

# Homing Instinct

Dani McClain

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"Greedy" is the word that comes to mind. As the announcement's meaning sunk in, I got greedy for the 70-degree days in the middle of February and the way sunlight bounces off the leaves of jade green succulents no matter what time of year. How the air—even in the middle of downtown Oakland—smells like flowers (yes, and weed and sometimes urine). The options always presenting themselves: Look toward the hills and see yellows and browns and the promise of a place where the wind blows a little less. Look toward the bay and see it glistening like a sheet of light, dotted with sails and bits of sky.

I got greedy for things that likely wouldn't be around much longer anyway.

As I listened to Breslow speak, my mind wandered to the parties at the New Parish and, before that, Oasis, places where old Stevie Wonder jams and Chaka Khan remixes brought back memories of childhood. The Malcolm X Jazz Festival in East Oakland and the Ashby flea market, the same people always turning up at all the same places.

When EO 3735 came down, I got nostalgic for the things around me. It should have made the decision easy, but it didn't. Paloma, on the other hand, knew immediately.

"I'm staying here," she told me just moments after the press conference at which the executive order was announced. Because the situation was so dire, the president had said, everyone would have ninety days to reposition themselves.

That was the word she had used: “reposition.”

“They couldn’t even put it to a vote?” I said to Paloma, realizing that this would be the only conversation that mattered for the foreseeable future.

“Why? So the people who still believe all that snow proves the climate isn’t changing can get on TV? If it had gone through Congress, we’d have to listen to their ignorant rants get equal time with the scientists and the people who won’t let their fear override what’s in plain sight.”

We’d watched the speech together and talked it over from every angle we could think of once the president had answered her final question and walked offstage and away from the press corps.

“I’m glad Breslow just went ahead and said, ‘Here’s what’s up: Figure out where you want to be and get there. And quit all this jumping on planes, trains, and automobiles all the time like your presence is so desperately needed at this meeting and that conference and this family reunion and that weekend getaway.’”

She was from Chicago but she knew her home was Oakland. It didn’t feel so cut and dry to me.

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I walked home thinking that if the Breslow administration were smart, it would hire Paloma to do a series of PSAs. For the print ads, it could just be her face, serious and resolute, eyes staring straight ahead. The caption in bold, block text would read, “COMMIT.” For the online and broadcast versions, it could be her voice saying something like, “When you move”—and the phrase would hang in the air while you watched quick takes from footage of the latest disasters: a shot from the Outer Banks of North Carolina when they still existed, the wind whipping giant waves into the cottages and splintering their stilts to shreds—“you prove”—and now the stampede on the Venetian Causeway during the Miami Beach exodus—“that you don’t get it.” The now iconic images of people swimming in the streets of New Orleans would fill the screen as Paloma said, her voice heavy with disappointment and judgment, “You still don’t get it.”

Playing off of people’s fear, their memories of the disasters no one even bothered calling “natural” anymore, was key here. The relationships between water and land, between humans and the weather, *had* changed dramatically. And, yes, it was long overdue for a political leader to demand that people stop living in the fantasy of infinite. But this change, this new emergency rule that mandated that people lock themselves into a location, was replacing the fantasy of the infinite with the fantasy that immobility would bring safety. The new lie around which people were to orient their lives was the possibility of buffering one’s self from the chaos and destruction that had come to define the times.

The first questions at the press conference had, surprisingly, been the right ones:

*What happens if people decide not to register their location in the database?*

*Aren’t you creating the conditions for a black market in travel?*

*Won’t the people who need food and shelter sell their mile allotments to people who can afford and want them?*

*Aren't you making mobility a luxury item?*

And then came the expected ones.

*Isn't travel expression? Isn't this a violation of the First Amendment?*

*Will the government take over the airlines, the high-speed trains? Will all transport be socialized?*

Breslow had delivered her answers with a calm and diplomacy that made phrases explode in my mind like popcorn kernels in hot oil: "sex for sky miles," "rooftop heliports." I remembered reading about dog collars that sent a shock when the animal got too close to an invisible fence. What would be the logistics of this new boundary? In the absence of knowing, my mind ran wild: Women would be selling their bodies to get a flight to a dying parent's bedside. The people who marched around in knee breeches and three-cornered hats screaming about the founders would pull their usual publicity stunts, protesting EO 3735 for all the wrong reasons. But would they resist? Would anyone? Why refuse to register and be shipped off to an up- or out-state federal penitentiary, the fate Breslow had said resisters would meet? By the time I got to my apartment, I'd decided that anyone who went that route was a fool. Why refuse if it meant having someone else choose home for you?

