



the
bird and
the book

by elisabeth harvey

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dedicated to birds

1. january

EVERY DAY AT SIX O' clock the shop on the corner of sixth and Main turned the open sign. It was after eight now and the sky was light all through, bottomless, though the air still tasted like dark. This is when Edna usually came out to prop the door open. If Edna were a book, she would be a linen hardcover written for a different decade: the kind you pick up absently in a secondhand store only to get stopped on the fact that someone typed all those words once, thousands of them, and isn't it remarkable that at one time those were the new thing. Inside the shop, all was airy and dim. A line of greyheaded men in flannel coats stood at the square horseshoe bar. On the far end, a couple teenagers huddled privately over something in a backpack. Behind the espresso machine was Jimmy, polishing up some glassware off the shelves, and at the window tables a pack of white-haired ladies played dominoes.

Devyn was drawn in by the smell of coffee from the other side of the street. She was warm. She'd been

walking for more than two hours now and her muscles were twitching; she had forgot how that felt. There were those two wrinkled dollars in her wallet, she remembered: soft as tissue paper. They'd been in there so long, they were like old friends. She was almost sad to see them go.

Jimmy paused across from her, enquiring.

“A coffee?” she said.

He turned to get it. The place was always a lively bustle at this hour, but right now, by far the loudest voice was coming from an old raconteur at the bar a few seats down, perched alone with long, straight grey hair and blue eyes. “Then he pushes me,” he ranted. “I’m not gonna take that. So I throw this guy up against the wall and then, get this—they say I started it. I got two witnesses saw what happened, two witnesses, but sure. I’m the one who gets written up ...”

No one was listening to him. Also no one seemed to mind. They were doing their own thing, and Devyn tried to do the same. She hadn’t meant to come in here—there’s just something about a smell like that, how it curls sweetly into the air, mixes with a salt breeze and brings you close; that is if someone’s

opened the door, which Edna had, because Edna understood aromatics as well as human nature.

Devyn's mind wandered home.

Today, she thought, was different from other days. She had woken with a start, clear awake, for one thing. It was the air that woke her: alive on her face. Rob had left the window open. For long minutes she lay alone under the duvet looking out the open window, and for once the room didn't seem to suffocate, not like sand, not as if you had to crawl to get across it. A bird flitted onto a branch outside the window, and from her bed she watched it, timeless. It sat with the light glinting off the hairlike feathers around its neck, jolting its head this way and that. It had never arrived, and would never go.

It flitted off. Devyn shoved the covers off herself and sat up. She pulled on the jeans she had left on the floor. She moved through the static house all dim and quiet, got on her shoes without breaking stride and walked out the door, combing out her hair with her fingers as she walked. Walking felt good, like remembering something important—a rhyme you used to know, an old phone number, your own name. Devyn

watched her feet calmly consuming the space before her: ten minutes and she was at the beach, forty minutes and she was past the edge of town, forty more and she was alone in the fog with the waves rolling up to her and away again, as if to say hello, there you are again, and again.

Jimmy set the coffee on the bar beside her dollar bills, and Greyhair left to pace the block and suck down some nicotine. Devyn tasted her cup. “Oh I forgot it tastes good,” she said, looking up at Jimmy. She’d stopped drinking coffee a year ago because she hated throwing out the damp old filters, because they smelled so bad, like rubber diapers.

“It almost wasn’t,” he shrugged.

“What,” she said.

“Shipping container fell over. Water got in, twelve bags.”

“What happens when water gets in?” she asked.

“Mold,” he said. He gazed at her cup affectionately. “Makes you grateful.”

Devyn looked at the lucky stuff steaming up at her. “What kind of coffee is it?”

“It’s a washed, small, about forty acres—”

“No it’s not,” Edna’s voice came from the back room.

“Oh, it’s the smaller one.”

The smaller what, Devyn wondered. “Does it have a name?” she asked.

“The farm does.” He said some Spanish words. She liked the roll of them, the melody. He greeted someone to her right. He disappeared into the back and reemerged. He came and went; customers came and went. Devyn sat at the bar enjoying something for the first time in however long it had been—a year? It was hard to say when her world had shrunk and dulled the way it had, but here, surrounded by ignorable noise, drinking something that tasted nice? having gone out walking—it was all so thoroughly good. It made her feel, somehow, that she was possible.

2. now and then

DEVYN WOKE IN THE DARK. The window was shut, but she could see the sky outside, just starting to change. The quality of dark was different at this time of morning from the dark of night: not visibly but per-

ceptibly, as if it were stretching at the edges; or as if, like an animal, it were only holding still—alive all through.

