

DIANE COOK

Moving On

FROM *Tin House*

THEY LET ME tend to my husband's burial and settle his affairs. Which means I can stay in my house, pretend he is away on business while I stand in the closet and smell his clothes. I can cook dinner for two and throw the rest away, or overeat, depending on my mood. Or make a time capsule full of pictures I won't be allowed to keep. I could bury it in the yard for a new family to discover.

But once that work is done, the Placement Team orders me to pack two bags of essentials, good for any climate. They take the keys to our house, our car. A crew will come in, price it all; a sale will be advertised; all the neighbors will come. I won't be there for any of this, but I've seen it happen to others. The money will go into my dowry, and then someday, hopefully, another man will marry me.

I have a good shot at getting chosen, since I'm a good decorator and we have some pretty nice stuff to sell off and so my dowry will likely be enticing. And the car is pretty new, and in the last year I was the only one who could drive it and I kept it clean. It's a nice car with leather seats and lots of extras. It was my husband's promotion gift to himself, though he drove it for only a few months before illness swept him into his bed. It's also a big family car, which will appeal to the neighbors, who all have big families. We hadn't started our own yet. We were fretting over money, being practical. I'm lucky we didn't. Burdened women are more difficult to place, I'm told. They separate mothers from children. I've heard it can be very hard on everyone. The children are like phan-

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tom limbs that ache on a mother's body. I wouldn't know, but I'm good at imagining.

They drive me away from our house, and I see all the leaves that fell while I was too busy burying my husband and worrying what will become of me. The leaves, glossy and red, pile in airy circles around the tree trunks like Christmas-tree skirts. I see the rake propped against the rainspout. The least I could have done is rake the yard one last time. I had told my husband I would.

I am taken to a women's shelter on a road that leads out to the interstate. They don't let us go beyond the compound's fence, because the land is ragged and wild. The night skies are overwhelmed with stars, and animals howl far off. Sometimes hiding men ambush the women scurrying from the bus to the gate, and the guards, women themselves, don't always intervene. Sometimes they even help. As with all things, there is a black market for left-behind women, most often widowed, though, rarely, irreconcilable differences can land one in a shelter. A men's shelter is across the road. It is smaller, and mainly for widowers who are poor or who cannot look after themselves. My father ended up in one of these shelters in Florida. A wealthy woman who had put her career first chose him. Older now, she wanted a mate. They sent him to her, somewhere in Texas. I lost track of him. The nearest children's shelter is in a different county.

My room has a sealed window that faces the road and when I turn off my light I can see men like black stars in their bright rooms. I watch them move in their small spaces. I wonder what my new husband will be like.

There are so many handouts and packets. We have been given schedules and rules and also suggestions for improving our lives and looks. It's like a spa facility on lockdown. We are encouraged to take cooking classes, sewing classes, knitting classes, gardening classes, conceiving classes, child-rearing classes, body-bounce-back-from-pregnancy classes, feminine-assertiveness classes, jogging classes, nutrition classes, home economics. There are bedroom-technique potlucks and mandatory "Moving On" seminars.

In my first "Moving On for Widows" seminar we are given a manual of helpful exercises and visualizations. For one, I'm to remember seeing my husband for the first time—we met at a new

hires lunch—and then imagine the moment happening differently. So, for example, rather than sitting next to him and knocking his water onto his welcome packet, I should visualize walking right by him and sitting alone. Or, if I let myself sit down and spill his water, instead of him laughing and our hands tangling in the nervous cleanup, I should picture him yelling at me for my clumsiness. I'm supposed to pretend our wedding day was lonely, and that rather than love and happiness, I felt doubt, dread. It's all very hard.

But, they say, it's helpful in getting placed. What I find funny is that since my husband died, as he was dying, really, I hadn't thought about the possibility that this would be hard. I thought it was just the next step. My Case Manager says this is normal and that the feeling of detachment comes from shock. She says that if I can hold on to it and skip over the bewildering grief that follows, I'll be better off. The grief-stricken spend more time here. Years, some cases. *Practice, practice, practice*, she always says.

We're each given a framed picture of a man, some model, and take it back to my cell and put it by my bed as instructed. I'm supposed to replace my husband's face in my memory with this man's face while being careful not to get too attached; the man in the photo won't be my new husband. The man is too smooth; his teeth are very straight and white, and there is a glistening in his hair from gel that has hardened. I can tell he probably uses a brand of soap I would hate the smell of. He looks as if he doesn't need to shave every day. My husband had a beard. But, I remind myself, that doesn't matter now. What I prefer is no longer of concern.

