



best lesbian love stories 2005

edited by angela brown

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Gravel

Judith Frank

Towelng off after a shower, Abby felt her ears pop and her heart begin its mad scramble. She closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was high on some nice drug, instead of percolating with chemotherapy drugs, anti-nausea drugs, thrush medicine, laxatives, and the steroids they gave her for the first three days after an infusion. Yesterday's treatment had been the final one. She opened the bathroom window to let in the raw spring air. It entered in uneven gusts, cooling her damp, flushed neck and face. The dog came in and applied himself to her wet ankles with an assiduous tongue. He was a little terrier mix named Tucker, and he had been decidedly unheroic when she'd come home from her surgery, tromping over her bandaged chest when she was lying down, shrieking in her ear at the slightest grumble of a truck in the distance. She nudged him away with her foot. She could hear the crunch of Claire's boots on the driveway, and the squeak of the wheelbarrow.

She wrapped her towel around her waist and turned toward the mirror, where there was a lot to take stock of these days.

Her big ridged bald head, not unhandsome. The thin fading scars that puckered her skin and slanted slightly upward toward the armpit: two handmade, inexpert seams sewing shut her chest. The bulge of flesh at the front of each armpit, at the top of each scar. The two small round scars where the drains had been. Her old radiation tattoos. She lay her palms on her chest, arms crossed, feeling the damp heat of her skin and the pleasant knobby surface of her ribs, a ship's hull. She gave her chest a virile grip; she flexed her pecs and felt them swell under her palms. As far as Abby was concerned, her breasts had been nothing but a huge can of worms ever since her first diagnosis twelve years before. Looking at her chest now, and enjoying the way its blankness broadened her shoulders, she marveled at how little she missed them. She knew it was improbable, but no matter how hard she tried to peer into the subterranean parts of herself to find a glimmer of grief, she always came up empty. On the contrary, she sought out the mirror. She secretly wished that her friends would ask to see her scars. She had strange and embarrassing fantasies about people accidentally walking in on her when she had her shirt off. She'd taken to wearing skintight undershirts with oxford shirts over them, unbuttoned. As the oxford whispered over the undershirt, it created a tease: Were there breasts under there, or weren't there? To Abby, this felt like a whole new and welcome way to be sexy.

Claire told their friends: From a gender perspective, Abby's having a ball. This seemed to their friends to be a pretty extreme case of looking on the bright side, but they were gamely supportive. Next, her doctors were going to go after Abby's estrogen, because her tumors were the kind that used it to grow on. Her ovaries were scheduled to be removed over the summer, and after that she would be put on a new class of drugs designed to mop up every last trace of estrogen produced by her body. She'd always known, she told her oncologist, only half-joking, that her femininity was killing her.

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In the front yard, under a tempestuous sky, Claire was raking out the daylily bed, which had been mangled by the snowplow. This weekend she was getting the grounds of the house in order, raking and hauling plant debris into the woods, using a chainsaw to take down the trees that had broken or died under the weight of snow. A load of new gravel for the driveway was scheduled to be delivered that afternoon. She straightened and leaned on the rake for a moment, contemplating with a gloomy eye the grass the plow had gouged when it plunged through the reflecting stakes she'd put up to mark the boundaries of the driveway, and the big rhododendron whose entire middle had been devoured, in late winter, by hungry deer.

They lived in the woods, where the soil was rocky and acidic, and where the front of the house got sun for only a few hours a day. So last summer, Claire had planted around the front entrance plants that can thrive in shade: azalea, mountain laurel, euonymus. She had covered their beds with layers of mulch in hopes that they'd survive the winter, but their poor remaining branches looked withered and paralytic now, and she wasn't sure they'd pull through. It had been a long winter: It had snowed on Thanksgiving and never let up till late March. By January, the piles of snow the plows had pushed back from the driveway had come up to her shoulders. When she had taken the dog out at night, her boots had crackled on the icy driveway amid the absolute quiet of winter desolation, and looking up at the rows of icicles hanging from the gutters, and at the tall pines whose branches moaned and drooped under the weight of snow, Claire had felt like a lost girl in a demented fairy tale. Her girlfriend inside, shrunken by poisons.

