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AND THE BUSY WORLD IS HUSHED

By

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And The Busy World Is Hushed

Algal blooms like emerald clouds lay across the glittering lake. Allen's motorboat cuts through the water, everywhere punctuated by bloated fish. He sees the lake's once precipitous sides have morphed into gentle slopes, layered with ancient sediment. The rocks along the edges are choked with moss. Candy wrappers and cigarette butts tick by.

"Humans are flukes," his mother used to say. "Water's the real trooper."

Allen cuts the engine as he approaches the shore. The motor's roar wasn't doing his hangover any favors. His mind is clouded, his insides bruised. Jem, the local girl, waits for him, barking into her handkerchief. That's what the town calls her tics, those sharp, high pitched sounds she works so hard to stifle—barking. The handkerchief reminds Allen of a bridal shower or silent movie prop. He doesn't want to be like the town, but he doesn't want to notice Jem's tic's either. He remembers, now, what his mother used to say about cowardice: "Don't come at me with that shit."

Allen considers Jem the perfect guest. A townie with the heart of an outsider, a level-headed girl who likely owns more books than clothes. She's young enough to appreciate adventure but old enough, no more than twenty-three, not to torpedo the place. Allen, ten years her senior, has never really noticed her until now. She waits for him in a tight tank top and faded blue jeans, her truck parked beside the outhouses. Her hair's dark as coffee grounds, even in the sunlight. She sniffs though she doesn't have a cold, blinks rapidly, then waves her handkerchief in a mock-coquettish way. Her petite concert harp leans against a tree in its carry case. No one plays that thing like Jem.

"Hey you," she says, when he draws near.

Like Allen, she grew up in the Bangor area, but has never camped at the lake. She asked him a few months back if she could stay at one of his cabins for a personal retreat. For a long time, then, she'd been thinking of the lake at night and lounging in the bowers of sweet birch. Now she was about to spend two nights there, in her own cabin. Lidw was like, for once, a fairy tale.

She tosses her duffle into the boat and hops inside. Allen realizes it's his job to carry the harp. The girl exudes self-reliance, but of course she won't carry her own harp. Allen likes these tactic quirks of gifted types. She's the reason he attends church from time to time. She's the reason he sits in that unforgiving pew with no padding. He longs to hear her play which she does, somehow, as though no one's there, fixed to the harp like its sole jewel, her fingers thrumming faster as her spirit burrows deep into her song. There is a subtle, alluring rage to her performance. She hides it beneath her dress and smile, but Allen can see it. He goes for her music but stays for her rage. It is a pain of great antiquity. He knows it well.

He sets the harp in the boat and covers it with oilcloth. Jem is in the middle of the boat fastening her life jacket. She tilts her face to the sun and he sees the strap of her top fall past her shoulder. She's calm, but she's not still, shrugging almost compulsively, her sniffing almost constant. Allen pushes off and climbs aboard. When she smiles at him, his stomach churns. He likes the way she looks at him, but his body hurts. Last night he stayed at his place in Bangor, where he downed seven Dos Equis then nursed a box of wine over *Twilight Zone* reruns and two Megan Fox movies. He reasons the punishment fits the crime.

He lowers the propeller and starts the motor. They dash the lake. Jem doesn't make some lousy comment about beauty or how much Allen must miss his mother, as did the townie he'd last conveyed. He likes Jem, too, for knowing when to stir up trouble and when to keep a lid on

things. Unlike other girls, she doesn't put her hand on his arm and widen her eyes. She sidesteps sympathy with a bowlegged strut.

"The fuck's happening to this lake, man?" she shouts. "Is it pollution or something?"

"Eutrophication," he says. "It's a slow death."

"Bummer."

Jem finds the lake both hideous and beautiful. There's an electric thrill to riding across it, a forbidden danger. Her fingers grip the edge of her wet seat, and the muscles in her thighs twitch and tighten. Her heart thumps loud in the pit of her stomach. She never learned how to swim. The water terrifies her but she won't show it. She hates showing things like that.

Her mother refused to pay for lessons, saying it was for Jem's own good. Her mother never said as much, but she believed her daughter's Tourette's would sink her like a body with concrete shoes. Tourette's, her mother believed, gave Jem neither present nor past. The girl was forever stuck in a future that was as daunting as it was predictable.

"You'll get scared," her mother used to say.

"You won't like driving a car, either," she'd say.

"That boy will only break your heart," she'd say.

Even today her mother is steeped in narcissistic sacrifice. She comes after Jem with the force of a bloodthirsty saint.

The joy she feels gliding along the water with Allen is different than when she plays her harp. Music is Jem's passion, but the church crowd admires her gift for the wrong reasons. They think they love her sound, her grace, yet what they really love is how she *looks*. They love how playing makes her *still*. Harp playing makes things easier on them. She's easier to take in, easier to stare at without the constant inner pangs of guilt or discomfort. But Jem suspects things are

finally making a turn for the better. Life reels toward her with hypnotic speed, eager for her hands alone. Beginning with this camping trip. Now here she is with her harp, being ferried across a massive lake by an adorable man—an adorable man who’s sad, no less.

“Anyone else camping this weekend?” Jem says.

“Just us.”

Jem spies her cabin through the trees. It’s chestnut colored, its solar panel sparkling. This is where she’ll release her hidden life, stone by stone. And then there will be Julliard, where everything will change. She’s been awaiting their decision like a scavenger in the sky, unable to focus on anything else. Here at the cabin she can get back to the music—that sacred intangible—and remember why she applied. No sooner has Allen dragged the boat onto the shore, than she heads straight to Cabin Two, certain it’s hers.

He’d planned on setting her up in Cabin Three because it has a better view of the lake, but the girl has chosen. She beams at him. *Can you believe this?* her eyes say. He likes the instinctual way she moves. Her excitement softens him. He straps the harp to his shoulder. It doesn’t feel so heavy, now.

Inside, he watches her set the harp up by the window. It couldn’t look more out of place. Dirty mugs are piled in the sink. A breeze sets the cobwebs a flutter. Someone left a rug and a book on how to start a lucrative soap making business. The rug is red as a hydrant, tacky. Allen wishes he’d led Jem to Cabin Three as planned.

She doesn’t mind. Already she’s on a stool to play. She breathes deeply. Her fingers cascade down the strings. The music consumes everything. She breathes.

Allen watches her and feels he’s unwittingly intruded on something he shouldn’t see. Then Jem’s voice rises above the sound.

“Thanks Allen,” she says, “It’s so good to be here. You have no idea.”

They hadn’t meant to meet for coffee earlier that spring. They hadn’t meant to sit together or laugh or make plans.

One day, after church, she dropped her harp off at home, then drove to a café. She loved Bangor in the spring, where flowers bloomed from window boxes and tourists tittered about hiking and Stephen King sightings. There was no seat but one by Allen Lawrence. She watched him sip coffee and read the paper. She didn’t know much about him except that his mom used to own a campsite up north, and that he was a carpenter. His fingers were stained with ink.

She asked if she could sit with him then plopped down before he answered. He looked at her, then away. Sensitive people always did this in the presence of flinching or blinking or sharp cries. Jem often thought polite people were as bad as assholes, if not worse. At least assholes were clear about what they couldn’t take.

Then Allen looked her in the eye. “You need something?” he said.

“Coffee.”

“You couldn’t sit at the counter for that?”

“Look around.”

Her face was stern, but Allen saw playfulness in her eyes. He remembered once waiting on Jem and her mother, Elaine in this café. All the servers had wanted to wait on Elaine Turner. She was a former beauty queen whose look had somehow maintained a certain extravagance. In cold weather, she wore a cape with oodles of broaches—flowers, stars, insects of diamonds. In the summer, her clothes were sheer, and she often wore lace-up heels. Allen remembered the first time he saw Elaine and Jem. He’d never needed to write people’s orders, yet he couldn’t

remember theirs. His mind had wrapped around Elaine like the suede straps at her calves. Jem was a little girl, still, who'd become the talk of the town, which he didn't like. He had enough gossip about his mother and her breakdowns. As for Jem and Elaine, her husband had taken Jem to the movies then left her in the middle of the show. The custodians found her sitting in the empty theater unable to speak. She was five.

It wasn't pity Allen felt, these many years later. He'd seen Jem play and was humbled by her gift. Now she was looking at him with a sort of pleasing curiosity. He didn't want her to stay, but he didn't want her to leave, either. He took up a menu.

"All right, Jem Turner," he said. "What'll it be?"

They ordered lunch. He asked her about school. She'd dropped out of college and was living at home, she told him, trying to figure it out.

"What about you?" she said.

"I've been on the road a few years, coming home just for summer."

"Where?"

"Oh, you know, around. Nothing stuck."

"Are you glad you're back?"

The waitress brought them coffee in a carafe and their food. Allen tucked into his—chicken fried steak with fries and a side of pancakes.

"From employee of the month to most valued customer," Jem said. "They should put your picture on the wall."

"It's called a hangover. Have some fries."

Jem dipped a wad of fries in ketchup then grabbed another handful, as if unsatisfied with the first. She ate. Ketchup stained her chin. When Allen handed her a napkin, she thanked him and laughed softly.

“Are you living with your mom?” he said.

“Yeah, but I’m off the hook this summer. She’s vacationing down south.”

“Doing what?”

“She and her new boyfriend are hitting the usual suspects: orchards, beaches, Disney World.”

“So, your mom’s got a new guy, huh? What’s he like?”

“He vacations at Disney World.”

“Ah.”

“Did your mom ever take you to Disney world when you were a kid?”

“Nah, she hated amusement parks. She thinks they were started by the CIA and built atop sacred burial grounds.”

“Dude, your mom was fuckin’ sick.”

“I know.”

“Sorry. I meant the good kind of sick.”

“I know what you meant. She was both.”

They ate their food in silence. Jem poured herself more coffee from the carafe and looked at him.

“You still run that camp?” she said.

“Why?”

“I want to camp there, duh.”

“So, you’re into that sort of thing.”

“Nope. But the lake sounds nice. I could play my harp.”

“There’s no water or electricity out there.”

“I like to suffer for my art.”

“I’ve seen you play, you know.”

“*You* go to church?”

“Someone told me there was an amazing harp player there. I had to see for myself.”

She looked at him, her mouth full of omelet and fries.

“You’re dangerous,” he said, as he put money on the table, enough for their food and tip.

“The way you play? It’s take-no-prisoners like.” He gave Jem his card. “I have to go to work.

But this was nice. We should do it again sometime.”

She watched him leave, then finished her meal. *You’re dangerous*, he’d said. She didn’t see herself that way. Jem Turner wasn’t dangerous. The world was dangerous. One way or another, that’s what everyone told her. “Dangerous,” she said aloud. She couldn’t help but like the sound of that.

Allen loads his things into the cabin. He turns on the propane tank and leaves jugs of water outside Jem’s door. He unlocks the shed and pulls out a canoe in case Jem wants to go for a ride. He paints some rocking chairs for the cabin. He’ll give one to Jem tomorrow.

Later, he paints on the porch overlooking the lake. When the sun sets, he feels a sense of dread. He’s got this recurring dream that haunts him. In it, everything good about him is reduced

to a small, trembling husk. What's left looks and acts like Allen, but it isn't him. He destroys everything. After all these years, he fears parts of his dream have come true.

Jem emerges from the woods in rubber boots and a yellow bikini, pale and statuesque, a pair of shades on the top of her head. She steps into the water but doesn't swim. Her bikini top is a size too small—the right amount of cruel. She bends over to examine a rock. Her breasts strain to free themselves. She stands up and stares at the setting sun. Allen calls out to her.

“What's up?” she says when she reaches the cabin.

He holds up one of the chairs. “What do you think?”

“Who's it for?”

“You.”

Her smile is tender, surprised. “I'd like it better pink,” she says, and dons her shades.

When she leaves, he lights a lantern and continues to paint. Soon Jem's music weaves through the trees. The song is sorrowful, heavy with memory.

God, she's beautiful, he thinks.

The lake is flat and dark. It's where his mother taught him to swim. It's where she taught him a lot of things.

She was strong and resourceful, but she smothered him. When he was twelve, she made him file her taxes and change the oil in her car. Later, she let his punk band rehearse at their house. She would remind him of this whenever he was too busy to assuage her moods or review her bank statements or tell her the right shade of lipstick. Some days she was animated, joyous. Others she lived outside her body, floating on and on.

When he was sixteen, he took a psychology elective, and told his mother about a disorder he learned: depersonalization. He recited the definition from memory, “a state in which one's

thoughts and feelings seem unreal or not to belong to oneself, or in which one loses all sense of identity.” In his mother’s eyes, he saw the sucker-punch of betrayal. She threw the keys across the room and told him to leave, then collapsed to the floor and cried theatrically.

He took her car and drove in a blind rage. He stopped downtown for gas. There was a police car outside the jewelry store. While he pumped, Allen watched the owner give a statement. Probably another shoplifter, he figured. His school was full of them. He headed north with a full tank, determined to never look back.

He drove past a field of dead goldenrod, then slowed when he saw Elaine Turner’s Volkswagen on the side of the road. He pulled over and got out. From somewhere in the field he heard screams. The Volkswagen was empty, its passenger door open. The stalks were dark and withered, like hair sprouted from the underworld. Allen pushed through them until he reached a clearing. Elaine was on her knees, holding Jem beneath her. She struck Jem on the head. The girl’s hair was matted, her face smeared with dirt. She was on her stomach, wailing. A diamond necklace lay in the dirt.

Elaine saw Allen but didn’t rise. Her hair was wild, her eyes narrow and fierce. The broaches on her cape looked monstrous.

