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Plan B = Liberation

The Fates seemed to turn against me when I hit sixty—or sixty hit *me*. My husband and I had been going to a health club for over two decades, we took spin classes, hot yoga, and even worked out with a trainer. I was fairly trim, had low body fat for my age, and felt comfortable being who I was even with amazingly fit people working out around me at our palatial health club. I was past the age of invidious comparisons. Admiring them didn't make me feel lesser or ashamed. I felt part of a team.

And then a car accident changed everything. I was driving back on a rainy afternoon from presenting a writing workshop at Oakland University in southeast Michigan on a slick highway. Suddenly I woke up in a wide grassy median, dazed, wondering why there were all these trees and shrubs in front of me. I was surrounded by air bags and my head hurt a little.

Before I could reach for my phone to call home, a blue Michigan State police car pulled up behind me, two cops got out and I was able to roll down my window. They asked me to step out and I did, surprisingly steady and calm. The whole thing had the air of a dream. They asked if I was hurt and I didn't think so, asked if I could make it home once they cut away the airbags. I thought I could.

They had me follow them out of the median which had a treacherous ditch I had apparently slid into and out of thanks to the slippery highway, and they drove part of the way home with me to see if I was okay. That moved me deeply.

Three days later I was in the ER with a concussion: nauseas, dizzy, and a bad headache. I was ordered to take things easy for a few weeks, though my avuncular GP said I could teach my classes at Michigan State University if I was driven there and back and otherwise rested at home. Easy-Peasy, right?

What followed over the next few years was a series of surgeries that weren't connected but somehow seemed to be: reconstruction of my heavily arthritic right thumb, the same surgery on my left, hernia repair, removal of a bone spur on my right foot that was waking me up at night, and escalating migraines.

My time at the gym kept getting interrupted by all these "procedures," and migraines that sent me to bed. I stopped feeling myself moving through the world with relative ease, unencumbered. None of what I was dealing with was remotely life-threatening but it sure threatened a lifestyle I was used to: heading to the gym three-four times a week. And all of it was traumatizing me, slowly.

As my sixties advanced I felt more and more besieged until I decided I needed something new in my life and started taking voice lessons at a school affiliated with Michigan State University where I was teaching at the time. I hadn't sung in a choir in decades and wasn't interested in doing that again. I wanted something private, a present for myself, and the intimate studio crammed with an upright piano and a bookcase filled with an odd miscellany of books and do-dads seemed the right place. My cherubic, warm-hearted, curly-haired teacher Natalie told me I had a two-octave range, was a bass-baritone and working together would be fun. And definitely *not* a waste of my time.

I had some years of German behind me because I'd been doing book tours in Germany, and the classes helped me feel comfortable navigating around that country, so I picked some art

songs by Schubert and Schumann, and the work lifted me out of my state of unease. It also gave me a new sense of control.

My goal's been simple through the whole process: enjoying myself. Yes, I was starting solo lessons quite late in life, but I still have a voice, I can make music, and that's sustained me as new surgeries wait for me. I still feel old and shaken at times, but my singing has kind of set me free. When I listen to the lesson I've recorded, when I practice between lessons to get a note or line just right, I'm in a beautiful, sustaining world.

My husband is a bit tone deaf, but he loves to hear me sing anyway, and as a former teacher, he enjoys my sharing what it's like to be a student again and what I think about how my voice teacher is coaching and coaxing me. I grew up with a great deal of body shame: I was chunky, had bad teeth and flat feet, so performing even for one person has taken courage I didn't know I had.

But that's all the audience I need.

And when I sing, I feel completely free.