I don't know about him." If we say something you don't want to hear, you press your fingers into your forehead and hang your face. Sometimes you look at me, your eyes flooded with bewilderment and anguish. "How is this my life?" you ask.

We aren't helping. "Yes, you are," you say. "You don't know how much you're helping." But I can't see it.

Another morning when I am on Zoom with a client, I see you and Paul from the window getting into Paul's car and driving off. When my meeting ends, I call Paul. You'd told him that the sensation in your ears was so painful that he decided to bring you to the emergency room at our local hospital. Again, no diagnosable malfunctions, but he describes your overwhelming anxiety and managed to have you see a social worker. I am able to join you there in time for the meeting.

The four of us sit on turquoise vinyl chairs in the overlit, chilly room, you between Paul and me, the three of us facing the young woman. I am hopeful; I want a professional witness. While Paul is more optimistic, I've been researching outpatient psychiatric programs and even inpatient treatment facilities. I know the latter are dire, but I feel dire. I am terrified.

I watch the social worker see your shaking, your hesitations, your sallow pallor. I watch her listen as you explain your anxiety, your depression, the discomfort in your ears. Her manner is kind, her eyes fixed on you. I want her to see what I have been seeing. I want her to admit you, give you medicine, make sure you eat. I want her to take the responsibility from us. I hear her ask you if you'd thought about hurting yourself, and I hear you say no. After an hour, she sends us home.

It is around this point that I notice my concern is being infiltrated by other emotions. Anger simmers. Resentment I can't risk articulating. And panic. Have I lost you? Where have you gone? What am I supposed to do when nothing I do makes you better? Sometimes I want to hug you and hold you and soothe you, and sometimes I do, but I'm afraid not enough. I'm afraid I let those

other emotions get in the way.

And I want my home back. I want my time. No matter how non-disruptive, how invisible, how helpful you try to be, you are there. There are three of us, not two. You watch me way more than Paul does, and I feel your gaze. Your mannerisms, your indecision, the pauses between your words—it is all irritating me. I start steaming.

Everyone says what a good and giving friend I am. They say they wouldn't be able to do what I am doing. But I feel like a terrible friend. I feel guilty. Small. Selfish. By the beginning of the third week, I realize we are going to have to take you home. Still, I say nothing.

One day, on a walk, you interrupt our conversation. "What about you?" you say. "You are helping me so much. How can I help you?" You know as well as anyone about boundaries, and you are sensitive to mine. I mean, you're living in my house, inhabiting the second bathroom, eating the food I cook. "How can I help you?" you ask.

I know my answer, but how can I say it? We are walking, you by the curb, me to your left. Then I do; I tell you, the way I have always told you everything. "One thing I know," I say, "is that you cannot live with us forever."

You stop. You are silent. You don't look at me. You move to the grass along the side of the road, and you sit on the ground. I have done this to you. I am watching you, and your eyes meet mine. "I understand," you say. I know you do, but I also know you can't right now. You get up, and we continue on. Instead of remorse or sadness or self-loathing, I feel nothing.

Underneath that nothing, though, I am cracking. We are approaching week four of your stay, and bitterness has entered my heart. I don't like myself. "I can't do this anymore," I tell Paul. He seems less affected by your presence—more patient, more generous than I. "This won't go on forever," he replies. "We'll figure something out."

Then, after months on a waiting list, you are admitted to a ten-day outpatient program at a psychiatric hospital near your apartment. And your cousin Len's wife in Florida, Ellen, a retired psychiatrist, offers to come up to spend time with you. I am elated, relieved, grateful that these circumstances have materialized and aligned.

And so, on a Thursday, Paul and I drive you back to Cambridge. On Friday, we drop you off for the first day of your new program and in the afternoon pick you up and take you home. On Saturday, Ellen arrives, and we all have dinner.

Matthew joins us, too, the one other friend you had not yet pulled away from. You've known him for decades, lived together three times when you were both getting your master's degrees from NYU. Before COVID, he owned a gallery in Boston and represented your work. Since then, he'd risen in the ranks to manager at a nearby Amazon warehouse.

It is a simple dinner: pasta and salad. Ellen makes the pasta; I make the salad. We sit around the white round table that is standing in for the dining table you'd buy later. There are unpacked cardboard boxes against the wall. The conversation is cheery, the kind you make over a meal with people you don't know well. You are quiet, smiling feebly from time to time. I watch you, steeped in your discomfort, and I realize that by not hiding from us, by letting our talk surround you, you are trusting us with your darkness.

I carry an image from that evening: Ellen and Matthew standing side by side behind your sleek kitchen counter, Ellen with her straight, shoulder-length brown hair and black leggings, Matthew in crisp jeans and a tidy shirt, his reddish-blonde hair cropped short. Both are almost 60, a decade younger than us. Both are smiling. That night I am so grateful that they are there to support you. I have no idea, then, how much.

On Sunday, Paul and I head home.

Seven Months Later

Time has passed, and I can feel it. I can feel you coming back.

Seven months ago, when we left Cambridge, Paul and I boarded a flight to Denver for the July 4th weekend to visit Ariel

and her family. I needed time with my one-year-old granddaughter, my only grandchild. I needed to be reminded of health and light. It was a last-minute decision, an urgent gulp of joy.

