

Hiding in Full View: Immigration as Self-Exile*

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* Extracts from *Good Evening,
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I am a sick woman, I'm a crazy one, and I'm a Finn. To boot.

I live in a trailer, I eat out of cans, I have no washing machine.

I've got a car, she's been with me for thirty-three years. She's the color of herring in sunshine, the side of them when they flip over in clear water.

People think I'm crazy – I can see their fingers whisking by their ears. They're the kind that wash themselves every day even though they never do anything that makes them dirty. I guess you have to wash off all them chemicals at some point, they build up, the perfumes and the softeners and the soaps. In Finland, my mother washed once a week like everyone else. Daddy warmed up the little grey sauna down the grassy path from our leaning yellow cottage, and she opened up her hair and lathered and poured buckets of water over it to rinse. When I got older, I did it for her. The last time I saw her naked body, her breasts hung down past her belly button and she said, look at them, they are *tissit* in Finnish, look at my tissit and where they've gone, and she laughed a rough laugh.

My own tissit hang heavy over the top of my belly, but they're not past the belly button mark yet.

Steny used to have names for them. Flash and Sheila, he called them, different names because they look different. Flash is all innocent and wide-eyed, hangs down lower with the nipple smack bang in the middle, like the brown eye of a doe startled. Sheila's smaller and saucier, reacts to things more, and I guess used to be more receptive with the men.

They're never coming back up again.

That night after the sauna, before mother and I walked up the evening-dewy grass path back to the cottage, we sat down for a cigarette on the wooden bench by the sauna, our feet in the chamomile. I can still hear the call of the spoonbill echoing in the deserted quiet, remember its long red legs bent the wrong way and the grey body bobbing and curtsyng.

It's the last time I saw my mother. She had already moved to her grey 1960s pre-fab apartment building then, five miles away on the outskirts of the nearest town, but she was still spending summers at the cottage.

I couldn't tolerate visiting her in the apartment. The place had beige plastic floors and plastic-covered walls and a view of the discount grocery. Sitting at her

kitchen table while she cried about being too old for any man, letting her lavish tears flow, I had to force myself to eat her disintegrating boiled potatoes and pig fat gravy, and stale sugar cookies, sliced sweetbread. She stood over me pushing more until the food started to push out of me and I had to run for the bathroom.

She wasn't used to plumbing, and there, in brown water, would be what she had expelled after her morning coffee. To save water she would hoard her offal in the toilet bowl and flush only when it was half-way full. She still only washed once a week like in the country. It never bothered me at the cottage; her smells mixing in with the breath of the winter apples in their cardboard boxes and the smoke leaking from the flames in the sooty cook stove.

I don't know what she would have wanted with a new man. It's been quite some time since there was any in my life. These days no one would go there. Who'd want to play ping pong with my two long ones. There's no burying your nose, they'd fall clear out of your way.

Sitting at my table I sometimes say out loud to the room: Ain't no hand touched this bag of skin since Nixon was President! Then I laugh, and if somebody saw me they'd think: 'crazy,' laughing at nothing. But it's not nothing, is it?

I'd guess the people here think I've got no sense of humor or any other sense. Except Neely, he seems to choose his own company more and more too. He was a wild one with his pills and booze and cowboy hats and long-haired girls in tight jeans when I first saw him, more than thirty years ago now, a big-shot record producer all the way from New Zealand on extended vacation, good-looking and reckless. Always with a group of people, clinking drinks.

I sometimes see him these days, looking at me when I'm sweeping or cleaning up at the café, and he's grinning to himself. The rest of them think I'm invisible. I got what I wanted.

It's true I'm quiet and don't say much, or to be specific, I say nothing at all, but I'm not confused about the nature of reality. I don't have much time for the world of people is all, but I talk all day long, and not to myself either, just *inside* myself. I've always found me the best company.

Sometimes even I wonder how I've been able to spend all these years 'alone'. A dreamer can, a consumer of memories. Or someone who lives in the moment.

