

OUT OF THE BLUE

My father texted me a link to an "Op-Ed Doc" from the New York Times that featured a man nicknamed "Slomo," a 69-year-old from North Carolina who had been a neurosurgeon in another life but who quit his job 15 years ago to move to California, where he now spends his days in a tank top, shorts, fingerless gloves and one of those floppy fisherman's hats, listening to music while he slowly rollerblades down beachside paths, high-fiving passersby and gliding with arms outstretched and one leg extended, ballerina-like. "Everybody has the capacity to dream up and believe anything he wants to," Slomo says. "The shrinks or the psychoanalysts would call it a personal delusion system. And you believe it because you choose to. When I skate, I try to regress down to what I think is about age eleven and a half, which is the last of the idealistic years, before the testosterone and all the other stuff takes off, and then before you know it, you're in the middle third of life. Once we see the light, we know that there will be no satisfaction until we experience a kind of divinity, something as close to divinity as man can experience. And I had an opportunity to get into that. When I start skating it happens to me. I don't identify as a doctor anymore. I mean I still for family and whatnot I give some opinions here and there but frankly at this point I'm just trying to get to the end of my life without becoming an asshole again." I called my father and told him that he should, as he'd suggested in his text, sell the house and move to Venice Beach, and to befriend Slomo, who, I said, looked like he could be his brother. My father laughed. He was preparing to gather some documents he would need in order to file his taxes. I told him I'd already done mine. Before long, he was complaining about congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. "Sorry, I don't know anything about that," I replied. "You're better off not knowing," my father said. He said he listens to NPR on his way to his office—and I imagined him, in his truck, driving off the mountain, winding beside a stream along a road that would lead him into the valley, which in the mornings was often clotted with fog—"and by the time I'm at the office," he said, "my blood pressure's through the roof." I told him he should listen to Merle—meaning Haggard—instead. "I was just listening to Merle yesterday morning," my father confessed. It was then, out of the blue, that he said that he couldn't help but wonder what it must be like to be in my mother's head. Before I could ask what he meant, he told a story about how she had gone in the bathroom to brush her teeth, but had picked up a hair brush

and was about to squeeze toothpaste on it, which had reminded him of the time she'd picked up the squeegee they keep in their shower to remove water from the shower door and was going to use it instead of the razor to shave an armpit. What had she been thinking in these moments and what would it be like to misrecognize a tool in this way? I had no answers. A couple days before, I'd called and he'd told me that my mother wanted to go home. The problem was, of course, she was already there, in the house where they'd been living for 27 years. "It makes me worry," my father said, "that she's been shacking up with another man, and now she thinks of somewhere else as home." I could hear my mother laughing, as she always does—and always has—at my father's jokes. I sometimes wonder what she actually understands—she can no longer form complete sentences or operate the microwave, and couldn't tell a joke to save her life, but as far as I can tell she never laughs at the wrong time. Like she might not even get my father's joke, but she recognizes somehow that what my he's saying is supposed to be funny. "She thinks there are people watching us," my father had said, and I pictured her in my mind, staring out the living room windows, of which there are many, allowing for views of hemlocks and maples and oaks and rhododendron and azalea and, just down the hill from the house, the pond my father had built years ago, all of which vanishes at night, supposing there's no moon to light any of it up, and is replaced by blackness and wavering ghostlike reflections, which, apparently, my mother confuses for things that aren't there. It could get scary, I suppose, if she were allowed to stare for too long and to wonder, in her enfeebled state, about what she thinks she's seeing, but my father is there and at least for now, she doesn't fight when he leads her to bed. "I've gotta put your mama to bed," he often says, to segue into the ending of a phone call, and I imagine my mother, older and heavier, in her night gown, climbing under the sheets my father has pulled back. It makes me think of the a photo of my mother that my sister posted to Instagram the other day. Actually, she—my mother—is in the background. The photo's main subject is my son. His head—topped with a blonde crewcut and his signature cowlick, which he inherited from his own mother—at three or four years of age, is as big as his torso. I looked at my mom, who was thin and strikingly beautiful and smiling, and burst into tears. I don't often cry, but the sight of her there, ten years ago, unable to know without so much as an inkling about the darkness that would begin to engulf her. And who can say what dreams she falls into at night, and whether they are more or less confusing than the daylight hours, when she stands in front of the microwave, not knowing how to operate it, or when she opens her mouth, and the words of a sentence she aims to speak shuffles into an incomprehensible jumble of sound. It may only be a matter of time before I too enter my own forgetting, but for now, I am able to close my eyes, and imagine Slomo as he glides alongside his concrete beachside path, his head full of jazz, his arms outstretched, and say, to no one in particular, "Goodnight."