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“Hemidactylus Frenatus (House Gecko) on My First Year Living Alone”

*Zip zip zip. Stop. Scurry scurry. Stop. Scurry. Stop. Door. Stop. Safe. Maybe. Corner.
Stop. Scurry. Light. Noise. Still.*

I sat in my overstuffed, white armchair, furniture that I had salvaged along with half of the “fancy” plates, a third of the silverware, all of the Halloween and Christmas decorations, one of the laptops, all of the books not about sports, the down comforter, two towels, measuring spoons, and little piggy pepper and salt shakers. The enclosing walls in my new place were much, much closer than those at the gated community centerpiece coach home with granite countertops and steel appliances. Even as big as the former place was, it was still a narrow escape. There was no fire. No hurricane that is so likely to stir and destroy in Southwest Florida.

But the alarm in my soul had sounded. I could not salvage my marriage. (The would-nots and did-not-want-tos are sometimes substituted in for the could-nots, depending on how honest I am feeling.) When you instigate a divorce, you give up the right to many things, especially the things that were once “ours.” Your opinion doesn’t count as much. *You* don’t count as much because you are the breaker of hearts, and vows, and dreams. *Do I really want the area rug? The other half of the place setting?*

These questions were followed by another question: Do I want to be reminded of how badly I got things wrong? No. Some things were not a battle: the West Elm wine sideboard and all of the wine glasses (there was no disputing who in the marriage was the wino), and all of the pre-marriage IKEA furniture (there was also no disputing who was masochistic enough to self-assemble over thirty pieces of particle board and beech wood, using only an Allen wrench). I can tell you truly, though, that my most prized possession in those days did not take the form of glass, wood or fabric. I had neither the stomach nor the will to wage an embittered war over what remained of the registry. I glimpsed the long-awaited, absolute certainty I needed, and resolved to save only one thing. The thing that was most in need of saving. Myself.

Dash. Carpet. Spider. Web. Sticky. Linoleum. Cold. Light. Dash. Carpet. Still. Blend. Safe. Maybe. Nope. Dash. Wall. Still.

I sat in the armchair reading *Moby Dick*. I liked it. Melville's description of the sea's lure to all men seems like this terrific assurance that there are still things that defy understanding, but nonetheless bind us all together. The sea is deep and dark enough to reconcile or drown any and all things. I was less than a ten-minute drive away from the sea in my new place, where I thrashed around and incessantly berated myself over one true thing: I had turned marriage into the holy grail of finish lines and was horrified to realize that no amount of sincerity about vows was worth a lifetime placating a nearly comical mismatch of souls.

So many asked what went wrong. And what followed after that was the query: Why can't you work it out? To understand meant drawing them a schematic of my logic. All of my life I had been told, even by my husband, that I had enough strength to overcome anything.

I found this reassurance very irritating. They did not understand that, for me, strength inevitably meant isolation. Strength was a consolation for loneliness. I wanted to trade my strength, so that I could be held. I concentrated instead on stillness. Absolute stillness. So as not

to disturb the feeling that I had finally gotten what I wanted—the thing we’re all told will complete us: a life partner. And that’s more or less how the marriage came about. The divorce came about when I stopped being still and realized that my strength, not the marriage, was the best thing I had going.

Shortly before our separation, I said to my husband, “I just don’t feel like you get me.” He didn’t know it, but I wasn’t criticizing him for not knowing me; I had blinded myself, and him right along with me, for seven years before finally admitting that only someone who didn’t have a lick of self knowledge—or self love—could have made the colossal blunder of dating, much less marrying, the wrong person. There was no drama of an affair, or a drug addiction, or physical abuse (the only reasons why most would ever concede a severing of those sacred vows). I simply knew in my bones that I couldn’t stay married to him for one more day.

“No one is ever going to get you,” he replied. He did not expect me to leave. Mind you, no one just picks up *Moby Dick* for a leisurely read. Or maybe some do. But I was prompted by my impending comps for my master’s. While a few of my classmates, friends, often teased me for my overachieving tendencies in the graduate program, my motto was unabashedly this: Anything to lose myself in any world but my own. Books were especially easy during those first few months living alone. School kept me focused and driven, away from landing on Mom and Dad’s front porch, one thousand miles from Bonita Springs, in defeat. School was the one thing I felt that I could control, and I did, with a white-knuckle grip.

Light. Linoleum. Scurry scurry scurry. Linoleum. Stop. Scurry. Human. Freeze. You don’t see me. Still freezing.