There is a long tradition of hermits in Finland. What we sense, smell and intuit of one another, without talking: I have words with all the creatures I cross paths with everyday, starting from whatever monster I find in the sink when I get up in the morning. Walking down the streets, the shiny-black crackles (yes, I know they're really grackles, but they don't grackle, they crackle) know me well and screech hello when I pass, and I screech and crackle right back if there's no one around.

Some of the happiest-looking people I see around here keep company with animals. Give me a good dog any day over some male scratching himself in front of the TV or on my bed, night after night. Christ.

There's an insect thigh on the table cloth next to my coffee cup from this morning, the one with butterflies on it. I've already got up to murder five or six big black

flies that crawled out of nowhere and roosted on my windowsill. One broke with blood on the wood of the sill.

The radio says there will be a storm. I've lit the Catholic candles, though with the door open, the bugs keep swarming in. I need a mosquito net, but I've needed one for so many years now that I'm used to the bugs, and most of them don't do much, won't bite. I've locked eyes with a lot of crickets and cicadas sitting on my sleeve or lunch plate. They stare at you from across light years of knowledge and understanding, like they just dropped off from another planet. Some bugs are almost like company, frittering their wings as they hover over the glass cylinder trying to decide whether to take the plunge to the flame.

The gusts are already cooling at the edges, and I can feel the cold front approaching.

The big water bugs though I have to murder, I can't help it, I bash them to death with whatever's handy. Some trouble with the centipedes too. Or millipedes? What's the difference.

Big honky-tonk noises from the Plankton, yells and whoops. It's like a distant companion. Sunday evenings, when the bar is quiet, it's almost too desolate.

I was having my weekly cocktails there on Tuesday night when the TV started showing one of those beauty pageants for toddlers, where they put make-up on kids and cinch their waists and drape them in pink lace. It shouldn't be legal, parading their little bodies and making the girls up to look like miniature blow-up dolls, barely out of their diapers. I almost left my drink half drunk and Six Days on the Road on the jukebox, but Rose changed the channel.

I still would've left if that partner in the beat-up hat hadn't done it first. That man has killed. It's all over him. Kept looking at me.

I went back today to pick up a pizza, and maybe to see if he was there still. He wasn't. Ate the pizza, the whole thing. Soon I can't go, spring break starts next week.

They do break the spring, to pieces.

The sun keeps coming out and lighting up the sea, all frappé and restless behind the dunes. Used to be I could see it sitting down, but there's too many shrubs and plant life taken over the vacant lots between me and the sea, so now I have to stand up to catch a glimpse. It's rough, weedy country. If you venture out into the green-looking parts, you're liable to step on a sand rat, snake or tarantula, and be picking sticker burrs off your clothes for the next half hour.

I'm not complaining. Elsewhere on the island the pink and lavender condo houses are taking over, the Trump Towers of Texas, to be whacked into splinters in the next hurricane. Some developer could still take the sea away from me, and then it'd be just me and the dogs in the kennel next door, fenced in and no view. Barking.

Could still happen. Hope I don't live long enough to see it.

It's four-thirty in the morning, but there is no sleeping through this uproar – the metal roof is growling like the devil and the house is shivering and shaking like the north's gonna take it south clear across the dunes, and onward. Even when the gusts calm for a moment, the wind never stops whistling in the wires.

When I woke up the first thing I thought of was the picture Grandmother gave me before she died, the one that every child in Finland gets, of a guardian angel hovering over a girl and a boy crossing a ravine. They're lost and frightened, their eyes and mouths forming little o's. In my dream I was on the road again, sitting in my car in the dark, in the middle of a big empty parking lot. Used to have that picture pinned up on the visor.

So tired I see specks and ghosts. I am lonely, isolated, on the loose when I wake up like this.

I don't know why I kept that picture after leaving New York, even though I kept almost nothing else. *As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for the Lord is my shepherd.* But I never really believed it, not even when we were driving around Manhattan with our megaphones and our flowers for peace. It might have been better to believe, but if you don't, you don't. Once you know something, you know it, and once you see, you can't help but see.

