



SWING

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Mom boarded young adults in a large ramshackle boarding house connected to her own in Sage, British Columbia. This was her second chance at parenting. Her first shot, for my brother and me, was wildly off the mark. Now that Mom is gone, I've inherited a young woman she cared for in this boarding house. Her name is Lena. She's forty-six years old, stands five foot two at best, and has fetal alcohol syndrome.

When I introduce her to people, I say she is a friend of the family, without elaborating. I don't mention our inherited relationship. At first I thought she had Down Syndrome but that was wrong. The two are often mistaken for each other. Fetal alcohol syndrome is both less understood and more prevalent. Symptoms include intellectual disability, poor memory and/or executive function.

Mom called in January 2021 to tell me she had been diagnosed with stomach cancer. She lived with bipolar and didn't like hospitals or doctors. When finally discovered, her cancer was stage IV. COVID precautions complicated everything, but I desperately tried to get my family across the Canadian border and my brother boarded a plane from Toronto. Mom was delighted to see us all and died less than a week after we arrived. It was very painful but mercifully short.

Three days after Mom's death, my brother and I stood in front of Lena, Craig, Ryan, and six other tenants of various ages and abilities.

"We know Mom meant a lot to you and we are very sorry for your loss. Unfortunately, we need to close down the house," I said. The house had begun innocently enough when Mom rented a room to a Japanese exchange student. After that it started to expand and devolve when Mom flushed her bipolar medications down the toilet. Soon after, she acquired more and more tenants and new rooms sprung up inside existing ones in the basement. The house and all its inhabitants lived through her manias and depressions, everyone going up and down with her, a ship in her storm. It was as though the house and its inhabitants were a reincarnation of our childhood, a grown and mutated nightmare version of what we'd lived.

We told Lena, Craig, Ryan, and the others we would help them financially as they found new homes. Mom had mentored Lena, as she had other young women over the years, so I committed to helping her longer term. I helped her find a new place and we used Craig's new car to move her in. Craig had convinced Mom to sell her car to him for next to nothing just before her death.

I provided Lena some money to ease the transition. Something inside me couldn't let her fail when it was relatively easy to help. As kids, after my dad died, my brother and I were in the throes

of Mom's bipolar. No one helped us then, when it would have been relatively easy to. Whether I admitted it or not, I was trying to fix the past by focusing on someone else's future. My brother thought I was nuts for continuing to help Lena and counseled cutting ties as fast as possible. I ignored him and have covered her rent and bills periodically since.

In 2025, four years after Mom's death, Lena was having a very difficult year. Ryan, another ex-tenant of Mom's and now Lena's boyfriend, finally succumbed to alcoholism when his internal organs failed. Lena had provided him with a roof over his head, food, love, and either directly or indirectly enabled him to acquire alcohol. He, a handsome man about ten years younger than Lena, had provided her with little other than someone she could call her boyfriend. Lena's small friend network seemed to accept this bargain or, at least, never steered her away from it. Ryan was not cruel, just always drunk. It would be the second time alcohol severely disrupted Lena's life.

Lena loved and took care of Ryan as he slowly died. Then she lost her job at Osprey Coffee. As she told it, a new manager was hired, who promptly fired everyone to bring in his own staff from another store. That day, she texted me that "the new boss of our Osprey has made some changes and wants his team to transfer to ours." This seemed like a crazy management decision. If the entire Osprey staff of one store went to another, they would have to hire a whole new staff for the first store. Companies do insane things sometimes. Also, sometimes, Lena's stories didn't make total sense.

I had to look back to find her "I was fired" text. The one just before it, unanswered, was mine, trying to convince her to get dentures. She'd had her teeth pulled six months before being fired and stopped there. She had been afraid of the subsequent denture procedure, so I texted her what I found online: "Getting dentures is generally not painful, though some initial discomfort or tenderness is normal as your gums adjust. Most discomfort subsides within weeks as you adapt to wearing dentures." Sage is four hours inland from Vancouver, British Columbia. It's a good place to get dentures because it's a big retirement area. The denturists get ample practice. Also, everyone is used to seeing people with dentures; dentures outnumber real teeth in that town. Mom, who lived there for decades, had her teeth pulled in her forties and promptly replaced by dentures. Whether it's class, age, or something in the water, it's a very popular procedure there. The dentures, I reasoned, would help Lena get another job. Osprey Coffee, to their credit, was supportive of her when she came back to work toothless. I gave them a lot of credit until they fired her.

