***The Half of It – The Story Behind the Story***

At the beginning of the pandemic, I’d go for my daily walk, and neighbors would stop for a quick hello from the opposite side of the street. We’d check in: how’re you doing, how’re you holding up? And often they’d say something along the lines of, “You must be getting so much writing done!”

*Writing?* I’d think. *How on earth would I do that?*

Coming up with an idea for a story, inventing characters, building a world for them, “hearing” their voices, setting them on courses of action—or even inaction—takes an enormous amount of concentration. You have to be able to mentally put yourself in a soundproof booth, away from real life, so you can be immersed in this other life that exists only in your head. With Covid constantly pounding on the door—*Wipe down the mail! Don’t hug anyone! Why did you just cough! Get more toilet paper! Check on Mom! Check again!—*I found it impossible even to *read* for pleasure, much less write. Every writer I talked to felt the same way. We were all far too distracted to get much work done.

And not for nothing, my living situation wasn’t exactly conducive. My attorney husband, who was now working from home and needed a room with a door so he could hold confidential conversations with clients, took over my office. My two youngest sons were home from school, and my adult daughter soon moved back into our fairly small house. She set up camp in the living room with her fulltime-job Zoom calls and occasional yoga sessions. My laptop and I became nomads in constant search of a little corner to temporarily call our own until someone invaded, and we’d have to move again.

As social media constantly attested, many of us were finding new ways to manage our anxiety. There was suddenly a whole lot of bread being baked, musical instruments being dusted off, and rocks being painted. I dove into sewing masks for local hospitals. But what really kept me on an even keel (or quarantine-even, anyway) was gardening. I’m here to tell you, my yard practically looked like the grounds at Versailles. (Not really, but in my head, yes.) And I couldn’t have cared less who saw me smeared with dirt, digging yet another hole, planting yet another hosta, jigging to whatever song came up next on my Spotify playlist (not coincidentally called Mom’s Playlist, like Helen’s). I was getting through however I could, just like everyone else.

About midsummer, I started thinking about how the pandemic was not only wreaking unimaginable havoc … but it was also putting us all on pause in some ways that might not be so bad. In my house, with nowhere to go, no white-knuckle commute for my husband, no revolving door of people coming and going as we usually have, there was time to think, to reflect, even. Paradoxically, with so many fewer choices available, I saw my family opting for things that were actually better for them. More exercise, more creativity, less running around for running around’s sake.

In August 2020, the opening scene of *The Half of It* popped into my head simply as a woman my age sitting on a bench by a river reflecting on her life. (The actual bench exists by the Sudbury River that flows through my town). But of course a writer needs to add conflict, so her self-review is not a happy one; it’s one of regret. There’s some pivotal moment in her past that precipitated a series of wrong turns which led her to this point of admitting that she isn’t really happy and hasn’t been for most of her adult life. It needed some action, of course, so I sent a three-year-old running by to break her out of her navel gazing and force her to do something.

At first Cal Crosby was just another grandparent who, it turns out, also has regrets. They reveal this to each other as people sometimes do with strangers they never expect to see again. But then a friendship begins, and they form a little playgroup, getting together with their grandchildren, supporting each other to fix what went wrong.

*Boring*.

What if … what if this guy was with her at that pivotal moment when things started going south? What if he’s the *reason* for the regret? Woohoo! Now we’re talking!

I’ve always wanted to write a reunion story: two people separated for whatever reason who serendipitously cross paths years later. It always included a moment where one looks at the other and thinks, *So this is how you turned out.*

Until August 2020, I’d never come up with a satisfying context in which that would happen. Now I had it, and I started poking around, playing with it, writing notes, possible motivations, secondary characters, whole scenes.

By September, both my younger sons had moved out—one to his own apartment, and the other to a semester in the wilds of Wyoming. My daughter had shifted her “office” into one of their bedrooms. I had given up resenting the loss of my office, in part because when my husband was on a non-confidential call, he liked to walk around and clean, sweeping the mudroom, unloading the dishwasher, making beds. One day I looked up and he was outside wiping the window next to me with glass cleaner and a rag, talking away into his earpiece. Losing an office and gaining a housekeeper was a tradeoff I was willing to make.

Covid was still banging on the door of my mental soundproof booth, of course, but it had become a familiar refrain at that point, one that was easier to ignore for a few hours. In fact, as the fall came and the yard went dormant, writing supplanted gardening as my go-to coping skill. Being in Helen’s world was the mini vacation I couldn’t have in real life. With nowhere to go, I wrote more than I ever have in my career, sometimes logging as many as four or five thousand words in a day. I completed a full first draft in March 2021, just seven months after I’d started.

What made it really interesting was writing about the future—October 2021—which I hoped and imagined would be post-pandemic. (Boy did I guess wrong. I had to go back later and add in the occasional mask in revisions.) I knew from the beginning that I didn’t want to write about characters social distancing, and my agent confirmed this instinct as soon as I told her about my idea. “Oh, God,” she said. “Don’t write about Covid. We’re all so sick of it!”

The tricky part was waiting to see if what I hoped—that we’d be semi-normal by October 2021—would come to pass. In early January of that year, with cases spiking and the vaccine rollout slower than expected, I thought I’d have to shift the whole story to spring of 2022. I read the newspaper every day for clues as to what the future would hold, and not, I’m a little ashamed to say, only for the sake of the planet. I had Helen and Cal to worry about. I was on their planet, too, and I wanted them to be safe.

That’s the funny thing about writers. The world inside that mental soundproof booth? Sometimes it feels very, very real, no matter what’s happening outside.