The Catholic candles are sputtering with cooked insects and bad manufacturing. Bought them at the New Family Grocery. New because it now sells the seashells that people no longer have the patience to discover for themselves on the beach, and instead buy in bags imported from China. Also sells curls of Texas bullshit, exported to China, it said in the paper. Every time I walk past the place, I think: what's so 'family' about you? America is real good at calling things family this and family that, as if there were other groceries for people with none, or who're down and out, or just happen to hate their own folks' guts. Where are those of us supposed to shop who don't have a family? It's only half of this town that's made up of Christian families in their neat little houses and standard lawns and landscaping, but the Grocery is the only grocery in town and it's for every deckhand, hobo, alcoholic, junkie, tourist and vet.

Families: the kind of people with console tables. The rest of us are a ragged collection, families of people and their cats, a man and his dog, deckhand and barmaid, a man and his paintings, a woman and her memories.

Those years on the road are a strange vision in my memory now, the deep dark of the American night. Parked outside some deserted shopping mall, rain flowing down the sides of my car, wondering what Steny would think if he knew where I was, if he saw me through the glass lit by the distant, diluted light of a street lamp, behind the slow dance of dissolving rivulets on the window. Or what my mother would think if she saw me looking so much like her – pale faced and clutching a bottle to my lips like a baby.

In the first months on the road I still longed for Steny sometimes, but I'd always known I'd lose him eventually. I was just a pantyhose model, I was never going to be Ingrid Bergman. Maybe knowing I'd lose him was why I wanted him so bad, why he had such a pull on my loins even through the rain of a thousand miles. He came with the danger of loss, the sweetest threat.

I don't remember much about the end times in New York though. The drugs, yes, the amphetamines, the weed, the LSD. Steny thought amphetamines would

do me good. Vietnam, civil rights, women's lib all passed me by while I sat in bars or in some other haze. I only read about the peace march past the White House. I wasn't even an onlooker, I just wasn't looking.

Alcoholic memories are not like other memories. They're not real, they're *unreal*, like dreams, distant hallucinations of *someone else's* life.

On the road the days were long and timeless, and I had no plan. I'd follow another car, or an unusual-looking cloud. I didn't check the road signs much, and often found out 'where' I was from the newspapers after I'd stopped for the night at some bar. Romeville or Littleton or Rockville, they could've been anywhere. It was like traveling in space.

I didn't have a lot of belongings left, a few random things, a handful of pictures. But I still looked like something back then, and you couldn't disappear properly if you were looking too good. It took a while to dowdy-down, but I adapted to my circumstances, like an animal that uses coloration to camouflage itself. I learned to blend in so that the men no longer came at me with their stories about themselves, talking my ear off. Peacocks have feathers, men have words, they gun ahead and try to tell you everything they do, only here and there throwing you a snippet of a question, like a peanut to a monkey.

"Those sure are shiny – your ear rings," one said to me in a roadside bar somewhere in the Midwest. I went to the restroom and threw them in the garbage.

Whenever those big-talking men saw I was fixing to leave them empty-handed, at the bar, they'd say things like,

"Oh now, I'm all broken up about you leaving, baby."

"You could come over, hon, and we could fire up the grill. I've got a sirloin this big!" – I remember one man holding up his hands showing something the size of a bread loaf.

I got good at picking the kind of places where you'd be left alone – a local bar that seemed unpopular and half-forgotten. I'd look at the number and type of cars parked outside: more than five, it was too full. All trucks, too risky. I took in the distance of the establishment from a nearby town. If it was too far down the highway from houses where people lived, too illicit. It had to be close but not in town. I liked the places traveling salesmen liked. They were like me, drifting across the map.