Ellen stayed in Cambridge for close to three weeks, and she took charge. She made doctors' appointments for you and accompanied you to them, speaking for you when you couldn't speak for yourself. She shopped and cooked for you, all organic and nutritious. She ordered supplements that she said would bolster your physical and mental health. She insisted on positivity. I could hear her in the room when I called you: If you told me how bad things were, she'd say you were improving. "She looks better," she'd say, taking your phone from you. "The mornings are hard, but there are good moments in the afternoons." Sometimes she would prompt you, like you were a child: "Tell her what we did today," and you'd report that the two of you had gone to Whole Foods or out for a walk.

Paul and I spoke with Ellen regularly. And I became the checkpoint for your friends. They phoned me for updates, troubled that you hadn't returned their calls or answered their texts. I want to remind you now of how much they care about you, even when you pulled away from them.

When it was time for Ellen to return to Florida, you were afraid. "What is my life?" you asked, not for the first time. Your outpatient program was finished. Your apartment was not. You didn't want to go anywhere or do anything, but you also didn't want to be in your home. Paul suggested that you come back to New York, but you said no. I think you knew that I still needed some distance. I did. I felt strongly about it, but I also felt bad.

Instead, you ended up in Florida at Ellen and Len's condominium. It was the peak of summer, so hot that you wouldn't go out during the daytime, even to swim. When the sun set, you walked around the development. That's when you called me, on those walks, the only time you didn't have to worry about being overheard. That's when I started to detect a tinge of spirit in your voice. You stayed in Florida for six weeks. It was there, I believe, that you began to return to yourself.

From Florida, you delegated all interactions with your contractor to Matthew. Appointing him as your go-between was a

wise decision. He could address with ease the problems and questions that destroyed you to even think about.

At some point, Matthew began sleeping on the couch in your apartment—to oversee the workers, but also, you soon learned, because he was separating from his partner of 20 years. During one of your phone calls, you told Matthew that if he needed, he could stay with you after you returned from Florida.

Now, in an apartment built for solitary living, that notably does not have a guest room, Matthew has set up his bedroom in the office off the living room. An impassioned chef, he has taken over your kitchen, with its convection oven and shiny flat stovetop. Every morning he boils you a perfect egg and leaves it in a porcelain eggcup. He makes frittatas and soups. He has filled your fridge with aluminum storage containers stacked high, the contents of each identified in black marker on blue masking tape.

You have come to love your apartment: the openness, the custom shelving, the blond wooden cabinets, the specially designed lighting, the studio where you now spend much of your time. You roll up your new window shades to let in the view of Beacon Hill across the Charles River, where sculls press forward like dashes across the water.

I couldn't have told you any of this seven months ago. I couldn't have imagined the way you have found your way back. Your return to—and embrace of—the life you nearly lost is more than I had dared to hope for.

Recently, when we visited you for Sofie's birthday, she was talking about her dilemmas with her boyfriend and the strain of many unknowns. Sofie and I were seated on either end of your comfy gray couch, while you stood nearby. Across the room was the new dining table, circular and white, with round placemats made of plush felt in buoyant primary colors. To the right, a daybed, also gray, angled beside a cluster of leafy plants. Outside, it was dark, and the reflections of streetlights along Storrow Drive formed long twinkling cones that pierced the Charles. "I can guarantee," you said, your eyes on Sofie, "that something unexpected is going to happen that will determine the next step. We don't know what or how, but something will happen. This I know."

Now

Things happened to you. Unexpected things that led to other unexpected things. And now you are better.

I know you are shaken by the last year. You are still on medication, still in therapy, still hearing as if you're underwater. Still, you tell me, a little afraid.

I am shaken, too, and I watch myself for what is different.

Along the way, something in me stuck. Or stained. For a while I could not snap back to the way it was before. I came close. But something had changed. I no longer felt the deep pain of your illness—a mixture of my own dread and helplessness. Instead, I felt a transitory detachment, like a blip, like a momentary drop in cell service when the conversation becomes garbled and then reestablishes itself and you can forget about it and move on. Except for a while I wasn't able to forget about it. Maybe I could move on, but I couldn't forget about it.

I'd catch myself judging you; I couldn't stop. I hope I didn't show it, but my mind kept turning your actions into failings or fragility. When you didn't remember a word, your intellect was soft. When you second-guessed a decision, your will was tentative. When you told me you had fallen coming up the subway stairs, I conjured a grim projection of your decline.

Was it my silenced resentment towards you for collapsing onto me when you had to? Was it persistent fear? Was I more aware of vulnerabilities in you that had always been there, more able and willing to see? Or was I protecting myself from losing you again? Whatever the reason, could I still be the truest kind of friend that I wanted to be?

A few weeks ago, Sofie ended up in the ER with an infection in her eye. There was an hours-long wait. Should we drive to Boston, a trip I knew my body would rebel against? Instead I called you. No problem, you said. You would walk over to the hospital right away. It was a beautiful day, and you would bring snacks, sit with Sofie. I was flooded with gratitude, and it didn't escape me that it washed away the doubts that were plaguing me.

Last weekend I drove to visit you. We planned the trip because Matthew was away, so I could sleep on the couch in the living room. Sofie came over, and we ate up the food Matthew had left for you. We walked across the Longfellow Bridge and tried on clothes on Charles Street. You made us iced espressos with oat milk, and we talked. Well, you and Sofie talked. I think I listened more, happy.

Before I left on Sunday, you hugged me and lingered there. Then you told me to hug you back harder. And I did.