Claire was thirty-four, ten years younger than Abby, and when she tried to imagine living without her, her mind went blank and dead. They had gone to the same college a decade

apart and had met in a gym when Claire was wearing her college T-shirt and Abby came up to chat and flirt. She had been bisexual until she got involved with Abby. One day soon after they met they had gone on a hike in the hills surrounding their town, and Claire had confided that she found women more interesting and compelling than men but couldn't see herself giving up the exciting danger she associated with sex with men. Abby had given her a lazy and cocky smile.

In the past months, she had seen Abby through her surgery and through the frightening postsurgical infection that had landed her back in the hospital for a week and taken seven different antibiotics to get under control. She had seen her through periods of chemo when Abby lay on the couch, as wasted as an addict. She had leapt for the remote control to turn off the TV whenever George W. Bush appeared on the screen, because Abby's last cancer episode had occurred during the Gulf War, and they both believed that Bush presidencies cause cancer. She had filled the house with crackers, ginger ale, oatmeal, and macaroni and cheese, Abby's comfort foods. Yesterday she'd brought home ten dollars' worth of organic strawberries and washed and frozen them for smoothies.

Claire was a big girl, slender and strong. In a flannel shirt she looked like a farm boy, capable hands dangling at her side. In a little black dress she looked like Jackie O. She was stubborn and opinionated; Abby said that her opinions were sometimes wrong but always fiercely held. Claire was a lawyer, and her family was disappointed that she'd settled in Abby's small town to run a family law practice; they had always imagined her, Claire joked, as a senator in an Ann Taylor suit, commanding the floor. Still, Claire's mother was given to tousling Abby's hair and thanking her, on behalf of the whole family, for undertaking the difficult management of her daughter. Only Abby knew how goofy Claire was, and how much she sometimes craved being fought and overcome, or cradled like a child.

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Now Abby went into the bedroom and lay down naked on the bed for a second and closed her eyes. Half an hour before she had taken Dexamethasone, which they gave her to stimulate her energy and appetite, so she was hoping to be roused any moment now. Last month, galvanized by the crazy energy of the steroids the morning after an infusion, it had suddenly struck her that she and Claire had been together for eight years, sharing a thirty-year mortgage, a bank account, several beloved animals, and a cancer diagnosis, but they had not yet merged their books on the living room shelves. "It's ludicrous!" she'd squawked at Claire, who was still in bed, and who'd groaned and turned over. That morning Abby had taken all the novels down off the shelves, put the duplicates in a box to sell at the used-book store, lined up the remaining books on the floor, re-alphabetized them, washed the shelves with water and Murphy's oil, and put the books back up. Only that night had the energy sapped out of her; she had thrown up dinner, and she spent the next few days in bed.

The dog went berserk and Abby heard the beep of a truck backing up. She heaved herself up and put on underwear and jeans and a sweatshirt and then went into the living room and peered out the window. The gravel truck had arrived and was backing down the long driveway into the turnaround in front of the house. She stood barefoot on the wood floor in a warm pool of sunlight, thinking vaguely that she should probably put on a hat in case the guy came inside. A few days earlier Claire had embarked on the gravel project, new gravel having apparently gone from being one of the many things they could spend their savings on to being an absolute necessity. In Abby's experience, when Claire reached this point, it was no use resisting. Her argument usually went: If they didn't take care of the problem now, it would cause an avalanche of other problems and

ultimately seriously compromise the structural integrity and/or resale value of the house. So Claire had called quarries and found that what they needed was called trap rock. She had compared prices. She had described the driveway's dimensions to the guy at the quarry and, at his recommendation, had ordered a truckload.

"A truckload?" Abby had asked when Claire got off the phone, raising her eyebrows in feigned interest. She was sitting at the kitchen table eating pretzel sticks and reading *Entertainment Weekly* as dinner cooked.

"Yeah," Claire said. "That's apparently twenty-five tons of gravel."

Abby had looked up from her magazine. "Twenty-five tons!" she said. "That sounds like an awful lot." But she wasn't sure; she'd never done this before either, and it was Claire who was the authority about things around the house—Claire who, the daughter of an architect, had been raised to believe you could alter the environment you lived in.

