

## The Letter

The gravel of the sloping drive crunched under the wheels of the Range Rover. The delivery truck was already there, and Nicole stopped the vehicle, panicking a moment. "Maybe we should have tried to call her ahead of time to explain." She turned to Jonathan who was sitting in the passenger seat, focused on the shaded front porch of the small ranch house. Parenting was an entirely new experience for her, but she was growing accustomed to these non-responses from her nephew.

She studied him. He kept his kinky-curly hair short as it was prone to fuzzy enormity with any length. He had inherited it from his mother. Sarah had complained frequently about her untamable spirals, and Nicole reminded her (this was one of their rehearsed patterns, one of their familiar serve and returns perfected over a lifetime) that the grass was always greener, referencing her own straight, lank hair that cost her small fortune in thickening sprays and professional blowouts. Nicole still marveled that such opposites emerged from the same parents.

Jonathan's skin was tawny year-round with cheeks a little too pink. These and his wide jaw, broad shoulders, and height had undoubtedly come from his father, and Nicole knew that his lanky frame would soon fill out and drive the girls crazy, just like Brian. Sarah was incredulous when Brian went out of his way to ask her out when he had all kinds of girls after him – she had always been unaware of her allure.

Jonathan turned to Nicole, "You're doing it again."

"Sorry." It had been happening a lot – being tossed headfirst into a pool of memories, lost to the present. Nicole often wondered how Jonathan avoided it, but she couldn't bring herself to

ask him. The grief counselor was reminding her with increasing regularity that they needed to talk about Sarah and Brian, remember them, grieve them together, insisting that this was part of the 'process', but she and Jonathan just weren't there yet.

Nicole turned back to the wheel, pulled up the drive and past the delivery truck, put the SUV in park, and turned back to Jonathan. "You're sure you want to do this, right?" If he answered 'no', she was prepared to pay the delivery man and back out of that driveway and begin the long drive from this obscure West Virginia town back to Manhattan. The five and a half months since the accident had been building to this moment, but she would forfeit it all if that is what he wanted. He had been through too much.

Jonathan was again looking at the front porch. He answered her without hesitation, "Yes."

The door of the house opened. "Ready or not, here we come," Nicole mumbled as she opened her door and stepped out of the car. Jonathan was already mid-stride. "Damn-it," she said a little louder than a mumble as she took a few quick steps to cross the front of the SUV to catch up to him, no easy task in her new Jimmy Choo's, the heels of which were sinking two inches into the gravel with every step.

The brick-sided one story was in a secluded spot on the ridge just outside of the town, with only one other house visible up the road a few hundred yards. The drive and the front lawn sloped up to the porch, and a tree cast dappled shade on the bay window. Wild rose bushes with magenta blooms bordered the cement walk leading to the two low wooden steps attached to the red-wood-stained porch, where a white wooden bench sat as centerpiece, complimenting the periwinkle door. The old woman stepped out.

"Are you Liz," Jonathan asked, and Nicole shot a glance at him. That was not how the two of them had decided together – she thought – to start this discussion, and she wondered what he was going to say next.

"No one has called me that in many years, young man." She could not have been more than four foot ten and not a pound over ninety soaking wet. Frail was not a strong enough word, but her voice sounded half her age with muscle and energy behind it.

"We have something for you." He looked at Nicole like it was a cue. The woman looked at her, too.

"What?" Nicole was caught off-guard.

"Give it to her?"

"Oh, right. Already? Okay...sure." Nicole unzipped her Coach bag, replaying the last few moments to pinpoint at what exact point Jonathan had completely taken over. She pulled out the small stapled pile of yellow lined paper and handed it to the woman. She took it, looking back and forth between the two of them and then put on a pair of reading glasses hanging from a chain around her neck. The two watched the woman as her eyes started to move across the page.

Nicole did not breathe. Jonathan swallowed and shifted his weight. The breeze was still. The woman's finger moved along the edge of the page as she turned it, and her dry skin made a slight scraping sound. Nicole was submerged again: Brian working the spatula under a partially cooked omelet and Sarah leaning over her coffee cup as they both listened to her sob over her latest break-up on the heels of landing her dream job. Sarah insisting, "It's his ego, sweetheart. He is threatened by your success. It's so obv—"

"Excuse me, ma'm," came a deep voice behind Nicole.