“I was driving and saw the car,” he said. “Then I heard the screams.” Allen didn’t dare say what he thought. *It was like someone was being tortured.*

“Go home, Allen,” Elaine said.

He ran back to the car and sped off and didn’t stop until he reached his house. His mother was sitting in a lawn chair on the yard with a six pack of beer. She opened two, one for her and one for him. They drank in silence. The front window was open and its screen was coming apart. There were holes and tears. Parts of the mesh hung in ribbons.

“I can fix that if you’d like,” he said.

His mother smiled. “Nah,” she said. “I like it. It’s all *depersonalized*.”

They push the canoe onto the lake and paddle. The stars reflect across the water. The trees are clothed in darkness. Jem looks back at Allen and he smiles. They stop when they reach the middle of the lake. Jem turns to face him.

“You like it?” he says.

He watches her take in the sky. She looks dazzled and fearless. Her hair hangs in thick braids. She’s wearing one of his shirts over her nightgown. She was worried she’d dampen her clothes, so he raced to his cabin for a shirt.

“This place is amazing,” she says.

“Glad you could come.”

She drinks from her thermos, then hands it to him. “Hot coco,” she says. His fingers brush against hers for longer than he intends. “Thanks,” he says, taking a sip. “It’s very sweet.”

“You ever come out here alone?” she says.

“Sometimes.”

“Does camping ever make you think about weird shit?”

“Depends on what you consider weird.”

“Reincarnation, for example. I’ve been thinking about it a lot today.”

“You believe in that?”

“Hell yeah. I’ve lived many times, each life, I’m sure, more ridiculous than the last. There’s some kind of crazy after me. I’m telling you.”

“I’m still glad you’re here.”

“Same.”

“Yeah?”

“The crazy can’t kill me, you know? Despite everything, my heart’s wide open. Or, it tries to be at least.”

Her heart is open, he knows. She moves closer to him. Their knees touch. Her smile is different, no longer friendly, the kind he’s seen on women in dark cars and restaurants. She leans in and brushes the hair from his eyes. Her life jacket bulges against him. He wants to unbuckle her and lay her down. She presses her lips to the corner of his mouth and he suppresses a shivery moan. She overwhelms him, like a shock in the night. She has an inner light, both lovely and remorseful. He’s got no business touching a woman like her.

“Jem,” he says. “We should get back.”

Her voice cracks when she speaks.

“Oh,” she says. “Okay.”

He tries to speak, but she’s long gone. She turns her back on him and paddles. The purple-black glow of her head is colder than any look she could give. The trees disdain him. A scolding flight of birds leaves skyward. Moonlight suffuses Jem like an aura. He paddles hard, but the canoe is a steed that only answers to her. The loons calling from the dark want to haunt him.

She helps him drag the canoe back to the shed. He thanks her, and she walks silently to her cabin. He clears his throat to call out, but in the end says nothing.

Jem hears the crash after midnight. She puts on her robe and runs to find Allen on his side on the porch, beside a broken rocking chair. She puts his arm around her neck. They stand, and he tells her he's sorry, so sorry. His pants are splattered with pink paint. She smells whiskey on his breath.

She leads him inside and helps him lie on the couch. He hears her open a jug of water from the cooler and pour some into the glass. He pulls a blanket from the floor and tucks himself in. The world's spinning, but this blanket will hold him. Jem kneels beside him and brings the cup to his lips.

He never did anything to help his mother. She'd shown all the warning signs. *Tell someone*, he used to think, but he never did. He'd carved a life in the chaos of her world, loving and hating who she was. Then the summer before college, she died. When the gun went off, he felt everything but surprise. He didn't bother to see if she was alive. He just called 9-1-1.

Jem gives him her handkerchief. She's never comforted a man before. He wipes his face in a slow, painterly way, careful not to wrinkle or dampen the fabric. There's a gentleness to him she can't quite place. She saw it at the restaurant and on the boat and that time many years ago when he emerged tall and frightened in a field of dead goldenrod. She remembered how his eyes went from her mother to the necklace Jem had stolen. Allen and her mother had started to speak, though Jem couldn't hear them over her own screams, the weight of her mother's fist still heavy on her cheekbones. Jem thinks about that necklace, that gaudy heavy thing glittering dumbly in the dirt. She'd only taken it because she'd wanted to know what it was like to be her mother, adored and understated like the shimmering broaches on her cape.

Allen hands her the kerchief and smiles. She thinks about the woman she tried to be on the canoe tonight, that dangerous open-hearted woman who won't be denied. Allen holds her

hand and his heat surges through her. She wants to want him. Earlier, she'd acted like she had, but she was only pretending, unsure why. He's drunk now, but his eyes shine with clarity. *I want you*, they say. *I love you*, they say. Well, perhaps they don't say that last part. Jem has never heard anyone—besides her mother a few times—say those words. In college, before dropping out, Jem had this roommate, Angie, who loved everybody and everything. Yet nothing Angie said ever felt real to Jem. Her voice was high-pitched and sickly-sweet. Angie didn't know what it was like to have your voice stolen like jewels from the store, so that all you have left inside is the cheap shit that makes you say and do the wrong, wrong things.

Allen's touch is tender and strange. He puts his hand on her cheek. She closes her eyes and sees herself in her last year of college before dropping out. There was the night she drove down I-245 N as fast as she could. The passenger seat cradled her bong and a paper bag thick with grease. Inside were three helpings of fries and cheeseburgers. There was no one else in the truck. She finished the food long before she got to the lake. The lake was the one place where Jem could simply be. There was no pressure to drink or go out or attend live shows where the music made her head want to explode. Earlier that day, she'd walked past the campus library where potted geraniums had started to shed their brown and silver leaves when a group of basketball players made their way up the hill, each one coughing and shrieking into a phantom kerchief. At least, that's what the frightened part of Jem swore she saw. She tried so very hard not to believe that part of herself. Despite everything, she chose to believe the best in people. That belief was like a polished and sunny guest bedroom, a place she could enter at any moment but never dare stay for too long. On the highway, the truck warbled and clattered. Yellow foam dangled from the tattered backseats. Earlier, Angie told Jem she was jealous of her truck. Angie was always having to ask boys for rides. Jem was floored that Angie with her perfect GPA and

honey hair and alabaster skin was jealous of *her*. Jem wanted to feel sympathy but couldn't. Girls like Angie were never in any real danger. They would always have options. They would always have rides. Jem parked in the little lot then headed to the lake. She stopped when she saw a stream of glowing tents line the lake. College students tossed Frisbees and beach balls and turned up the music until the earth shook. She wanted to join them in that laughter, that freedom. But she couldn't move forward. She stood watching them for what felt like hours. Slowly, she sunk to the ground and put her hands in the dirt. She imagined a better, parallel self rising up to meet her. A different and regal Jem who could take her by the hand and say, "You can do anything. You can be loved by anyone." She watched the college students laugh and careen in the dark. Maybe she knew how to have friends in another life, but in this one, music is all she knows. Nothing can hurt her when she plays.

She opens her eyes and watches herself comfort Allen. She pities this moment, pities what they are. All she wants is a friend in this world, sturdy as a bone. Nothing else. Perhaps that's all he needs too. She wants to be that for him, wants to know how. For the first time in years, she prays.

"Lord, support us all the day long," she says, "until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done." As a girl, she'd pray to ease her tics or ward off her mother's anger. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake...* She remembers saying that last part with her fingers crossed. Now her fingers comb through Allen's hair as he falls asleep. Over and over, she says her favorite line, "And the busy world is hushed."

He rises in the late afternoon. Everything hurts.

He walks along the lake and finds Jem leaning against a tree, reading. She's barefoot, her jeans rolled to her knees. Something happens to his brain when he's with her. He's like a flower, hopelessly soft. *I love you, girl*, he thinks.

She looks up. Her smile is impossibly forgiving.

"Hey," she says.

He opens his mouth to say he's sorry but says the other thing instead. "I love you, girl."

"What?" she says, eyes huge.

"I said I love you. I just wanted you to know."

She closes her book and stands and walks to the lake and paces. "You're drunk," she says. "You wake up, and the first thing you do is reach for the bottle."

"I'm not."

"No," she tells herself. "No, no, no."

She pulls her hair and slaps herself and quickens her pace. She talks to herself, but the words don't make sense. He hasn't seen her like this since she was small. He remembers how she'd throw these elaborate fits, how her mother would rush her away. He goes to Jem and takes her hands.

"It's okay. It's true. I had to tell you."

She yanks herself free and shoves him. "Is this some cherished cycle for you, Allen?" she says. "I've met your kind before. You weasel your way into the hearts of anyone willing to put up with you. But I'm not going to put up with you, you understand? "

"That's not it."

“Why should I love you? You think we’re destined to be together or some shit because we grew up in the same town and witnessed each other’s traumas or whatever?” Jem takes a deep breath. When she speaks, her voice is low and cold. “And why should you love me?”

He knows better than to answer. Anything he says will be cast away. He isn’t losing Jem. He never had her to lose.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “but you can’t.” She’s crying now. She brings his hand to her lips and kisses it. “You can’t love *me*,” she says then disappears into the woods.

The leaves are heavy with sunlight. A squirrel clings to a tree. He watches the water ripple. When water is disturbed, its molecules oscillate in tiny circles. They radiate from a center that slowly returns to peace. *Water is nothing dancing*, he thinks. *It never gets stuck*.

He finds Jem on the gravelly shore, seated in the motorboat. She trembles though the day is still warm. Her hand is at her mouth. Her eyes are shut, streaming with tears. He sits beside her and lets her cry until she’s done. They are the only people for miles. They are the tiniest tribe.

“You came looking for me,” she says. “After all of that.”

She leans against him, her cheek on his heart. He wraps her in his arms and watches the setting sun.

Alone, Together

The new hire was sexy and mean. When Violet introduced herself, Lara, brand new, had looked at her and said, “I’m twenty-three,” as if she would always be so. “When people tell me I’m too ambitious,” Lara continued, “that only fuels my ambition. Don’t cross me.” It was then Violet had noticed the scar on her neck, thin as a piece of thread.

Lara started working at the general store the summer she graduated from NYU. She wore short camisole dresses to work. Her skin was clear and dry. The island heat appeared to swirl above her though she was a little wet behind the knees. The gloss on her lips gathered in hard drops at the corners of her mouth. The faint purple beneath her eyes was speckled with mascara. She showed conditional hospitality, tossing half glances to visitors and co-workers. There was a type of islander and tourist she liked best. She’d greet them with her sweet and oily laughter, then chat with them about products and sometimes New York City. She sat on the counter and crossed her legs.

When she walked, her fingers traced whatever reached towards her. So much reached towards her. That summer the island thrummed with Queen Anne’s Lace and Tiger Lilies, and every soul was smothered with beauty, but Lara couldn’t care less. Yet her face was beautiful. Something furled and unfurled across it. It told the world she was curious about the nature of things but indifferent to passing its tests.

Rain pricked the table from which Violet had been offering samples of brie with rosemary lentil crackers. She’d sampled more food than usual. Tonight Bailey Island would host a conductors’ retreat in an old barn near land’s end. The conductors and musicians arrived by

ferry an hour ago. They'd stood still as the ferry approached the island, their black instrument cases like erect shadows behind them. Once on land, the musicians disappeared into the hotel to escape the heat while the conductors scattered about the island to practice. Violet watched two conductors circle the general store parking lot. They moved in graceful turns. One pinched a bygone brie's toothpick and used it like a miniature baton.

Thunder marbled the air. She packed the food in Tupperware and folded the table cloth and tucked it under her arm. She made her way into the store where Lara was leaning across the counter with a magazine. The air conditioner had made the room chilly. Goosebumps stippled what Violet could see of Lara's breasts. Her hair smelled of lightning.

"You forgot the table," Lara said. "It'll be ruined."

"It lived a long life," Violet said.

"What?" Lara said.

"The table. It lived a long life. I don't know about happy, though."

"But what will take its place?" Lara said without the least note of humor.

The store was empty but for them and Mavis, who'd worked at the general store long enough to rise above anything. As a child, Violet had thought Mavis's jowls hung like butcher meat. Now, Violet's face with its new lines, turned for comfort to the old woman. She did no more than shrug at Violet's glance, but today that was enough. Mavis, Violet knew, could glean heaviness from even the saddest soul.

"I was joking," Violet said.

Lara set down her magazine and looked brazenly into Violet's eyes. "Are you going to the conductors' retreat tonight?" she said. "It's open to the locals."

Already Violet was but another casualty in the collection that had succumbed to Lara's ambition. She knew this, and liked it, too, though she couldn't say why. "Enjoy yourself," she said.

"I'll save you a seat," Lara said, her eyes alight with interest.

The cheese and table cloth were heavy in Violet's arms. "No need," she said.

She stored the table cloth and cheese and stocked some items and refilled the icebox in the cooler. She said goodbye to Lara for the first time, then clocked out and walked home in the rain.

When her parents passed away, Violet moved into her childhood home on the island. It was two stories with walls pink as lungs. Returning to it each day after work she felt a sweetness in her belly. She sat down on the couch and closed her eyes. At thirty-eight, Violet didn't know what was next. She thought an island was the best possible interlude.

Violet had been living in Portland but didn't connect with city life. She smiled as she remembered the tipping point. It happened at a boutique. She liked to self-medicate with discounts and sales. She'd stood before a mirror bordered with stage lights. A salesgirl had brought her a red trench coat that fit Violet like a vine. She'd admired how the coat gave her a cardinal's chest and full hips. The coat had shown her that perhaps everything would be All Right, that she had time to reverse a few things and begin again. She believed it until she turned around and noticed something about the coat she had missed. On the back were the words, THE FINISHER sewn in purple thread. She shook the coat off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Life no longer pretended to be sane. Why should she?