Mostly I don't remember, but a few places I do. Like Oklahoma. I remember scanning the license plates outside with my engine still running: Oklahoma, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Oklahoma. Two of the Oklahomas were trucks, but one had a pendant in the window from a middle school and a flatbed full of lumber and tools. The other truck was washed clean, and the two regular cars seemed normal, so I turned off my engine.

Inside it was four men and a woman sitting at the bar watching TV. It was late evening already and the TV had a movie on they were all watching, including the bartender. He walked backwards to me and I thought that was a good sign – it wasn't a high-risk kind of place if the bartender could have his back to the door when a new customer came in.

When he turned, he was young and smooth and slim faced, younger than me. “What can I get you, ma’am?”

“Whiskey, straight.”

He asked if I wanted water. Yes, I said, and watched him as he made the drink, slow and deliberate, like a ritual, or some kind of mating dance. It was beats off a regular person’s regular movements. He turned around in that same measured way and put the two glasses down in front of me. He smelled so clean, ringlets of brown hair hanging over his ears, eyes dark and alive.

When the movie ended and everyone started leaving, I got up too, but he walked over to me.

“Another drink before I close up?” Those eyes.

“I think –”

He said: “Don’t” and touched my hand so lightly and I don’t know why I stayed that last night, in his small cot in a backroom with no window. Early in the morning I slipped out before he woke up and took my empty whiskey glass sitting on the bar top. I still have it.

I forgot Finland too during those years. Childhood? A forgotten place. I was eliminating all the other memories, too, all because of the one nightmare one. A frightened little face, a little hand gripping mine like a vice, almost not being able to do it, the blue van next to the airline terminal being emptied of suitcases, the large family huddled on the walkway, in our way. Small hands wrapped around tiny ears when a plane took off, thundering. And then.

Then I went to the car. There was a ticket on the windshield.

Maybe I should be afraid of the memories now, but I am not. I’ve tested the waters of remembrance with less dangerous forms of pain. Mother, father, Finland. I am forever climbing up our old hill from the sauna to the leaning yellow cottage. I follow the path strewn with fallen leaves, and wet, they cling to my bare knees as I climb up the mountain that is my journey.

Thinking of Steny all that happens now is that I remember him, but he has no hold over me. He used to make me so crazy, so blind. I guess it’s what we call love. I’d never been in love, so I didn’t know it was only a form of insanity.

His bosses had egged him on, those sharks, sent him to Scandinavia: *Find us a Nordic beauty, like that Bergman girl! You’re young, you’re ambitious, you got no family!* He was just the kind of dark handsome stranger who could get a girl to leave hearth and home. I’m what he brought back.

Early on when he first took me to his mother’s house in Dallas I had no idea what went on behind those sparkling exteriors of big American homes, or that it was just another version of what had gone on in my own childhood. The Dallas version was gin-and-tonic and soap-opera afternoons while the kids played outside with the nanny. The Finnish version was less pretty. For all his Americanness, even Steny had no idea what went on in America. He never thought about it, he never even went to the grocery store, took the train,

worried about who did his laundry. The big car, big house, big job combo he swallowed whole.

Steny's mother Cora-Ann was a brittle old bitch. I would have never made it through those fifteen months without Bella next door. She rang the doorbell one morning after Cora-Ann had gone to some charity to-do, stood there with her long brown hair hanging straight down – *one of those hippies from California*, Steny's mother had said about her – holding out a cake. Bella said it was angel food, and I wondered what that was, but it sounded promising. She invited me over for a “refreshment,” and that afternoon when I sat down at her lime-green kitchen table in her lime-green kitchen, the refreshment turned out to be a gin and tonic.

She was my angel, answered questions I couldn't ask anyone else, words, things, foods, customs. What's a rosary, after Steny laughed himself sick when I came home with one, presenting it to him as a necklace. It was only years afterward that I understood why that had been funny. There were almost no Catholics in Finland, so how was I to know, I'd never been anywhere or known anyone outside of my hometown or my small circle of acquaintances in Helsinki. It was years till I realized why it was funny to make that kind of mistake, and close to decades to actually *think* it was funny.

