

ABANDONED

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He's back home again. In Italy. His beloved Alps. He's been gone a couple of weeks now. The first few days were fine. I caught up on everything around here. It actually felt good. Calming. I ate when I felt like it, did what I wanted. Not that I have to cater to him when he's here. I just do. I find it hard not to. Even when my friends find fault.

I must have some sort of addiction. I think of people who try to quit smoking or conquer a drug habit. There are step by step programs that are supposed to liberate you from your self destructive practices. I think perhaps I too am in need of some such program.

But, I must admit, it is liberating to be able to do as I please right now. I guess I'll call this stage one: the *liberating* stage. Next, I think, comes the *anticipation* stage which is when I can think about all I'll accomplish now that I'm alone. Like plucking and trimming my eyebrows, for instance. If I don't tend to them soon, I'll need a weedwacker to get them under control.

But it's starting already. That feeling of being abandoned. While he's cavorting in the Alps, I'm here doing my duty. Resentment is looming ahead like a thief casing a home, stalking me. I know I'm vulnerable. I know it isn't really true I can do as I please. I have to cut the grass, pull the weeds, check the mail, pay the bills, take the dog for a walk, eat, sleep. And today I have to go down to our cottage to mow out there too. And it's June Bug season and I need to slap those pesky critters off the house. I bet the place is swarming with the darned things. There'll be clouds of them buzzing about sounding like a zillion miniature airplanes. Who says it's quiet by the lake? This time of year, it's like having that ear ringing disease. Tinnitus, is it?

Yes, the first few days are always fine. *Liberation, exhilaration* and *anticipation*. Free at last. And that's quickly followed by the *accomplishment*

stage. I spin like a tornado and clean up, toss out, go to the dump, sort and file and put order back into the chaos.

When he's home, we have the ingredients for the perfect storm. Annoying little habits become insurmountable hurdles. Take his aversion to doors. My husband will not, under any circumstance, close one. An outside door will stay ajar welcoming in clammy hot air and the air conditioner will run like a gazelle. If it's winter, the furnace will be running a marathon thinking it has to warm the entire planet. Garage doors stay open even though thieves come along and steal stuff. Kitchen cabinet doors are always gaping and I sometime think I should get a screw driver and just take the damned things off. I am so tired of walking through the kitchen slamming shut all those doors. I'm like flight attendants when they cross check and march down the aisle slamming shut those overhead bins.

But, right now, all the doors are shut tight, and yet a sliver of sadness is stabbing me in the back. The truth is complicated. Confusing. The truth is I don't enjoy being here when he is there. Well, I do, but just for a bit; not for months. Can you detect the turmoil I am in?

Is this the price we pay for being bicultural, I wonder? For having a home here and another there? It's like being bipolar, bisexual, ambidextrous, double jointed. The curse of the bicultural?

This train of thought ambushes me. Why does place matter so much? Is it only because people make it matter? Is it because it contains our memories? Is it because place contains "objects of our affection?" That's the title of a book by Lisa Tracy I have just read. I won't give away the author's views on these objects; suffice it to say the objects of her affections were significant enough to merit an entire book!

So, I start thinking these deep philosophical thoughts while pacing the room and I come upon a toothpick which pricks my big toe.

The prick of the toothpick brings me back to reality. My husband always has one between his teeth. He leaves them all over the house

and I often find one when I step on it and it pricks my foot or I sit on the couch and it pricks my behind. Once, I collected them all up and placed them in a nice neat row on the dinner table. "I picked these up today," I said when he sat down for dinner. He just moved them to the side and started eating.

But now, all the toothpicks are standing up like soldiers in their toothpick holder, and I am beginning to miss the daily toothpick hunt. I'm vacillating between missing him and anger that he has the nerve to just get up and go and leave me here alone to keep all these balls up in the air. That's about where I am now. I think, what if I drop all the balls? Then what? And why does he feel he can do this?

I've thought about this long and hard. People tell me: "He thinks he can do this because you let him." *Mea Culpa.*

When my husband hears the call of the 1000 year old Ice Man in the Alps, what can I say? Or, when his brother calls listing his ailments drowning out my squeaky protests, what can I do? Oh, you want to go home to see your brother. Sure, I understand. He's getting older. Have you looked at my jowls lately? Have a nice trip.

Years ago, when I suspected I had this disturbing trait of being overly passive, I looked into assertiveness training. I sent for and received tapes and faithfully listened to the much acclaimed advice and did my best to put it into practice. Apparently, someone noticed. My assertiveness tapes disappeared one day. I searched and searched and finally had to ask my husband and son if they had seen them. My son's response took me by surprise. "Mom, for God's sake, don't listen to that crap! I like you the way you are." Ah!!! He showed me where he had hidden them and I just threw them into my catch all drawer and they never surfaced again.

I take my mind off that incident and try to stay on track. I am in emotional limbo. When I'm between stages, which is where I think I am now, I feel somewhat like those gerbils you put into those balls so the little animals can run around all over the house and not get lost under a couch. Just keep going. Follow the program. Yesterday, I filled my trunk twice and went to the dump. I bought new hanging files and

replaced all the old crumbling plastic tabs and wrote nice new labels with a dark pen. My filing cabinets are looking lovely.