Violet knew she would leave the city, but she didn't know when or where. A week later she received a phone call about her parents and the fatal car crash. "Back to Bailey," she'd whispered to herself.

At home Violet devoted her time to playing music and writing songs. She made videos of herself and posted them online. Recently a commenter had described her music as haunted and melodic. "I don't condone drug use," he had written, "but this stuff is like musical meth."

Violet had soared and for days after that her head bubbled with fantasies of the man moving in with her on the island. She'd bring home samples from work and let him feast on her bare stomach. She'd run her hands through his hair. He'd suck on orange peels until they were strings.

Now Violet decided it was time for the fantasies to end. She didn't want the fantasy of another. She wanted the swarm of her cells to meet another's.

She checked her computer for new comments, then stepped to the back of her house, where it faced the sea. She stood barefoot in the grass and watched the horizon. She refused to think about Mr. Musical Meth taking off her clothes, and yet that was where her thoughts strayed. When she tired of staring at the blue stretch of nothing, she played her guitar on the porch. She didn't sing. Even the playing was too calculated. Her fingers were tired and she was unsure why.

It had been over four years since that fatal car accident, but she thought she heard her father's steps behind her. These were the moments when she couldn't do anything at all. Grief swelled within her until she was nothing but this deep organ of love for her parents. She pressed her face against her guitar. She let herself fall apart. Then the sadness dulled and her eyes dried up. She felt like a bug strapped to the shadow of a boot, careless of the shadow's size.

She looked up to a conductor in her yard. He stood several feet away absently twirling his baton in a white-gloved hand. He couldn't have been more than nineteen. His suit was wet from the rain. His eyes were a wild green and his voice was like a drooping flower. He apologized for intruding. He was lost, he said, and needed directions to the hotel.

It wasn't until he was out of sight that he shouted, "You play good, lady."

The words were gentle like a communion. Life wasn't very wide and it didn't last long. Violet would go to the conductors' retreat. She would drink a glass of port wine then ride her bike to the old barn where Lara would wait for her with eyes full of this world upside down.

At night the barn lit up like the pages of a storybook. Rosehip bulbs kissed its sides. The island shrank and the mass of visitors made things seem warmer than they were. The world felt fragile and contained.

The show had already begun by the time Violet got there. In a shaft of light from the barn's open door, Lara was smoking against a tree. Violet leaned her bicycle against the barn and walked towards her.

"I hope you have short term memory loss," Lara said.

"Excuse me?"

Lara held up the program that listed all five pieces of the evening. "Each conductor plays at least one of these songs. Nothing else."

Lara wore a white halter dress that showed off her scar and the tiny, amber beauty marks that arched across her chest. Her hair was piled in a sleepy hive of sparkly barrettes. Her ears were studded with plastic strawberry earrings so old some of the red had rubbed off.

"Thanks for saving me a seat," Violet said, leaning against the tree.

The island was lifted into Bach's "Mass in B Minor." Violet wished they had chosen something else. Bach tugged at her fringes. She refused to tear up beside Lara.

Lara quit crying after the third Bach. She wiped her cheeks with the end of her dress then smoothed the fabric over her thighs. Her mascara ran sweetly beneath her tears. Her nose squeaked when she sniffed. She looked amused, as if she'd made a private joke about broken records. Violet pretended not to notice.

She lost count of how many conductors played. Pachelbel's "Cannon in D Major" weaved in and out of the barn. Lara's profile was wistful. Her knee touched Violet's. The conductor milked Pachelbel for more than he was worth. Romantics were brave but inconsiderate. When he was through, the audience applauded again, again.

"Let's go," Lara whispered.

They walked to the sea and stood barefoot on the rocks. Violet's skirt billowed in the wind. Lara leapt onto the sand and gathered shells. Her shoulder blades shone in the moonlight. Violet joined Lara and held her shells.

"I hear you play," Lara said.

"Word gets around."

"No. I mean, I *hear* you play. Sometimes I walk by your house and can hear your voice and guitar. Do you ever perform?"

The last time Violet played live was at a waterfront bar in Portland. The heavy lighting had dripped like yolk over everyone's face. It was distracting. She was better off playing alone.

"No," Violet said.

"I need a creative outlet. Can you teach me?"

"Torturing me at the store's not enough for you?"

“I’m sorry,” Laura said with a humility Violet found surprising.

She hadn’t been looking for an apology, but there it was, panting at her feet. Violet breathed it in and was glad.

“When and where?” Violet said.

“Your place after work. Twice a week?”

There was a sadness in Lara Violet couldn’t name, but she felt it everywhere. Lara’s beauty put a fine point on sorrow. With a face like hers, Violet thought, a flicker of grief could ignite another’s heart into flames.

In the distance there was more applause. Lara bowed. Violet laughed and did the same. When Lara straightened, her smile was gone. Her eyes took in the sky. She told Violet goodnight and left.

Stunned, Violet thought of everything Lara carried, known and unknown. The unknown tongued at her skin, erasing her.

Lara couldn’t play to entertain a child. In Violet’s living room her hand quivered from C to G. Her skin flushed beneath Violet’s guiding hand. When she strummed, the guitar sputtered.

“How do you do this?” Lara asked.

“Practice.”

“Before that. I get scared even before I start. Don’t you get afraid?”

“I’ve found the anxiety goes away the moment you sit down and just do the work.”

“You’re brave.”

Violet had never linked creativity to courage. Maybe courage was behind it all: jotting down the vanishing notes and playing until three in the morning, until the fingers bled. Taming the power and sparing no one in the way.

By her fourth lesson, Lara decided talent was a fancy parlor trick. She continued with the lessons, but they evolved into self-guided tours and questions about photographs on the walls.

One night she arrived stoned. She drank half a pitcher of orange juice and ate all the humus. Violet considered sending her home. Then Lara turned on the radio and swung her hips around the kitchen. She ran her hands through her hair. Violet couldn't say no.

The next time Violet invited Lara to stay for dinner. They had salad and wine. Lara's hair was coiled in French braids. She wore a crochet halter top and a denim skirt. Violet pictured the place beneath it bulbous with heat. She went to the bathroom to curse herself in the mirror.

"Don't you do this," she said. "Don't you fucking do this."

She rinsed her face. Beneath the weight of the towel her eyes flooded with the colors of Lara. And when Violet returned, Lara's legs moved toward her, certain as an amen.

Upstairs Lara pinned Violet to the bed. Violet removed Lara's clothes and ran her cunt up and down Lara's thigh. Lara freed herself and swooped down. Violet brought a pillow to her face. Her voice rang foreign in her body. She didn't want to release the sound too soon. Lara's lips were swollen with love. She took the pillow and kissed her like she had nothing to lose. Her hands slid over Violet until they found an opening there, and there. Her fingers were spattered and wrinkling. Violet felt the softness of Lara's back, her bottom wreathed in sweat. Violet tried to balance love and lust but failed. She straddled Lara, her face to her chest. Their hearts thrashed like waves.

A few hours before dawn, Violet rose to find Lara sitting with her hands in her lap and her legs dangling from the bed. Her eyes were open but unseeing, and from her lips flowed a stream of quiet gibberish. Lara was asleep, Violet knew. When she touched her back, Lara cried out and fell back on the bed with her knees to her chest. Violet put a pillow beneath Lara's head and covered her with the sheets. She left to pee, then held Lara until the morning.

Sunlight filled the room. Lara's face in her arms was peaceful, as if she hadn't moved all night. Outside, the summer kites were like spirals of pleasure. Lara yawned. The sound was full, that of a woman improbably rested. She kissed Violet on the cheek and stepped into the shower. Soon Violet heard the tick of the gas stove and the sigh of its flames.

She found Lara in just a t-shirt, frying eggs. Two cups of coffee waited on the table.

"If you must know," Lara said, "I remember some things about last night but not all. I get night terrors. Don't bother asking why. I have no idea."

"Lara—"

"Don't diagnose me, Violet. Don't you ever diagnose me."

She plopped the eggs on a plate and sat at the table with her coffee. Violet tucked Lara's hair behind her ear. Lara held Violet's hand.

"I didn't mean to snap," Lara said. "I get sensitive about mental health stuff."

"I'm sorry you had a bad dream."

"Can I request you don't say that every time it happens? Because it's going to happen again."

Some nights Lara slept peacefully. Other nights her dreams were like hell entering through the cracks of the floor. They filled the bed with an invisible war. Violet wanted to help but didn't know how. They drank green smoothies and watched meditation videos. Violet lost

sleep. The purple beneath her eyes matched the purple beneath Lara's. One morning Lara traced the marks with a finger.

"They're kind of like mental break down hickeys," she joked. "You're welcome."

"Happy to help."

"It's what you do," Lara said.

"What do you mean?"

"Mavis told me about that time on the bridge after her husband died."

In high school Violet worked as a dishwasher at Morse's grill. The kitchen window faced the water and the cribstone bridge. One day she saw Mavis walk across the bridge to the halfway point. She rested her hands on the railing and leaned over. Violet panicked. Still aproned, she ran towards the bridge. Violet knew the granite slabs could withstand wind and waves, but what about Mavis who, since the sudden loss of Joel, moved through life as if her insides were packed with clay? She and Mavis locked eyes. Before Mavis could say anything, Violet took Mavis's hands into her own and said, "What can I do?" even though nothing could be done and nothing else could be said.

Lara wrapped her legs around Violet and held her.

"*You* show up," Lara said.

On the anniversary of the death of Violet's parents, in September, she and Lara had dinner with Mavis. She lived on the east side of the island in a two bedroom house atop the Giant's Stairs, a jagged formation where mica had left twinkling pictures in the rocks. From the screened porch they watched tourists Bacardi-stung and aloe-smear descend the trail. The waves drooled spindly creatures into the crook of the reaches.

Mavis cooked salmon stamped with lemon slices, Violet's favorite. Lara set the table and lit a candle. Violet told stories of her past as it was. Somehow her brain conjured images of moments she'd thought lost. She remembered her parents encouraging her music, the islanders encouraging the child she was, the child she was hopping through doubts, blaming the world without knowing why. She wondered how she loved the world anyway.

Her father had been a pianist. As a child, she once asked him if he loved his piano more than her. He'd scooped her into his arms and said, "Of course not. You're my girl."

As Violet talked, Lara focused on the candle's flame, her eyes gleaming like glass. Her lips trembled and tears slid down her cheeks.

"What is it?" Violet said.

Lara told Mavis that she was sorry and that she'd love to get together again sometime soon.

"What happened?" Violet said after Lara had walked away.

"Do you want to lose her?" Mavis said.

"Of course not."

"Then go to her, now."

She found Lara at the end of a hallway papered with images of clouds and trees.

"I know I lost it a little," Lara said, "but I'm okay."

"What happened?"

"Thank you for sharing those things about your family. It was beautiful."

"Lara," Violet said. She wanted to say more, but Lara silenced her with a glance. Her face was puffy. She looked at Violet and softened. She told Violet to come closer. Now, a new moment for Violet's brain: Lara pulling her towards the paper sky, kissing her.

That night in bed Violet brought her finger to Lara's scar.

"Do they have anything to do with this?"

"Violet. Please."

"You've got to help me out here," Violet said, though she'd meant something very different. *If you leave, I won't make it.*

"Yes," Lara said after a long pause.

"Yes what?"

"The dreams. They have something to do with this."

"I'm so sorry."

"Please, love, stop saying that."

Outside fall cloaked the island. They lit candles that smelled of maple sap and piles of leaves. They made love and roasted pumpkin seeds, then took a bath. Violet sat with her back against the tub and Lara between her legs.

"Sometimes I miss life off the island," Lara said.

"Like what?"

"Well, New York mostly."

"Why'd you leave?"

Lara was silent.

"Did you have a hard time finding a job?" Violet asked.

"I was great at finding jobs. I was bad at keeping them."

"I like you more every day."

"Don't you ever tire of being a sample girl? I mean, the name alone is awful."

“I have my whole life to be called a woman, Lara.”

Lara turned and sat on her knees, her breasts over the water. A soap cone stuck to the side of her head like a party hat. “I’m no girl,” she said to Violet with immutable certainty. “I’m a woman. You know that, right?” Violet thought of Lara curled up in bed, her dreams lost to morning. Sometimes her eyes were heavy and her lips quivered with something awful she couldn’t say. Violet would kiss her, then. It wasn’t that she didn’t care. It was that, after all these years, she was still bad at being herself. “I started looking for jobs,” Lara said. “I don’t want to stop us, you know? But I won’t work at a general store all my life either.”

“Have you found anything?”

“I have an interview next week for some stupid office job in Chelsea.”

“Oh.”

“I know.”

Lara laid her head on Violet’s chest. Before she met Lara, there’d been a cold husk within her. Day by day Lara had carved at this husk until it broke. Now light flowed from its frayed edges. It was scalding.

“People can sense something different in you,” Violet said. “They’re afraid of it.”

“Are you afraid?”

Violet kissed the top of Lara’s head. “No,” she said. “Once, I thought you were a little mean.”

The next week, after Lara left for her interview, Violet wrote new songs. Her fingers leapt and her voice filled the house. Love, she realized, had distracted her from the very thing that had taught her what love was. For two full nights she slept well. For two full nights she hurt.

On the third day, when Violet returned from work, Lara was waiting for her on the porch, a suitcase at her feet. She wore a camel jacket and silk scarf. Her bowler hat was the color of the Russian sage. Her face was flushed, but her smile had been sapped of delight.