It had sounded like a lot to Claire too, although she didn't say so aloud. "Think about it," she said, opening the oven, stooping to poke a fork in the baked potatoes. "Stone is really dense."

"True," Abby said. She hesitated to question Claire's judgment since Claire had carried the burden of every single decision and chore since Abby's illness. "But twenty-five tons? Isn't that the weight of, like, a Mack truck?"

Claire closed the oven and stood. "I really want a good cover," she insisted, intimating, to Abby's exasperated ear, that Abby would be satisfied with a half-assed job. "And you'd usually need a Bobcat to spread all of that, but he says he's going to do this thing called tailgate spreading, where he'll open the back of his truck just a tiny bit and let it sift out as he drives." Her hands were on her hips. If he did all the spreading, she added, it didn't matter how heavy the stone

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was. And anyway, the gravel itself was surprisingly inexpensive; it was the delivery that comprised half the cost. She was revving herself up into certainty, with that driving, passionate, irrefutable rationality that always put Abby herself into a trance of conviction.

Now Abby stood at the living room window watching Claire talk to the gravel delivery guy at the truck window. Tucker was barking shrilly and insistently at the front door, and Abby yelled at him to shut up. She watched Claire gesticulate over the driveway; she was wearing sunglasses, and looked disheveled and flushed and beautiful from raking and the wind. The guy was nodding.

Claire stepped back, arms crossed, and the truck began to pull out. Abby heard its roar and the grind of gears, saw the back door rise a crack and then spring open. An enormous pile of gravel swept out onto the turnaround, raising a cloud of dust. Abby clapped her hands to her head. Claire shouted and ran toward the truck, and there was another consultation. A few minutes later, five huge piles, presumably five tons apiece, had been dumped onto the driveway, one of them blocking the garage, and Abby had run back into the bedroom to pull on some socks.

When Claire came in Abby rushed to hug her, laughing. "Oh, honey," she said, "that tailgate spreading didn't work so well, did it?"

Claire was stiff in her hug, and her eyes were huge. "What are we going to do with all this gravel?" she cried.

"It's fine," Abby said, soothing, laughing. "We'll spread it ourselves."

"He said we needed at least a truckload!"

"Yeah, well, at least it didn't cost too much." Abby was rummaging in the front closet for her work boots and gloves. She sat on the hall floor and started pulling them on.

"What are you doing?" Claire demanded.

Abby gazed up at her, her bald head huge and her lips pale. What Claire missed most of all, she thought as she looked at her, more than her breasts even, were her eyelashes. "Going out to shovel," Abby said.

"Are you kidding me?" Claire asked. "You can't go out there the day after chemo."

"Why not?" Abby asked, pulling on her Xena Warrior Princess baseball cap, one of a dozen or so hats she now owned, many of them brought over by friends, who had also showered her with large quantities of pot. "I'm all hopped up on steroids, remember?"

She walked past Claire and out the door into the blustery afternoon and trotted over to the garage for a shovel.

Last time, Abby had been radiant with terror and in love with everybody. She'd gone to a breast cancer support group and been dazzled by the courage of the women there. She'd dropped every thankless activity and relationship with relief, and when the radiation therapy ended, she learned how hard it can be to let go of illness and the thrilling permission it offers. She had spent the intervening twelve years trying to achieve what she considered the ideal distance from cancer: far enough away to let go of the fear but close enough to hold on to the electric joy of being alive.

This diagnosis, for some reason, had come without terror, even though it should have been scarier. Instead it came with a grim mix of incredulity and irritation. She balked at the idea of joining a support group, or contacting the local cancer resource center, or writing about it in her journal. It began to grate on her the way people flung around the word "chemo," as though they were on such intimate terms with it that they could use its nickname; she always called it "chemotherapy" herself, to set an example. She listened with a strained polite expression to the legions of acquaint-

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tances who reported that they knew someone who had undergone “chemo,” and voilà! her hair had come back thicker, or darker, or curly.

