

ANNE LAMOTT

I met for our first walk, I had some progress to report: I had stopped meeting the love of my life at X-rated motels. I still met him at *motels*, but nicer ones. I had stopped seeing the man with the bleeding wife. I felt I had standards again—granted, they were very *low* standards, but still . . .

Slowly I came back to life. I'd been like one of the people Ezekiel comes upon in the valley of dry bones—people who had really given up, who were lifeless and without hope. But because of Ezekiel's presence, breath comes upon them; spirit and kindness revive them. And by the time I was well enough for Bill even to *consider* tapering off our meetings, I had weaseled my way into his heart. I drank, he led a church, and together we went walking every week all over Belvedere Island, all over the back of that great green turtle.

from
Traveling Mercies

Anne Lamott
Anchor
Books
1999

Flea Market

In the dust of Marin City, a wartime settlement outside Sausalito where black shipyard workers lived during World War II, a flea market was held every weekend for years. In 1984 I was living in a mother-in-law unit on a houseboat berthed at the north end of Sausalito, on San Francisco Bay. I was almost thirty when I moved in, and I lived for the next four years in a space about ten feet square, with a sleeping loft. I had a view of the bay and of Angel Island. When it was foggy, San Francisco across the water looked like a city inside a snow globe.

I got pregnant in April, right around my thirtieth birthday, but was so loaded every night that the next morning's

Overture: *Lily Pads*

first urine was too diluted for a pregnancy test to prove positive. Every other day, Pammy, who still lived in Mill Valley with her husband, would come by and take a small bottle of pee to the lab that was near her home. I did not have a car. I had had a very stern conversation with myself a year before, in which I said that I had to either stop drinking or get rid of the car. This was a real no-brainer. I got around on foot, and by bus and friend.

The houseboat, on a concrete barge, barely moved even during the storms of winter. I was often sick in the mornings. On weekdays, I put coffee on, went for a run, took a shower, had coffee, maybe some speed, a thousand cigarettes, and then tried to write. On weekends, I went to the flea market.

Marin City is the ghetto in this luscious affluent county, built in a dusty bowl surrounded by low green hills on the other side of the freeway from where my houseboat was. The town is filled with families—lots of little kids and powerful mothers. There are too many drugs and guns, there is the looming and crummy government housing called the Projects, and there are six churches in a town of two thousand people who are mostly black. On the weekends, the gigantic lot where the Greyhound bus depot used to be was transformed into one of the country's biggest flea markets. Many years before, I used to sit on my mother's lap on the exact same site and watch black men drink coffee at the counter while we waited for a bus into San Francisco. Now every square foot was taken up with booths and trucks and beach umbrellas and tables and blankets and racks displaying household wares and tools and crafts

and clothes, much of it stolen, most of it going for a song—hundreds of sellers, thousands of buyers, children and dogs and all of us stirring up the dust.

You could buy the most wonderful ethnic food here, food from faraway places: Asia, India, Mexico, New York City. This is where I liked to be when I was hungover or coming down off a cocaine binge, here in the dust with all these dusty people, all this liveliness and clutter and color, things for sale to cheer me up, and greasy food that would slip down my throat.

If I happened to be there between eleven and one on Sundays, I could hear gospel music coming from a church right across the street. It was called St. Andrew Presbyterian, and it looked horned and impoverished, a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a small parcel of land with a few skinny pine trees. But the music wafting out was so pretty that I would stop and listen. I knew a lot of the hymns from the times I'd gone to church with my grandparents and from the albums we'd had of spirituals. Finally, I began stopping in at St. Andrew from time to time, standing in the doorway to listen to the songs. I couldn't believe how run-down it was, with terrible linoleum that was brown and overshined, and plastic stained-glass windows. But it had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish-looking white man making all that glorious noise, and a congregation of thirty people or so, radiating kindness and warmth. During the time when people hugged and greeted each other, various people would come back to where I stood to shake my hand or try to hug me; I was as frozen and stiff as Richard Nixon. After this, Scrip-

ture was read, and then the minister named James Noel who was as tall and handsome as Marvin Gaye would preach, and it would be all about social injustice—and Jesus, which would be enough to send me running back to the sanctuary of the flea market.