I never once suspected an intruder or any real threat in this new, seedling life I was tending. On occasion, I allowed myself nervous peeks behind shower curtains and less-than-fully open doors before bed, startled only by the passing of my own reflection in the mirror. But I

never really expected to find anything that was more menacing than freedom. That night, reading in the armchair, a curious tapping and creaking began to emit from behind the door containing the water heater. I cast a distracted glance toward the sound. *Nothing*, I thought. *It will stop*. It did not stop. I sighed and laid the book on the ottoman, getting up to wander over to the door. Only a few steps toward the sound, each one rapidly led me to consider more sinister possibilities: *Maybe not creaking. Maybe scratching. Maybe clawing. An animal? A rat? Shit*. A wave of exasperation swept over me. It seemed as if I spent all my time owing up to and accounting for choices tantamount to a Scarlet Letter. The final divorce hearing was maybe just a few weeks behind me. I had expected to feel this tremendous sense of relief and peace. But I was still shaky. I could feel the veil of my betrayal and his grief hanging like a mist over me. Couldn't I at least be spared this rental upkeep bullshit? I'd made it out of Level One, past my devastated and combative ex-husband. Now, Level Two: Protect my new life from rats. *This rat, if it is a rat, is my problem*, I conceded and reached for the doorknob.

Still freezing. Not safe. Human. But not moving. Freeze. Water trickling.

There was no mangy fur when I opened the door. No slender tail. No flash of rodent teeth. Instead, there was water draining at a slow trickle out of a pipe alongside the water heater, and into the metal pan the heater sat in. I furrowed my brow, surveying this process. Then, as if cued by my appearance, the trickling gave way to a full-out pour. The pan started to fill. "That can't be...is it supposed to do that?" I said out loud. There were other pipes and knobs. Some knobs were red, others were blue. One was clearly a valve, with a tag hanging off of it. *Saying what?* I wondered. *Turn and die?* I couldn't see far enough to read it. I bit my lip and stared at this domestic contraption from hell. I envisioned electrocution and explosions. I called my landlord and left a message that teetered between "I beg you, have pity on the newly divorced girl with no male figure to take care of this masculine stuff" and "What the hell kind of fucked

up appliance have you stuck me with in this place of yours?” Then, I called and woke my dad up. He ventured a few groggy possibilities, but without being able to see, it was hard for him to know for sure.

“It’s definitely filling up, though, Dad. I mean it’s going to spill out soon. It can’t spill out.” He speculated some more, while I grew more antsy, my thoughts escalating. *It will spill out! And then...then it will be on the floor. I won’t be able to stop it. Everything will be wet. Forever.* So went the greatest of projected travesties in my weary head. We resolved to turn one of the knobs. The blue one. Never had my father been as calm as when I took the sharpest turn in all of my life, except maybe when he taught me to drive stick shift. I thank God almighty for it, on both counts. The water finally slowed to a trickle again. Dad cautioned that I would be without hot water until it was fixed. If that meant I could go back to stressing out about just my future, and not my future *and* a potential endless flood in my place, I was willing to live with that.

Dash. Carpet. Stop. Human. Carpet. Move slowly? No. Maybe. Yes. Stealth. Stealth. You see me.

You can forgive Melville his exhaustive treatment of cetology, flukes, baleen, and blubber because of his short chapters. When you’re faced with six hundred plus pages, with thirty more darlings in the literary canon still to go, the brevity of each chapter really gives you the merciful illusion that you’re making some kind of respectable progress. This feeling helped a great deal after the water heater debacle. Settling back into the armchair and back aboard the Pequod, I calculated how many hours of sleep I could allow myself before double-checking the water level in the water heater pan. *If you let too much time go by, you might have a hell of a mess to clean up. But if you drink coffee, you can stay up later and at least get through page 473. You can get up and check the pan, and then sleep for another three hours—that’s not enough*

time for it to fill up again...is it? And then, in the midst of the incessant mind chatter, I saw him. A deliberate trot right across the carpet to catch my eye over the book's spine. If he had been a horse, I would have called it a prissy canter. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him. He paused. I swear it was to make eye contact with me and demand that I acknowledge him. He continued his plain-view parade directly into my bedroom. I lowered my eyes back to the book and slowly shook my head, as I thought of accidentally squishing him with my bare feet before bed, or unintentionally stepping too close and causing him to break bad and clamp down on my toe.

Human. Nonthreat. Move as I please.

I had decided he was male since the day I began to suspect that I was not the only living thing in my new place. There had been this barely perceivable quickness in my periphery. It could have been a subconscious wish of mine to assign masculinity to anything else in my place that breathed. A knee-jerk reach, perhaps, for the infallible, unflappable stability that we women like to think men are hardwired with. The gecko had squeezed or darted his way into the place at some point, somehow, and proceeded to confront me with his presence numerous times thereafter. A flick of movement here amongst the cluster of greeting cards. A dark twitch there against the floorboard. He was preparing for his debut. I extended a finger toward the greeting cards positioned prominently on my kitchen counter that read, "See? You are loved." I nudged a card's edge, only to catch his sinewy, retreating form launching itself off of the counter into midair and unharmed onto the linoleum. After landing, he paused there, momentarily taking in his feat, only to make another frenetic exit.