She felt awake. But it was probably too early to get up. What was she supposed to do at this hour? Also the habit of sleep was strong. She told herself she should stay in bed for as long as possible, until Rob got up, and then for as long as possible after that. She noticed the choice, though. If she waited too long thinking about it, the lethargy would come sliding down, her eyelids would shut under their own weight and then she wouldn't have a choice. She would fall back asleep and wake again heavy in the unforgiving glare of morning, her body made of mud. Rob would get up first, but she would have to get up eventually. She would crawl out of bed unprepared and struggle all morning to find her footing; she hated that. It was Sunday, so there was church to be on time for, so Rob would have to nudge her to get up. She hated that too.

The sky stretched at its edges: still dark, still dark.

Stiffly Devyn slid out of bed, disturbing the covers as little as possible. She picked up the knot of clothes she'd left on the floor and carried them to the living

room to get dressed. She didn't turn on the light. She sat down at the shadowy kitchen table. What to do now? Nothing, there was nothing one could do.

In the gathering morning two forms became visible beside her. One was a hulking monstrous thing, the other lean but top-heavy—Devyn's old friends the Fomors, those ancient gods of chaos and despair that younger gods are ever beating back. "Oh it's you," she murmured, as if surprised, but she wasn't. Her Cyclops was meaninglessness. Her Medusa was the many-voiced thing that had begun some years ago to tell her, here and there, in small and ultimately countless ways that there was no point in pushing back against the gloom, in looking for something to point herself toward, no real occasion for strength or tenacity on her part at all, because no such thing existed—not for people like her. Nothing for her at all, really. Nothing she would want, at least. "At times I feel the world pushing in on me like ice on a river," Devyn said to herself, "thicker and thicker until people can walk right on top of me and not leave a footprint." Medusa's silence was cold, but Cyclops sighed. It was the kind of thing he understood.

Devyn heard Rob stirring in the bedroom. He wouldn't get up until it was light out, but the sound of another body in the house made the whole place feel smaller. She had the impulse to stand up and do something, who knows what, but just then one of Medusa's snakes hissed, "Yes but what would you even do?"

Slowly, Devyn stood up anyway.

She went out the front door. She couldn't just leave this morning—there was church, but it seemed better to be outside. It was surprising, how much light there was already. The whole pale world was cold, visible and shivering. Devyn sat on the concrete step and shivered with it.



Medusa and Cyclops filled the entire back seat between them, and the car handled differently under their weight; it cornered differently. Devyn looked out the passenger window. Of course as soon as she did, Rob had to ask, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just ... looking."

During the service, during the announcements, the pastor told them all there were some retreats coming

up. Man Camp. Also a ladies' retreat. The men's event was an outdoorsy thing where they would read the Bible all weekend, do an obstacle course and learn to sharpen knives. Iron sharpens iron. The ladies' thing would involve flip-flops for some reason, pearls and also fondue. Strings of pearls, Devyn realized. It was a Bible verse. "You interested in that?" Rob asked. People were greeting each other now.

"What," she said. "No." She smiled at someone who was trying to say hello to her.

"Men's retreat looks good," he said.

"Yeah." She shook someone's hand and smiled.

"I think I want to go to that. Do you mind if I'm out that weekend?"

"What? No," she said. She smiled at someone else.

When the pastor started talking again, Devyn studied the announcements in the bulletin more closely. There was flower clipart on the ladies' insert. Turns out the flip-flops had to do with faithfulness. Don't flip-flop. There would be a pedicure during that portion.

"Are you sure you don't want to do that retreat?" Rob asked her again, driving home. "Could be a good

opportunity.”

“For what?”

“I don't know Devyn, people get a lot out of these things. Make friends. Go deep in the word, get away from the distractions. I think it would be good for you.”

“I have no distractions,” she said heavily. Cyclops murmured something incoherent behind her, but she could tell by his tone that he was backing her up on this one.



Rob went for a jog that afternoon, and Devyn sat down again at the kitchen table. She could hear the sound of time passing. It was the broken clock: it ticked but the hands didn't move. Was she depressed? Is this what it's like to be depressed? “Probably,” Cyclops answered. It was kind of assuring, the label. She pushed her forehead into her palms.

She was restless, though. Rob had kept the bulletin from church with the information on it about the camp for men. It was still on the table. There was knife clipart on it. Her mind wandered: when Devyn was a kid, she'd had this idea that when she grew up

she was going to get a post office box at some one-room post office near a wilderness, BLM land probably, and she would figure out how to live out there, only she'd come back once a month to check her mail. Could you do that? She had wondered how to solve the problems. How would you replenish your food supply, for example? Could you forage enough to live on? "What about your period?" Medusa asked.

There was that. Devyn had written to Thomas about it once, kind of joking, but also kind of not. "It's a strange thing, friend of mine," the letter said, "but I have no idea where to buy tampons in this city. I guess there are grocery stores but I have yet to cross one and let me just say, there's nothing like finding yourself on your first day in a new town on the first day of your period. If you're at a friend's place, all good. What's under the bathroom sink is fair game. But this is the problem with my wish to take a survival course and go into deep wilderness for years on end: I still can't think of a natural remedy for the female reproductive system. Okay this is not polite conversation, but it's part of the human experience for several humans, so I think you should know."