Lena may be the friendliest person in Sage. Her customer service skills were unparalleled. Somewhere, she had learned to compliment almost everyone she met. This woman had lovely hair; she loved another's brooch or glasses. That sweater really suited the wearer. That said, work is hard to find for a person with fetal alcohol syndrome, even one with real people skills. Take teeth out of the equation and it becomes that much harder.

That year was a difficult one for Lena, so I decided to treat her to a trip to Nashville. While the cities are over 2,000 miles from each other, this trip was less random than it sounds. Lena's father, who'd adopted her as a baby, had loved country music as much as he loved Lena. He'd said to her, "I chose you because of your big eyes," and with that simple combination of words, he transformed the most visible aspect of her disability into her biggest asset. He wasn't just good with words; he was equally good at math and together they worked through her high school math courses. He was hers and she was his. A perfect equation. And Lena's father had promised to take her to the Grand Ole Opry. They listened to the broadcast each week at 5 pm on Saturday nights. I could see her there in the safe harbor of country music: a shared love with her dad.

My dad loved country music as well. My dad, brother, and I would listen to Willie Nelson, George Strait and Johnny Cash cassettes on the tinny speakers of his truck in the Northwest Territories. My dad died up there on the MacKenzie Highway in a horrific crash my brother and I survived. His music stopped on August 21, 1985. Ours went on.

Lena's father died, too, before he could fulfill his Nashville promise. Lena said her mom never cared for her. As she tells it, shortly after her father died, her mom kicked her out, stole her \$10,000 inheritance and they haven't spoken since. I understood then why Mom's love had meant so much. After her death and then Ryan's, Lena had no one. A trip to Nashville was more than warranted.

I was coming from a nonprofit conference in New Orleans, during which I had caught some kind of bug. A little feverish, looking out over Nashville, I wondered where the studios were, where Dolly Parton, Randy Travis and Waylon Jennings sang into big microphones with over-the-ears headphones, take after take to get it just right for the rest of us. It's not a big city. They must have been within sight.

I found the airport taxi stand and texted Lena the directions as she was arriving a little later. My instructions were straightforward: go down the escalators, walk straight through the doors. Once outside, take a right and walk to the very end where she'd find me and the taxi stand just around the bend. She texted "I'm at Nashville International airport outside by taxis and shuttles." Except she wasn't. I found her right outside the doors with a shy smile on her face. I hadn't seen her in a few years. She was shorter than I remembered, stocky, with thin, rough-cut hair, wearing an oversized T-shirt and hiking boots.

Once we got settled into our Airbnb, a little blue house in East Nashville with artifacts from Africa and South America, and a Bruce Springsteen Live Acoustic Tour 1996 poster on the wall, I made us some tea and asked, "What would you like to do while you're here?"

"I don't know." She laughed a little and smiled her pleasant smile. "I'm just happy to be here."

"Ok. How about tickets to the Grand Ole Opry?"

“Whatever you want.”

I expected a much more positive reaction. My fever was lifting so I felt the twinge of disappointment clearly. I admonished myself for needing a different answer. A gift should come with no expectations. I bought the tickets.

As we climbed into the cab that night, I noticed her moving gingerly, closing in on herself, but I didn’t ask. As we pulled away from the curb, I asked the driver if we could pass through downtown. The driver, Tarik, was about my age, early fifties, with a trimmed salt-and-pepper beard and decent teeth. He smiled knowingly. “Yes, sir, we can, and I can show you the main attractions.” We proceeded to hit the highlights: Johnny Cash Museum, Honky Tonk Highway, and the Ryman. It became clear on the first stop that Lena really just wanted a picture of herself in front of each one of these places and our driver obliged. Tarik would pull over, Lena would get out, navigate through the sea of cowboy boots and cowboy hats, and I’d grab a few pictures and then on to the next stop. “My friends aren’t going to believe this! Johnny Cash!” Lena said. She was ecstatic.

Tarik finally dropped us at the Grand Ole Opry and we proceeded to our seats in the front row. There was no sign of Lena’s initial ambivalence as she stared up in wonder at one performer after another. I was a little jealous of this level of rapture. I said, “I think the radio broadcasts you and your dad listened to were from right here. From this stage.”

“Really?” Lena replied, her eyes shining.

Hank Williams Jr.’s son Sam stepped onstage in sequined leather tassels. He resembled a young Tom Cruise. I thought he was trying a little too hard to live up to his name, going through the honky tonk motions as though he had studied them hard, but Lena was completely sold on his performance. Then Sam played “Hurt People Hurt People” slow and determined. It rang so true.