We are allowed outside for an hour each day, into a fenced pen off the north wing. It is full of plastic lawn chairs and the women who have been here awhile push to get chairs in the sun. They undress down to their underwear and work on their tans. Other women join an aerobics class in the far north corner. The fences are topped with barbed wire. Guards sit in booths and observe. So far I've just walked the inside border and looked through the chain. The land beyond is razed save for the occasional toppled rooty stump. Weeds, thorny bushes grow everywhere. This is a newer facility. Decades from now, perhaps young trees will shade it, which, I think, would make it cozier. Far off, the forest is visible; a shaky

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line of green from the swaying barren tract, it is the forest that is so unknown.

On my walks I often need to move from another floor (the floors form a human shield around the building, going into the ground with a sear, bent, almost folded, but still standing). I imagine the guards don't know the names of the prisoners who try to escape at night. I don't think I could live that kind of thing.

Four weeks in, and I have gotten used to my floor. It turns out we're all here for the same reason: of us whips up some new cool. I've read the old women's magazines lying around, sampled it, drink tea, chat. It is a humane shelter, in ways, this is a humane shelter. There is no certain future. Aside from the past, we are mostly left alone. The women are down-to-earth, calm, not particularly lucky. I've heard fights in the north wing, the basement, is always full. As is the north wing who had just been chosen was across the cheek with a razor blade. The Placement Team contacted the women who had been rejected her. There she was, alive. When she returned from the north wing to minimize the scarring, she had a scar on her bed where her blood still stained the floor. I would have changed the floor, but others would have too. That's what it is.

Last week, our girl Marybeth came from near Spokane. We stood in a line, each on each other's shoulders, and we made her a care package; we wrote out recipes on index cards so she could always remember them. She cried when we handed it to her.

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On my walks I often need to step around a huddle of women from another floor (the floors mostly keep together, socially); they form a human shield around a woman on her knees. She is digging into the ground with a serving spoon from the cafeteria. It is bent, almost folded, but still she scrapes at the pebbly soil. I can't imagine the guards don't know what is going on. There are runners who try to escape at night. They think they will fare better on their own. I don't think I could do it. I'm too domestic for that kind of thing.

Four weeks in, and I have gotten to be friends with the women on my floor. It turns out we're all bakers. Just a hobby. Each night one of us whips up some new cookie or cake from a recipe in one of the old women's magazines lying around the compound, and we sample it, drink tea, chat. It is lovely to be with women. In many ways, this is a humane shelter. We are women with very little to do and no certain future. Aside from the daily work of bettering ourselves, we are mostly left alone. I like the women on my floor. They are down-to-earth, calm, not particularly jealous. I suspect we are lucky. I've heard fights in the night on other floors. Solitary, in the basement, is always full. As is the infirmary. A woman on floor five who had just been chosen was attacked while she slept. Slashed across the cheek with a razor blade. The story goes that when the Placement Team contacted the husband-to-be with the news, he rejected her. There she was, all packed and about to begin a new life. When she returned from the infirmary with tidy stitches to minimize the scarring, she had to unpack and crawl into the same bed where her blood still stained the sheets. If she had been on our floor I would have changed the sheets for her. And I know the others would have too. That's what I mean about feeling lucky.

Last week, our girl Marybeth was chosen and sent to a farm near Spokane. We stood in a circle embracing, laying our heads on each other's shoulders, and Marybeth did not want to leave. We made her a care package; in our best handwriting we'd written out recipes on index cards of the things we'd baked together so she could always remember her time here if she chose to. She cried when we handed it to her. "I'm not ready," she whimpered. "I

still miss him." A couple of us encouraged her. "Just do your best." When, eventually, the guard led her away we heard her trying to catch her breath until the elevator doors closed.

~~A window has~~ blinked to life across the road. A man is awake, like me. He pads around his small room in pajamas—hospital blue, like ours. I want to be seen, so I stand in my window. He sees me, steps to his window, and offers a quiet wave. I wave back. We are opposing floats in a parade.

If we had been poor and I had died, my husband would be over there now, waiting for someone to want him. How strange to worry about someone wanting you when we had been wanted by each other so confidently. Most people reach the age of exemption before their partner dies, and they are allowed to simply live alone. Who would want them, anyway? Ideally, you marry the man you love and get to stay with him forever, through everything you can think to put each other through, because you chose to go through it together.