Thomas hadn't replied directly to that, but she hadn't needed him to. They'd been kids together and as such, there was a certain comfort level. But Devyn realized thinking about it now that what she'd said in that letter was stupid: you can always get by with toilet paper, if you know what to do with it. Maybe she hadn't known that then. Maybe that was when she had figured it out. But there's no toilet paper in the wilderness.

Rob was back from his run: she could hear him on the sidewalk outside the door, stretching briefly in the brisk air before his plunge into the warmth of the house. He would come in dripping, his sleeves wet with rain, and make for the shower. "Don't just sit there," one of Medusa's snakes said. "Be doing something."

There were dishes in the sink. "Not those," Cyclops groaned.

"Stand up and look busy," hissed a snake.

Devyn fell back to the bedroom, disappearing from sight just as Rob turned the handle on the front door, so that was good, because it wouldn't appear she was trying to avoid anyone. She heard him move across

the house to the shower: twenty more minutes alone. Is that what she wanted? What was she supposed to do with another twenty minutes?

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the wall in front of her. There was a shelf. Some journals, a vase. A bear from childhood. There was the journal she had been writing in back when she penned that letter to Thomas, after she'd moved across the country for college. Cyclops sat down next to her; the bed creaked under his weight. "Before you dropped out," he said.

"Before you got married," a snake amended. Medusa was leaning in the doorframe, her *négligée* draping her frame like a sheet on a rail.

Devyn hunched on the bed with the journal in her hands and paged through it like an artifact, a layer in the soil containing evidence of a former version of herself, a different version. "A better version," Cyclops whispered.

August 1

The other day I was leaving the mall, and there was this woman standing outside a

doorway, in the alley, a locked door, employees only. She was standing outside it talking on her cell phone, holding a fancy shopping bag and wearing only one shoe, one foot bare. What had to happen to lead to this picture? Every time I come up with a different answer I'm laughing.

August 3

Evening is pale. Cool, a faint breeze. I walked out the screen door down to the iron gate but the roses have died on the vine. I touched them and they crumbled, and the odor was gone.

August 4

The day stretches on, and the wind has forgotten how to blow.

August 5

My heart is like a plug of earth sitting in a saucer of shallow water, waiting for summer to end.

August 14

Dear Thomas, I see your face in the photo. It's kind of like a wish. Yesterday I learned that wishes come from bull thistles. I never knew this before, but after a while the hairy purple part opens into all these seed puffs, and those are the ones that float across the sky in the summer, that you wish on. Remember the one we saw way up in the blue, and the other one that caught on the spiderweb. Spider got a wish. Anyway, you were wrong: the bull thistle doesn't have thorns because it's spiteful. It has them because of what it's protecting. Does everyone ache this much? They say if you get saved, the aching goes away, but it doesn't. You hear a chord change, you come across something you can't put your finger on; you glance at the sky and there it is, there it goes.

August 15

I wonder what I'm going to do. I guess I'm going to find out.

September 27

Dear Thomas—Texas. I have moved to Texas. It's ugly here and it's hot, and even though technically it's fall, it feels like summer still and the air is so sticky, I mean my hair is a fluffy mess and I can't tie it down because it's too short. I need a hat. When does it get cold around here? And why is everyone such a believer? Everywhere you go, all these gift-shop signs are saying, "I wasn't born in TX but I got here as fast as I could." Maybe they have to talk it up because it sucks so hard that if they didn't, they'd have to leave right away, and maybe they don't have the money to do that.

I'm on the patio of this place in Deep Ellum they call it, which I guess used to be just Elm Street before people changed up the name. Janet and her friends went walking around to see the freaks. I ran into a homeless guy. Someone witnessed to me, too; they came up and said, "If you were crossing the street and you got hit by a beer truck, what would you

say to God at the gates of heaven?" They said that. They said "beer truck." Just being relatable. I wish I'd said, "Same thing as if I'd got hit by a moving van," but I didn't. I tried to tell them I was saved but they weren't so sure I was the right kind of saved, so they kept pushing for details. Anyway the homeless guy was neat. I had a loaf of sweetbread in my backpack, so I gave that to him. His name is Andre and he doesn't want to go home and see his father.

I've got a cup of hazelnut coffee in my hands. It's my

Sorry for the interruption. Everyone got back and they wanted to show me the tattoo places so I could see the art. Flash, they call it. Janet's friend Faleesha said I should try to sell my pictures to places like that. We walked by this club, Chumleys, and some kids were playing guitar in there. I listened for a while from the outside. The doors were open. I don't know, Thomas, I don't know about a lot of things, but I don't ever want to draw flash.