It was breaking the news that was hardest for Abby. She begged her friends to spread the word so that she wouldn't have to do so over and over, but they were turning out to be preternaturally discreet when it came to cancer. She was reminded of trying to come out in college; in a community rampant with world-class gossips, she had been unable get the news circulating because everyone was suddenly, infuriatingly, respecting her privacy. She'd had to tell every one of her friends herself, making, she later said, lunch date after frigging lunch date. Now, she was learning to break her bad news gently and gradually, following up with assurances that the tumor was small and sedate and that her prognosis was still good. She made jokes so her loved ones could see she was still herself, and comforted people in advance so they wouldn't panic and fall apart. But they still did. She complained to her therapist that the house smelled sickening from flower arrangements and that her principal was insisting she take a medical leave over the spring semester. “And did you know,” she added, “that the slogan for breast cancer in the American cancer establishment is ‘Why Me?’ It's even part of the hotline number. Can you believe that? Only Americans could expect to be so immune. It's disgusting. Why the hell *not* me?”

He said, “So you're saying it's not really that big a deal and that everybody's making it a bigger deal than it is.”

Abby paused, and then laughed “Not to put too fine a point on it,” she said.

A few weeks after her diagnosis she dreamed that she was being pushed onstage, a microphone forced into her hand, to deliver a stand-up comedy routine. After that, whenever Claire heard her delivering the news to people on the phone, and

being witty and charming about it, she'd hold up a card she kept by the phone on which she'd written in big block letters: YOU DON'T HAVE TO DELIVER A STAND-UP COMEDY ROUTINE!

But there was another aspect of Abby's reaction to this new cancer, an aspect harder for her to articulate. Somehow, she sensed that having breast cancer the first time had made her a hero, but that having it again made her a loser. It was especially excruciating to tell those who understood best, her cancer buddies, the ones who'd survived breast cancer and Hodgkin's and melanoma, because every recurrence was a blow to them all and she knew she was demoralizing them. She also hated to be the one stigmatized with a recurrence. She could just imagine how she'd react if it happened to one of them. She'd step up to the plate like a man to help, but with a deep and guilty gratitude that it wasn't she who was sick again; and emotionally, part of her would begin to recede. She didn't want people to fly off the handle, but it frightened her that they might start acclimating themselves to the idea of her death.

Claire rushed out the door after her. Abby was emerging from the garage with a shovel in her hands, saying, "We'll need the wheelbarrow."

"Wait, just wait!"

Abby turned to look for where Claire had left the wheelbarrow, and Claire could see an angry mosquito bite on her scalp, in the exposed oval of skin above the clasp at the back of her baseball cap; it seemed to her a damning sign of Abby's obliviousness. "Stop," she barked.

Abby looked at her, leaned on the shovel's handle. "What? I just want to get started. It's okay." She was welled up with chivalry; she wanted to lunge in and hack away at this problem, to protect Claire from embarrassment and despair.

Claire saw the joyful resolve on her lover's face, and thought,

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Baby, you have no clue. A rage whose cause she couldn't name was brewing in her. "We don't have a plan," she said.

Abby gestured expansively over the driveway, at the five enormous piles. The daffodils they'd planted at the edges of the woods were just starting to come up, and the bare branches of the trees were clicking and groaning in the wind. "How complicated could it be?" she asked. She had a tremendous urge to be planting the shovel into the big piles, shoving, heaving, scattering stones, sweating from physical activity rather than fever or nausea, taking her place among the striving people of the world.

Claire's face was cloudy, and Abby let her hand drop. Claire was slow to anger, but held onto it for a long time—the exact opposite of Abby, whose anger flared quickly but burned itself out just as fast. It wasn't a good combination for fighting. Abby usually passed through all the stages of a fight—outrage, hurt, seeing Claire's side, melting into empathy, apologizing, and getting ready to cook dinner—while Claire was just warming up.

"I just want to make a plan. You'll get started and then you'll get sick and it'll be totally up to me to finish it."

"That's exactly why I want to get started!" Abby exclaimed. "Can't you see that? In a few days I'm going to feel like shit, but right now I finally feel good enough to do something around the house."

"Can we at least make a plan for where to start?" Claire's tone was murderously patient.

"Why do we need a plan? We should start by the garage, so we can get a car out."