But I had not prepared for something like this. Had he? Had my husband kept some part of himself separate so he could give it to someone else if he needed to? Was it possible I too had managed to withhold something of myself without even realizing it? I hoped so.

I look around my small cinder-block room, painted a half-hearted pink, the desk too large for the unread library book on it. I had a picture of us hidden under my mattress. It was one of those pictures couples take when they are alone in a special place, at a moment they want to remember. We smooshed our heads together and my husband held the camera out and snapped the picture. We look distorted, ecstatic. One night, I fell asleep while looking at it; it fell to the floor, was found at wake-up, and was confiscated. I still can't believe I was so careless.

In bed, I imagine my husband lying beside me, warming the rubber-coated mattress, beneath the thin sheet so many women have slept under before me. My scalp tingles as I think of him scratching it. We rub feet. Then I have to picture him dissolving into the air like in a science-fiction movie, vaporized to another planet, grainy, muted, then gone. The sheet holds his shape for a moment before deflating to the bed. I practice not feeling a thing.

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Moving On

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A few women on other floors have been chosen and will leave tomorrow. I can smell snow in the air pushing through the small crack where the window insulation has peeled away. Late fall is now winter. When it is too cold, we aren't let outside for activities in the pen. I would give anything to run through a field and not stop. I have never been the running-through-fields type.

From what I can tell, being chosen is bittersweet. I imagine many of us wouldn't mind living out our days at the shelter in the company of women like ourselves. But then again, it wouldn't always be us. Marybeth's replacement was cruel and tried to start fights between us. She told me my muffins were dry. She squeezed one in my face; it crumbled between her fingers. She crept into sweet Laura's room and cut a chunk of her long shiny hair with safety scissors. Laura was forced into a bob that didn't suit her. Luckily, this woman was very beautiful and was chosen after only four days. We're waiting for her replacement. Even though there is uncertainty in being chosen, it seems more uncertain to remain among the women, a sentiment I've also seen expressed in the manual.

Something very special has happened. I met my window friend. He came over with the other men from the men's shelter for bingo. This happens occasionally. It keeps everyone socially agile.

Even though we wave across the road, when he walked in I recognized him instantly—the darkness of his hair and the general line of his brow. The nights we wave have become important to me. It's nice to be seen by a man.

My window friend spotted me too, stopped in the doorway, and waved. I waved back and then we laughed. A tiny, forgotten thrill bubbled up in me.

He sat next to me. Close up I found him handsome. He clowning around, pushed the bingo chips off my board whenever I wasn't looking. He was nervous.

He said, "I'm going to tell you ten bad jokes in a row," and he did, counting on his fingers, not pausing for my laughter, which made me laugh through the whole thing. A guard watched us disapprovingly. We looked to be having too much fun. I guess it goes without saying that relations between shelter dwellers are prohibited. I mean, how could we survive together in the world if we have both ended up in a place like this?

At the end of the evening a whistle blew and the men began to shuffle out. Again my window friend stood in front of me and waved and I did the same. But this time he touched his open hand to mine and we pressed them together and smiled. I felt us quake like small animals that have been discovered somewhere they shouldn't be and have no time to run, or place to run to.

The next night, after we waved quietly, I undressed in the window, the lights bright behind me. He placed his hands against the glass as if to get closer and watched.

Tonight, his light isn't on and so we don't wave, but still, I undress in front of my lit window. I can't know if he's watching from the darkness, or who else is watching, for that matter. I loved my husband. I mourn his tenderness. I have to believe that someone out there is feeling a kind of tenderness for me. I'll take it any way I can.

I've been moved to another floor. Someone from the men's shelter reported me, and my Case Manager thought it best for me to occupy a room in the back of the building. Now I look out over the pen.

For days, I feign illness and stay in bed. I hear the groups of women doing their outside activities. It is a cyclical drone of laughing, arguing, calisthenic counting, and loaded silence.

When I do go outside to the pen, the women from my old floor give generous hugs and we try to talk, like the old days, but it's different. There are new women. A couple of friends have been chosen and are gone. A new woman replaced me; she lives in my room and has a view across the road to the men's shelter and my window friend. Her name is even close to mine. She told me that the women sometimes slip and call her by my name. She told me this to comfort me, with a sympathetic pat on my arm. But it doesn't help. Is there any difference between us beyond a few letters in our names?

The women on my new floor are mostly concerned with escape. They are bullish. Their desire scares me. But there are two nice women. They don't try to escape, or not that I've heard about. Our way out of here is to get chosen. So we swap tips from the different pamphlets we've read.