You'd always have to shower after you got home, you'd be so covered with dust, the soles of your shoes sticky with syrup from snow cones, or gum, or one of those small paper canoes that hot dogs are served in.

I went back to St. Andrew about once a month. No one tried to con me into sitting down or staying. I always left before the sermon. I loved singing, even about Jesus, but I just didn't want to be preached at about him. To me, Jesus made about as much sense as Scientology or dowsing. But the church smelled wonderful, like the air had nourishment in it, or like it was composed of these people's exhalations, of warmth and faith and peace. There were always children running around or being embraced, and a gorgeous stick-thin deaf black girl signing to her mother, hearing the songs and the Scripture through her mother's flashing fingers. The radical old women of the congregation were famous in these parts for having convinced the very conservative national Presbytery to donate ten thousand dollars to the Angela Davis Defense Fund during her trial up at the Civic Center. And every other week they brought huge tubs of great food for the homeless families living at the shelter near the canal to the north. I loved this. But it was the singing that pulled me in and split me wide open.

I could sing better here than I ever had before. As part of these people, even though I stayed in the doorway, I did not

recognize my voice or know where it was coming from, but sometimes I felt like I could sing forever.

Eventually, a few months after I started coming, I took a seat in one of the folding chairs, off by myself. Then the singing enveloped me. It was furry and resonant, coming from everyone's very heart. There was no sense of performance or judgment, only that the music was breath and food.

Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life. But I had to leave before the sermon.

That April of 1984, in the midst of this experience, Pammy took a fourth urine sample to the lab, and it finally came back positive. I had published three books by then, but none of them had sold particularly well, and I did not have the money or wherewithal to have a baby. The father was someone I had just met, who was married, and no one I wanted a real life or baby with. So Pammy one evening took me in for the abortion, and I was sadder than I'd been since my father died, and when she brought me home that night, I went upstairs to my loft with a pint of Bushmills, and some of the codeine a nurse had given me for pain. I drank until nearly dawn.

Then the next night I did it again, and the next night, although by then the pills were gone.

I didn't go to the flea market the week of my abortion. I stayed home, and smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little, and went for slow walks along the salt marsh with Pammy. On the seventh night, though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop over the next hour. I was going through a pad every fifteen minutes, and I thought I should call a doctor or Pammy, but I was so disgusted that I had gotten so drunk one week after an abortion that I just couldn't wake someone up and ask for help. I kept on changing Kotex, and I got very sober very quickly. Several hours later, the blood stopped flowing, and I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love,

and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "Fuck it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.

God ~ a relationship
And here in dust and dirt, O here,
The lilies of his love appear.

I started to find these lines of George Herbert's everywhere I turned—in Simone Weil, Malcolm Muggeridge, books of English poetry. Meanwhile, I trooped back and forth through the dust and grime of the flea market every Sunday morning till eleven, when I crossed the street from the market to the church.

I was sitting through the sermon now every week and finding that I could not only bear the Jesus talk but was interested, searching for clues. I was more and more comfortable with the radical message of peace and equality, with the God in whom Dr. King believed. I had no big theological thoughts but had discovered that if I said, Hello?, to God, I could *feel* God say, Hello, back. It was like being in a relationship with Casper. Sometimes I wadded up a Kleenex and held it tightly in one fist so that it felt like I was walking hand and hand with him.

Finally, one morning in July of 1986, I woke up so sick and in such despair for the umpteenth day in a row that I knew that I was either going to die or have to quit drinking. I poured a bottle of pinot noir down the sink, and dumped a Nike box full of assorted pills off the side of my houseboat, and entered into recovery with fear and trembling. I was not sure that I could or even wanted to go one day without drinking or pills or cocaine. But it turned out that I could and that a whole lot of people were going to help me, with kind eyes and hot cups of bad coffee.

