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WONDERING WHERE EVERYTHING WENT

*"Boy," said Anastasia, "you know what I wish? I wish that everybody who loved each other would die at exactly the same time. Then nobody would have to miss anyone."*

*"Well," said her father slowly, "it just doesn't work that way. It just doesn't seem to work that way very often."*

*They packed the rest of her grandmother's things: her glasses, the gold pin that she had worn on her dress at Thanksgiving and Christmas, her stockings, and a pair of soft woolen gloves. It didn't take very long.*

*Anastasia thought of her own room, and about the time when she had decided to leave home, and had packed in her father's US Navy bag. There were so many things in her room that she had had to leave most of them behind.*

*She wondered how it happened that when you were ninety-two you didn't have many things left.*

*(Anastasia Krupnik)*

I want to talk, this morning, about making journeys, and leaving things behind along the way.

When my own mother died, four years ago, when she was 86, I went down to Virginia to bury her and to help my brother pack up her things. I had been struck, visiting my mother just the week before her death, with how SMALL she had become. She had never been a large woman - she was my height, I think, about 5'6" - and when I was a kid I remember her grumbling about her weight, and going on diets - but she was never particularly large. But then, as she aged and grew frail, she seem to shrink, as if part of her was leaving.

And then, in her empty house, after her death, I was astonished at how little there was to pack and label. I remember thinking "When did the piano disappear?" - although surely I knew it had been sold, years before, when my parents moved from a large house to a smaller one.

Why were there no guest towels anymore? I remembered her monogrammed linen guest towels. My brother and I used to roll our eyes each time she got them out, arranging the bathrooms for company, thinking to ourselves that such niceties - which, incidentally, needed special laundering, and ironing - were obsolete. They dated back to the days of servants.

But they were emblematic of my mother. And suddenly, I realized they were gone.

"She had a fur coat, didn't she? Where's her fur coat?" I asked my brother.

He shrugged. He didn't remember. She had been in and out of the hospital and the nursing home for four years. We were cleaning out a house that had been unoccupied for a long time. "I think she probably gave it away when they moved to Florida in the 70's," he said.

He was probably right. I hadn't noticed. I hadn't been paying attention.

"And her knitting! She had all that yarn left over from so many grandchildren's sweaters. What happened to it? She was going to make patchwork blankets out of all those different colors."

My brother was shaking his head at my ignorance. "She was *blind*," he reminded me. "She'd been blind for at least three years. She didn't *knit* any more."

He was right. I'd forgotten.

My newest book is about Sam, the Krupnik's youngest. Many of you know Sam.

His books almost didn't get written, incidentally. many kids had written me letters, asking for a book about Anastasia's little brother, but I thought they didn't know their own minds. Who really wants a book about a 3-year-old? Not MY audience.

But the letters kept coming, and I suppose they triggered my subconscious, which went to work on it; and then, one day, I sat down at the computer, and a book about Sam began to take shape. I began it at the same place that I ended the first book about Sam's sister.

*'Does he wet his diapers a whole lot?' Anastasia asked suspiciously.*

*"He's only five hours old," said her mother, "so I haven't had time to conduct an exhaustive study. But in all honesty, Anastasia, I have to tell you that I think he will probably wet his diapers a lot."*

(Anastasia Krupnik)

*"Does he wet his diapers a whole lot?" the girl asked the man and the woman.*

*Yes, he thought, I do. As a matter of fact I am wetting them right now, right at this very moment.*

(All About Sam)

When it was finished, I gave it to my editor, and he read it and chuckled, but then - being a businessman- he said, "But who is it FOR?"

And I - being a smartass - said to him, "It's for the same person all of my books are for. It's for ME."

So that is how Sam's books came about, and came to be. The newest one is the third.

Now in this third one, which is called SEE YOU AROUND, SAM! Sam makes a journey. Just as an aside, I will tell you that in every book - in order for there to be a book, a story, a point, a reason for writing it - the main character makes a journey. Sometimes - very often, in fact, it is an interior journey: a journey that does not involve geography, except the geography of the mind and heart. But there is always a going forth - a quest - a seeking for something - and as coming back, when the something is found.

Sam's is that kind of circular journey, too. But it is also the most fundamental of geographic journeys. He leaves his house, announces that he is running away, going, in fact, to Alaska, where he will be better understood - by walruses - and he sets out on his quest to find a world which likes him better and makes him more comfortable.

As he heads off, stopping at houses around the neighborhood, he begins to collect things. People give him stuff. He acquires and he accumulates.