"Shit!" She threw her hands up and teetered backwards on her heels. She regained her balance and turned to find the delivery man standing behind her.

"I'm sorry, ma'm. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I know, I know. Just a sec," Nicole reached back into her bag and grabbed a small wad of cash and stuffed it into the breast pocket of his coat. "Here. The three of us need to talk over something important before you can do your thing, okay? Wait." She held up her index finger and raised her eyebrows at him. "Wait."

"You got an hour," she heard him say as he walked back to his truck. She turned back to the woman.

Not taking her eyes from the page, the woman shuffled sideways to a bench and sat down. "Where did you get this?"

Jonathan shoved his hands into his pockets and looked down at the cement porch. Nicole could already feel sweat beads on her upper lip and in her armpits, and she knew it wasn't just the humidity of the summer morning. He wasn't going to explain – how could he – and Nicole had to remind herself that she was his parent now, his guardian.

"I can explain." Nicole took a small step toward the woman. "He nearly drowned. He was in a car accident actually. The vehicle went over the side of a bridge in upstate New York. He and his parents – they were on the way back from a weekend in Vermont. My sister Sarah loved getting out of the city for the weekend and loved going to Vermont. Brian – Jonathan's dad – was driving, and they skidded on a patch of ice on a bridge. They went through the guardrail and landed in the water." Jonathan leaned up against the side of the house on the front porch. "Nobody knows how long he was under water or how he got out. He was the only one that made it. The back windshield was broken out, but he doesn't remember doing that. He was in a coma

for three days. I was there, waiting for him to wake up. When he did, he sat up and asked for lined paper and a pen. Just like that, 'lined paper and a pen.' He didn't say anything else. One of the nurses brought him some. And that – " Nicole pointed at the slim stack of paper in the woman's hands "– is what he wrote."

Nicole's bracelets clanged as she moved toward the bench and sat down next to the woman. She wished she hadn't worn them – they felt gauche. Besides the chain of her glasses, the woman wore no jewelry. She wore a v-neck cotton lavender shirt and white cotton pants and white orthopedic sneakers. Her hair was wavy, silver and to her shoulders. Her eyes were almond-shaped and deep brown, her nose had a small hump in it but the effect was regal, and her lips had been full but years had pulled the pout into a heavy frown. Still, Nicole thought she couldn't ask to look better at ninety-three years of age.

"Is this your hand-writing?" The woman's voice was thinner and higher this time, and she didn't sound as strong.

Jonathan walked over and sat on the bench next to the woman. He took one of the pages from her and studied the handwriting, as though he had never considered that question. Nicole had compared the handwriting in the letter to the very different handwriting from his schoolwork many times, but perhaps he hadn't given it a second thought. He was only a fifteen year-old kid after all.

"No, actually, it's not," he answered her.

"Well, I *know* it's not, young man." The energy in her voice was back again. "That is... It's...."

"Ma'm, I know this is crazy, and I assure you, we are just as confounded and amazed by this whole...." Nicole struggled to find the best descriptor. "This whole experience.... It's.... We

don't believe in this kind of thing. We don't.... We've never had anything like this happen before. If it hadn't been for...Sarah and Brian not making it out...." She realized she wasn't finishing half of her sentences and decided to stop talking.

"But you are telling me that *he*", the woman pointed with her thumb at Jonathan while she looked at Nicole, "wrote this letter. He took a pen and put these letters, these words to this paper right here."

"Yes, ma'm, I watched him do it."

"If this is some kind of joke..."

"How could it be?" Jonathan hadn't considered that she might see them as scam artists, though Nicole had anticipated that impression. He put the page back in her hand, and the woman's eyes went back to the writing on it.

Nicole wasn't sure the woman was still listening, but she tried to tell her more. "After he wrote that, he lay back down and went right back into a deep sleep, just like he had never woken up from the coma. It was another twenty-four hours before he woke up again, and when he did, he was groggy and took a while to be able to speak properly. The doctors said *that* was normal. What was definitely *not* normal was how he woke up the day before, asked for the paper and pen, wrote that letter in handwriting *not* his own, then picked up his coma right where he had left off. At first, the doctors thought it was some sort of neurological enigma, like when people suddenly start talking in a foreign accent. They did all sorts of tests, but the results were inconclusive. And it didn't happen again.