“How did it go?”

“Okay, I think.”

Violet’s head throbbed. She said nothing.

“Can you sit with me for a second?” Lara said as she sat down and patted the spot beside her. “There are things I wish I could tell you. I want so badly to tell you.”

In Lara, Violet saw something terrible. The earth rotated in her stomach. Lara beside her was miraculously still. There was a secret in her so blurred, Violet wondered if either of them would ever see it clearly. Lara’s breath wobbled, and her voice was hoarse.

“In the dreams,” she said, “I can’t touch anything. It’s a world without language. The entire dream is a feeling, the kind of feeling there are no words for anyway. A part of me loves you very much. That’s the part of me I want to live by.”

Without mascara, Lara’s lashes were gold. The breeze pinched her cheeks and they glowed. In that moment her body looked enchanted, but her words expressed only this world’s harshness.

“When the love part of me fades—because sometimes it fades and I don’t know why—I’m left wondering how I’ve managed to be with you or anyone else. It’s amazing, you and me alone, together.”

Violet remained still, Lara’s face crystallizing in her mind.

“Truth is,” Lara said, “there’s this thing in me that keeps me from loving as much as I want to. This thing knows me better than anyone else. When I try to push past it, I am sick and frozen and terrified.”

Violet took Lara in her arms. “That thing you say is inside you,” she said, “I’ve had my whole life, too.”

“You have?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For saying it first.”

They sipped tea on the couch. Two crystals dangled in the window and scattered rainbows of light across the room.

“I’m very tired,” Lara said. There was a slash of rainbow on her cheek. “Could you play me something while I rest?”

On her guitar, Violet played a wordless lullaby she had never performed. Lara closed her eyes, and Violet stared at Lara’s scar.

“They offered me the job,” Lara said when Violet had finished.

Violet saw the coming days in a flash. Lara would accept the job offer and more suitcases would populate the house. Violet would become a ghost in her own bed. In her mind, the relationship would remain dark and fresh, like a plum bitten into, the juice of it powering her through the days of no touch or sound. She’d imagine Lara on the roof of her apartment, tracing with her hand that riverbed of monstrous hopes, the New York City skyline. She’d imagine Lara swimming back to her. She’d wash ashore bound in lush seaweed.

Several months from now, not in her head but her house, the phone would ring. A young woman's voice over the rush of midtown traffic would sound in her ear. After a time, the woman would say, doubtfully, "I'm thinking of visiting the island this summer," and Violet, weightless, would say how ever so lovely that would be.

"Come here," Violet said, and lay down beside Lara. She pressed her stomach against Violet's and hooped her arms around Violet's neck. Violet breathed her in and held her. Their fingers locked. Their skin heated. Violet swore never to lose the fever of them, and she wouldn't. This heat would cover her body like a tarp until she pulled it back and saw what was there: a woman who loved and was loved, her scars hidden in plain sight like a child at rest, her heart withered in place. Lara squeezed her hand and Violet felt the beginnings of a loss she could live with. Seeing it through would take all her breath. It wouldn't look so bad.

About Life on Jupiter

“What don’t I know about you?” he says. “There must be something.”

She doesn’t answer him at first. They’ve been lying here for hours beneath swathes of goose down and throw pillows and the rose petals they’d gathered from the chapel earlier that morning. Her head is heavy on his chest. Blond hair spills onto the mattress. He traces the sweat along her spine, fingers the dimples and lone freckle, the heart and stars tattoo from a high school trip to Atlantic City she’s long kept hidden from her parents. Or maybe that was from the trip to Tulum. All her secrets blur together into one long line pulling on him like a chain, pulling him closer to her. But surely, there must be something about her he does not know.

Again, he asks his wife, “What don’t I know about you? Tell me.”

She rises slowly and sweeps the shiny bangs from her eyes, her makeup still hard and cakey. He smiles when she pulls on his ear. She could pull on him for hours if she wanted. With her, he is solid and ebullient, a tower full of bells.

“No,” she says.

The hotel's heater is on full blast, and their room is sticky with heat. They are drowsy and studded with sweat. He fears if Birdie, naked and slick, moves another inch she'll slide right out of his arms and onto the hideous carpet.

"I told you," she says. "You know everything there is about me. Everything worth knowing anyway."

"That's just it," he says. "I want to know all the things not worth knowing too."

"You're a very strange man, my Benjamin. Do you know that?"

"I know it deeply, Birdie, my pet. Now won't you tell me something about you I don't know?"

She sighs and tells him once again there's nothing to know, that she's the same Birdie he's known for the past six months, that it's taken him approximately 182.5 days to turn her inside out. Her face plops back onto his chest with an endearing *thunk*.

At the chapel where they eloped this morning, she pressed herself against him. Her dress was sparkly and fashionably short. There was rouge and heavy perfume. A little crown teeming with marigolds. She'd kissed him ferociously, yanked on his coattails with her fist. He was enamored and intrigued by the grip of her fingers, the fear and fury on her lips. She kissed him like no one was there, like she was running out of time, as if someone had punched a great big hole in her life and only he could stop her from standing alone at its center.

He wants to know everything about her. True, they are only twenty-two, but he's old enough to know how life works. He wants to know her before it's too late. Before medical school and mortgages and children and terrible vacations. Before their years alone together drift away untouched.

"Fine," she says. "I have an irrational fear of artichokes."

"Right. You call it *Alcarchofa-phobia*. Alcarchofa being the Spanish word for artichoke. Now tell me something I don't know, will you please?"

"My mother is a triplet."

"I knew that too."

"When I was young, I had an imaginary friend who was a legendary jazz musician and vampire."

"Ah, yes. Count Dizzie Fats. A real showstopper that one. Talented and deadly."

"See? You know everything there is to know about me."

"That can't be true, my pet. Tell me one thing I don't know. Please."

“All right. I’m not sad about dropping out of art school.”

He straightens and she slides off him, tucks herself neatly back into the sheets. She stares at the ceiling. Her face expressionless.

“Birdie,” he says.

“It’s true. I’m not upset about it. I don’t actually enjoy art. Dropping out was a relief.”

“Birdie, you don’t have to try to make me feel better.”

“I’m not. I chose to drop out of school. Art is more of a hobby than a calling. It has to be a calling for it to work.”

But Birdie *had* made it work, this she’ll never tell him. One day her art teacher looked at her paintings and said, “Birdie, you paint with joy, such indescribable joy. I’ve never seen anything like it.” But Birdie has never been a joyful person. Certainly not indescribably so.

“I never asked you to drop out, you know,” he says.

What, Benjamin wonders, to do with a half-truth? He doesn’t know what to say to her. She’d dropped out of art school soon after he proposed. He was so grateful to her. He never wanted to

ask her to drop out and he never had to. She'd telescoped in on their future and saw what needed to go.

"You really don't enjoy art, Birdie?" he says. "You really mean that?"

"I do, Benjamin. I really, really do."

"Then I guess, dear pet. That is something about you I did not know."

Birdie watches him smile then close his eyes. In her are several minor chords, a small hymn of rage. She doesn't care for his complacency. He thinks he knows everything there is to know about her, but that is not possible. You can't know that much about anybody. You're lucky to see anything glinting above the surface at all. She longs to tell her husband this, to wipe the peace right off of his face.

"Actually, Benjamin. There is something else you don't know."

"What is it?"

"Once, when I was in third grade, me and this boy in my class were kidnapped."

"You were what?"

“Only for a day. ten minutes to be exact. We were two blocks away from school waiting for his mother to pick us up. She was running late that day, and we waited for almost thirty minutes after the bell rang. The man drove a rusty green truck that swerved across the lanes. He glided to a stop when he saw us, left the engine running. He got out of the driver’s seat. His eyes were long and bloodshot. He told us our mother was running late and that she was sorry, so sorry.’

“Birdie,” Benjamin says, “no.”

“Then he scooped us into the truck one by one. We were small for nine, so very small. And the certainty in his voice left me spellbound. We sat up front beside him and he buckled our seatbelts. He drove us around the block and uttered a bunch of nonsensical things. Then, with absolute clarity—a clarity I’ve never encountered since—he started talking about life on Jupiter. He talked about the slimy space animals and the little blue men that ruled the planet. He talked about how Jupiter was his favorite place to visit, that he’d visit more often if his boss ever gave him the day off. ‘Life on Jupiter,’ he’d said. ‘It’s the greatest thing there is. You get to leave all this behind and no one questions where you came from. You get to say whatever’s on your heart until you feel so good you’re nothing but this messy, staggering pile of goo people just want to love on all day long. And on Jupiter you like what you are because you get to be what you’re not. No one minds your little dumb soul. You see, on Jupiter no one knows that beneath all that beautiful goo you’re just another piece of trash.’ I wanted to hear more of his story, but my friend beside me started to wail. I think the terror of it all had finally caught up to him. The man

turned the car around and dropped us off in front of the school. The last thing he said to us was, ‘You kids are all right, you know that?’

Birdie does not tell Benjamin how deeply her skin had flushed beneath the man’s arm as he’d buckled then unbuckled her seatbelt, how good it had felt to ride beside him even as her dear friend shook with each silent, rolling sob. She doesn’t tell Benjamin that it took everything within her to not sob herself as she watched the truck drive away from the school until there was nothing but silence and the waves of twisted cottonwoods shading the road. As a girl, Birdie had reasoned the man had bigger and better places to be like Jupiter or Mars or even the next town over. He didn’t have to stay in the same dull, pathetic place haunted by manners and grief. She’d followed her sobbing friend across the school’s brick path. He collected himself by the big brass statue of children holding hands around a globe. She pressed her finger over northern Maine, their home, wishing she could erase it entirely. “Big dumb Earth,” she’d whispered aloud, “full of little dumb towns and little dumb souls. And for what?”

“I didn’t care so much for the story as for the way the man told it,” Birdie tells Benjamin now. “I knew he was full of it, but he spoke with such conviction. No one I knew had ever spoken like that before. I’m not sure there are many people who believe that much in themselves, you know what I mean?”

But Birdie does not see whether or not her husband knows what she means. For her story unraveled something within her, sent her spiraling to the bathroom where she now runs a hot bath over her face. She loves life under the water, how the steam and scream of it erases her

somehow. She holds her breath and lets the water wash over the elopement and the corny chapel and the horrified look on Benjamin's face just moments earlier. She lets it wash over the rundown farm where she was raised, the dirt she's always carried within her. After the kidnapping, she stopped speaking to her friend who'd rode along in that truck beside her. She hadn't stopped speaking to him out of trauma or shame. She'd resented him for screaming, for not letting her hear the rest of the man's story. She rises out of the water, lets the blast of air sting her heart. Slowly, she sinks back in, lets the water do its job. It washes over childhood and art school and life on Jupiter, over that joy her teacher saw—the indescribable joy!—and perhaps over several other things not worth mentioning.

Flirting with the Guardian

Evelyn parked beside Bennett's Toyota, close enough to see its honeycombs of rust. She longed to be with him these rare mornings she got away—his work excited her, *he* excited her. Three garden beds lay between his studio and the house. Clothes billowed on a line, their pins salted with early snow. She cut the engine and wrapped her head with a scarf.

Inside, they sat at his desk and waited for the tea to cool. She removed her boots and placed her feet on his lap. He looked at her, stricken by her simple features—the weight of her breasts, her toffee-colored hair, her lips parted as she looked about. She was vacant and determined, undeniably herself. Her presence was commanding. Unlike any other woman, moreover, she knew it.

And yet she was married.

A sculpture he'd started but never finished stood on its plinth in the back of the studio. He called it "Guardian of the Inner Place." He saw the completed piece in his head, certain as desire: a seven-foot abstract statue of a man he knew but could not name. The statue's legs were thick and gleaming, jagged like lightning bolts. He saw the missing parts in his dreams—a hand washed up on some astral beach, arms dangling like chimes from branches. It was the face he couldn't see, or didn't want to see. It might, he feared, look too much like him.

Bennett had come to rely on his talent, and the success it brought. Since graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago, he'd won numerous prizes and enjoyed over ten one man shows. At thirty-one, Bennett was very comfortable with himself, even he thought, unstoppable. He'd returned to Maine, three years back, to work in peace. Evelyn saw this in him, he hoped.

She sipped her tea and eyed the statue.

“Tell me about the Guardian,” she said, her face alight, as if she were asking about a recent voyage.

On his desk were a sugar bowl and kettle, stacks of paper and a jar of buttons. That morning he’d been so absorbed in his work that he plopped a few buttons into his tea. This is what he told her.

“You don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

“There isn’t much to say.”

“I don’t agree.”

The studio was welcoming but unkempt, like a church rummage sale. The walls were a deep blue with cherry-wood chairs stacked against them. On the floor were metals and tools. A recent painting dried on the wall. She adored his sculptures and his paintings. There was a disturbing, magical quality to his figures, nothing like the smirking family portraits her parents had hung in the wisteria-covered home of her childhood. She thought she knew him, but what did that mean? His work was how he warded off a grief from nowhere. She had to tease him.

“Guardian or no Guardian,” she said, “your work’s given me any number of complexes. I’ll never run out of things to write about.”

Evelyn was a poet, but she hadn’t written a word in months. Her heart, somehow, had walled up. She dreamed of moving in with Bennett. She’d write and he’d sculpt and together they’d put this town on the map. There would be statues of them in the park, bouquets of doves on their bronze shoulders. She looked at the Guardian. What she’d give to do one thing well, to taste the golden bitterness of work.