He gets a baby blanket and some oranges and a jar of peanut butter from Mrs. Sheehan, and Mr. Fosburgh gives him a world atlas and a flashlight so that he can find his way. Gertrude Stein provides a fur hat.

But after a while Sam is so burdened by all of his accumulated stuff that his journey bogs down. He is hungry, tired, miserable, scared, and he has wet his pants as well.

So he divests, and returns home, to the place where he feels most comfortable, though he had to make the journey in order to figure that out.

A journey is a way of figuring out what stuff matters, and of getting rid of what doesn't.

In 1977, I was divorced, and I left the house where I had lived comfortably for many years. I took only my car, my typewriter, and my clothes. Everything I owned fit into my Honda Civic. Although many people - especially lawyers - would tell you that it is not the best way to go about things, simply to take nothing - for me it proved to be liberating. First of all, it made me work much harder than I might otherwise have done, because of simple necessity. When nothing is provided for you, you have to provide it for yourself, and so you become self-disciplined, and self-discipline is an awfully good thing for a writer to have.

It was the first of my acquisitions: self-discipline. I got up every morning, in my over-a-garage furnished

apartment, put on some clothes, since I had kept those, went to my typewriter, since I had kept that, and worked, in order to buy food and to pay my rent.

Whenever I had any extra money, which was not often and was certainly not much, I began to acquire STUFF. I didn't buy furniture, because I had rented a furnished apartment, hideous though it was, and people loaned me things. And I didn't buy gadgets or ornaments. I began to buy books.

After a while, I bought some pine boards and made myself bookcases.

And when winter came, and I had to move again, because my little garage wasn't heated (this was in Maine) I rented someone's summer house for the winter, and discovered that I couldn't fit my belongings into my Honda anymore. I borrowed a friend's station wagon in order to move.

And when winter ended, and I had to give the summer house back, and I found another place to live - someone's guest house - it wasn't furnished. So I bought parts of a bed from a second hand store, and I borrowed wicker porch furniture from a friend, and my ex-husband's new wife gave me my old pine kitchen table because it had been my grandmother's, and I bought a painting, a landscape done by a painter friend, which cost \$300. Nobody could understand why someone who didn't own a television or a whole set of dishes would buy a painting.

I'm not certain I understand it either, but I can tell you that when you start a journey from scratch, and begin to

acquire, you sort out somehow what your real needs are. I needed books and a bed - and I needed a wonderful painting - more than I needed a television.

The next thing I acquired was music. My grown daughter gave me her old stereo, and I began to buy records.

Now let me back up to explain what I was doing in terms of writing, while I was also scrambling to exist and to sort out my life and what things I valued.

My first book, *A SUMMER TO DIE*, was published in 1977, coinciding almost exactly with my divorce. I got my first fan letters - a few surprises from adolescent girls - as a result of that book; but I had no way of knowing whether it would do well, sell well, or what "doing well" meant. I was a complete novice to the field of children's books. I'd been a free-lance journalist, a part-time magazine writer up till then. My editor had called me to tell me that *A SUMMER TO DIE* was getting starred reviews, and then he had to explain to me what starred reviews were.

I wrote my second book, *FIND A STANGER, SAY GOODBYE*, while living in that garage apartment. It was under contract to Houghton Mifflin but had not yet been published, and I was working on a third book, the book that was to be called *AUTUMN STREET* and which was derived from childhood memories about a friend - the grandchild of my own grandparent's cook - who had been murdered many years ago.

Then a couple of things happened, almost simultaneously. One spring day in 1978, I got a call from Mr. Ralph Steiger, president of the IRA, telling me that they had awarded A SUMMER TO DIE the IRA Children's Book Award. I didn't know who Ralph Steiger was, or what the IRA was, but I thanked him politely and hung up, a little mystified. I called my editor, in Boston, and asked him what that was all about. I told him that Mr. Steiger wanted me to go to Houston and I told him I would, but I was embarrassed because actually, I couldn't afford to go to Houston. My editor, Walter, patiently explained that Houghton Mifflin would pay my way.

And so I went to Houston to receive my award, which I thought would be a plaque or a certificate, maybe like the National Honor Society Award I had received in high school. And when I arrived, my editor met me and took me to a luncheon at which there were 2,000 people; and we sat at the head table eating chicken, and listened to Mildred Taylor make an eloquent speech, during which I whispered to Walter "Do I have to make a speech?" and he blanched and whispered back, "You mean you don't have a speech?"