“My chest hurts,” Lena said as she leaned forward and down, hands to her heart. The pain wasn’t sharp, she said, more of a dull ache. I asked her if she had just started feeling this and she shook her head with shame. It had begun earlier but she didn’t want to say when. Turns out, a lot earlier. I let her call it and she reluctantly did, halfway through the show.

Leaving the Grand Ole Opry, she saw a security guard just outside of the front doors; she straightened up and said “Hi, sir!” in her friendly manner. She proceeded to ask to get her picture taken with him, and he obliged. After I took the picture, she said to him, “You have a nice smile,” which I’m sure brightened his evening. I thought maybe he reminded her of her father. Either way, she was a wonder. All she said as we made our way to the cab line was, “He’s tall.”

The next morning she simply said, “It hurts,” and I kicked myself for not acting sooner. Lena had no health insurance in the United States. I’ve lived here for decades and knew what a cluster-

fuck this system is, even if you have insurance. I felt my own body tense and shrink into itself. It was a familiar feeling—the one that comes when things go wrong.

The new plan was to get her on a plane back to Canada and straight to a doctor. But I didn't know if she would be able to fly. We headed to the nearest urgent care to get her cleared to go. "It's not that bad," she said. "I'm used to it." Then she revealed that the pain in her chest would wake her up at night in Sage. Why, I thought, had she come to Nashville? Why had I brought her here? My mom would not have done that to her.

Urgent care took its time, my panic rising as the seconds ticked by. The nurse finally came and asked Lena about her symptoms; she answered meekly about her chest pain. The nurse took me aside and told me Lena needed to be admitted to a hospital immediately. I considered calling 911 but thought it would take longer to wait for an ambulance. Four minutes later we were in a Lyft. Our destination: Ascension St. Thomas West across town. Lena seemed to be suffering more than before. It was painful to watch. I tried to comfort her by repeating that it would be all right and that we were lucky that the hospital was so close. The Lyft driver helped by distracting her with conversation. "Oh, you're from Canada!" he said. "You are lucky. I love Canada! I went to Toronto. Clean city. Not British Columbia. Not yet."

"It's a beautiful place," offered Lena as she closed her eyes to rest. "Friendly."

"I bet it is!" He fully understood our urgency. We flew down the highway, weaving through traffic as he chatted away.

When we arrived I opened Lena's door and helped her out. She was in real pain now. We made it into the emergency room and Lena took a chair, leaning forward with her eyes closed, her small hands clutching her chest, rocking ever so slightly back and forth under the fluorescent light. The place, mercifully, was empty. When I explained the symptoms to the nurse on the desk, she picked up the phone, and moments later two more nurses came out briskly, one pushing a wheelchair. They helped Lena into the chair and wheeled her down to the end of the hallway lined with empty chairs and through the double doors. They wouldn't let me go with her.

Time crawled. A few more people came in and took seats in the large space.

I went back up to the front desk and the nurse said calmly, "We believe your friend is having a heart attack." But heart attacks are when people clutch their chests, collapse, and die. They don't slow roll for days. I felt so stupid. It was like I'd been dropped into a maze. How do we get out of here? Each way forward in my mind seemed to lead into another wall. "They're prepping her for surgery."

"Surgery?"

"Yes. They first try stents to clear the blockage."

"Oh, okay."

We were in a cardiac emergency room. I didn't know such things existed. It was ten minutes, tops, from entering that emergency room to Lena going under the knife. I live in Brooklyn and every emergency room there is always packed. Not so in Nashville. I could hear my mom saying, "Robert, the gods work in mysterious ways."

An hour later I stood in front of a tall man in blue scrubs and a surgical mask pulled down to talk to me. He looked at the wall behind me more than I thought necessary. "We installed a stent." He paused before continuing. "But it's not enough."

"Not enough?" God.

"On a healthier heart we can clear a single blockage, but for your friend, that wasn't sufficient. She is going to need triple bypass surgery, which we can schedule in the next few days." Another awkward pause. "I want you to understand that she is not well. We will do our best."

He wasn't unkind, just not a people person. It occurred to me then that I hadn't provided much information about Lena to the hospital staff. It had all happened so fast. Maybe her body was telling them everything they needed to know. They hadn't even asked for an insurance card.

"Sir," he continued, "the average life expectancy of people with fetal alcohol syndrome is thirty-four years."

What? Our roller coaster dropped into something close to a free fall.

"Fifty percent of people with fetal alcohol syndrome have congenital heart defects."

I wanted him to stop talking.

Over the next few days I made my way back-and-forth to the hospital. Lena wasn't awake yet and had a million tubes running to and from her. One young nurse explained that the heart damage was severe. She spoke in a compassionate tone that carried more meaning than the words. I think she was trying to tell me that Lena was going to die.