Claire looked at her bald girlfriend, who was rolling her eyes in a display of barely restrained forbearance. She couldn't believe that Abby kept trying to take charge; it galled her that she was leaping in and opining about how to deal with a crisis, when she'd spent the last three months so incapacitated she

could barely read. An image was blooming in Claire's mind of the havoc Abby was going to wreak by randomly spraying gravel all over the place; she could see parts of the driveway ten inches thick, others barely covered, the wheelbarrow wallowing through a dense layer of sludge to drop the remaining three or four pebbles on the bare dirt nearest the street.

"We should start closest to the street," she said.

They haggled over this for a long time. Abby normally would have deferred to Claire, but now she found she just couldn't. It was stupid to start at the street; Claire was being unnecessarily complicated about this, insisting upon a degree of foresight Abby found paralyzing and ridiculous. Everything about Claire expressed stasis—the arms crossed resolutely across her chest, the unwashed hair plastered down on her forehead, the wraparound shades that hid her eyes and reflected Abby's face back to her as a big angry balloon. Claire was arguing that they should call their neighbors and ask to borrow one of their cars for a few days, and Abby was yapping, "Why? Why? Let's just get out one of our own cars. Why make it more of a big deal than it is?"

Finally, Claire stalked into the house to call their neighbors. Abby defiantly shoved her shovel into the heart of one of the piles by the garage, staggered backward with it, and heaved the gravel in the air. It fell and scattered with a splash. She did this three more times, and each time, the gravel slid down over the gash she'd made in the pile, erasing all traces of the shovel's mark. Claire emerged from the house a few minutes later, announcing that their neighbors could spare their minivan if she and Abby needed a car over the next few days.

So they trudged down the driveway to start shoveling at the street, Abby shaking her head, still thinking it was stupid not to start at the garage. Quickly, they devised a system: Abby filled the wheelbarrow, and Claire wobbled with it to the designated spot, dumped it, brought the empty wheel-

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barrow back, and then went back and raked out the spilled gravel. Once she began to work, Abby let her anger go and began to enjoy the metallic crunch of the shovel into the pile. She stepped on the edge of it with her boot and levered up a shovelful, shook and bounced it like a chef with a pizza in a pan. The sun was passing in and out of the clouds, and she quickly worked up a sweat; she took off her cap and peeled off her sweatshirt and wiped her head with it. She stood up, resting, breathing hard, and grinned at Claire, who was approaching with the empty wheelbarrow. "Not unlike working on a chain gang, is it?" she said. "I feel like we should be singing the blues."

Claire set the wheelbarrow down, put her hands on the small of her back, and arched into them with a groan. She straightened and looked dolefully over the driveway, which did indeed look like a penitentiary work site. "Oh, we'll be singing the blues all right," she said. That is, she thought, *she* would be. Abby would be lying queasily on the couch, watching *The Golden Girls*.

They had pondered the question of prostheses for a long time. For Abby it was more embarrassing to have people know she was wearing prostheses than it would be for them to see her flat-chested. A butch in falsies: What could be more mortifying? And yet she was an eighth-grade teacher, and the thought of her flattened chest being scrutinized by thirty nosy thirteen-year-olds wasn't that appealing either. It was a breakthrough when Abby came to realize that buying prostheses didn't mean she had to wear them all the time.

A few weeks before she was to begin chemotherapy, on a cloudy winter afternoon, she and Claire went to the local lingerie store that specialized in bras for breast cancer survivors. The bell on the door tinkled as they entered the store swathed in down coats, breathing steam. They headed toward the reg-

ister, Abby's shoulders and elbows knocking underwear and bras off tiny hangers, their eyes scanning for the saleswoman with the most promising gender. There was a stocky salesperson wearing a black oxford shirt, but she was talking to a customer, and when they were approached it was by a woman in her sixties with dyed red hair, a brooch on her turtleneck sweater, and chains on her glasses. Her name was Marcia, and they gave each other sidelong looks as she led them to a back room marked off by a curtain. It was a comfortable space with fabric-covered benches in pastel colors, and another curtain creating yet another dressing room inside. Although she couldn't have put her finger on anything that was wrong with it, Claire had an uncomfortable sense that Abby was being incorporated into some notion they had about her shame. The two of them sat down on a bench, side by side. "Are you okay, Big Stuff?" Claire asked, when Marcia left the room for a moment.