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The next day, the administration announced its title for the mandate: Operation HOMES (Honoring Our Most Enduring Settings). A secondary goal of this thing was to get people to move away from the coasts, the places the oceans reclaimed for themselves more and more each year. There would be financial incentives for people who chose to leave the Gulf Coast and much of Florida and California. They would get "sky miles" (the government had jacked the phrase from the airlines) added to their allotments.

Commentators had already found a way to turn this into a political debate, as if various Republican and Democrat perspectives were relevant as people scrambled to make intimate decisions. I took a break from following the commentators and the presentations and called my mom back east.

We danced around it for as long as we could, talking instead about what this pundit had said about the policy and what that news report had revealed about how it would be enforced. We touched on the high points from the coverage—the man who had broken down crying as he recounted that his wife had told him in no uncertain terms that she and the kids would be moving to Virginia to be close to her family and that he could do what he liked, the Wisconsinite who stood thigh-deep in snow declaring that she was a seventh-generation Badger and those goddamn Floridians better not flood her pristine state. Well, the news had bleeped out one word, but you could see it forming on her blue lips.

Finally she asked the obvious: "What do you think you'll do?"

She had always accepted my wanderlust. More than accepted, she'd financed it at the start and encouraged it once I wanted her blessings more than her money. And though it had meant we hadn't lived in the same state for more than a decade, she had settled into the rhythms: I would be home a week in the summer and a

week at Christmas, and Mom would travel west so we could spend time together at Thanksgiving, and another week together in the spring. A month total. One out of twelve. That's what we had together. The new law capped all oil-dependent travel at twenty miles per month. So it would take either one of us ten years of sacrificing all other car or plane trips to save up the miles needed to close the distance between California and Ohio.

I knew she was thinking it, so I went ahead and said it: Say I had a child. Say it happened this year. You would be able to meet your grandchild when it was what, nine? And that's if I chose to make my birthplace my first destination. What if I wanted to go someplace else? Take the child to some part of the ocean that was warm and calm enough to swim in? Or to another country, to see how other people lived? When would we see each other again, and how would it feel when we finally did?

People in Washington weren't talking about this new law like it was a temporary measure. When it was discussed, there was never an expiration date attached. It was the new way. It was the new scaffolding for our lives.

"What do you think you'll do?" she asked.

I took a deep breath and fought the urge to hold it. "What would you like me to do?"

She chuckled. "I know better than that, missy. What do you want? Hasn't that always been what I told you to figure out first?"

"Yep. Sure has been." Now silence was heavy in the exchange. "I haven't figured it out yet. Yesterday I told myself I had a week to decide. So that's what I'm taking."

"Did you make your pros and cons lists?"

I laughed, thankful for the constancy of my mother's belief that logic and the length of one list measured against another could solve any problem the world threw at you.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm just starting them," I said, but of course I didn't plan to. I already knew everything that would go into a column making a case for staying in Oakland. The list would confirm my fears that I was an individualist to the bone, that I had turned into someone who placed personal comfort and loose camaraderie above the bonds of blood and going—instinctively, without the need to think it through—where family needs you and you know you need them.

If I couldn't be safe—and I couldn't, no one could—I should face the chaos shoulder to shoulder with the people whose love and care I'd been able to count on for decades, right? And I should pick the place where those people were concentrated, yes? The answers should have been obvious, and I'd always thought that when push came to shove, I'd know what to do. But they weren't and I didn't.

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Some people were angry drunks or got sloppy and far too certain of their own wit or brilliance after too many glasses of wine. Paloma got spiritual. Or rather, a little liquor made her willing to talk about ideas she usually kept close to the vest, ideas that could easily be used against her by anyone looking to paint a picture of the Bay Area as home to a set of loopy, half-serious seekers who stayed high

on positive thinking and law of attraction bromides.

We were at Tony's apartment, and I washed the dinner dishes and listened. The first sign was that Paloma had used the word "transformative" at least three times in a handful of sentences as she spoke to the group that had gathered to pretend their lives weren't about to radically change. Similar indicators followed. Paloma, who had been my bestie for more than a decade, first referenced "the universe" as the source of her strength in the midst of EO 3735 talk, then thanked "the most high" for keeping her grounded.

A petite, intense woman named Robin spoke. "You need to be thanking President Breslow. She's about to keep you grounded for real."

I smiled and looked away from the sink and toward the table where my friends sat.