Devyn was a freshman that autumn. She was studying art, kind of: that was her major. She didn't know what it was leading to, though. People said, *You've got so much time. You've got your whole life ahead of you. You're going to do great things.* But time passes, whole lives go by, and great things don't just happen. Devyn didn't know what to aim for, and no one seemed to think that was a problem. *College is about exploration,* they said. *A lot of people switch majors.*

She switched to literature, because art wasn't something she actually wanted to study. Then she switched to math, because she liked fractals and Fibonacci sequences; they were the deeper magic behind all the chicken scratch, only it turns out the chicken scratch is kind of important. She switched to business for one week on the sudden fear that if she graduated without any marketable skills, she'd be in a lot of debt with nothing to show for it. But she hated business. So she switched to religious studies. That was sort of interesting, and familiar to someone who'd grown up in church, and challenging to someone who'd grown up believing that all the other religions

were fundamentally wrong about the nature of reality. The marketable skills question remained a question.

She met Rob at a ballroom dancing club on campus during her second fall term. At first glance, Rob was what the average person would write off as a Regular Guy: gets good grades, plays on some team or maybe he jogs; he probably jogs. The one who laughs too loud in the cafeteria, wears preppy clothes, joins clubs. Then, anyone who had a conversation with Rob would find out that he went to a Bible study. There it is, another clean-cut Christian with a lot of things under his skin that weren't so holy and didn't get so much air time—things like the past, like the masturbation habit that could never be conquered or confessed, like the web of assumptions small and great that probably made him think he understood things he had no authority on—things like sin. Like righteousness. Like the way these played out in other people's lives. But the average college student isn't the best judge of character. Devyn summed Rob up at a glance and spent the rest of that year finding out, over and over, that he wasn't her first impression.

The ballroom dancing club was a daily thing, and

for her, this at least made sense. It was the act of moving, the satisfaction of making the forms you intended to make at the moment you meant to make them. The click of that, of going into the music, losing hold of the world and finding yourself hidden in a fold of it somewhere. It was beat and color and the sweet smell of fresh sweat. Every night, Devyn lost the sequence at some point, froze up and blundered. Every night, she floated down the fire escape steps afterward feeling the euphoric pulse of the entire sky in her veins.

The first time she ran into Rob there, he asked if they could partner up and she realized he was good. He must have taken classes. His closet must be cluttered with dance club trophies dating back to middle school. Unlike the crowd of mediocre hopefuls in that room, he could teach her things. When she made the same mistake four times in a row, Rob didn't mind; he didn't even seem to think of it as a mistake. He exuded warmth. He laughed in a way that made her laugh. He showed up again the next night, and the next, and Devyn started dancing with almost no one else. She got better, too.

The euphoria got better.



They ran into each other in the campus bookstore.
“Oh hey,” Devyn said.

“Hi,” Rob laughed. They were next to a wall of textbooks, neither of them sure what to say next.

“History of western civ?” Devyn asked dorkily. Obviously that was what these textbooks were, and what else does one do in the textbook aisle but look for a textbook. Dead-end question. So he’ll say, *Yeah I’m here for a western civ book*, obviously, and then what is she supposed to do with that? He’s taking western civ, so what.

He smiled, ignored it. “What are you doing?”

“I have to buy a binder,” she answered.

“I mean after that.”

“Lunch?” she shrugged.

“Okay,” he smiled.

They strolled easily across campus to the cafeteria, went through the line together all festive like a party and took their paper plates outside, where the sun was shining hot and bright. “What have you got this afternoon?” Rob asked.

“Nothing till tonight. I’m killing time, it’s so nice

out.”

“What’s tonight?”

“Oh. There’s this Bible study I go to.”

“Oh yeah?” Rob’s eyes lit up. “Awesome, which one?”

She told him. It was a campus group. Nothing that great—the messages were awkward, because the guy who led the group was awkward, but the people were nice and the music was amazing. “I mean, amazing,” she told him. “The worship leader? He’s not the usual.”

Rob was nodding. “Yeah—yeah, we used to have this guy at my old church and, I don’t know how to describe it.”

“He’s so real,” she said. “He gets up there all by himself, and it’s like he’s just, praying. Like he’s not even aware of—or like ... he’s taking care of everybody in the room.”

Rob was nodding.

“People pray in words all the time, and it’s just words,” she said.

Rob said, “People play music all the time.”

“But they come together,” she said, “and it’s like

dancing. I mean it clicks. Do you get that? You forget everything. You go in.”

“Is that how you connect with God, mostly?” Rob asked. “Through music?”

“Oh,” she said. “In general? I don’t know.” Devyn set her paper plate lightly on the grass and lay back, lacing her fingers over her head. “What is it for you?”