I didn't. But I made one anyway, because everyone was looking at me and I had to say something; and so I told them that the population of the room was four times larger than the population of my town; and that the check they gave me - for \$1000 - was four times larger than the amount of money I had made the previous month.



Afterward, a TV reporter interviewed me in front of very bright lights, with a camera going, and she asked me whether, since my book was a realistic novel, did I think the death of fantasy was at hand. I stared at her for a minute and then said that I didn't have the slightest idea, and she glared at me and said "Cut." And then I went back home to Maine, to continue working on the book I was writing and the magazine articles that I had lined up.

I found myself wondering, on the plane going home, what all of that was about.

And when I got home, I discovered that the little local paper - the York County Coastal Star - had gotten wind of the IRA Award and had mentioned it in a small article. As a result of that, the local middle school principal called me up and asked if I would speak at their eighth grade graduation, coming up in a couple of weeks. And I said sure. It wasn't that now, having made one brief speech in Houston, I suddenly felt myself to be an accomplished speaker. It was just that I felt as if I had said thank politely to 2000 strangers, I could probably say Congratulations politely to maybe 43 kids who lived in my immediate area and rode their bikes past my house.

On the appointed evening, I put on the same peach-colored dress that I had worn to the luncheon in Houston; and I drive my Honda Civic down the road about a mile, maybe less, to the middle school gym where the graduation was

taking place. It was a very hot night. I had no speech prepared.

I sat down in the front row, on one of the folded chairs that had been set up in the gym. I was sitting beside the school principal, and the local superintendent of schools, both of whom were listed on the program as speakers, along with me. The rest of the gym was gilled with grandparents and parents and brothers and sisters of the eighth grade graduates.

The kids were seated on the stage. The boys all wore too-big corduroy suits and looked very hot. The girls wore pretty dresses and corsages and looked very hot. I wws hot, too. I began to think about what I would say when it was my turn.

The school principal got up, went to the stage and made his remarks, and among his remarks he said, "These are your golden years."

I looked at those kids sitting up there in their clothes that didn't fit on top of their bodies that didn't fit, some of them with zits on their chins and some of them with braces on their teeth, and I found myself thinking, "These are their golden years?" *He's lying to them*, I thought.

Then the superintendent got up and went to the stage and made his remarks and among them, he said, "Life is like a football game, and this is first down and goal to go." *Excuse me?* I thought. In what way exactly, is life like a football

*game? This man is the superintendent of schools and he is talking nonsense to these kids.*

Then it was my turn. By now the kids were almost falling asleep, they were so hot and so bored. I went up to the stage and stood at the microphone in a way that meant I was half-facing the kids, and half-facing the audience, and I said that I was sorry but I didn't think these were their golden years at all. I thought that if you had to assign a color to eighth grade - based on my own memories, I would assign it dull beige. At best, dull beige. Golden, I told them, comes later, if it ever comes at all.

And I told them that life was not like a football game. The thing about a football is that there are clearly listed rules, and if you break them, the penalties are quite clear, and there are several guys in striped shirts who keep track of everything, and also you have - if you're a good player - learned all the plays. Life is much more of a complicated set of surprises, and when you need the striped-shirt guys, they are nowhere in sight; and often there is no one who cheers if you make a good block. And there is frequently no team - you're just out on the field all alone.

I told them what I remembered most about my eighth grade year. No math, no science, no history, not even any English, which was my favorite subject. What I remembered was the desperate envy I felt of a girl in my class named Bonnie Forsythe, because she had enormous breasts and I didn't have any at all.

After I had said all of that - which didn't take long - I looked at the kids and I saw that they were no longer dozing. They were smiling. They were nudging each other. They had a sense of recognition, and they were looking at me as if I knew what I was talking about.

But then I looked out into the gymnasium, at all the parents and grandparents, and their faces were like concrete.

I realized in that moment that I could talk to the kids - or I could talk to the parents - but I couldn't talk to both at the same time, not with any truth, not without platitudes.

And so I chose the kids. It was a moment of epiphany, one that I've told about often - perhaps you've heard me before - one that I will not ever forget.

So that is what was happening to me as I went along my somewhat tremulous path of starting to acquire a new life and deciding what I would acquire with it.

I still have that first painting that I bought. It hangs over my living room fireplace. I still have the first books - there are hundreds of others now. And the music. The second hand stereo is long gone, replaced by a new one; but I still have the music.

I have a television now (okay, I'll be honest; I have two televisions, actually), and a microwave, but they came along much later in the acquisition of STUFF, and they would be the first things to go if I had to strip myself down once again.

