
SUE ALLISON

What I Did Without You

I had a lot more time, obviously, since I wasn't going to the hospital every day, and spent it in the usual way of people seeking escape: reading. Worked late, on days I didn't leave early because I couldn't concentrate. Broke up with that boyfriend. Bought my own damned ring. Wrote a book. Went to London for the party and had my wallet, watch, and tape recorder stolen from my room and went home, too bereft to stand it.

Stopped going to the theater: your thing. But discovered opera and went obsessively, twice, three times a week, sometimes just for an hour. Wished I had done more for you. Why I didn't take you to Italy for a week? Or rent a car and drive to the Hamptons for the day? What would have been so hard about that? I didn't even take you for a taxi ride around town, for one last time. Trying for normal was hard enough, and all I wanted, all I could imagine you did, too, a grilled ham and cheese, a chocolate milkshake, the Sunday *New York Times*. As if nothing had changed and never would.

I don't know how to tell you what your absence meant. My grief outlasted sympathy, sincere, but short, as if losing a brother doesn't take as long to get used to as if your husband dies or your wife or a parent, child God forbid, and everyone recognizes your need for psychological

and social rescue. People invite you. They bring casseroles. They don't say, oh, well, that's over, that quick-moving illness on the downslope to death, as if death were a relief and you could get back to your life.

I fell in love—suddenly, madly; it was so exciting—and got married and moved, to Washington, but by the time I left Manhattan, I had already stopped avoiding your neighborhood, my old neighborhood from when I moved in with you before getting my own place and you taught me how to live in New York. We got a dog, and then another so the first wouldn't be lonely. Adopted a child, a beautiful girl. We moved to a farmhouse in the country, which was the real life-saving life-changer: I couldn't be looking for your long face and your loose-legged lope weaving down Second Avenue eating a slice of pizza or just absorbed in your own happy thoughts if I wanted to. I couldn't imagine you in the country. Learned to play the piano well enough to make the music make me cry, to golf, to drive. I got glasses. I went to graduate school. The town we moved to turned out to be in a time warp and we got a social life of dinner parties, home concerts, hunt breakfasts, tailgate hopping at the steeplechase races, strutting in our high boots and thorn-proof coats as thoroughbreds ran through

the fields like in a painting.

But enough about me.

The Second Avenue Deli closed. Your old neighborhood went way upscale. I don't know where all those Hungarians went when the yuppies moved in. Claudia married, a stage actor, and moved to Brooklyn. It was she with whom I went to the opera. I don't know long I would have made it on my own. We'd meet at the ticket window absolutely every Monday after work to buy our next week's seats up in the balcony where you can't see much but the music is sublime. Thank you for her, your friend, who became my substitute brother.

That acting teacher you hated so much got famous. I met Jane Perkins at a party at her brother's house and nearly fell over; a name from your past and there she suddenly was. Finally saw the movie you said was your favorite, *Reds*. I rented it

and watched it on my laptop computer. Everyone has a laptop computer these days and cell phones and all kinds of things you never heard of. The world economy collapsed, but the show goes on.

I wrote this because when I woke up, I woke up remembering the question that came to my mind the night before the night you died but that I did not say aloud—there in your hospital room with your friends gathered around your bed, chatting, as if it were a party, and *West Side Story* playing softly on the radio next to your head so that in the midst of this scene you said, "It's so beautiful," and when I realized you were talking about the music, that there was music, I said, "What is it?" and you said, dreamily, "Bernstein," and I said, "What piece?" and you rolled your eyes—because I knew if I did I would cry.

So this is it. What I did. It's not much, really, but it's a lot more than I expected. 