“I like music,” Rob shrugged. “I like sermons. I think the part I connect to is service, though, helping people, doing things.”

“What about connecting with God?”

“I think I do that through service.”

Devyn closed her eyes. “I think, for me, it’s under my skin.”

“What do you mean?”

“For me, praying is—walking around.” She tried to think of a way to say it. The way a breeze could register against her skin as if it were a reply within some larger conversation. A dry leaf hurrying across the sidewalk could seem like a living sign, nothing more than itself but also very much more. The weight of sun on her legs felt like a demonstration of friendship. God was not reducible to words in those moments: to

pray was simply to be wherever you found yourself, at the center of things; to feel the sky whirling around you in an immeasurable circle so large it felt motionless.

“So you pray while you walk?” Rob said.

“It’s not ... ” she began. “It’s more like, an experience.”

He didn’t know what she meant. But he was trying to wrap his mind around her. He looked across the lawn, to the plaza on its other side, where a crowd of international students were drifting among tables, chatting and playing chess.

“So you want to go?” Devyn said presently.

“Where?”

“That Bible study. It’s at seven.”

“Oh yeah, yes I would love to,” he said. “That sounds great.” Rob lay back in the grass with his hands behind his head. He looked at the clouds moving slowly across the arc of blue above them, so high above that they seemed almost not to move at all.



Night was falling as Rob pushed his way into the darkness of an open mic, a claustrophobic shuffle of

artistic types: the self-absorbed, the innocent, the black-clad dangerous. There were the goth kids. There was the solo white professor who'd managed to stay hip into middle age. A crowd of Muslim students sat at a table against the wall, and the Hare Krishna parade was joyfully drumming by outside; he could hear it through the door. "Sorry," he cried: a kid half shaved, half in locks shouldered past him, eyes rimmed in iridescent eyeliner. In the black light, Rob's white socks were a cottony blue. He milled uncomfortably along the edges of the room, trying not to get in anyone's way, gazing over a sea of heads toward the stage until, finally, Devyn got up to the mic.

"Freedom," she read from the page, "is an overused word people write poems about."

She was one of the innocents. Her face was bare and her clothes unremarkable, but she didn't look out of place here, either. Rob became aware of the fact that no one in the room but himself was wearing Dockers.

"I'll tell you what freedom is," she was saying. "It takes four hours. Your hands and elbows are bleeding and you've got scum in all your creases; mostly,

though, what you've got is your CV joint in your fist, brandished like a club, because all you had was a hammer and a couple cheap tools (not even a ratchet set), and you thought it was welded under there like the impossible, but you went down to Hades and hammered the damn thing loose. And when you stand up? You know something. The broken part was stuck on with lies, that's it, and that means all the crap you've ever been through just turned to grease that you're gonna be able to scrub off when you go inside, leaving only your body to deal with. Towel-dry. Clean. Maybe you don't know what you're doing with your life." Devyn looked up. "But your car is half fixed, okay?" The room clapped and whistled. Rob clapped and whistled. She started down from the stage and he craned after her; she caught sight of him, and her face lit up. She mouthed his name and jumbled through the crowd, threw her arms around him briefly, the way one does. "What are you doing here? Oh my gosh are you on the list?"

He shook his head, grinning.

"Do you want to stay? Let's go outside," she said.

They broke through the doors into the quiet of the

street, a sudden cocoon of silence after the ring of noise inside. Half a moment's hesitation—then Devyn started off down the sidewalk and Rob fell in step, wondering where to suggest they go once they found her car. Something to eat probably, but where? Nothing fancy. Not midnight pancakes either—or maybe yes, midnight pancakes? “That was a good poem,” he said.

“Thanks. I didn't think you'd come. I didn't think it was your scene.”

“It's not.” He wondered what he'd say when she asked why he had decided to show up in that case, but she didn't ask. “So are you, a writing major or something?” Rob said.

“No, religious studies.” She let out a laugh.

“What do you want to do?”

“No idea, don't remind me.”

They walked. The street was warm in the lamplight. “I've never been to one of these things,” Rob confessed.

“Me neither,” she laughed, happily this time. “I mean, not in a long time.”

“Ha, I thought I was the oddball.”

“You were,” she flashed him a smile.

Devyn liked the sound of their footfalls. She liked how still the leaves were, hanging from the trees by one finger; how like sculptures they seemed: still as stone, though the slightest breeze could have ruffled them all over.

“How far away are you parked?” Rob exclaimed.

“Oh, back at the—” She was surprised. “I’m not—I wasn’t trying to—” She was dismayed by his surprise. She had done a weird thing. It’s weird to set out walking with nowhere in mind.

“You’re so independent,” Rob said without planning to.

“What does that mean?” she frowned.