She stood and walked to the back of the studio. The Guardian came up to her shoulders. She wrapped her arms around it and mimed the waltz. She said one day it would grow up to be very handsome.

“Finish me, Bennett!” she cooed.

The Guardian’s chest reminded her of the milk crate she’d stood on when she was a child, to peer into her next-door neighbor’s window. How she’d longed to join that family, to pull up a table at their chair and scream. While Evelyn and her sister were forbidden to speak after 9pm., the neighbors were so full of life. Everything was permitted, any and every word. She fell into a trance. The Guardian made her feel as though she were transforming into pure nightfall.

Bennett raised his mug and smiled. In her arms, the statue was less intimidating. Her face dazzled. Her cheeks flushed naturally, and her eyes, her chief asset, were mineral blue. Her movements softened him. He was at ease before his work now, alarming ease, as if an artist’s frustration was a ritual he’d memorized but never felt.

She ran her fingers over the statue and felt its power. Though the Guardian was unfinished, it looked like it might scream. Bennett pretended otherwise, but Evelyn knew his work was evolving. The Guardian was doing something. Thoughts like harpies tore through her. She had the urge to write them down but felt somehow empty. She wasn’t like other writers. Misery didn’t interest her. She wasn’t out for revenge. Poetry offered sunsets, the desire to perfect oneself.

She returned to Bennett and settled in his lap.

“I have something for you,” he said, and handed her a leather box.

Inside was a pearl necklace. She held it to the light and smiled.

Last year she attended one of his exhibitions in town. He'd recognized her from the library where she worked the circulation desk. She wore dresses that zipped in the back and a different colored scarf in her hair, one for each day of the week. The dresses stopped at her thighs and were tight at the hips. The veins in her neck were skim-milk blue. In the summer the air conditioner was on high—her nipples pushed against the fabric. She spoke to everyone yet Bennett had kept his distance. He liked the way she told stories. Her lone remarks won by their incisiveness.

After the exhibition, they walked in the sculpture garden. Fireflies danced in the leaves and water rose from the fountains. Evelyn told how she was raised in Western Massachusetts, then moved to Maine with her husband to be near his aging parents. She enjoyed working at the library, though she believed work like that exploited our most boring facets. Her passion was writing, but she wrote in secret.

"I can't remember the last time I shared my work with anyone," she said. "I love what the bible says about not casting pearls before swine. When I heard that, I was like, 'Damn, Jesus. You nailed it.'"

"I say cast your pearls anyway."

They reached a dark corner of the garden and sat on a marble bench. Her lips were stained with wine. Listening to her, he felt dizzy. Her remoteness was familiar. She held his gaze the way one held a living thing. She was young. She wore a wedding ring. He saw their situation clearly but couldn't see himself. She moved closer and their foreheads touched.

Now she donned the necklace and thanked him. After a long morning's work, it was nice to be soft with her. Her hands were wet. They dampened when she was nervous. He held them as they kissed. She said his name, and he followed her to the house.

She pulled her dress over her head and formed their world, which he ruled and felt. She stretched out, reaching for the corners of the bed. He kissed her neck, her shoulders, his authority like thunder. She was wet and motionless. He was reeling. He slipped her breast into his mouth and she moaned. She straddled him, imagining webs of light binding his ankles and thighs.

She woke at dusk. The day had passed without them. Bennett was on his side, snoring. He smelled of coffee and deep cedar. She kissed his shoulder blade.

Another woman would panic. She'd grab her things and fumble for her husband's car keys as a stream of readymade excuses flowed through her. But Evelyn had decided to leave her husband. He knew about Bennett and had begged her to stop. When she didn't, his anger was like another person in their house, though she never rose to it.

Within Evelyn lurked an unbridled monstrosity. She thought of what she'd abandoned for this marriage: lavish foreign countrysides, the luminous ideas she could never share, children. Evelyn wasn't blameless. She knew that. The things people did to escape themselves, the things *she* did, set her heart adrift.

She could move in with Bennett if she wanted, if he'd have her, but never asked. She needed to sit with her loss, let time suture her divided self. Her greatest fear was that she'd live and die a private person. She imagined her pearls yellowing within her.

Growing up, she was close to her older sister, Nan. Her mind was sharp but forgiving. She wore fishnet stockings and dark lipstick. She read Evelyn's poetry with enthusiasm and marked the troubling parts with a green gel pen. In eighth grade, she was suspended from school for writing a story called "A Meditation" about a teenage boy who falls in love with a

gravedigger. Nan had mocked the teacher's homophobia. There was no one else Evelyn had wanted to be.

When Nan was sixteen, she drove home from a party and fell asleep at the wheel. Her car drifted off the road and wrapped a telephone pole. The police found her conscious but unable to speak. She was asleep by the time Evelyn arrived at the hospital. There were specs of dried blood on her chin and raisin-colored circles beneath her eyes. The circles seemed to deepen over time, not fade.

Nan forgot details, names. Once, at dinner, she tried to recall sunflowers but couldn't.

"They're big and bright as planets," she said. "There's a little green man at the center."

Months after the accident, she looked at Evelyn as though she were something materialized from a fog. Evelyn imagined crawling into bed beside Nan as she cried. She'd heal her sister with poetry and prayer, drag the memories back to where they belonged. But in the dark, Evelyn couldn't move. She let the cries sing her to sleep. Her courage broke like waves in a storm.

That was the year Evelyn first stopped writing. She opened her notebook to a blank page and darkness gathered in her heart. She read books that made her forget the way the house felt with all the lights off to ease Nan's migraines, the way her parents stopped making eye contact, as though one glance would erase everything, the way a scream would rush up Evelyn's throat whenever Nan called her the wrong name or hummed like a broken child as their mother combed her hair.

Bennett wrapped his arms around her.

"Morning," he joked.

"I'll get dinner ready," she said. "You should get back to work."

He brushed the hair from her eyes and kissed her forehead. “You interrupted me,” he said. “I’m grateful.”

“I can’t stay away.”

Bennett owned a bronze casting facility in Tuscany. Every other fall he stayed at his friends’ villa and taught classes at the college. He wanted Evelyn to go with him this year, if she could.

There was a distant look on her face. He knew little about her past or marriage. He suspected she’d survived one of those bruised, off-color childhoods. Her husband was respected. He wrote for the local paper and had even praised Bennett’s work. Bennett never thought he’d be caught in such melodrama, but Evelyn was his world. Her affection made him swoon. She revealed herself in pieces. There were times he could feel the expansiveness of her heart—he could lose himself in its red rooms. He wanted to discover who he’d found.

She smiled, the distance gone, her cheeks flushed with autumnal grace.

She pictured herself in the Tuscany countryside while Bennett taught and worked. She’d wear long, flowery linens and pass groves lacquered with sunlight. Her bag would be filled with notepads and books. She’d scale mountains. She’d drink wine. When her mind wandered to darker times, Bennett would kiss her cheek. But in Tuscany, what would she *do*?

Evelyn was the first in her family to go to college. She’d graduated in four years and was engaged her senior year. Her husband’s family was vast and warm. She had little to do with her own family by then. Her parents had not encouraged her studies. The bond she once had with Nan had faded. She lived at home with their parents. Evelyn visited last Christmas and saw Nan’s symptoms had improved. She worked part-time at the supermarket and had a boyfriend. Evelyn longed to connect with her sister, but Nan’s resentment was palpable. She was angry that

Evelyn had left and married a man she didn't love. This, anyway, was the story Evelyn told herself. She couldn't bear to think Nan had moved on too.

Evelyn hadn't written a word since her last visit home. Bennett thought it a phase, but she knew the block was a certitude.

"Tuscany sounds nice," she said at last. "We could stay through Christmas."

"It's a plan."

"What will you work on there?"

"I'll be teaching mostly, but I'd like to revisit some sketches I drew for a new piece."

"A *new* piece?"

He studied her. After a while, he said, "The writing will come back, you know."

"Okay."

"You have to trust that it wants you."

She remembered the day she showed him her work. She watched him taste her wild mind. He told her she *must* write. He said it the way a yogi would say one *must* breathe.

She asked Bennett if he planned to finish his statue. Typically, work excited him the way love excited him, but with the Guardian he felt resistance. He'd hooked into something that unnerved him. He'd never sculpted a human.

"The Guardian really got under your skin," he said.

"It's dangerous," she said. "The work reminds me it's not writing I'm afraid of, but living."

She imagined what it would be like to leave her marriage. She'd enter Bennett's house with all her things, overpowered by warmth. There'd be books and plants and a tool box he

forgot to put away. A candle would wink in the corner, and there'd be blue orchids mounted in a gilded vase. The divorce would be finalized. She'd be free—they'd be free.

His voice was soft, almost a whisper. "What do you mean?"

"Deep down, I'm afraid of what I am." A silence stretched between them. "You can finish it," she said, "the Guardian."

"I try, but something keeps getting in my way."

Outside, birdsongs faintly rose and fell. She closed her eyes and turned on her side.

The past few months he'd seen her slip in and out of fogs. He blamed the writer's block, but now he feared there was something more, something in her work itself.

When he worked, he felt a blazing freedom. From one mote of attentiveness, life lovingly expanded. His process was long but certain. He got things wrong and wrong again. He returned to the work, battered but interested. He had to surrender to it repeatedly, as he would surrender to the Guardian. He finished things and kept going.

"You don't have to do it, you know," he said. "You could give it up. It's okay to not be anything."

This, he knew instantly, was the wrong thing to say. She stood, and he took her hand.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She said something about starting dinner and pulled herself away. Her underwear had landed on the back of a chair and hung like a laced kerchief. She slipped them on, then crawled about searching for her bralette. He watched her dress and leave.

She rinsed potatoes in the kitchen sink. The clock radio played classical, her favorite. She was tired but unsure why. Her life drifted like a cloud.

Through the window, she saw Bennett return to his studio. She went out and peered into its window. Bennett had put on his welding helmet. He kneeled before the Guardian like an acolyte. The flame touched the steel and sparks beat down. She was happy for him.

She drove into town and parked at the cemetery. It was where she'd go after fighting with her husband. She climbed onto the roof of the car and let her mind crawl.

The sky was clear and studded with stars, like those nights she wrote fervidly in her childhood room. She thought of a poem she wrote in high school, long after Nan's accident: *This boxed-up spirit? Where do I set it free?* Fifteen years later she didn't know the answer and she couldn't write a better line. The tombstones were small and the color of sediment. They witnessed her darkest hours, then watched her emerge, ready for the sun.

She imagined the Guardian completed, glimmering with a knowing smile. It stood relaxed in contrapposto. Its palms were held aloft, ready to receive. She saw herself taking its hands and looking into its eyes, and the image tore open the heart she thought she'd lost. In it were treasures that had long prevailed—the loneliness that rose into poetry, the ghost who'd do evil to heal her sister, the love of a master sculptor. Still, she couldn't submit to them. Could she give up the writing itself? Bennett could sculpt and she could give up and maybe, finally, she'd have peace.

The Guardian melted into her. Words and images filled her like bathwater. She looked at the stars and cried. It was time to go home.

Driving along the ocean, she watched couples in windbreakers holding hands and talking into their scarves. She loved the ocean at night, where no life was wasted.

At home on the table there was tea and a nest of candles. Bennett cut potatoes and smiled as she removed her coat. She poured herself tea from the pot they'd picked up at a farmers'

market in Belfast. She and Bennett had spoken with the potter like three old friends. The man was ninety-four. He made everything by hand and worked outside on cloudless days. He was soft-spoken and kind. She remembered the day well, full of good people like the potter. Until now, she'd forgotten the joy in simply showing up, the peace.

The teapot was lavender porcelain and covered in flowers, made by hands vested with spells of faith. She brought the cup to her chest and let it warm her.

The Witnesses

My mother brought me to see Miss Wendy, the lady who'd burned off her breasts the day her husband died, with a candle, or so the children say.

Mother met Miss Wendy at the market. She had grabbed Mother's hand and placed it on a mango. The best ones look like Rothko paintings, she told Mother, and had a sweet aroma around the stem.

Her chimney looked like one from a fairy tale. I'd always seen its top from my bedroom window, a stack of sullen pink bricks with a trail of smoke above the trees. I imagined doves swinging from her windows and fat tulips in mid-bloom round the lawn. But no birds waited for us as we approached her door. Instead, a stuffed coyote snarled at us from the window. Before Mother knocked, I tugged at her blouse.

"What is it?" she said, smiling.

I was afraid to speak the words Mother had used to tell me about her friend. "Mom, how did Miss Wendy burn off her breasts?"

"It was an accident," she said.

We lived in the heart of the Texas Hill Country, in a little town known for its family bakeries, burning red antique stores, post-menopausal wine tastings, and the Found Museum: a two story building that houses the world's second largest apple seed. The place ices over every several years and schools shut down because of it. One year a leaf came to be known as God's Fingernail. It had turned orange and gold, the only one, shimmering in the sun amidst all the greens.

My mother was twenty-nine the day I was born but didn't look a day over seventeen. She'd traipse the town in her overalls with me tucked in her sling. The locals knew when she was coming. They could see her from their windows as she walked down the hill and would marvel at her flowing strawberry hair.

There weren't many people who never visited our house. Mother worked at the florist and invited her customers home where they were greeted by stacks of overdue library books and, for a time, my father in the stained apron he wore while working on his statues.

I wasn't to disturb him. I could see him through the window of his shed, hunched on a stool with a strap from his overalls dangling at his waist. Mother never bothered him either. Instead, she put flowers by his door. She did this even after he left for that trip to Florence with that bug-eyed waitress who always knew how many crackers I liked in my soup.