A phone call from Italy leads me to the two pronged bitchy, self pity stage. This is a bad place to be in. So that when my husband calls and he is jovial and I can hear sensuous music and loud voices in the background and everyone is laughing and having a great time, that's when I enter the bitchy, self pity stage. "I can't hear a damn thing you're saying," I squeal. "Tell your friends and relatives to shut up."

But today, like it or not, I have to go to our cottage. Another abode we both enjoy. Ironically, we go there to get away from our real home in the city. And, of course, we are fettered to that place too because, just like our city house, we built it ourselves. Memories. Just less of them. It is relatively new and not stuffed with family possessions: my mother-in-law's embroidered sheets, my father-in-law's Alpini hat from the great war, my husband's grandmother's eyeglasses, the old iron key to his old house demolished after one of the earthquakes, my great grandfather's portrait, my grandfather's graduation diploma from 1884-1885. I'll stop there. What an arsenal of artifacts. And these are a paltry few of the objects of our affection. There are plenty more in Italy.

As I go over this inventory, another thought grabs me: most of these possessions are from the paternal sides of both families. Very few are from the maternal sides. My mother barely knew her father and had little if any meaningful contact with her family outside of her mother. They left her nothing and so nothing came down to me. Almost ditto for my husband's mother. But instead of leaving a void, this absence of stuff feels like a lightness, a reprieve, an opportunity to move on in whatever direction we choose to.

Now there's an interesting thought!

So, now what? I really don't know what stage I'm at because it seems I go from one to the other several times in a day. It isn't a straight line projection. It's more of a wandering, meandering thing. You could be

ambushed at any time and slip into or out of the place you're at. A song on the radio, for instance; I turn to mush if it's one of our songs. The bile flows out and little halos circle my head like orbiting planets.

But enough self-pity. I need to get out to the cottage.

It's in the 30s and we had violent storms all last night. The air is thick. I can barely breathe, but it'll be better out at the cottage by the lake, I think.

Usually, when we turn off the highway and take the road that leads to the lake and the cottage, I feel a sense of excitement and joy. But I don't feel that today. Not at all. It's just me and my little Jack Russell, Eddie. I don't know where the joy went. Yes, I do. It's in Italy. It went with my husband. He took it with him in his carry on.

Just get on with it, I tell myself. I open the garage door. A memory flashes before me. The night he chopped wood till dusk and wouldn't listen to my entreaties to come in. I sulked inside as the darkness of a lakeside abode descended, not knowing he had slammed the garage door and caught both his hands under it. When he finally extricated himself and walked in holding both hands tight to his abdomen, I feared the worse. Imagine, he'd been out in the cold dark night with his hands trapped and smashed when he could have had those handsome, hearty hands on me instead!

So, today, I open the garage door and wipe away that memory. I mount the riding mower. I know how to start it. He's showed me. Open the valve to let the gas flow, foot on the brake pedal, lever on choke, the other lever on disengage, stick in the key and turn it. Vroom! Starts every time. I back out and lower the choke lever, pull up the other one into engage and set the pesky side lever to the height I want to cut the grass. It's the toughest lever I have to deal with, but I do it. I am off and running. Eddie is running circles around me. The heat and humidity are bad by the lake today. To make matters worse, there's a stiff wind. Every time I run the mower down towards the lake, the wind blows grass into my face, hair, eyes, legs, clothes. One side of me is plastered with damp grass. If one were to take a photo of me from this angle, I'd look like an impressionist painting. The June Bug greeting committee is out in full

force. There are squadrons of them preparing for an advance. Every time I get near a tree, they buzz around my head and batter my face and fly up my nose and into my mouth and ears. I get a small reprieve when I turn the other way and get away from the trees. Eddie is jumping like the Jack Russell he is trying unsuccessfully to catch all the bugs.

What the hell am I doing, I wonder? Do I really think I'm super woman? Did he not tell me to call that fellow who mows everybody's grass around here? Why didn't I do that?

I know why. Because I am a frugal Friulana Female. I won't pay others to do what I think I can do myself.

I could be doing some fun things. I could be shaving my legs, plucking my chin hairs, tweezing those eyebrows, which now have white hairs sticking up looking like dandelions gone to seed, getting a Brazilian now that I know what it is. But who for? He's not here to enjoy the sight.

What am I? An anomaly? Why do I think I want to do all of this? There must be something wrong. But then I think, why is it wrong to be helpful, to work hard? I don't hear anybody criticizing Mother Teresa! Why, she's a saint, I believe.

Damned it. I enjoy being saintly. But, damned it. I miss my mate too. I miss being together in this symbiotic relationship we seem to have. He and I pick off each other's nasty lice just like those chimps on the Discovery Channel. I need him here to pick these June bugs out of my hair.

As I circle the perimeter of the yard and get closer and closer to the centre, I look out and feel a tiny sliver of pleasure. Doesn't that lawn look nice now that I've mowed it? And now that I'm completely caked with grass clippings and look like a green extraterrestrial, the scent of fresh cut grass brings a smile to my face, although I'm careful not to open my mouth. That smell. I can't resist it. That look. A freshly mowed lawn with trees swaying in the wind this way and that, the way people sway on bleachers at sporting events. And my flower garden with the twirling petals of my yellow Iris showing off like ballroom dancers, and Solomon's seal flopping around and getting all tangled up. What a sight. It's a double edged sword as they say. Pain and pleasure; can't seem to have one without the other. Pain and pleasure. They come as a boxed set. Just like him, I think. Just like him.