"He was in occupational therapy for weeks, getting his speech and motor functions back to one hundred percent. His recovery was amazing; he worked so hard. And this thing we are doing today – you should know that he has seen this through. It took some leg-work, but

everything was where Jonathan said it would be. He had all these random bits of information in his head that he kept remembering, like a bread trail, and we followed the crumbs."

The woman was not reading any longer, only staring at the writing as though it were in an ancient language. Nicole feared they were losing the woman entirely. Nicole stood up and said softly, "Jonathan, I think maybe we should give her moment so she can take all this in." The two started down the walk.

After a few steps, Jonathan turned back to the woman and said, "Ma'm, we don't want anything from you. I promise you. That letter is yours and what is in that truck is yours. I don't remember anything. I don't remember how I got out of our sinking SUV, and I don't remember waking up and writing that letter. And I think that I don't remember because...it wasn't me. I think it was him." He pointed at the papers in the woman's hand. "And I don't understand how that can be. But I know that's how much he needed this done. That's how much he loved you. And I had to make sure I did what he needed me to do. I'm really grateful, ma'm, to your husband for what he did for me, for saving me from drowning that night. That's all I'm sure of in this whole thing. And I'm cool with not having all the answers. I hope you read that letter, ma'm, and I hope he means as much to you as he does to me."

Nicole's eyes and throat burned with emotion, and she saw Jonathan at eleven months, arms up by his head, smiling a chubby, two-toothed grin, as he took wide, straight-legged, jerky first steps to Sarah's outstretched arms and Brian behind him, waiting to catch him if he stumbled. Now, Nicole was watching Jonathan take his first steps as a young man; he hadn't stumbled yet, not even a little. She knew then he was going to be alright; he might just be better for all of it.

They sat side-by-side on the front bumper of the Range Rover, and Jonathan leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Nicole reapplied lip gloss and checked her phone, while Jonathan stared at the gravel between his feet. His thoughts were swirling. She could tell by the way he hunched his shoulders forward and pushed the gravel back and forth with the ball of his foot. She wanted to ask how he was feeling about the conversation on the porch, but she knew quiet was necessary for the moment.

The moment didn't last long. Jonathan sat up. "Aunt Nicole? I think we can go now."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I think it's okay. I've done my part, you know. She has the letter." The woman was still reading, and Jonathan looked at the delivery truck as though to confirm it was still there.

"The rest is up to her."

Nicole thought about giving the woman her mobile number. She hadn't even given her name, but she couldn't imagine interrupting her now. Maybe anonymity was best anyway. The woman would have to see they didn't have any skin in it if they just walked away. And Jonathan was right – the rest was up to her. It had nothing to do with them anymore, and at least this part of his recovery was over.

Jonathan got into the passenger seat of the car, and Nicole went to the delivery truck driver and gave him another fatter wad of cash. "Stay until she tells you to bring it in the house." She started back to her car door.

"What if she doesn't?"

"She will."

"But what if she d---"

"She will!" Nicole tossed the words over her shoulder a bit louder.



"This is fu—"

"You have my number. We'll stop by tomorrow before we leave town. I'll double your fee in cash!"

The driver shook his head as he climbed back into his truck. The woman looked up and watched as the SUV pulled out of her drive. She sat back on her bench to start the letter over again.

My Liz,

When I was facing the end of my life, all I could think about was the beginning of you and me. Our times together were like yesterday, and since I passed, I find myself lingering in the corners and shadows of our places: our first house, Eddie's Diner, my acreage before I built our houses. I swear that property was the most beautiful piece of West Virginia I have ever seen. You know, I never cared about big mountains or oceans. I am the happiest surrounded by trees and creeks. I never should have sold that land. Some developer has put in a bunch of streets and houses, and it doesn't look anything like it used to. Now that I am on the other side, I can be near rolling hills and green trees fed by little creeks and rivers in just half a breath, just because I am missing the ridge the way I remember it.