That winter, the winter of 1979, I set aside the half-written book which was to be called, eventually, later, AUTUMN STREET, and wrote ANASTASIA KRUPNIK instead. It was winter in Maine, snowy, icy, cold, I was poor, and I chose to make myself laugh.

That was a pivotal year for me, 1979, the year that I decided what I would do with my life. I gave up journalism that year; I moved away from that village and settled in Boston; I continued the journey I am still making.

It has been a journey somewhat like Sam's: geographic, often; carrying around a lot of stuff, figuring out what to discard and what to keep; and circular, back to the beginning, but changed now, knowing now who he is and where he wants to be.

Sound familiar? It is the journey of Jonas, too. Setting out because you have no choice; you have to change the way things are. Deciding what to take: what will keep you alive; what will nourish your heart and spirit. Shedding things along the way: what is too burdensome, what no longer has meaning or value. And not knowing, really, what your destination is to be - but finding, when you arrive at it, that it is the same life you left, the same you, only changed. There's laughter now. Colors. Music.

In the first Anastasia book, when she packs her grandmother's things, she comments wistfully that there is so little there. And that is true. But when she looks through the things that are left - the things her grandmother has

cherished and saved - she finds a soft nightgown, a sweater, a wedding ring, and a little paperweight painted with tulips that Anastasia herself had made in first grade.

When Rabble Starkey, in the book of that name, sets out with her young mother to start over, to forge a new life, they take a dictionary, a cookie jar, a pillow filled with pine needles, and a patchwork quilt.

When I packed my own mother's few things, what I found was much the same. No fur coat, no piano, no linen towels for guests. But I found my own kindergarten report card, which said, "She refuses to drink her milk at snack time," and I found, too, a letter from her grandson, my older son. He wrote it to me, in 1988, and I sent it along to my mother. I brought it back home with me after her funeral. On several occasions I have read parts of this letter to audiences - so perhaps some of you have heard it before - but it describes so well, I think, something that we all - writers, teachers, parents, whoever we are, all of us who work in some way on behalf of children - feel. My son's life was too short; he was killed in an accident last summer. But when I read this at his memorial service, I was reminded again, with gratitude, that he had had this moment.

*.....I had gone first, so I was finished flying and was walking around, still in my flight suit, carrying my helmet, heading for the VIP tent for a cup of coffee.*

*It was a typical English day, cloudy, drizzling occasionally. But there were thousands of people there...the Brits really love their air shows.*

People kept stopping me and asking me to sign their programs.  
(Sometime, Mother, you'll have to explain this autograph thing to me. What do they do with these autographs?)

While I was signing one for someone, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a little boy about eight years old watching me,. He was holding his program, and his parents were nudging him to come forward to get an autograph, but he kept shaking his head and looking at the ground. He was too shy.

So I said to him, "Would you like me to sign your program?" and he said, "Oh, please, sir."

And (although I'd been managing just fine, doing a juggling act, up till then), I said, "Would you mind holding my helmet for me while I sign my name?"

He took my helmet, and I signed his program, which only took a second, and then I glanced back at him and saw that he wasn't looking at me, but at my helmet in his arms. He was stroking it as if it were made of the finest crystal.

I was almost overwhelmed with the sudden awareness of what that helmet meant to him... what I symbolized to him...that I was a hero to that little boy, and to others like him.

And I found myself saying, as I took my helmet back, "You know, I think I wore out my gloves on today's flight, and I'll have to get new ones. Would you like to have these?"

He said, "Oh, yes, please, sir."

And I gave him my (perfectly good) pair of gloves and said good-bye.

As I walked away, I thought, "Lowry, you jerk, those were \$75 gloves."

But throughout the rest of the day, walking around, occasionally I saw that little boy. All day long he was wearing the gloves....they were enormous on his little hands.

And each time I saw him, I thought how lucky I was to have had that encounter with that child. I think most people go through their whole lives without ever having a moment like that, when they become aware of what they represent....

(Grey Lowry, excerpt from 1988 letter)

I think my son was right when he said "Most people" but he would not have been correct if he had said it in this room. Every one of you here has moments like that, when a child makes you aware of what you represent. I do too, when I get their letters, or when I see their faces as I sign their books.

And when I have shrunk, I hope a long time from now, and my kids are packing up and wondering where all the STUFF went.... there will still be things that were permanent acquisitions of my journey. There will be books. There will be music. Colors. Memories. And there will be the encounters, all the encounters, with the children.