We don't bake. Sometimes my old girls send down cookies, but they come a couple of days after their baking parties and so they

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I open my window and the

are crumbly, stale; nothing like the warm, fresh treats I was so fond of. I've started throwing them away, but I won't say anything, because I like it that they still think of me.

The alarm sounds.

It sounds when someone runs.

Floodlights sweep over the field, then through my window. I hear the far-off yowling of dogs as they smell their way through the night, tracking some woman. Curiously, I find myself rooting for her. Perhaps I'm half-asleep but, peering out my window, I think I can see her. When the lights pan the wasteland between the pen and the forest, something like a shadow moves swiftly, with what seems like hair whipping behind, barely able to keep up with the body it belongs to. ✕

There's nowhere to hide before the forest line. The runner needs a good head start. I doubt she got it. They never do. And yet they always try. What are they looking for? Out there, it's dark and cold. No guarantee of food or money or comfort or love. And even if you have someone waiting for you, still it seems such a slippery thing to depend on. Say my window friend and I ran. Would he love me outside of here? Could I ever be sure? I barely know him.

I picture myself running. My nightgown billowing behind me, my hair loosening from a braid as I speed along. Finally it comes undone and free. I hear the dogs behind me. I see the forest darkness in front of me. From across the field a figure races toward me. But I'm not scared. It's him. My friend. We planned it. We're running so that when we reach the woods we can be together. I feel hopeful to be running across this field, and then I suddenly know why they do it. They are running toward what they believe is best for them, not what the manual claims is best. It should be the same thing but it isn't.

I find at the end of this fantasy I am weeping and so I write it down in a letter to my friend. I write it as a proposition, though I'm not sure it is one. I just want to know if he would agree to it. It's another way of asking, if we weren't both poor wretches, would he choose me? I don't know why, but it's important to me. Maybe I've changed. The manual says that in order to move forward we must change. But this change feels more like a collapse. And that is not how the manual says it will feel.

I open my window and the wind pinks my cheeks. I like it. The

wind brings the smell from the field and even from the trees. It smells good out there, past where I can see. The dogs are silent now. The runner might have made it. I shake my head at the night. I know it's not true.

My window friend is gone.

At bingo I search for him. I want to explain my absence, tell him I was moved, while discreetly slipping the letter into his pocket. I can't find him. Another man follows me around trying to grab my hand; he whispers that he has secret riches no one knows about. Finally a guard from the men's shelter intervenes, takes the man by the arm. I ask about my friend and it turns out he was chosen. The guard says he left a few days ago. I ask how many exactly. "Just two," he says a little sheepishly. I'm destroyed. I say, "Two is not a few," and return to my room. It is painted a buzzing shade of yellow and I hate it. The desk is even bigger and emptier now that I've stopped pretending to read. The floodlights from the pen shine in my window at all hours.

The next day I slog to lunch, but I can't eat. I stare at my crowded tray until the cafeteria empties. My Case Manager calls me in. Her eyebrows are raised, imploring. She opens a file and in it is the letter I wrote to my window friend. I can't even muster surprise. Of course they would find it.

"I wasn't really going to run," I say. "It was just a fantasy."

"I know."

She pushes the letter to me.

I read it. My handwriting is looped and sleepy. The pages are worn. I wrote a lot, and reread it obsessively to make it right. Reading it now makes me blush. In the letter, I am begging. My tone near hysterics. I promise that we'll find a house, unoccupied in the woods, abandoned years ago. That we'll forage for our food, but that eventually we'll find work, even though all the jobs are spoken for. I insist we'll be the lucky ones. We'll have a family, a house with a yard. He'll have a nice car, and I'll have nice things. We'll have friends over to dinner. We'll have a vacation each year even if it is a simple one and we'll never put anything off if we really want to do it. And we'll never wait for something we want now, like children. We'll never fight over silly things. I won't hold a grudge and he'll say what he's feeling instead of shrugging it away. I won't be irresponsible anymore. I won't buy bedding we can't afford. And

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I'll be more fun. I'll be going when all he really wants him things he doesn't like. I won't forget to do small rake the leaves in our yard

Of course, I'm writing to

It reads as if we're fighting a friend's couch. Here is home.

I look up.

"Be sensible," my Case Manager says. "I can't put your name moving on."

"But when do I grieve?"

"Now," she says, as though

I think of the man from his room, but all I see is his and wooly slippers. He shrugs his shoulders he is sad enough

For a couple of weeks I allow women's leftovers onto my sends, even though I don't rougher women who some supply business. Now my intervenes and tells me to in a progressive time it's go. She gives me some hair literally, exercise. "Get the flesh above my hip.