I remember the day Father made the statue of the cherub.

"I think it's the worst thing I've ever done," he said as he set it in my lap.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"It's yours."

I wanted to place it at the end of our drive. We didn't have any pets, but I liked the idea of having something greet me when I came home. Fireflies danced in the bushes as we walked down with the statue, watching us like yellow eyes. I was about to point them out, but Father asked what it's like to be a child.

"Don't you already know?" I said.

The day Mother met Miss Wendy, I was at home eating chips and digging for buried treasures beneath the cushions on our sofa. Father's statues watched me, three-headed creatures with scary mouths made of porcelain china.

I'd fallen asleep by the time Mother returned. She woke me to say she'd made a new friend.

"She's invited us to her house for drinks." Mother had a smell that reminded me of melons and brie, and she always looked clean, even when she hadn't bathed for days. "Miss Wendy is quite the character, as you'll see."

I'd never been to a character's house. Every day, characters flocked to ours, where Mother greeted them with a tray of powdered lemon squares. One time a man who stunk of sulfur arrived with dirt on his cheeks and a toothy accordion in his hands. I sat on the couch while he played. Mother clapped and danced.

Whenever she opened the door for these people, it was as though they walked straight through me. Not even my father's statues were discussed. The people only wanted her, and she wanted them. I knew when we were done with them for the day. A silence hung about, ethereal and cold. I'd ask her if she knew when Father was coming home, but her cheeks would fade, and she'd say let's get ice cream. I couldn't tell her how Rocky Road hurt my stomach, or how I'd seen some boys destroy Father's cherub, drawing its stony blood, or how I missed Father so much I screamed into my pillow until my eyes and throat were sore. I just dipped my finger in the ice cream and put it on the tip of my nose and crossed my eyes while Mother laughed with all her heart.

By the time Mother knocked on Miss Wendy's door, my fingers were in my mouth. Mother kept clearing her throat. I'd never seen her like that.

"And please, Anna," she said, "try not to look at them."

"Look at what?" I said.

"Her breasts."

“I thought she burned them off.”

“Possibly.”

“Then what am I not supposed to look at?”

Miss Wendy appeared and beamed at Mother. “Caroline,” she said.

I stared at Miss Wendy’s heavy tongue and teeth like corn. Her chapped lips formed a grin bordered by dimples. She wore red tights and a linen blouse that fell to her knees. She wasn’t tall, but bent down anyway to get a better look at me.

I could feel the sweat on her palm as she cupped my chin and feared her mustard-colored nails would slice me open. I held back my tears as she widened the door to let us in.

There were cracks in the floor and a coffee table with sugar cookies and a pitcher of Sangria. Mother poured herself a glass. On Miss Wendy’s couch, I felt small, a puppet waiting for Mother to fill my mouth with words. Miss Wendy sat in a wicker chair and smiled. I looked at the dead coyote.

“Don’t mind him,” Miss Wendy said. “He can’t get you.”

It was strange watching Mother in that house, this woman who’d never learned how to be a guest. She drank so fast that the ice cubes humming in the pitcher almost became a song. Wind swept through the house. Miss Wendy’s blouse rippled like a sheet on a line. She drummed her fingers on her knee and smiled.

Two empty chairs rattled on the porch. Green hills speckled with bushes and an early wave of dancing blue bonnets framed the yard. In the distance a stream trickled in the sun. A lone fisherman thigh-deep in it kept on reeling only to find his lure had been ignored.

“Your house is so pretty,” I told Miss Wendy, struggling not to stare at her chest, wondering what I couldn’t see.

“You certainly have grown, Anna,” she said. I looked at Mother. Miss Wendy chuckled. “This might sound strange,” she said to Mother, “but Anna and I have already met. It was very brief. I congratulated you,” she said, turning to me, “after the play. I wanted to let you know my great grandson was ‘The Voice.’”

Two years before, my school had put on a musical about Jonah and the Whale. The art teacher had constructed a seven-foot-long cardboard whale and painted it white. As “The Tail,” my part was to make the tail flip every five seconds. “The Voice” was Larry Brunson, a twelve-year old who weighed over two hundred pounds and had a gorgeous baritone that tamed the audience’s whispers. He had no neck and long dark hairs on his arms and legs. He looked like a poisonous caterpillar as he swayed in his seat, the rolls of fat on his stomach shaking with vibrato.

“Sorry,” I told Miss Wendy. “I don’t remember that.”

“I thought you kids were wonderful,” she said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Caroline?”

“I didn’t go,” Mother said, and took another drink. “The Bible doesn’t belong in public schools.”

“I never turn down the chance to be part of an audience,” Miss Wendy said.

My father picked me up from rehearsal a few times. One day we took home another girl, too, Penny. Her mom with her faded jeans was waiting in the drive. Father turned on the radio, and they went into the house. I pressed my forehead against the seat and tried to breathe while Penny’s eyes burned my face.

I followed Mother’s eyes to the uniformed man in the photograph on the mantle. He had a dimpled chin and sad cow eyes that were muddled and black.

“Who’s that?” Mother slurred.

“That’s my husband,” Miss Wendy said. “It was taken shortly after the baby was born.”

“Was he in the Marines?” Mother said.

“Thomas served for several years.”

“Where is he now?” I said.

“He passed away, dear.”

I looked at my feet. “I’m sorry.”

Miss Wendy shut her eyes and rocked in her chair.

“Did he die in the war?” Mother said.

Miss Wendy let out a shriek. “That filthy drunk died on shore leave!”

Mother’s mouth moved, but said nothing. Miss Wendy poured herself a glass of Sangria and went on.

“Thomas was always such a sweet man. So good to me and the baby. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise. But he was a glutton, I tell you, who could out-drink my own sweet mother, and that’s really saying something.”

I watched Mother fiddle with her wedding band. Miss Wendy pressed her hand against her chest.

“In the end, his drink got the best of him,” Miss Wendy said. “That and gravity, I guess. He got so drunk one day he fell off the boat. When my little boy got older I told him his daddy fell off the boat and drowned. Not a complete lie, I guess. But it was so much more than that, of course. We couldn’t have the funeral because of his condition. The boat was up against the dock. Just like that!” Miss Wendy shouted, and clapped. “My poor Thomas fell and was crushed against the dock. Clap, clap, clap! Just like that.”

Mother buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Miss Wendy handed her a napkin and patted her back.

“There, there. I shouldn’t go running my mouth about such things. It’s not good for you or the girl.”

“So he was there,” Mother stammered, “and then he wasn’t. He just wasn’t.”

Miss Wendy held Mother’s face.

“And he will come back to you,” she said. “Look at you. How couldn’t he?”

Mother nodded and excused herself. Miss Wendy returned to her chair and smiled.

“Your mother will be all right. She’s just upset about a few things, but it’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Even then I knew she was wrong. She was wrong about me, wrong about my mother. There was no way for her to know what lay ahead. She couldn’t have known everything that was going on either: how we Wright girls were stranded on the shore, ready to break into a million pieces, while my father was on the other side of the world, complete.

“That’s the saddest story I’ve ever heard,” I said.

“You have to remember neither of us was there. What happened to my husband was just melodrama. But, honey, there were people who saw what happened, the witnesses. For them, it was a *performance*.”

When Mother returned, her face was swollen. It was time to go, she said, and thanked Miss Wendy. I wanted to ask Miss Wendy about what had caused her to burn her breasts right off her body. I imagined her showing me what wasn’t there. I saw her lift her blouse to reveal her body like the trunk of a tree with the bark soaked red from rain. I wanted more from her, from

the woman who had watched me move the whale when my parents wouldn't, back when I wanted only to drown in the voice of her great grandson.

At the door, she and Mother said goodbye while I looked out at the stream.

The fisherman was in it, still. His line was still empty. He stood there with his head against his rod, as if deep in prayer. Mother kept telling me to get in the Blazer but like the fisherman, I couldn't move.

In Defense Of The Highest Octave

January 31, 2019

Dear Margo,

I get you, I think. Your column “Margo Mulls” got me through some tough times. I love the one from last year that was nothing but haikus for a broken heart. This may sound corny, but I swear your work is the real deal. I have one of your haikus taped to my bathroom mirror: “You no longer circumspect/glow like fireflies/live from self-respect.” So good! I mean, I’ve never been in love before, but I feel like you wrote that heartbreak column just for me.

You’ve always just gone for it, Margo. I really need someone like that right now. Can’t believe they stopped publishing your column. My mom’s a huge fan too. She introduced me to your work even though she doesn’t read much. She’s got cancer for the second time, but I’m not bringing that up so you’ll feel sorry for me. You strike me as the kind of person I could talk to about life or what it could be.

I got a question for you, Margo. A big one. But I’m not going to ask it just yet. The editor told me if you respond, he’ll print our correspondence in the paper. I like this better than private letters or email. Do you ever get the feeling that no one is paying attention, Margo? You don’t have to answer that. It’s not my real question. I promise I’ll ask it one day.

Guess I’m supposed to sign these letters under something vague and sad like, “Confused,” “Fed Up,” or “Almost Motherless,” but I won’t do that to us, Margo. I will use a pen name though. This is small town New Hampshire. Going incognito sounds about right.

Respectfully,

Kia

February 4, 2019

Dear Kia,

Why the heck not? I was surprised to read your letter in last week's issue. It's been over a year since my last column. Questions stopped coming, and I stopped writing. Correspondence hasn't been on my mind. I'm interested it's on yours.

I have no idea who you are, but I think you're fabulous. I'd like to write you once a week though I expect you to take the lead on this. I won't be asking the questions, Kia. That's up to you. Don't worry, I'm not enlightened. I'm just tired. I'm hesitant to give you advice, but we'll see.

I am thirty years older than you and almost never leave the house. I have a few close friends who help me with errands and keep me company. My house is round, eight-sided and cardinal red. The wooden roof forms a sinking triangle beneath the branches. When it snows, the house glistens like an iced truffle. My internet connection is terrible. I sometimes have electricity. I am prone to happiness and bouts of unearthly weepiness. I'm not a good witch or a bad witch. Please don't hold me to either.

You may share as much or as little as you like, but we must never meet. I'm a virtual recluse, and I don't care to be someone I'm not. After years of pretending, I've retreated into my best shell.

You've asked me not to feel sorry for you. I don't feel sorry. I just wish what you're going through with your mom wasn't true.

I'm going to sign off with an old list I continue to live by. I wrote this during a time in my life when I needed it more than anything. I once shared it in "Margo Mulls" many years ago. I think it bears repeating.

Deep Down Margo Knows:

1. You can't take anything personally.
2. Small emotional cracks tend to become chasms.
3. Most people aren't good or bad. They're simply after an unlimited use of the cosmic spotlight.
4. Unrealistic expectations are a chokehold.
5. Never let the bastards win.
6. Stillness precedes clear action.
7. Nothing is more socially frightening than meeting someone with no access to interiority.
8. It's best to always have a book or example on hand.
9. Life is a pleasure and a responsibility.
10. Enjoying yourself is part of the job.

If you agree with one or more of these things, we'll get along. I'm glad you've got big questions, Kia. In my experience, they fair better than our big plans. And yes, sometimes I feel like no one is paying attention.

-Margo

February 7 2019

Dear Margo,

It's a deal! I accept your terms and look forward to hearing more from you. I was excited to read your response which is great because I don't get excited about a lot of things. Not

anymore. I'm glad you feel at home with whoever you are, Margo. I know I've got a lot of growing to do, but sometimes I feel this completeness within myself too. It's very strange.

Maybe that's why my school put me in the Gifted and Talented program. I don't mean to sound braggy. I just thought you should know what I go through every day. They stick the G&T juniors on the third floor in a room with no windows and one large skylight. This is where the magic's supposed to happen. It used to be the music room, but the music program got cut last year. The room's now G&T and storage space for the instruments. There's a piano, a harp, some tubas and trombones, saxophones, and a sad looking French horn.

I think the school started G&T because they felt bad about cutting the music program. The joke's on them though because G&T is just six weirdos goofing off in a brassy chamber. We're supervised by Coach Duvall, but he just watches movies on his phone. It's rare when all the G&T kids show up. Most of them spend the period getting high behind this offensive totem pole near the football field.

I show up to class because I get to sit next to the harp and write you letters. G&T's mostly me and this guy Rex who's into Latin and urban planning. For some reason the school believes G&T students should never be without clay. There's a new jar on my desk every week. I don't know what we're supposed to do with it. I give my clay to Rex. On Mondays, he points to my jar and is all, "You going to finish that?" as if it were lunch.

I guess school isn't so bad. It's better than being at home. My dad works in Boston, but he started working from home when Mom got sick. He's turned part of the living room into an office. He works behind two bookshelves and a worn shower curtain splattered with palm trees. He works long hours. Sometimes he works after we've had dinner. He listens to alternative rock

while he does whatever he does. He turns the volume up whenever Mom wretches in the bathroom. Dad can drown her out, but I can't.

Your house sounds great. I like that you're in the woods. I wish we were. We live in a new neighborhood where the homes are tall and close together like a miniature city. I once stood in the thin alley between our house and the one next door. I formed a human cross, and my fingers touched the brick. The windows in the house next door are made of blue glass. People move behind them like freshwater fish. Children in library books tend to have this, I don't know, transcendental relationship with their neighborhoods: street baseball and wisecracking elders, mud pie feasts and secret romances. Not me.