Steny was furious when he found out I was pregnant, right before a trip we were supposed to take together to Hollywood. It was the big party where I was supposed to be introduced for the first time – he called it a soft launch. It was meant to be the start of my film career and he had booked a calendar full of meetings and parties. No auditions yet. He said I wasn't ready, he said next year, when my accent was better.

He said get rid of the baby. He railed like it was my fault, like he'd had nothing to do with it. But it wasn't until he started calling from New York to tell me I shouldn't talk to any reporters about it that I thought he was a little delusional. There hadn't been any reporters from Finland for a year.

We fought every time he came home to Dallas for the weekend. I said who cared, really, about me being pregnant, it wouldn't be long till I was presentable again, and he screamed: “Time is money!”

I'm grateful to him for making me learn English. It didn't hurt that I wanted to prove Cora-Ann wrong, come hell or hot water, like I used to say. Thanks to Cora-Ann and Steny I got better at English through arguing – it's the best language training you could ever have.

Bella and everybody in Dallas used to ask me all the time why I left. All immigrants are asked to answer that – why did you come, why are you here? Some come for money, or for family, or to escape something that was after them, others because they couldn't think of anything else. The official story is that I came for love.

A better question to ask would be: Why did you stay?

The answer: my skin feels at home here.

For many people a place is like a person. For a person who is on the run, a chosen place is a refuge and a friend. Perhaps the only one. In this tucked-away place, this

back-ass, miserable little Texas town, the only glorious and lively things about it are the parts that people aren't responsible for: the sea and the sky. The beauty is that no one even knows anymore that I came here from someplace in the first place.

Walking down the street, everyone here has his or her own relationship to it, loving it, despairing of it, dismissing it, unable to see it. One person delights in the dandelion squeezing through a crack in the old sidewalk, another bends down and yanks the plant out of its nest and flings it into the nearest garbage can.

At the New Family Grocery I often think I'm more American than you are. I love this country more than you ever could. You just don't know better. You live here in ignorance.

Texans, they think of themselves as Americans, sure, but what they think is that they're the only authentic Americans, the rest are Yankees, immigrants, hillbillies or New Yorkers. You can see why, in a way, even geographically: the shape of Texas on the map gives shape to the whole country: it's the udder to the big cow. Without Texas, America would look like a pork chop.

Whatever else America is, regardless of how much hope it seems to offer, for most people, original or immigrant, it is the end of the line. Most who come, stay. It never occurred to me to go out and see if there was something better out there in the world – like everyone else, I had already started taking America for granted. It only occurred to me to go to a different place *in* America.

Why did I stay in Port A?

Because it had no mirrors. No public bathrooms, no shopping malls, no shop windows, no city streets, no hotels, no hallway mirrors in people's houses, because I never went to any. No restaurants with mirrors when you entered. No wall mirrors anywhere. The only places that had any were bar restrooms – easy to avoid, usually too high up, scummy or worn from decades of wiping down.

Because this is the kind of place where, if you're walking down the sidewalk with a grocery bag, someone will stop and ask if you need a ride. Not that I want one.

Though it's also the kind of place where if you're a woman walking down the street at night, someone in a big white pickup will roll down his window, taking with it the reflection of neon and the night, and ask, You going a long way, honey? And then it's a different kind of friendliness.

A few tried that on me in the beginning. I never got in, said nothing, couldn't, and the cowboys gave up. But even so, no one turned unfriendly. They've let me be. In the South, people may hate you behind closed doors, but they're not likely to let it show as brazenly as in New York. Texans rarely turn up their noses when they're faced with something they don't understand or approve of. They're good at pretending.

I stayed because on this island, spring is only absent in summer. Even in February the air smells like there's something nice in the oven in the house next door, a distant promise. When the air parts like that, like it did earlier today, and the balmy breeze begins to leak in, you realize you haven't smelled it in a long time, and it is a sweet reminder of sunshine and still heat in windless corners, the dead silence of a heat wave.