I know she's right. We all some women cry. Other women one life while dreaming of

Each night a new alarm morning I'll see who looks flying across the barren trees I'll also look to see if anyone whoever she was, made it thought of that life. But the

I'll be more fun. I'll be game. I won't insist he tell me where we're going when all he really wants to do is surprise me. I'll never cook him things he doesn't like because I think he should like them. I won't forget to do small things like pick up the dry cleaning or rake the leaves in our yard.

Of course, I'm writing to my husband.

It reads as if we're fighting and he's stormed out, is staying on a friend's couch. Here is my love letter, my apology: please come home.

I look up.

"Be sensible," my Case Manager says, not without some kindness. "I can't put your name on any list until you've shown you're moving on."

"But when do I grieve?"

"Now," she says, as though I have asked what day it is.

I think of the man from across the road, my window friend. But I can't even remember what he looks like. I try to picture him in his room, but all I see is my husband, waiting, in his plaid pajamas and wooly slippers. He shakes a ghostly little wave. I can tell from his shoulders he is sad enough for the both of us.

For a couple of weeks I allow myself a little moment. I scrape other women's leftovers onto my plate. I eat the treats my old floor still sends, even though I don't like them. I barter for snacks with some rougher women who somehow had it in them to set up a secret supply business. Now my pants don't fit. My Case Manager finally intervenes and tells me to cut it out. She says even though we live in a progressive time it's probably not a good idea to let myself go. She gives me some handouts and a new exercise to do that is, literally, exercise. "Get that heart rate up," she says, pinching the flesh above my hip.

I know she's right. We all deal with things differently. At night, some women cry. Other women are bullies. Others bake. Some live one life while dreaming of another. And some women run.

Each night a new alarm sounds, the dogs, the lights. In the morning I'll see who looks ragged, as if she spent a futile few hours flying across the barren tract to the forest, only to be recaptured. I'll also look to see if anyone is missing. I still secretly hope she, whoever she was, made it, and I feel twinges of curiosity at the thought of that life. But they're just twinges. Not motivation. What

I want, I can't have. My husband is gone. So my future will be something much quieter. It won't be some dramatic feeling in the wild unknown. There are other ways to be happy. I read that in the manual. I'm trying them out. My Case Manager says this is healthy.

Eight months into my stay, I am chosen. My Case Manager is proud of me.

"That's a respectable amount of time," she insists.

I blush at the compliment.

"The knitting helped," she notes, taking quiet credit for suggesting it.

I nod. However it happened, I'm just glad to have a home.

My new husband's name is Charlie and he lives in Tucson and the first thing he bought with the dowry was a new flat-screen TV. But the second thing he bought was a watch for me, with a thin silver cuff and a small diamond in place of the twelve.

My Placement Team takes me to a diner on the outskirts of town, where Charlie waits in front of a plate of pancakes. He has girlish hands but otherwise he is fine. The Team introduces us and, after some papers are signed, leaves. Charlie greets me with a light hug. He is wearing my husband's cologne. I'm sure it is a coincidence.

I am his second wife. His first wife is in a shelter on a road that leads to the interstate outside Tucson. He tells me not to worry. He didn't cause their broken marriage. She did. I nod, and wish I had a piece of paper so I can take notes.

He asks me how I feel about kids, something he certainly has already read in my file. I answer that I've always wanted them. "We'd been planning," I say. There is an awkward silence. I have broken a rule already. I apologize. He's embarrassed but says it's fine. He adds, "It's natural, right?" and smiles. He seems concerned that I not think badly of him, and I appreciate that. I clear my throat and say again, "I'd like kids." He looks glad to hear it. He calls the waitress over and says, "Get my new wife anything she wants." There's something in his eagerness I think I can find charming.

I am not ready for this. But I've heard that someday I'll barely remember that I ever knew my first husband. I'll picture him standing a long way down a crowded beach. Everyone will be pleased to be on the beach. I'll see something about him that will catch my eye but it won't be his wave, or his smile, or the particular

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curl of his hair. It will be platonic, something I wouldn't associate with him. It will be the pattern on his bathing shorts; bright, wild, red floral or, maybe, plaid. I'll think something like "What a nice color for bathing shorts. How bright they look against the beige sand." And then the image will disappear and I'll never think of him again. I'm not looking forward to this day. But I won't turn my back on it. As the manual often states, it's my future. And it's the only one I get.