Abby grinned. "Talk about a bull in a china shop," she said. She leaned over to kiss Claire, but quickly straightened when Marcia brushed aside the curtain and entered the tiny room again, smelling of perfume and asking which side Abby had had the surgery on.

"Both," they said. Claire's knee was jiggling anxiously, and Abby lay a hand on it to still it.

Marcia tsked. "And you're so young too."

It was a pleasant enough sympathy, practiced without being soulless. "Oh, that's okay," Abby said.

"What size bra did you wear, dear?" Marcia asked.

"I don't know," Abby said, taking off her coat. "I haven't worn one in a long time."

Marcia pulled out a tape measure and ran it around Abby's chest. Watching Abby lift her arms with cheerful obedience, Claire realized she was afraid that any minute Marcia was going to reassure Abby that even without breasts she could

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still look nice and feminine. And Abby shouldn't have to take that. She was such a good sport, the best-natured patient in the world under awful circumstances, and now she was going to have to deal with some straight lady's noxious assumptions about her gender. That possibility filled Claire with fury.

Marcia straightened and pronounced Abby a 36A. She slid open the door of a closet and started examining boxes; she took a few down and opened them up. There was a new technology that allowed prostheses to stick to the body instead of being sewn into the bra. Marcia held one form out with the back side up, and they each gave the sticky surface a tentative poke. Then, with an air of proprietary pride, Marcia slapped it hard onto her palm and turned it upside down to demonstrate how firmly it held.

Abby and Claire held out their hands, and she pressed a small, peach-colored silicone mound in each of their palms. They turned their hands upside down and looked at each other with impressed faces. Claire gently ran her hand over the soft surface of the fake breast.

"I want a smaller size than I actually was," Abby told Marcia. "I want the difference between wearing the prostheses and not wearing them to be very slight."

Marcia rummaged in the closet, reaching way in the back, and pulled out a box marked "Size 0." "That should do it," Claire said, laughing softly. She watched as Abby lay one of the small forms against her scars and pressed, then took a step back and assessed in the mirror. Her stomach bulged a little over the waist of her jeans, and her sandy hair was shaggy and unkempt; soon they would give her a buzz cut to prepare for it falling out. Looking at her, Claire realized she hadn't yet really been able to take stock of Abby's scars without her mind conjuring an image of the surgeon plunging a needle into Abby's scarlet, swollen, blistering, infected chest to siphon off orange fluid. She could see that Abby was finally healing well. But now, in a tiny room

surrounded by mirrors, watching her lover focus on settling the peach-colored blobs in the right place, Claire was heavyhearted. Sure she could come to love this chest, as Abby was clearly coming to. It was just that she had passionately loved Abby the way she was. Claire pressed her hands between her knees. "Too much to the center," she said, and Abby peeled the left one off, grimacing. "Does it hurt?"

"No, it just pulls," Abby said. "Hey, what if I get a tattoo on one of the scars? I was thinking of a bow and arrow." She drew an imaginary arrow and narrowed her eyes, taking aim.

"No way!" Claire cried, stricken by the idea of more needles.

Abby had assumed that if they got these stick-on prostheses, she'd be spared having to wear a bra, something she hadn't done in decades. But that turned out not to be the case: Even though the prostheses were supposed to fit securely, Marcia told them it was recommended they be worn with bras. Abby grimaced with disappointment, and Claire placed a commiserating hand on her arm. "Well," Abby finally said, "I guess I can't have one of my boobs sliding down my chest in front of my homeroom class." Marcia persuaded her to buy two bras, since her insurance would cover them. "Okay," Abby said. "But listen up. They have to be extremely unfrilly. I can't emphasize that enough. If you have jog bras, that'd be ideal."

"I understand," Marcia said, and vanished into the store.

Claire put her hands on Abby's shoulders and squeezed. "How you holding up, champ?"

Abby lolled her head around like a prizefighter between rounds.

Marcia returned holding four bras on hangers. Claire and Abby took one look and said, "No."