"It's not safe in here," I muttered in his direction. These exploits of his went on for weeks, with me all the while speculating what insects or dust bunnies he was subsisting on, and half anticipating to wake one night and find him sitting defiantly on my face. I have to admit

that, as I regarded him with something in between amusement and suspicion, I was grateful for his company—and the distraction. Peace was as elusive as the white whale.

You. Dark. Door closing. Linoleum. High heels. Carpet. Bedroom. Bathroom. Still.

They always happened in bathrooms. Rather, that was where I absconded with myself so that my mini meltdowns didn't happen in public. I was like my wiry, flesh-colored, would-be roommate most of the time, respectful of unknown surroundings, keeping low to the ground. The relief and resolve I held, with my momentous decision behind me, were in constant opposition with careening guilt and paralyzing sadness—what I referred to as “the chasm.” Occasionally, I would grow bold, often with a glass of something alcoholic in my hand, and act as if I was someone with something to celebrate. Another, more likely possibility was that I was just trying on an outfit of normalcy—for myself more than anyone else. To pretend that there was nothing wrong, and I hadn't just pulled the plug on the life that I myself had orchestrated. I would tell myself I had every right to smile, laugh, and carry on like a normal person.

Then, suddenly, provoked by God knows what, it would take me hard and fast in its grip, “Stop celebrating, you liar.” It happened while watching movies, in the car, in Wilmington, NC, in a bridesmaid's dress [I know that I was really asking for it at weddings], on Sanibel Island, and in the most trusted of company. My guts would sour. The smile and calm were torn from me and replaced with the unforgivable thing I had done. Then, I had precious little time to attempt a graceful exit and resign myself to totally losing it, with a cool, rock solid, lavatory floor beneath me. I couldn't catch my breath. I wanted to run, scream, tear my skin off. Instead, I hugged my knees to my chest and rocked.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” I, the renegade, whispered to the darkness, to my ex-husband, to his family, to my parents, and to myself. I had killed my own dream.

The darkness answered, “No one is ever going to get you.”

I rocked some more. “I know it,” I said. I wanted to shield innocents like the gecko who wandered unwittingly into my dark center of purgatory. *No one could ever know this, see this, stand this. This is mine—for me to live in, drown in.* Part of me is still convinced that observing me in such a state, as he undoubtedly did from under the bed or nightstand on numerous occasions, was precisely the reason for his demise.

Me. Slow. Carpet. Couch. Slow. Slow. Still...still.

There is a freedom that comes with knowing who you are and what you want. But a warning to all those who, for whatever reason, creep or dart their way into new surroundings: the toll for the right decision is often just as high, or higher, as the toll for the wrong one. At last, I discovered him on the floor one day next to the couch, curled up and quite decomposed. With dark, hollow eye sockets and shriveled vestiges, he looked like some miniature dinosaur relic. I huddled next to him. Had he felt a bit of triumph when he came into the new place as I had? I stared down at his tiny, lifeless form, and felt like the last refugee, the only one still standing in no man’s land. What had finally done him in, I wondered. Starvation? A fatal battle with a Daddy-longlegs? Lack of sunlight? He had never stood a chance with me. Gently easing a piece of paper underneath him to transport him outside to a more befitting place of rest, I sighed, “I told you it wasn’t safe in here.”

A year has passed. I still live alone. A few weeks ago, a new roommate hopeful sprang inside my place. I noticed him almost immediately because, unlike the first gecko, he did not hesitate in presenting himself to me. Not more than a couple of feet into the entryway, he sat in dark contrast to the beige carpet runner, completely rigid in the kitchen light. I laid the mail on the counter and gazed back over my shoulder, spying him. “Ohhh, you,” I groaned. I turned and squatted to take a closer look at him. He did not even twitch. There was no telling if he was staring straight ahead in denial of his blatant exposure, or if he was just as keen on scrutinizing

me. The stare-down continued for a few more seconds before I made my case, “All right. You don’t know this, but you’re in a bad spot, and I would like to help you out. If you’re stupid about it, I can’t help what happens to you in here.” He held his position. I slowly stood up. Still, he did not move a millimeter. I turned to grab a magazine and placed it directly in front of him. In a flash, he flipped himself 180 degrees to face the door. I moved slowly forward with the magazine behind him, all the while expecting him to shoot up a wall or defy any direction that was away from the exit. But he kept scooting himself straight forward, little by little, always keeping a couple of inches in front of the magazine. He reached the threshold. I leaned over and pushed open the door. Out he went, back into the world. The gecko’s was a small life spared. But, all the same, he made it out alive.