

Dear Claire

December 15, 2015

The apartment is half packed and you're asleep, and I'm soon to follow, but first this. You haven't had a lot of questions, which surprises me, but maybe you're doing me the favor of spreading them out so I'm not overwhelmed. If that's so, I thank you, because I am overwhelmed. I'm also ready. I think you are, too. I hope you are. Either way, it's happening.

I've wondered when you might come around to where we're going and why. It's a fair question, if you ever do ask it, and not knowing when you'll see this, maybe I'll just rehearse whatever my answer is going to be, hoping I can replicate it when the questions come.

I've decided that you leave Texas the same way you leave any other place—little by little, then all at once. You talk yourself into leaving early on, convince yourself that Texas doesn't serve you, it's never really served you, that you're free to go and should do so as soon as possible. And you hold this to yourself for a while,

because it's still audacious, even if you're entitled. Long ago, I didn't dare share with my friends that I was thinking of leaving—that I'd about decided on it—because I knew they would never think of leaving, and thus what made me think I should? A thousand things, really. More than I can explain right here, right now.

What I needed was a crutch, some reason for going that I could lean on, and some way of making the leaving inevitable.

A job is a crutch. There's not a Texan alive who doesn't grasp the value of a place to work and the ability to put food on the table. I can remember your grandfather talking years ago about some East Texas politician defending an asbestos plant, for crying out loud, saying that a little crud in the lungs was worth the tradeoff for economic security. The guy died of lung cancer, too, so that's nothing if not loyalty to a premise.

I didn't have a job offer, though. I needed something else.

A man filled that need. I'm sorry, Claire, because whenever you read this, it'll be obvious to you that the man was your father, and here I am, dispelling any idea you might have that ours was a romance for the ages. Maybe, if I'm honest enough, you'll know it wasn't before these words ever pass your eyes.

It rubbed me wrong, the feminist stance I'd always been proud of juxtaposed against the reality of leaving under the guise of a man's opportunities, but it played with your grandmother and her sisters. It went over well at a Sunday picnic as the potato salad was passed around. "There's this fella I'm seeing, and well, he's just got a peach of an opportunity, and, well, we've talked about it, and it just seems like the thing to do." I actually talked like that. And that got them all to nodding and clucking and saying, well, we love you and we'll miss you, but it must be done.

First, though, I had to talk to your grandma and grandpa. Grandpa, he just took it in, considering, smoldering, pretty much silent except to say, "Well, it's your life," and perhaps he didn't recognize what a breakthrough that was, a man of his age and station conceding something like that.

I thought it was damn near profound. Seems pathetic now.

Grandma, on the other hand, picked at a few things. “You’re so close to your degree.” And, yeah, I was, but there were colleges where we were headed, and so I told her not to worry, that I’d get it done. She came back and said she didn’t know I was serious about Paul, whom she called “this boy.” They’d all been boys to her, every last one of them, even though I was twenty-two and had been lying down with men since I was seventeen. (Jesus, that was hard to write, but I promised myself I would be honest, if nothing else, and there it is. Whenever you read this, let me know if we need to talk.)

I couldn’t bring myself to tell them what the score really was, that he was a way out, not my soulmate. So I told them things got serious when I wasn’t looking. And finally came this from your grandma: “I just never pictured you anywhere but here.” You can’t even engage with that, because what might she have thought if she ever bothered to look at the picture I saw?

So one fine spring day, we headed out, and there I was, waving from the passenger seat of the Mustang your father still complains about not having anymore. We had dabbed your grandma’s tears and hugged your grandpa. We were gone. It was nearly eight hours before the immensity of Texas let go and released us into New Mexico, and I thought, well, that’s it, I’m finally free. And your father, long before he was your father, reached over and squeezed my knee, and I never liked that, but it was almost comforting that day.

Texas was gone, falling behind us a mile a minute, and I was relieved and scared all at the same time. You leave Texas little by little and then all at once, yes, but Texas is also a magnet—a big, southerly magnet pulling at everyone else in the country with myths and manufactured romance and jobs and cheap living and low taxes. You can get away, but can you ever really leave? Expats from Delaware or Maryland probably don’t confront such questions.

“Denver tonight,” your father said. “Montana tomorrow.”

And I said, “Texas, never again.”

Well, Claire, that was a lie. Here we go.