"You didn't even look at them!" Marcia said reproachfully, and began holding them up one by one. "Not even this one?"

It was a very plain and pretty white bra, with a delicate V neckline. Claire stood and puffed up before it like a big

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threatened waterfowl. “No!” she squawked. “It’s not her style.”

After a long time, during which Claire wondered if they were being punished, Marcia returned with two unobjectionable jog bras. Abby tried them on and gave them the thumbs-up. As she got dressed, Claire stood, pink-cheeked and sweaty, their parkas stuffed under her arm. At the cash register, they were all super nice to one another, trying to compensate for any awkwardness that had occurred.

They left off shoveling for a lunch break, and after they’d eaten, Claire went into her study to make some calls, agreeing with Abby that they’d go back outside in half an hour. Abby took Tucker out to pee; he sniffed a pile of gravel, his tail wagging, and clambered up it. As she followed him around with a periodic command to “Go potty,” Abby examined the driveway. If she flattened the side of the pile blocking the garage, it occurred to her, she might be able to get out the Subaru, their all-wheel-drive car. She could take one side over the flattened pile and the other along the edge of the woods. She took the dog back inside, came out, and began to dig.

Twenty minutes later, putting papers into her briefcase and getting ready to go back outside, Claire heard the grind of the garage door rising and the gun of the car’s engine. She froze. What on earth was Abby doing?

Behind the wheel, Abby was inching back and forth into the tightest three-point turn she’d ever made. When she had the car facing forward, she shifted it into drive and aimed for the semi-flattened side of the pile blocking the way. She felt the car rise up the pile, tilt, and then sink into the gravel; the right-side tires rumbled over leaves and roots and stumps in the woods. Her heart was hammering. And then the wheels caught and she was over and easing the car gently around the other piles to the foot of the driveway. She got out and Claire

watched from the window as Abby strode toward the house, looked over at the ruts the car had made, and smacked her hands together once in satisfaction. When she came in, calling “Hey, baby, guess what!” Claire came to the door and said coldly, “You could have damaged the car.”

“But I didn’t!” Abby sang, gloating.

“I was going to wait till we’d shoveled those piles a little flatter.”

“I did!” She leaned smugly against the door frame, trying to disarm Claire. When Claire wheeled and walked away, she heaved a mighty sigh. “I don’t get it,” Abby said, following her into the house. “Why won’t you let me take responsibility? Just because I can’t *always* doesn’t mean I *never* can.”

“Because you start something and then the whole thing is dumped on me.”

“You keep saying that! Aren’t I an extremely responsible human being?”

“Normally you are, but you’ve been sick! I’ve been alone this whole winter.” Claire sank into the living room couch, her shoulders crumpling.

“I’ve been here!” Abby exclaimed, sitting on the edge of the easy chair and thumping herself on the chest. Tucker took that as an invitation and jumped onto her lap.

“Not always,” Claire protested. She was reining herself in, knowing that Abby would be humiliated if she could see the image of her that came to Claire’s mind: a bald and wan invalid shuffling around the house, soaking in the bathtub, wafting into the kitchen to put the kettle on, while Claire was on the phone with the insurance company or the furnace people or the veterinarian, or trying to get someone to shovel off the roof .

“Oh, come on,” Abby said, “even at my sickest I’ve been myself.”

“How can you say that?” Claire burst out. “That night you

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spiked a fever from your infection, you were delirious and dry-heaving and speaking in tongues. If I hadn't taken you to the ER, you would have died."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Abby had heard Claire make that claim to her friends on the phone, and she didn't know why it bothered her, but it did, a lot. She had never even been septic, although she knew she had come very close. "I was never even close to death."

"How do you know? You were unconscious the whole time!" Claire argued hotly. *God, she thought, it was so easy for Abby to say that.* She hardly remembered anything about her entire hospitalization, while the memory of it still electrified Claire with terror.

"I know that was hard," Abby said, leaning over and touching her knee. "But you know what? You can't keep me alive."

"I know that," Claire said, and Abby thought, *No, she doesn't, she thinks it's totally up to her.* "It's just," Claire said, her eyes filling with tears, "I'm worried it's always going to be like this. I want my girlfriend back."