He put his hands in his pockets and asked himself the same question. “I don’t know, I don’t know why I said that.” He was glad they weren’t sitting across a table over pancakes. “It’s just, it never would have crossed my mind to go to one of those places and read a poem.”

“Uh,” Devyn sighed. “Sometimes you have to do that. Just to, show it you can. Try to prove it wrong.”

This was a new thought. “Yeah,” Rob frowned. “Ac-

tually, that's true," he decided. "I took this class last term on—"

But Devyn had stopped walking. She had a strange look, and Rob broke off, concerned. She asked him, "Do you want to go back and do something?"

"For the open mic?" he said. He didn't. But he couldn't get around it now without coming off like a coward: *what are you scared?* Devyn did things like this all the time, no big deal, and now she was looking at him, half a smile building on her face and so much energy coming off of her, it was contagious. "To be honest, no," Rob confessed, and his voice broke like a laugh. "So I guess, I kind of have to? No, no what am I doing?"

Devyn put her hands on his arms, same as where she held him when they danced, but different this time, more. "You're okay," she said. "You could dance! What do you want to do? Can you sing? It doesn't even have to be good. Open mics are about just getting up there."

"I don't do this kind of thing," he groaned.

"Come on," she said. "Don't walk, you'll second-guess yourself. Run!"

Their steps were staccato on the sidewalk, their breathing ragged with edges of laughter. They burst back into the crowded room and Devyn made straight for the guy with the list. Rob gave him his name. His heart was pounding, from running or from fear. It took an endless twenty minutes though before his name was called, so the running wore off, but every time he thought of what he was about to do, Rob felt the panic jet through his stomach again like a metallic shot.

He sang. He forgot the words to the second verse. Mortifyingly he almost broke down at one point, but as he got to the end of the final chorus, his focus pulled together and lucidly he saw all these people in the room, looking at him—rooting for him. “This is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this,” he admitted into the mic. They broke out cheering. Rob stepped down from the stage, his ears ringing, and he could not stop smiling at her.

June 14

Hello again my friend. I had to write to you tonight, and isn't it strange you won't see

these words until they're a week old? But in this "right now" I want you to know: I met someone. It's serious. I mean it's wonderful. I've known him almost a year now and it's the kind of thing that changes everything, you know?

I will keep my eyes open and let you know if I find it, the answer I'm always trying to find. You will keep on wishing for the flood you're always talking about, that could drown the desert. And maybe, who knows? We'll even find it.

That summer Devyn counted each sunrise one by one as the solstice approached. She could feel the turn of the year impending, a point of clarity about to emerge like a bubble on the surface of a brook. When at last it came, at the end of that summer's longest day, she walked outside into the evening and marveled at the illumined world: only three hours till midnight, yet light all through—bottomless. A lawn mower droned somewhere, walking through the dusk. The grass was cool under her feet. The still forms of spi-

derweb cloud stretched unmoving above her; daylight reached its hands into night and Devyn stood still seeing in a place where, at another time of year, all had been dark.

Twilight fell, and the sky waxed blue, deep bluer. Devyn shifted like a shadow. She drifted back inside. “You and I,” the letter on the table called after her, “are a dolphin in the sand. You and I are a coral reef on the floor of a dry, dry desert.”

“You and I,” the sky outside whispered back, “are a seed in the earth, not yet old enough to know about rain or the color green.”



Rob put his diamond on Devyn’s finger that winter, her junior year. She put her gold on his the summer after, almost two years from the day they’d first met. They had a small wedding in a public park, whose wide, white-rock creek bed was rushing that morning with water, because there had been a flash flood—made everyone wonder if the wedding could work—yet within hours the sun was back out, and they were onto another week of humid summer heat. The marital counseling they’d got from their church did not

prepare Devyn for the magnitude of her own joy. Rob looked stunning in his tux. People who had never seen him before were stunned. Devyn wore her joy like a gown and it shone, her shoulders shone; her sister Janet gave her away.

They drove to Galveston for their honeymoon and spent a couple weeks working down the Gulf toward Mexico. When they got back, they moved into student housing for young marrieds and started on Rob's last term of grad school. Then 9/11 happened. Rob was shaken. Devyn didn't know how to feel. They fought; he said he didn't understand how she could be so calm about this, and his saying so made her go even calmer. It was an awful start to Rob's last term and a confusing way to begin being married, but what do you do; life went on, Rob finished his master's just before Christmas, and they started their new chapter with the New Year.

The joy that Devyn felt marrying Rob settled into happiness. So she didn't have to decide on a major after all, she thought wryly. She was ashamed of dropping out, but she told herself this wasn't a quitting, just a turning. She got a meaningless desk job and

Rob found work in his field; they saw each other mornings and evenings and weekends. They worked days, kept house together and went grocery shopping. One didn't have much time alone, but that was a luxury in a way, and a novelty. They took walks together in the evenings. They remained stocked in birth control.