I had a hard time leaving the hospital after that news. Disoriented, I took wrong turn after wrong turn and the hallways went on and on like in *Severance*, where each turn opened onto another identical, endless hallway. I finally hit a dead end and took a stairway down to an exit out the back of the building.

The next night, I decided to get out of the house to see some live music. Okkervil River, a band I like, was opening for Antlers, a band I'd never heard of, three blocks away from our Airbnb at the Basement East. In between acts, I went to the bar to order a beer. The small dark space was still filling up, lots of solo guys and some couples. As I waited for my drink, I started chatting with a man and woman beside me who were filling up triangular paper water cups from a Gatorade barrel.

"Do you think there are more Okkervil River or Antlers fans in the room?" I asked.

"We were just talking about that," the young woman said. She had short hair and wore practical shoes, and her name, I would learn, was Ellen. "I said Antlers."

The man, bearded and bespectacled, and whose name I would learn was Clint, chimed in, “I like Antlers but said Okkervil River.”

“I’m Okkervil River,” I replied.

“Where are you from?” Clint asked. Apparently, I don’t sound or look like a Tennessean. They did.

“I live in New York.” I usually say this first and save the longer “I grew up between the Northwest Territories, Alberta, and British Columbia, but now live in Brooklyn” for later. Often this is after, “You don’t sound like you’re from New York.”

“Are you here just for this show?” Ellen asked.

“No, no. I’m not supposed to still be here. I was here with a friend of the family, but she had a medical problem. Pretty serious. It was actually a slow-rolling heart attack.”

Ellen and Clint looked at each other. “Oh,” Clint said. It seemed like they wanted to say something but were restraining themselves.

“When did this happen?” Ellen asked.

“A few days ago.” This seemed to confirm something for them.

“We know Lena,” Clint said.

I didn’t know how to respond.

“We’re nurses,” Ellen offered, “and we’re caring for Lena in the St. Thomas West ICU.”

“Oh my God,” I managed to say. “Thank you so much.” My mind was spinning. How small could Nashville be?

Ellen sighed. “She is very sick.”

“Oh, okay, yes, I know,” I managed. I wondered just how sick that meant this time.

“But it’s so good to meet you,” Clint said. “She’s been talking a lot about you.”

That felt good. “Thank you,” I said. “And I appreciate all that you’re doing for Lena. I really can’t believe this. Can I buy you both a drink?”

They reluctantly agreed. As the drinks arrived, Antlers went on. He’s a one-man band, too, slower, moodier and sensitive. As the crowd filled in and the show progressed, I lost Clint and Ellen. Antlers ended with a few high-energy duets with Okkervil River. I learned later that they flip back and forth on the bill, taking turns opening for each other in every new town.

At the end of the show, I saw the nurses a little way ahead of me but thought I should let them have the rest of their night off. I got online to buy a live Antlers/Okkervil recording on orange vinyl. Later, when I got to the parking lot, I heard a man’s voice call out.

I turned, and the nurses were coming down the stairs toward me. “Hey, hi,” Clint said. “We just wanted to say that, well, that we’re really glad that people like you exist in the world.” A few stragglers filed past us. Ellen continued for him. “Lena has talked about why you flew her to

Nashville and how you've helped her in Canada and here. We treat so many people with all kinds of challenges, people who have . . . no one. It's a miracle she's alive."

Hearing this from complete strangers felt good. It triggered a positive chain reaction going back in time, binding together all my failed or unnoticed efforts to help. I don't know if they could sense this inner bloom I was experiencing. It seemed to reflect outward. And I said, "I'm so glad you both exist. You help people every day. And I am so grateful for everything you are doing for Lena." It was intimate and completely open at the same time. At 1 a.m. in East Nashville something fundamentally human passed among us three. That shared feeling was almost too much, and on the other side of it, we had only awkward goodbyes.

The next morning I texted Lena, "Good morning! How are you feeling?"

Lena texted back, "Hi how are you it's ok. The Dr's had to shock me twice Then they put something in the left side of my neck to help and it has thank goodness."

I learned later that Lena had gone into cardiac arrest and they'd had to use a defibrillator twice to restart her heart. Someone yelled, "Clear!" and they shocked her chest like in the movies. Twice. Then back to surgery to insert a pacemaker.

When I saw her at the hospital, she was in and out of it. When in, she mentioned that someone had dropped off some information about programs for people who can't afford treatment. It looked like a grenade to me. Handle it wrong and you're done. Best not to even go near it. I wondered if I was liable for this cost in any way but quickly put that thought aside.