Normally, Abby's empathy would have surged into life at the sight of Claire's tears, but now something stuck in her, like a stake in frozen ground. "I'm here! I've *been* here!" She was waving her arms in an extravagant gesture of trying to get Claire's attention, something she felt she'd been doing all day. The effort was exhausting her.

Claire was crying now. How could she explain the way the chemo had diminished Abby's life force? Abby couldn't see it when she was feeling better, but during those weeks it seemed as though her very spirit had vanished. "Not really," she said miserably. "I miss you. I miss your hair and your breasts and your eyelashes, and your swagger and your competence, and all those things I'm attracted to." She was thinking that if she just said it the right way, the most hon-

est way, Abby would turn toward her with the warm and openhearted attentiveness she loved and help coax her desire back to life.

“What are you saying?” Abby demanded. “That you’re not attracted to me anymore?”

Claire’s heart sank.

Abby ran an agitated hand over her scalp, and set the dog down on the rug. She knew she was approaching dangerous territory, but she barreled on recklessly. “What are you saying? That I didn’t do a good enough job of being the most cheerful and stoic patient in the world?” It was dawning upon Abby that she’d been performing a comedy routine for Claire too; the awareness came with a sickening sense of betrayal. “If you’re not attracted to me because I’ve committed the terrible crime of *getting sick*, just tell me.”

Claire put her fingers to her temples and pressed hard. It wasn’t just yes or no, but she didn’t know how to say that. The house was getting dark, and she realized she hadn’t showered all day.

“Say it,” Abby spat.

“What do you want me to say?”

“If you’re not attracted to me anymore, just say so.”

Claire looked at her. “I love you,” she said. “But it’s hard. You’re really different.”

Abby got very still—the great stillness before the brain registers pain. When she finally spoke, her voice was flat. “If you’re not attracted to me, I want to break up. I’m not going to hang around hoping...” She trailed off, dazed and wounded to the core. Claire had taken such tender care of her. Abby was normally shy about asking for care, but she had felt she could ask Claire for anything, and that Claire would hold on to the image of her better, healthier self, keep it safe for her. And now it turned out Claire had lost her desire for her after all. Abby stared at the rug, unable to bring her eyes to her lover’s face.

Judith Frank

How could the bottom drop out so fast?

“Who’s saying anything about breaking up?” Claire cried, “I’m just trying to tell you how I feel.”

“Well, don’t!” Abby struggled to her feet and staggered into the bedroom, where she collapsed onto the bed. When Claire came in a few minutes later, she found Abby in a deep, turbulent sleep, in her dirty jeans and sweatshirt, her arms thrust between her knees. She left the room and went outside and sat on the front stoop. It was getting late, and the wind was starting to bite. She wrapped her arms around her knees. She could smell damp earth and rotting wood and plant life, the organic stink of spring.

How, Abby wondered, do couples make it back from that point—from the shattering of the unspoken commitment—to see each other in the most generous light? Or was it more pertinent to ask how that commitment can *ever* last, fragile and miraculous as it is, in the first place?

Although neither of them could have said how, and although at a different moment under the influence of different and meaner stars they might not have, they did make it back. Over the next few weeks Claire shoveled and raked when she came home from work, and as soon as she was able Abby began to help. At night they sank groaning into bed, Abby’s arms aching wonderfully, Claire curled behind her, her cheek pressed to Abby’s naked back. Their neighbor came over as they worked, standing with his hands in his pockets, laughing at them and telling them about the time he accidentally ordered so much mulch it had supplied the entire street for two summers. Later, his son drove over on a rider mower with a wagon hitched to the back and hauled off a dozen wagonfuls of gravel for his parents’ driveway. It grew warm outside. Abby’s colleagues dropped by and caressed the newly grown fuzz on her head, and ate corn

Gravel

chips and salsa, and stayed too long. One evening Abby took Claire's hair in her fist and pulled her head back for a kiss, and Claire's eyes grew wide. The driveway remained thick and rippled for months; Abby and Claire's cars bounced over it when they came home. Then one day they noticed that it had begun to smooth out.

And when Abby's hair grew back, it was darker, and curly.