"Go ahead, laugh," Paloma said, her face relaxed as she set down her wine glass. "Y'all know about that river flowing fast these days. It's so great and swift that some will be afraid. They will try to hold onto the shore. They'll feel like they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly." The lilt dropped from her voice as she said with a wink, "That's not you, is it Rob? 'Cause I don't want to be the one that has to come pry your hands off that shore, girl. I really don't."

Robin raised her eyebrows and shook her head slowly. "Nope. That's not me. I know the river has its destination. Now go ahead. Finish preaching, Reverend Doctor."

Tony jumped in instead, continuing the lines. "But we all know we must let go of the shore, push off toward the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water."

I sat down at the table, drying my hands on the front of my jeans. "See who is there with us and celebrate," Tony added.

It was just something that had gotten shared around. A message attributed to the old holders of an even older wisdom in a place none of us had ever been, somewhere in Arizona with a vowel-heavy name where Native people had decided to advise anyone who'd listen on how to live. It was very likely the Internet ramblings of some Berkeley hippie who honestly believed "Hopi elders" had asked him to communicate on their behalf. But Paloma had been taken by its pointed questions—"Where are you living? What are you doing? What are your relationships? Where is your water?"—the message's urgency and the way it seemed to point a path toward accepting and making sense of a nonsensical and ever-changing world. She had painted some of the words in black block letters on a huge canvas and decorated the remaining space with images of pregnant women, gardens in bloom, children dancing, and a pack of wolves howling together at the moon. When Paloma had mounted it on a wall in her living room, we all praised her artistry, but I admit I rolled my eyes a bit at the Earth Mama archetypes.

That night in Tony's kitchen, I realized the message had lodged itself in our minds, finding a place to settle amidst the cynicism, fear, and doubt.

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Later that night, I dreamed that the sky was red and the air smelled like burnt

oranges—tangy and smoky in a way that made my mouth water and my eyes tear up. I knew I was on a long and likely futile walk eastward, with no maps or sense of direction other than the knowledge that I was walking away from the ocean and toward a place called Nevada, followed by a stretch called Utah, followed by an obstacle course called Colorado, followed by an expanse called Nebraska and on and on. I walked toward the hills and eventually through the Caldecott Tunnel, and after that I knew nothing other than that I was passing the towns where men had tested open carry laws in Starbucks, so bold in their love for the Second Amendment that they brandished their guns like shiny new toys. I looked up at the sky and knew that it was always some shade of red or orange now, everywhere. I knew that to the west, in the direction I had come from, redwoods were dying, toppling over on each other with loud, disastrous sounds like a chorus of whips cracking at once. And to the east, in the direction I was headed, great lakes were drying into exaggerated puddles. I stood still and felt a cold prickling move like a wave through my body. I knew that feeling. It was my body accepting some hard truth before my mind was ready to. The sensation was there as I woke up, and with it a clear string of words echoing in my head: “Not a place to live, but a way of living.”

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My body traveled its normal paths the next day, but my attention was elsewhere. In the shower I wondered who I could trust. Paloma? My cousin whose libertarian leanings sometimes brought us to the same conclusions? Were there others whose minds had already landed here (there had to be), and, if so, how would I find them? How would we find each other, and what would we do once we did? Walking the blocks to the BART station I considered what I might need and how I could possibly prepare. I had my *idée fixe*—that phrase stuck in my head and pulled me forward. Toward what and how, I had no idea.

Without warning, my thoughts ran full speed into a wall of fear that left me paralyzed, nervous about having peeked through this door that was opening. Some part of my consciousness, deputized by the Breslow administration, kicked the door shut, admonished me for even thinking that path was a possibility. I muttered a silent apology to the watcher within and shrank back from the risk, the threat of punishment. And that’s how I remained until I found myself that afternoon ostensibly typing an email to my boss but unconsciously straining to remember all I could about Fred Korematsu. Assata Shakur. Others who had hidden, escaped, run, resisted.

By the time I was home again that evening, I was clear. Sure, the law was right to urge people to think about where the land could actually sustain them. But geography was not destiny. Nowhere was safe and nothing was infinite, and to impose a law predicated on an outdated belief in stability was immoral. I would not obey an immoral law. Instead, I decided to let go of the shore, the nostalgia, the need for certainty. I thought of Tony, Robin, and the others, my family in Ohio, people I knew all over the country. Who among them would refuse to register and what would they do once they did? When I pushed off toward the middle of the river—if I could keep my eyes open and my head above the water—who would I see there in the torrent?