If I were to give a slide show of the next ten years, it would begin on the day I was baptized, one year after I got

sober. I called Reverend Noel at eight that morning and told him that I really didn't think I was ready because I wasn't good enough yet. Also, I was insane. My heart was good, but my insides had gone bad. And he said, "You're putting the cart before the horse. So—honey? Come on down." My family and all my closest friends came to church that day to watch as James dipped his hand into the font, bathed my forehead with cool water, and spoke the words of Langston Hughes:

*Gather out of star-dust
Earth-dust,
Cloud-dust,
Storm-dust,
And splinters of hail,
One handful of dream-dust
Not for sale.*

In the next slide, two years later, I'm pregnant by a man I was dating, who really didn't want to be a father at the time. I was still poor, but friends and the people at my church convinced me that if I decided to have a child, we would be provided for every step of the way. Pammy really wanted the kid. She had been both trying to conceive and waiting to adopt for years. She said, "Let me put it this way, Annie. We're going to have this baby."

In the next slide, in August of 1989, my son is born. I named him Sam. He had huge eyes and his father's straight hair. Three months later he was baptized at St. Andrew.

Then, six months later, there would be a slide of me

nursing Sam, holding the phone to my ear with a look of shock on my face, because Pammy had just been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. She had a lumpectomy and then aggressive chemotherapy. All that platinum hair fell out, and she took to wearing beautiful scarves and soft cotton caps. I would show you a slide of her dancing in a ballet group for breast cancer survivors. I would show you a slide of her wading in the creek at Samuel P. Taylor Park, her jeans rolled up and Sam, on her shoulders, holding on to the ends of her scarf like reins. There was joy and there were many setbacks, and she played it way down: two days after she'd finally begun to complain mildly about a cough that wouldn't go away, a doctor aspirated a *liter* of fluid from her lungs. More chemo, and the hair that had grown back fell out again. "Come shave it all off for me," she asked over the phone. "As it is, it looks like hair I found in the trash can and tried to glue back on." I gently brushed almost all of it off. She loved visits with Sam, grieved that she wouldn't get to watch him grow older. The cancer went into remission. A few months later, a slide would show her in a soft pink cotton cap with a look of supreme joy on her face, because her adoption lawyer had finally called and asked if she and her husband wanted to adopt. They did. They were given a baby girl named Rebecca, my darling goddaughter.

But the cancer came back. Not long before she died, my favorite slide would show her lying on a chaise in her lush and overgrown garden, beaming. Out of a storage room that we used for changing Rebecca, we had just fashioned a guest room for her sister, who was coming in from Italy to

take care of her. She'd been up and around all morning, trying out the guest bed here and then there, putting it near the window, wanting the sun to fall on her sister just so. We found a place for all the extra junk, and a little rug for the floor, a tiny chest of drawers, and pictures for the wall. So then she went outside to rest, dressed, happy, looking once more like a citizen of the world. It was sunny and blue, a perfect day, and she had the radiance of someone who has been upright and really moving for one last time, so happy and light that even without hair, wearing a scarf, she seemed like a blonde again.

She was thirty-seven when she died. We scattered her ashes one sunny day from a boat out near the Farallon Islands—white-gold sunlight, mild breezes, baskets and bags of roses.

Then there would be some fabulous slides of Rebecca growing up. In many of these photos, she is dressed in bright saris and veils, as she and her dad go to India quite a lot to visit an ashram there. She has long brown hair, like a filly.

Meanwhile, Sam grew tall and thin and sweet, with huge brown eyes.

Then there would be thousands of slides of Sam and me at St. Andrew. I think we have missed church ten times in twelve years. Sam would be snuggled in people's arms in the earlier shots, shyly trying to wriggle free of hugs in the later ones. There would be different pastors along the way, none of them exactly right for us until a few years ago when a tall African-American woman named Veronica came to lead us. She has huge gentle doctor hands, with dimples where the knuckles should be, like a baby's fists. She stepped into us,

the wonderful old worn pair of pants that is St. Andrew, and they fit. She sings to us sometimes from the pulpit and tells us stories of when she was a child. She told us this story just the other day: When she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

And that is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.