Going to Live with the Dugam Dani

I dug through cobwebs in the crawlspace behind my bed to look for the suitcase from the honeymoon trip. What was I thinking, joining my name with his—blocky, black letters on a frayed travel tag? Back there in the flashlight’s gloom, I could feel the ghosts around me—my father’s and mother’s and there, in the corner, the babies. Spirits puddle in the rafters and globes of absence brush through light. The beautiful eyes of my newly dead grandson follow me everywhere. He finds me on the toilet. He watches me soap myself and floss. He follows me as I kick the sides of the broken washer until it dents and hurts my foot.

Maybe because of my years of bad luck, I’m quick as a jackrabbit when I decide to get out.

“You’ll never win,” my husband said every time I read off my numbers. His name is Jim and he has a roll of fat around his neck. His head seemed smaller than the last time I’d checked. Loving my husband was like loving a bad habit. Leaving him would be easy as jumping off Brooklyn Bridge.

My only daughter would have come with me, if there’d been a warning. She’s one of the good ones and she likes a wild time. Full of all my best qualities, she could have been anything. But I couldn’t wait for her, her children, her employer, her tiresome responsibility. I packed my old suitcase with all my best stuff. I snapped the latch shut on all that crumpled crap.

“Winning the lottery can be a curse,” my husband, the broken record, said again and again. “Did you hear about the guy who committed suicide?” he said.

I look carefully at my husband, the genius in tube socks.

“You’re so right,” I say and he flinches. Jim sneers on the left side of his mouth. Some people think my husband’s a mean guy. I don’t even know what to think anymore.

What I know about the Dugam Dani could fit into a coin purse. I know they lived in New Guinea, and that the men wear gourds to cover their private parts. The women have missing fingers. The men tell lots of jokes. The connection between jokes and missing digits is in punishment—but I can’t really remember what the women did wrong. I didn’t really care. Don’t bore me to death with printed ideas.
I had dreams for myself, sure. Everyone does. But this one, the one where I’m released, poof, and suddenly free, I hadn’t put the wheels to spinning on that. I married a Catholic and gave up on happiness. Most of my dreaming was local. I imaged myself on the stage at Tanglewood. My dress would be burgundy, low-slung and my voice, a strand of water pearls, strung across the night. Watching me up there on the stage, women, and even some men, couldn’t help themselves from crying.

But this was no dream. There’s no preparation for my kind of luck. I’ll be out of our house without a trace—a woman picked up in the talons of a hawk. Winning the lottery doesn’t happen every week. I’ll only get three thousand bucks each month—but winning is winning and it’s time to get out.

I put on the sunglasses, a zebra striped thong, a pushup bra and tight jeans. I click my heels knowing there’s no way I’m going home. I’m not even sure if the Dani exist anymore. New Guinea looks a long way from Massachusetts. The book was written the same year my fourth child entered kindergarten. Now he’s in on unemployment and sleeps on his sister’s couch.

I’m out of here flying. Over open ocean, there’s no looking back. Back and forth, trying to stay alive, trying to catch a breath—that’s the plan I had before this. The moon looks like an old face outside the plane window. In my mind, my husband’s face hangs like a bulldog’s and he stomps around the house. About to see the light, he stops in the hallway and punches plaster until it breaks.

There are no pretty pictures behind my eyelids. Being trapped made me flat as a map of Kansas. Being free, who knows. I’m my own boss now—although Dani life is quite public, my book says. Maybe I’ll have to share all my stuff. Just like in our house, that leaky trap. Ghosts, it turns out, enforce the rules. People are gentle with children, generally. But then there’s the part on cutting off girls’ fingers, as appeasement or an offering for peace and long life.

I’m leaving my people and I won’t look back. I don’t think about my sister anyway, except on Saturday mornings, the hour I used to call her. “That you?” she would say, like she expected someone else. Seven o’clock sharp, who else would call her like that? I can see her in her kitchen with her lists and her white sneakers. The house is in order and she is tuning
her radio to some progressive public station. Her helmet of white hair shines a halo around her head.

“Who do you think it is?” I would say. We laughed hard like it was a joke we hadn’t heard before.

Sometimes—or all the time—my sister drives me nuts. She thinks because she’s younger, she’s got permission to be stupid.

The further the planes flies, the worse I feel. The man on one side of me is wearing headphones. The college age girl on my other side is sleeping with her hood tied tight under her chin. In my lap, I see a photo of Dani women and girls with spears and arrows. They are preparing to dance together and pray for enemy death. When people die, ghosts remain in the vicinity of their homes and are a potential cause of trouble for the survivors. When Dani are asked why they fight, they say it’s because of ghosts. We’re more advanced than that in our family. We’re not actually all that terrible. We have cars and medicine and shoes for our children. My sister would take me in, even if I did something terrible. When we buried my grandson, we put his ashes in a space age building made of marble and glass. It looked like the prison where he spent two years.

One time last winter I drove up to my sister’s house in the middle of a snow squall. My grown grandson slept in the passenger seat, quiet as a rock. He had been using crystal meth and stealing again. The snow was coming down in flakes the size of white moths. I knew time was standing still. It was like magic, the way it just hung there. I could decide to make a change, if I wanted to, I thought. I could be free of all the mess of living. I had never felt so powerful in my entire life. My hands on the wheel looked like men’s hands, like the hands of Adam or someone even stronger. Muscular and dry from the winter, I could hurt someone with these hands. Then the storm stopped and I couldn’t remember what had set me off.

“Do you think you had a mini stroke or something?” my sister asked when I told her about time standing still.

“No, I think I hate my family,” I whispered.

“I don’t believe you,” said my sister, looking serious. Her sad face made me angry enough to want to spit.

“What I do hate is your living room couch,” I said and we both laughed because it’s a known fact that my sister has terrible taste.
I look at the ocean and think how I wish we were flying close to the surf. Sometimes when a plane falls out of the sky, it descends for five minutes before it finally hits earth. The people sitting with seatbelts tight, clutching at their hearts, can see the end coming like a movie spinning in their head. I imagine what five minutes of waiting feels like, upside down, right side up, air funneling past the windows away from the rock hard sea. When I was younger, I could imagine smooth landings. The tops of trees seemed like places I could live. An ocean might be a cushion full of sunlight. Out here hanging above the world, I wish my life had been different. I wish I could be my sister and she could be me. I wish my grandson could have learned how to fly. I wish everyone in the world could see what I see, descending foot by foot, going to live with the Dugam Dani.