As for sex, past the first blush of discovery Devyn had stumbled into a total confusion. Partly, this was situational. Ever since the topic had started coming up in youth group Bible studies, it had been something you weren't supposed to think about; instead, you were supposed to focus on God; you were supposed to imagine that you were running, and you were supposed to run toward God, and one day, when you happened to notice someone else running next to you, in step with you, you were supposed to marry that person. Then there would be sex. That's how the youth pastor had put it. So for years Devyn had ignored this part of herself, but sex was on the map now that she was married and she wanted to find out everything about it. She came to Rob eager to find out and expected him to come to her in the same spirit, and to some extent he did: skin and voice, smell and warmth.

But there were also stops. This was the confusion. Rob had preconceived notions about how sex was supposed to go. He had ideas about what he liked and what he had imagined for himself. Of course, Rob had been told by youth pastors to ignore sex too, and he had tried his damndest, but unlike Devyn whose sexuality had remained pretty far inside like ovaries and uterus, Rob had never been able to overlook the existence of his own genitals. He was introducing her to a part of himself that he knew well. She was bringing him to a place that she herself had never gone.

Maybe that on its own wouldn't have been a stop if Rob had been more open, but he had preconceived notions, and he also had the assumption that his notions weren't just his own; they were what *normal* was. So Devyn would reach for him in one way and he would respond as if she'd done something else. She would start something, and without noticing what he was doing, he would turn it, change it into something different he liked better. Missionary position, or from behind, or her on top—he thought his interests showed some pretty good range, but Devyn surprised him, and the fact that she could surprise him un-

nerved him. Once after seeing a late movie they crossed the parking lot back to their car, and everything was silent and deserted, so while he was going for his keys she unzipped his pants and put her mouth on him. Rob was nervous. They got in the car, drove fifteen minutes, got into bed, tried to pick up where they'd left off, and ended up in missionary somehow. He wasn't sure how. Missionary is usually where it ended up when she surprised him. For Rob, the return to familiarity was reassuring, but for Devyn it was bizarre, as if some things were fine, and other equally interesting things were not—like the time she wanted him to watch her make herself come. Judging by his reaction she got the sense that this wasn't just a matter of *fine* and *not fine*. Some things were okay and others, actually sort of bad.

But anyway they were figuring it out. The first layer of novelty fell away—virgin sex and rings on fingers—and the second layer set in: playing house and wife and husband. Spring moved into summer and all hint of rain disappeared. The temperature climbed one afternoon to the next, falling back a little less each night, like the inbound tide of some heavy ocean. Rob

and Devyn were tired. They spent their time together as if they were each alone, because the power bill was higher than expected and sometimes when it's muggy it's just easier not to talk.

With the return of autumn came an elusive cool breeze, and then the first flash flood. The sky dove black in mid-afternoon, winds sprang up from some long-secret hidden cask, the trees danced as if they faced their death, and then the rain—

With the first flash flood came hope. Devyn remembered happiness, disturbed that she hadn't noticed its going. She remembered Rob, her husband, her friend. In the late light of evening they would lie in bed and she would trace the lines of his body with her hands, the way his hips transitioned into his back, the roll of muscle on either side of his spine. She would tell him stories: the lady at the mall in the doorway of a closed store wearing only one shoe. Rob would roll over and look up at his wife, marveling at how curious and open and giving she was, like a child. Sometimes it embarrassed him, to be honest. Sometimes he wondered if he'd be able to match her, let alone lead. In the middle of the night she would kiss him awake. She

would put his hands on her in the shower. Sometimes, most times, they would make love and all would be well, but other times Rob would laugh nervously and look at her as if something were off. “You like sex a lot,” he said once.

She glanced at him, off balance. “Don’t you?”

“Do you have to ask?” he answered quickly, wrapping her in his arms and kissing her. But there was that nervous laugh.

That winter, a second layer of novelty wore through. Underneath was a third layer that didn’t feel like novelty, though Devyn would think of it that way later; this was the novelty of realism. Fairytale ideals took wing and there came a gratifying sense of hardship, in which one works hard because hard work is the stuff of life and trials are met with the self-abandonment of a hero. At the time it felt more mundane than that, but the mundane was part of the grit: another testament to the fairies’ flight. Devyn thought about the classes she hadn’t taken, the stupid job that she had, the questions she’d set aside. She thought about Thomas’s ocean drowning the desert. She thought about the CV joint on the car that didn’t be-

long to her anymore. Then one night she saw a shape in a shadowy corner of the room, more of a shape than a shadow. It took her a while to figure it out—but with some investigation, Devyn discovered that it was in fact a Cyclops. Numbing the edges of the room. Making the greys greyer. Little by little, sucking out all the air.