I stayed because of the wind that the sea sends from the other side of the world, laced with the fragrance of sweaty sailors on ships, baskets and bushels of oranges and pineapple in big shipping crates, men on oil rigs, the smell of the dead things of the sea, its smell of wonderful rot, and the sounds and splashes of dolphins and other sea creatures.

I stayed because of the sea. I don't mind the sea looking back at me. It glistens and glares sometimes, other times it's unclear, soft-surfaced. I don't mind it lapping at my ankles, reaching higher up my legs, going into every nook and cranny of my shell.

She, the sea, is the only one who's seen all of me. The only reflective surface I can stand.

I stayed because the grackles whistle as I pass – *wheeeeee!* – *baby, look at you walking by – tsk tsk tsk.*

And because here every day is erased, the counter reset.

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At seven in the evening the front room of the weathered trailer was darkened by the tall poppies swinging in front of the living-room window.

The trailer sat high on a blustery sand dune, and when she let go of the door to reach for the lamp, the wind from the Gulf heaved it back against the frame with a clap.

She found the switch for the table lamp, turned on the transistor radio and latched the flimsy aluminum door with its scratched plastic window behind her, wiping off the sheen of sweat on her forehead. The wind howled and she could hear the electrical wire dragging across the roof with the sound of a big cat scratching slowly.

First she went down the few feet of hallway to the unused bedroom at the back and cracked the miniature door to quickly look in and make sure that nothing dangerous lurked within. Through the wall, across the five or six feet of tangled brush that separated her trailer from the shipping container housing the vet's office, she could already hear the thump of music. Shelley, the vet's assistant had come by for her nightly check and had switched on the Corpus Christi dance music station.

Carmen had heard her at the café explaining to people that the electro-pop and the human voices of the DJs calmed and comforted the dogs at night. Carmen knew otherwise: the dogs baying in tune with certain dance numbers were the biggest reason she had long ago abandoned use of the bedroom.

Back in the living room she removed her sunglasses, baseball cap and shoes and stood on the creaky floor in her shapeless, long-sleeved blue dress. Her bent head a nest of overgrown strands, she peeled off the long-johns underneath the dress, delicately, without removing the dress, and then slipped her arms out inside the dress to remove the undershirt over her head through the neck.

She sighed in relief and looked around the little room where all of her daily activities were concentrated: the cavernous Indian print-covered couch, the red-top

Formica kitchen table, the two metal-back chairs, the tiny nook of kitchen. The room was bathed in green from all the vegetation surrounding the trailer.

She opened the front door again – even with the wind gusts it was too hot in the metal box of the trailer. It let out onto a small, drooping porch set on top of concrete roadblocks. A gecko sunned itself on one of the rotting one-by-fours, catching a last triangle of sunlight.

– Hello friend, she said.

Elsewhere dusk usually conjured up a cooling down, an easing off of the stark light and burning heat of the day. Not so in Texas, where dusk was dense with an after-burn. She stood in the vast maritime hum of the outdoors, with nothing to look back at her but the sky, her silhouette framed in the doorway by the electric light behind, facing a sea of reeds that gradually darkened as they receded toward the fore dunes. She held in her hands the transistor radio which she had picked up from the table, the cord straining behind her, playing a song she knew by heart. The wind washed against her face in deliberate waves, died for a moment, then rose to greater intensity until it hardly ceased at all and the poppies whipped frantically against the tin side of her trailer. She turned up the volume as the wind mounted, letting it swell as the air swelled until *There's an old flame burning in your eyes* evaporated into the wind and only shreds of sound could be heard intermittently through the din of the tropical storm.

She was rooted in the doorway as gusts transformed the landscape and something inside the trailer toppled. Not even when there was a loud crash behind her did she turn back, not even when the wind began to slash rude drops of water across her face, and even when the front of her was soaked in the space of a few seconds she kept her face turned up to the sky.

This would have been the only chance to catch the famous smile, but no one was looking.