But there is this boy next door. He looks my age, maybe a little older. He must be homeschooled because I never see him at school, and he's got G&T written all over him. His bedroom's on the second floor. Sometimes I watch him from the bathroom. I call him Blue because the glass colors his skin this weepy, aqua color. Also, he's so upset about something he screams for half an hour straight each night. He sits on his bed with his hands over his ears. His jaw drops, and the muscles in his neck leap. Mom calls it the shrieking hour. I spend this time in the bathroom where I peak behind the window curtain and watch Blue's face stiffen.

Dad can't stand the shrieking hour, but I kind of get it. I think if Blue kept those screams inside they'd kill him.

Thanks for sharing your list with me. It's a gem. I agree with everything but number 5 because sometimes number 5 can't be helped, if it means what I think it means. When you say, "bastards," you're talking about terrible people, right? I have no idea how to do number 10, but I'm going to try.

Friday our school celebrated its one hundredth birthday. Instead of getting the day off, we all had to bring cupcakes and answer the question, “What will you do on your one hundredth birthday?” I jotted down the most rewarding thing I could think of at the time: *On my one hundredth birthday, I’m going to sleep on a boat beneath the stars and not take any crap.*

How about you?

-Kia

February 10, 2019

Dear Kia,

I never cared for high school. I’m surprised it’s still legal. But if G&T is your home away from home, so be it. There are many ways to come back to ourselves. This can happen in places we least expect.

When I was in college, I took an astronomy lab. We met Monday nights at the campus observatory. I enrolled because I was terrified of outer space, the entire galactic mob. The thought of angling a telescope toward infinity filled me with dread. I’d had this dread for as long as I could remember. I wanted that feeling to go away.

We learned about constellations and coordinates, neutrinos and the god particle. I was fine with these things in the abstract, but the thought of really seeing something shortened my breath. One night our class met on the roof. The lab assistants had set up a telescope. We were each assigned a constellation and expected to find it. The assistants carried clipboards with notebook paper that said Pass/Fail. When it was my turn, my heart was in my throat.

I was told to find Orion. Easy enough, I thought. I closed my eyes and lifted the telescope. Hands shaking, I adjusted the knob. I managed to open one eye and stare into space. I

saw a red orb, an inky shimmer light years away. I felt as though I stood on the edge of the world. I was elated.

“I think I found something,” I said.

The assistant peered inside and adjusted the knob.

“You sure did,” he said. He told me to look again. My discovery was nothing more than the red sign of Hannaford, the supermarket.

“No one’s ever done that before,” he said.

He marked F for Fail on his clipboard. I could’ve gotten upset, but I was tired of playing against myself. Until then, I’d defined my life by failures of courage, no matter how small. I wasn’t gifted like you, Kia, but I was ready for something different.

“I did better than pass or fail,” I told him. “I did something no one’s done before.”

I tell you this because I think number 5 on my list can always be helped. The bastards are the demons in our heads. You asked if imposter syndrome, a common bastard, ever goes away. Bastards are cyclical. They never go away, but over time they may lessen their grip on us. The good news is we can change our story anytime. We can tell the bastards NO! and wrestle them to the ground. I like to imagine wrestling my bastards while wearing a zoot suit, but the attire is up to you.

The people closest to us don’t always model this. They want the best for us, but they’re a little trapped too. I don’t mean to sound discouraging because I believe you’re well on your way. If you are persistent and brave and clothed in nothing but yourself, what can stop you?

Overcoming my fear of space was worth it in the end. I now appreciate astronomy. Who doesn’t want a navigable darkness?

On my one hundredth birthday, I will also sleep on a boat beneath the stars and not take any crap.

-Margo

February 16, 2019

Dear Margo,

Thank you for your response. Sometimes, when I read your letters, I get this big-hearted feeling and think to myself, "Amen" which is weird because I'm not religious or anything.

This week my parents celebrated Valentine's Day. Dad cooked a nice dinner and bought Mom an expensive looking dress. She looked pretty, she always does. But she also looked really far away. She's getting worse, Margo.

Sometimes Mom gets angry with me, but I don't think it's all her, you know? Yesterday I brought her water, and she asked me if I cleaned the kitchen. I didn't know I was supposed to so I said no. Her eyes welled, and her upper lip pulled back. She knocked the glass out of my hand and told me to clean it up. I picked up the pieces. My heart raced in fury. My breath came out of me in soft, quick bursts.

Long before she got sick, Mom would talk about what she called the Highest Octave. She wasn't talking about vocal range. She was talking about human potential. Mom used to say she wanted to see me at my highest octave. I don't know how to live that way. I tip toe through life trying not to shatter myself or other people around me.

This weekend Dad's going to Boston. He says it's work related, but I know he's looking for a place to live. If something happens to Mom, that's where we'll move. He wanted to move

there when Mom got sick, but she wanted to be near the trees for as long as she could. Maybe Mom will get better in time to see the red winged blackbirds. They're her favorite.

Maybe one day I'll regret writing you all of this. But for now, I don't care. It's freeing and terrifying. I worry about myself sometimes. In college, you worried about yourself and did something about it. I'd like to do the same, but I don't know where to begin.

Blue is screaming again, but I don't have the heart to spy on him. I think I'll just stay in my room tonight and listen.

-Kia

February 18, 2019

Dear Kia,

Here's something I never told my readers: I didn't plan on becoming an advice columnist. I fell into it several years ago when my then husband and I moved to Laconia. Years ago, I had a career. I watched that career advance dutifully, as I'd known it would. Then there came a time when I didn't need to push so hard. I'd saved like crazy and the death of my parents brought an unexpected inheritance. Suddenly I tapped into a freedom I didn't think to find for another fifteen years.

I've loved writing since I was your age, but I didn't have the courage to make it a priority. I sent some work to the local paper. The editor liked what I had to say and encouraged me to start an advice column. Soon my inbox was flooded with voices of women limited and mesmerized by the status quo. I wanted my advice column to be like nothing they'd read before.

This accidental career led to a realization I never wanted to accept: I don't like people, but I bleed for people. I've been this way for as long as I can remember, and I'm no longer afraid of it.

Kia, I've been thinking about the dynamics in your last letter. Your depth of sharing propels me to level with you: You're going to outgrow this hell. One day you'll stop bleeding for what doesn't serve. Recognize this change when it begins. You owe it to the person you are becoming.

-Margo

March 8, 2019

Dear Margo,

Thank you so much for your last letter. I'm sorry I've been out of touch. A lot's happened. I'm not sure where to begin so I guess I'll start with Rex. Last week Rex saw me cry. Crying at school is the worst. I tried making it through the day, but I kept thinking about Mom. When I entered G&T, something in me uncorked. I saw those lonely, untouched instruments and felt a wave of grief.

I sat at my desk with my face in my hands. Rex put his hand on my shoulder. No one my age has ever done that. He asked me what was wrong. Instead of saying, "Nothing," like a normal person, I said, "My house is sh--." It's not what I'd meant to say, and yet it explained everything. Rex said he was sorry and squeezed my shoulder. I said nothing and gave him my clay.

That evening, home was no better. Dad was in Boston and Mom was asleep. Then it was the shrieking hour. Blue was louder than usual. For the first time, he pissed me off. I thought of

my sick mother in bed and how hard I've tried to pretend like I'm okay so Dad stays proud of me and the school guidance counselor leaves me alone. And Blue just screams and screams like there's no one else on this planet. I wanted to shut him up. Without thinking, I put on my coat and boots and walked next door.

There were no cars in the driveway and the front door was unlocked. I followed the screams upstairs until I found his bedroom. The door was open, and he sat on his bed yoga teacher style with his hands on his knees, palms facing the ceiling. His room smelled like feet and Red Bull and my dreams going up in smoke. He wailed as if I wasn't there, as if no one else existed.

"You have to stop," I shouted.

He quieted and looked at me. His lips were parted. His skin was pale and dusted with freckles. There was nothing blue about him except, surprisingly, his hair. His head was covered in stupid pastel spikes. His eyes looked as though they'd just rolled out of a dream. I could tell he recognized me but was unsure how.

"What?" he said, after some time.

"Please stop screaming," I said. "Some of us are trying to keep it together."

"You live in this neighborhood."

"Yeah."

"And you actually heard me?"

"Of course I heard you."

"Wow."

He leaned back on his hands. He looked me up and down and smiled. My heart lurched and something in my bones blossomed. I let him keep looking even though I hated him. *Be strong*, I told myself.

“You wanna,” he said, “I don’t know. Sit down or something?”

“Of course not.”

I turned around so he couldn’t see me smile. Then my forehead bumped against the door. Now I’ve got this bruise that’ll probably last a lifetime. Oh, he had me, Margo.

He screamed the next night, and I returned to his room. He grinned when he saw me.

“What did I tell you yesterday?” I said.

“Forgot. I could use a review.”

I walked toward him without a word. He sat on his bed and looked up at me. I bent my knees and put my face near his. He smirked and I smirked back.

“Stop. Screaming,” I said.

He leaned back and moved his fingers across his lips, zipping them shut.

Blue screamed the next night and the next. I couldn’t stay away from him. Each night I stayed in his room a little longer. We learned each other’s names. I’m still calling him Blue. He’s into it. He doesn’t like his real name which is also his dad’s name. He said his dad walked out on his mom years ago. His mom manages a coffee shop in town and works weird hours. He goes to this private school that’s like G&T on steroids. When I told him about my mom being sick, he listened as if words were endangered.

We’ve started going for drives. One day I asked Blue why he screamed so much. He said he did it to get attention but nothing happened. Then it became this spiritual thing. Then I

showed up and now he doesn't know what the screams mean anymore. I asked him if he screamed because of his dad. He told me he screamed for a lot of reasons.

“Just tell me one reason,” I said.

“I've worked retail jobs since I was sixteen.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

We parked at the rotary club to watch the ice fishing derby. I'd never seen so many cars. Puddles spread rainbows beneath the tires. We stood at the edge of the frozen lake. The ice huts were bright and stilted. The sky was greased with dark clouds. Food trucks served dough and kettle corn and coffee. The ice looked thin, but the day was a beautiful thing. Men in trapper hats dropped their lines into the freezing waters. Children crouched before holes, waiting. Blue took my hand, and I was on the lake. I was with everyone. Light bounced off the clouds' edges and found *me* smiling for real. Blue bought me hot coco and knew to ask for extra whip cream. We walked back to the car, our fingers touching. Snow fell from the sky.

I haven't forgotten about my big question, Margo. I think about it all the time—except that day on the ice with Blue. It was nice not having to think about it. I want to live like that always.

Blue drove us out of town. We parked on the side of the road and entered the woods. He talked about this traveling artist who builds installations in remote places then leaves them there. Blue follows the artist online and discovered the location of his latest work. We walked through the mud and climbed over logs. I smelled the sharp odor of the woods. His hair burned lantern-bright in the snow.

We reached a clearing. At its center was a brass cannon tilted toward a ring of sky. I couldn't believe its size. The cannon was the length of a car, and its mouth was about as wide as a hula hoop. Its body was supported by two wheels, their spokes gathering snow. We walked closer, and the cannon reflected blurred ovals of ourselves. Blue squeezed my hand and said, "Come on."

He wrapped his arms and legs around the body and moved spiderlike inside the cannon. He lifted me inside, and I pressed myself against him. I closed my eyes. He held onto the rim with one arm and me with the other. A part of me wished the cannon was real. I wanted someone to light the fuse and blast us out of this place. We'd swim in the sky and never come back down.

I opened my eyes and Blue had this funny look on his face, like he was wondering where I'd gone. He told me he was used to coming here alone. He said he liked places better when I was with him. That's when I teared up. I couldn't help it. There's nothing scarier than really looking at someone. It was scary then, too, but nothing could've made me look away.

You can guess what happened next, Margo. It wasn't my first kiss, but it was everything I could want in a kiss. And that's not the kind of thing I can just write about in a letter.

-Kia

March 19, 2019

Dear Editor,

No one is brave enough to say this to your face so allow me: Enough is ENOUGH! This used to be a fine publication in a fine town until you turned the spotlight on that depressing "Kia" and bitter hermit Margo. It's bad enough you indulged "Margo Mulls" all those years. I was never a fan and don't you think I'm alone in this. Me and the other second sopranos of

Calvary Baptist Choir have read every word of this heinous exchange. And boy, do we have the headaches to prove it.

Tell me something, “Editor”. What good is publishing stories of one woman’s fake phobias or children engaging in explicit behavior inside honest-to-goodness weapons? Don’t think I’m not aware of what poor Kia must be going through. If this girl is who I think she is, then I knew before you did, Editor. I’ve offered to take Kia’s mother to lunch so many times and have not received one response. I’m beginning to think she’s not really sick. You can’t help people who don’t help themselves. Now let me help you.

Here’s my advice: stop publishing these letters. If you don’t, we will get you. That’s not a threat. It’s an exercise of my God given rights. The second sopranos and I will be hosting a rally this Friday in the Calvary Baptist Church basement. Readers, don’t go to the building that looks like a church. That’s now the post office. We’re located in the building that used to be the sushi joint, and Dunkin Donuts will be catering. All are welcome EXCEPT for Margo, Kia, Kia’s mother, and you Editor, if you don’t listen to me!

Best of Luck,

Nancy Kay Brown

March 20, 2019

Dear Kia,

As you’ve learned from chemistry, the building blocks of our universe have been impeccably arranged into what’s called the Periodic Table of Elements. The seven rows (periods) and the eighteen columns (groups) show trends of similar chemical behavior. Group 17 is made

up of what are called Halogens. Halogens are salt-producing and lethally toxic. They are extremely reactive because they need one more element to fulfill an octet structure and attain stability. They will do whatever it takes to get that last electron, no matter what. Halogens exist on the atomic level with the vigor of flightless birds.