Summer came again, and the heat drained the life out of them. They had spats. Rob was frustrated because Devyn said the aimlessness was killing her, but at the same time she wouldn't do anything about it no matter what he said. There were things she could have done, a thousand things the women's ministry was doing at church that she could have got involved with, for example. They didn't have much time alone, and at this point that was neither a luxury nor a novelty. Most of the time, sex was less a pleasure for Devyn than a routine, something people do because they're supposed to, like mowing the lawn. Then one afternoon she went into the closet looking for the missing vacuum attachment and stumbled on a Medusa hiding in there: skin and bones, chain smoking. The monster had been living in the closet for some time, she real-

ized, which was a shock, sure, though to be honest it wasn't as surprising as Devyn might have expected. "There are a thousand things you could be doing," Medusa's snakes hissed in chorus.

"I don't want to do those things," Devyn said.

"Those are your things," the snakes replied.

When at last that elusive cool breeze returned at summer's end to taunt Rob and Devyn with too-early whispers of a too-late autumn, they had a talk. *We don't like living here. We aren't built for these summers. We don't like what it's doing to our marriage. Let's move home; let's give this a fresh start.*

So, a month after their second anniversary, they left the south. They went out for breakfast, came back to say goodbye to the empty apartment and ended up on the floor together. They drove out of town through the season's first flash flood, and with the rain calling after them from the rearview mirror, it did feel a little sad to be leaving that behind. But they were on their way home now, driving north and west to the conifer rainforests floored in ferns where they would never have to wish for rain again. Rob had found a tech job with a company that offered him a choice on where to

live, and there was a location on the coast right near where he'd grown up, so they rented a house on a little street off the highway, set up strange rooms with familiar furniture, and found a church where they agreed to feel at home. One of Rob's high school friends went there. One of Rob's friends was just about everywhere they went now: at the grocery store, at the diner. Sort of an instant community. They reconnected with these friends over a meal, at the odd local event, on a hike. Rob and Devyn went out shopping for spades and gloves and seeds, laughed in the garden store aisles, kissed in the car before tromping back inside. So with a new layer of novelty to carry them a little way forward, they left their spats behind.

Fall played itself out. Then came winter: raining, raining. Devyn stood in the ankle-deep grass of the front lawn, eyes closed, feeling it sweetly ping her face in a thousand points. She went inside and showered. She thought of Rob and wanted him, thought of calling him in to her—but then, just like a switch, her wanting turned off. Flowers were coming up everywhere outside; the landlord had planted lots and lots of bulbs. The fragrance of daffodils was everywhere.

Devyn brought handfuls of them inside, set vases of them on the nightstand and lay on the bed in the cool dark of a raining afternoon, thinking of the sweetness of skin. When Rob wandered in to kiss her, she could see in his face that he wanted her—but not her skin. He wanted a feeling, an act; she didn't believe he wanted her at all. "You don't seem interested," he said to her part way through.

"I'm not," she answered.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. Their last, thinnest layer of novelty cracked like paint on a shifting wall. Devyn felt lost. She went to bed early every night and did not wake up for Rob when he joined her there. She got up late every morning after Rob had left for work, sat in the dark house while the rain fell, and couldn't think what to do. She hadn't made any friends. There was no one around to make friends with, except for Rob's friends. She hadn't found another job since the move; the old job was stupid anyway, and they didn't need the money. Also, Rob had said that he just loved providing for her, coming home at the end of the day knowing that no matter what he'd had to put up with

at work, she was there, free to be just who God had made her to be. Every once in a while he would say something about what it would be like once they had a baby. Devyn recognized this was sweet: the fact that he wanted a baby was sweet. In theory, her heart went out to him. But the room got smaller every time he said it and she couldn't afford to think about it much or else the panic would set in. "Yes but if not that, what?" Medusa said harshly once. The monster didn't always speak in words. Mostly she was just there—in the hallway, her face behind Devyn's own in the mirror, reflected in the dishwater, slowly turning her to stone.

She was there now, the gorgon. Devyn lay on the bed with the journal in her hands while Medusa fixed her with slate eyes from the chair across the room, the cigarette-holder dangling from her fingers. Devyn closed the book and rubbed her cheek bones. The sound of the television cavorted from the living room like squawking geese: Rob was laughing at something; the noise of it was grating. He had always had a loud laugh.

She pushed the journal away and rolled her face

into the covers. Behind her, she could hear Cyclops get to his feet. The floor creaked. The monster laid his hand on her shoulder, large as a book, and Devyn's heartbeat picked up speed. Slowly he sat on the small of her back. Her abdomen collapsed under the giant's weight. She wondered how fast it was possible for her heart to beat, because it was going like wild now and she wasn't even moving. Then the Cyclops lay down upon her, his body pushing her deeper into the duvet, and his hands found the back of her head, and his muscles tightened, pushing her face down until Devyn couldn't breathe, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't breathe.