The surgery, thankfully, went well.

Friday evening, as I walked through the front doors of the hospital, my phone rang. "Craig-Sage" was calling. I hadn't spoken to Craig in years. "Hi, Robert," Craig said, using my full name, as Mom used to. For all his bravado, I liked Craig and wondered if the car had worked out.

"So," Craig said, "Lena's mom and stepdad are wondering where she is."

"Her what?"

"Her mom and stepdad came by the apartment," Craig said. I took from this that Craig was living in Lena's apartment. "They haven't been able to reach her."

Lena had told me she was estranged from them. They had stolen her inheritance and kicked her out. I leaned on the scuffed hospital wall for support and tried to absorb this news. It tracked. I was more likely to help her if she was orphaned. As I entered her room, Lena quickly said goodbye to someone I assumed was Craig.

"Hi, Lena," I said. "I talked to Craig."

"Oh," was all she said. She was quiet and suddenly inscrutable, as though the roles we usually played had fallen away. Or she was scared.

My mind went one way and my heart the other. I wondered what else she had lied about.

If she had a family worrying about her, who could help her, why was she here? Why had I been paying her rent for so long? Were they lies or just half-truths half believed by a woman whose disabilities exposed her to so much danger, physical and emotional? "Can you explain yourself?" I asked softly.

She was spooked. She couldn't explain the discrepancies and instead repeated the same stories I'd heard before, including that Craig knew the truth and that her mom was awful to her. Her dad loved her, but her mom didn't. I wish I could say that my heart won out. It didn't. As much as I tried to understand, to flex and to bend, I just couldn't do it. I didn't yell at her or punch a wall or really say anything. I felt and acted like I did when I was little and someone or something disappointed me. I stayed quiet and walked away. Little bombs going off inside me.

I spent that night at Robert's Western World, the real home for country and western swing music in Nashville, or so the band leader said. Dressed in Wrangler jeans and a crisp white cowboy hat, he looked somewhere between his late fifties and late sixties and kept it western swinging as I ordered the recession special, a fried baloney sandwich that came with a moon pie and a Miller High Life. And then a few more. A man in his seventies was cutting it up on the dance floor with a woman half his age. He moved her effortlessly around his and other bodies. The man was the same age my dad would have been. I imagined sitting here with Dad, who wouldn't have been on the dance floor. What would he have said to me? What would I have said to him?

"Hey, son. It's nice to see you in Nashville. At least some of me rubbed off on you. Why are you here?"

"I'm here because after you died, Mom went sideways and I've been picking up the pieces ever since."

"You're picking up the pieces in Nashville? What pieces are here? Do you wear cowboy boots now?"

"The kind of boots you died in? No thanks."

"Yeah. I'm sorry for all that. I bet it was hard for you. Is your mom in the hospital?"

"Oh, no, Dad. She's not in the hospital. She passed away, thirty-six years after you. I'm here to help a young woman she had taken under her wing. She did that after you left, for a few young women."

"That's nice."

"Yeah."

"Son," Dad would have said, "I love you and the man you've become, but I think you need some help."

Instead of going back to the hospital the next morning, I went to the Parthenon. The one in Nashville, 5,700 miles from the one in Athens. It took the Greeks nine years to build the first

Parthenon, including a shrine to Athena; it took Nashville around seventy years to build the second. Sometimes, we go backwards. Staring up at Athena, I thought of Mom and then of Lena. I pictured Mom as big as Athena, the protector of civic life and justice, railing against the medical establishment that had controlled her as a young woman and never listened. I pictured her testifying in front of the town council in Sage, berating them for not helping vulnerable young women like Lena. Like her younger self.

For reasons I now understood, I had brought Lena thousands of miles away from her home, and somehow, someone or something other than me was protecting her. I wouldn't be able to fix myself with this, and I needed to stop trying, but I could and should still see this through. I looked from Athena's big eyes to her heart, forgave Lena, and returned to the hospital. A week later Lena was discharged and we drove northeast to New York City, so she could recuperate before returning to Sage. An hour into the drive I asked her if they had provided any medications for her to take.

"Don't be mad at me," she said.

She had been too scared to mention that she had prescriptions to be filled and no money to pay for them. They were waiting at a pharmacy across the street from the hospital.

I wasn't mad at her. I turned the car around and headed back to Nashville. Mom, I thought. I wish you were here to see this.

Meanwhile a very large hospital bill makes its way through the Ascension St. Thomas West billing department. Where it will go and how it will end, no one knows. ♦