The halogens' closest neighbors are the Noble Gases. The Noble Gases are stable. They have a complete valence shell. They are content with the number of electrons they've been given and are rarely reactive. Nothing can stop their fulfillment. They live a beautiful balance of interdependence and self-sufficiency. Helium, for example, is one of the most abundant elements in the universe. Large amounts of new helium are being created in the stars by nuclear fission of hydrogen.

I write this because even on the chemical level you'll discover human-like behavior that is frantic, hurtful, and extraordinary. Everyone is fraught and everyone is beautiful. I know this. But sometimes I feel like there are just two types of people in this world: The Halogens and the Noble Gases, each one disgusted and in awe of their neighbor.

Nancy Kay Brown embodies the Halogen mindset. I'd imagine her biggest fear is simply sitting with herself. She demonstrated this in her recent letter to the editor. I hated that letter, but there's something beautiful about her words existing within the same pages where you and I met.

I consider you, Kia, one of the noblest of gases. It's critical someone like you has perspective. Believe me when I say don't let the halogens get you down. You come from the stars, kiddo.

Now for the fun part: Gasps! Kia, we've been silenced, censored, put down, and humiliated by the Second Sopranos of Calvary Baptist Church. How does it feel?

-Margo

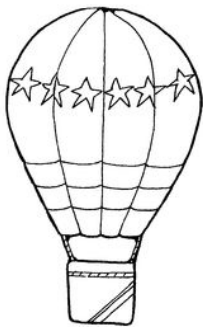
March 21, 2019

Dear Margo,

It feels f-----g great. Thank you.

Love,

Kia



March 23, 2019

Dear Margo,

Sorry to write again so soon, but I've got to tell you what happened yesterday.

Sometimes Blue's school has early dismissal on Friday. He picked me up during my lunch period so we could get coffee. I was in the parking lot when he arrived. He got out of the car and opened my door for me. He already had a cup of coffee in hand, probably his second. Blue drinks a lot of black coffee because he's tortured or whatever. He makes it look weirdly sophisticated. I confess I'm now a coffee drinker.

We drove downtown and passed the sushi joint that's now a church. There were several older hippie looking people hanging out in lawn chairs outside. I've seen these guys before.

They're the coolest protesters I've ever seen. They pop up whenever the town does something

racist or votes for someone thoroughly disappointing. I guess you could say I've seen these guys a lot.

They sat in beach chairs and held large signs and listened to the Grateful Dead. As we got closer, we saw that the signs said things like, "Free Margo" and "Long Live the Noble Gases." They were protesting Nancy Kay! I couldn't believe it. Blue honked his horn as we drove by and they waved at us. Blue says our letters have reached cult status. I'm proud of us, Margo.

Blue parked in front of the coffee shop his mom owns. She made me a chai latte with whipped cream. She's super young looking, like she might've had Blue when she was just a few years older than me. That's crazy to think about. Not about his mom getting pregnant but me being someone's mother. I'm not sure if I'll ever want that.

Blue and I sat on the couch near this woman weaving a reed basket. The basket was halfway done. I guess I was staring because she smiled at me and asked if I wanted to give it a try. I stood by her table and held the basket-to-be. I wove the reed up and over the spokes. I wove until I was in a trance. I slipped out of my mind. The basket was beautiful even though it wasn't finished. Loss is woven, love is woven. So much is at our fingertips, but we have to work hard at freaking everything. It's a gift, this work. That's how I'm going to look at it.

I thanked the woman when I was done. I sat on the couch, and Blue put his arm around me. I felt safe, but something unexplained was stirring inside me too. There're things I don't tell anyone, things that aren't good or bad. They must live in the shadier corners of my heart. Maybe I'm not making much sense. Do you know what I'm talking about, Margo? I hope so.

-Kia

March 25th, 2019

Dear Kia,

No need to ever apologize writing to me. It's a joy to hear from you. Thank you for your hot air balloon drawing and, of course, your beautiful letters. I've pinned the little balloon to the board that hangs above my writing desk.

That's wonderful news about the protest. I'm glad we've got fans. It's an honor to be appreciated by those who love a world reclaimed. It almost makes me wish I left the house more often.

I'm afraid I can't write as much as I'd like this round. I've received some news. I'm perfectly fine (what a phrase), but I need to reassess a few things. This process, unfortunately, is cutting into my writing time.

Feel free to write as much as you like whenever you like. Your words keep this grouch sane. Looking forward to hearing from you. Be brave and continue weaving your life, this strange patchwork of devotion.

-Margo

April 2nd, 2019

Dear Kia,

Are you all right? I haven't heard from you in a while. If you'd like to stop these letters, that's perfectly fine (there I go again). Just thought I'd check in. I'm still processing, but I'm here if you need me.

This morning I saw a red-winged blackbird. It flew by my porch, and its wings flashed in the light. They truly bring hope to mind.

-Margo

April 14th, 2019

Dear Margo,

I wish I had good news. Mom got moved to Hospice. I'm writing to you from the hospital. My body is here, but I'm not. I'm sitting in the hallway. It smells like Lysol and needles. All the nurses look at me with these heavy, bloodshot eyes. Even the ones I've known my whole life. I hate this hallway, but it's better than being in the room. The person in that bed looks nothing like my mother.

I haven't been in school all week. My teachers sent flowers and cards. Today I got an unexpected gift. A nurse delivered me a little house made of clay. It's a beautiful fairy cottage that fits in the palm of my hand. Its roof is made of mushrooms. There's a wizard's hat for a chimney. The window boxes are full of flowers, and the door is round and ringed like a tree stump. The cottage came with a note that said, *I'm sorry your house is sh--. Hope this helps.* –
Rex

That's when I lost it, Margo. I sobbed into my sleeve until Blue returned with our food. We didn't eat. He held me while I cried, and I held the cottage to my chest. That was hours ago. Blue's fallen asleep in his chair, but he's still holding my hand. I'm writing to you with the other. Dad keeps checking on us. He wants me in the room. I'll go when I'm done writing. I don't have a choice about being in that room with Mom. I'm afraid of what I'd choose if I did.

The cottage sits in the chair next to me. It looks so out of place. I doubt it would fit in anywhere. That's what I love about it. When I was little, Mom and I would make up magical places. She went everywhere with me. Mom wants me to live in a beautiful world. She told me this once. She said this as if it were my responsibility. I hope she knows I've tried. I'll tell her I've tried. And I'll tell her I'm sorry. About everything.

I'm not ready to say goodbye to my mom, Margo. I'm not ready for any of this.

-Kia

April 18, 2019

Jane Alexandria Worthington passed away on April 17th, 2019, surrounded by her family at Lakes Region General Hospital, after her two year battle with breast cancer. She was fifty-three.

Jane was born on October 15th, 1966 in Laconia, NH. She was the daughter of a Pharmacist and high school English teacher. Passionate about education, Jane worked for fifteen years as a guidance counselor at Plymouth State University. Friends and family have described Jane as “Fearless”, “devoted”, and “as generous as a human can be.” In her youth, she spent many hours volunteering at the animal shelter and rallying for reproductive freedom. She once described her life as a balance of visioning and practicality. She was a gifted crafter—which she contributed to “a continuous effort to shape and re-shape this human life.”

Jane is survived by her husband Jon Worthington and daughter who has asked to remain anonymous. There will be a celebration of Jane's life Saturday, April 20th at Lake Winnepesaukee. Friends and family are welcome to attend.

May 30, 2019

Dear Margo,

I did a bad thing. I broke the rules.

I found your house off Route 11. A cashier at Hannaford told me where I could find you. Her name's Elisabeth. I don't think she's ever left Laconia. She said she was your ex-husband's childhood friend. She said she loved "Margo Mulls" but loved our letters more. She'd heard about my mom and figured out I was the one writing to you. I think she told me where to find you because she felt sorry for me.

Like you said, your house is in the woods. Your steep driveway is walled with Ash. The redness of your house startled me even though I was expecting it. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. There was no car but mine.

I broke the rules because I wanted to meet you before I said goodbye. Dad found a place in Boston. We're moving at the end of June. I'm crushed Dad won't let me finish my senior year in Laconia, but I'm too tired to fight him. I also understand. Dad never liked it here. Now Mom's gone and *in* everything like the linens and the trees. It's too painful to stay.

Blue and I talk about running away together. We joke that we'll live in that cannon in the woods while we save up for our own place. He promises to visit me in Boston, but it won't be the same.

I knocked several times. I circled your perfectly round house. You weren't home. I sat on your steps. Light slipped through the branches. I let it stripe my legs and warm me. I sat still and breathed in and out.

I'm different without Mom. I'm heavy and tired, but there's a stillness too. I started feeling this way after the service. I'd kneeled before the lake and screamed as loud as I could. It

was the kind of scream you hear in nightmares and think to yourself, *Not real*. People watched me without a word. My throat burned, and my eyes watered. The lake was blurred light. Dad and Blue helped me up. I pulled away from Dad as hard as I could and held onto Blue.

I haven't been the same since. I'm quiet and faraway, bare as bones. I felt this way on your steps. I opened my mouth to take another deep breath, but asked the world a question instead. I asked my big question, the one I've been meaning to ask you. I hadn't planned on doing that. It just came out.

Margo, every time I feel at my highest I lose someone. Right after I aced my math final, Dad picked me up from school and told me about Mom's diagnoses. I fell in love with Blue and lost my mom. Rex made me a beautiful cottage, and I lost my real home. Now, I find stillness and I lose...you?

Maybe it's not loss but something else shifting. Remember when I said I had a big question for you? Well, now I want to change it. The original question had to do with the meaning of life, but now I don't care about that so much. My last question for you is this:

What's the point of living life at your highest octave when you're always alone? Are you running from your highest octave too? Maybe that's why no one's seen you in years.

-Kia

June 15, 2019

Dear Margo,

Are you around? I'm sorry if I offended you or creeped you out or anything. I'm not in the best place, but I could really use a friend. Please write soon.

-Kia

June 20, 2019

Dear Margo,

Just checking in again. Are you okay? I'm starting to worry. I'm guessing there aren't a lot of people in town who know you very well. No one can tell me if you're okay. Please, please write when you can. You don't have to respond to everything I said. I just want to know if you're all right.

-Kia

June 25, 2019

Dear Margo,

Is it because I broke your stupid rule? Is it about your cryptic "news"? Why can't you just write me back? If I upset you, just say so. You're choosing not to answer me. I can feel it.

June 27, 2019

Maybe I should've never written to you in the first place. I don't know what I was thinking. Now you've got this piece of me I can never get back. You don't deserve it.

June 30, 2019

Please don't prove me right, Margo. The bastards in my head can't keep winning. I'll write whatever you want. I'll be whoever you want me to be. Just please say writing to me didn't mean nothing.

-Kia

July 5, 2019

Dear Margo,

Please.

July 15, 2019

Dear Kia,

“Now you've got this piece of me I can never get back. You don't deserve it.”

Truer words have never been written. Reasons and apologies won't excuse my absence these past few months, but I'm going to try. Soon after I wrote you in April, I traveled to Mexico City to visit a dear friend who is no longer well. I like to visit him every now and then. This visit was crucial. Jake, my ex-husband, is a bit older and probably won't live to see another summer.

None of this should matter to you. What matters is I messed up, and you got hurt. I can't undo that. I'd left my place in a hurry and was under the impression that you had outgrown writing to me—something I would have supported either way. I hadn't considered your mother was in decline. I didn't know you'd soon experience a loss no child should know.

By now you're in Boston and have no need for this publication. But I have no other way of reaching you. I have to respond to your big question.

Dearest reader, noblest gas, I write to you in defense of the Highest Octave. No one knows the patterns of your life better than you do. No one can make up your mind. No one can put your heart on a leash and say, *heel*. I wish existence were that easy. I wish it were the least bit trainable. So, what's the point of hitting our highest octave if we have to hit it alone? The point is, Kia, once you do you'll never return to the same damn place you started. When you reach your highest octave, you're on fire. Even in despair you'll transform your coping mechanisms into something worthy of the gods. What do you think misfits were put on this earth to do?

At your highest, there will be people who honor you and people who wish to destroy you. You'll witness what you're made of. You'll fall in love with this earth and everything she holds in darkness. You'll meet people who choose their inner bastards over this kind of love. I'll never understand the things I'm guilty of too. We can't always help what's unresolved within us. We default to our most frightened place. This thing, this wounded thing I can't name, has folded my soul like a leaf and watched me drift. I wouldn't care to live if I thought I couldn't reopen to the world, if there was no possibility for reversal.

There's a purity to this strain of fortitude. I'm reminded of the axolotl, the Mexican salamander. They once swam freely in the lakes underlying Mexico City. The axolotl remains in its larval stage for most of its life. As they age, their form gets bigger and bigger like amphibious sunflowers. They can regenerate lost body parts at any age. No one really understands how. As I cared for Jake, I realized I missed him—even though he's still alive. I missed him so much my body shook under the covers. A piece of my heart was gone. I could regenerate not the part of me I'd lost but the shock and pain of its absence. Evolution has been very unkind to humans in

this way. I want to become something else. I want to swim freely. I thought I'd found my internal resting place, but I know better now. There is no place.

Kia, I hope what I'm about to say has been clear to you all along: I've learned more from you than you have from me. I don't know why people dread clichés. It's a privilege to have one happen to you. I'll miss your letters, and I'm sorry we never got to meet.

I'm home now and that feels good. Deep down I don't know much, but I understand people like you are in rare form. You move sideways into people's lives and give them reasons to keep going. I hope one day you know what that's like.

And I hope you can forgive me.

Yours,
Margo