Do you remember how we used to walk in the woods and talk for hours? You did most of the talking. You told me about your daddy and how much you loved just being with him and that he had bought you a honey-colored baby grand piano and paid for lessons starting when you were just eight years old. You never told me why you didn't take that scholarship from the music college in Virginia. I didn't ask because I was scared you would figure out that you should be there instead of with me. I should have encouraged you, though. I shouldn't have let you turn

down a full scholarship. We could have moved, I could have found a job there, and you could have gone to college.

If I had paid more attention to what you needed and wanted, I think we might have stayed together. I wanted us to be happy, but I wasn't looking for any ideas besides my own on how to get there. I think you believed you could get married and have babies and forget about everything else you wanted. You had to prove to the world and to yourself that your life mattered, and you thought if our family was good enough, our home nice enough, our kids the most intelligent and best dressed, that would be your proof. You put too much expectation on yourself and on all of us, and I didn't even try to lighten the load. There were a lot of things I didn't understand about us then and the few things I was able to grasp came too late.

I thought we were different, that we weren't like the rest of the world, making babies like we had to populate the entire country with children from little Berkley Springs. Don't misunderstand – I loved our kids, they were the world to me. But I knew that when we started down that path, I wouldn't be able to keep a hold of you. The busyness and exhaustion of meeting all the kid's needs and your wants drove us apart and kept us from each other. I knew I couldn't measure up, and I didn't know how to keep a hold of you. So I just got out of your way. There was nothing I could do. It was like being underwater and all I could think about was making it to the surface. I thought we would find each other again up there, but I never made it. I never could keep up with you.

And maybe that is exactly what I deserved. You weren't the only one I couldn't keep from slipping away. You see, I never told you that I listened to one of my buddy's drown when I was in the war. My unit had to do a raid across a river in Germany. We all had life jackets but my buddy Squirt – we called him that because he loved canned beans and ate too much whenever he

could, making his bowels loose for two days after – found a tear in his. I told him he should tell our commander, but he said, "No, he'll think I did it myself to get out of the raid tonight. I'll take my chances." We were more worried about our reputations than taking risks. In the war, a guy could never get out from under a bad reputation. We thought that we would rather go home without a leg or in a box than hump around Europe with our unit thinking we were chicken.

When we loaded into the landing crafts that night, Squirt was right beside me. We pushed off from the shore, and it was quiet at first. Then it got crazy real quick. Machine gunfire started from across the river and bullets started hitting the water and rapping the sides of the boats. One of our guys took a hit in the shoulder. We heard cries and splashes a little ways to our left; they were trying to return the fire, but it was too dark. Our commander said, "Hold on men, don't return. We can't see a damn thing." We all had our rifles up to our shoulders, trying to sort through the dark, the boats, the gunfire, and falling bodies. I knew we couldn't reach the shore with that many guys going down so early in the raid. We were barely halfway across the river.

The commander's voice rose up, "Out of the boat, men! Inflate your life jackets! Go!" I turned to Squirt standing next to me, but I couldn't see his face very well in the dark. We were shifting forward, being shoved by the men behind us. I inflated my jacket. I took Squirt's arm, but he pushed me away just as we stepped out of the boat. He was that kind of buddy – he didn't want me to risk my life to help him.

At first, he went straight under, but then he came up about ten feet away. I heard his arms working to keep his body afloat against the weight of his clothes. He must have shed his gear so he could swim to the surface. The gunfire from the shore was slowing. Our commander said, "Swim, boys! Move away! Stay together and quiet down. We're going to have to wait it out until

we get some light." I heard a choked groan from Squirt's direction as we did what the commander told us and swam further from the machine-gun fire and the sunken bodies.

We were quiet. Squirt tried but made the water ripple and move as he tried to stay afloat. I considered swimming over to him, but I would have made us both a target. There was nothing I could do. I gripped the edges of my jacket around my face, feeling the cold waves slush against my chin and ear. My legs began to tingle as they lost a little sensation, and I wondered if Squirt was warmer because he was moving or were his legs turning to rubber with the cold and effort. His breathing was getting choppy, and the waves slapped against my life jacket a little harder as he fluttered his arms more. No one else made a sound, and I wondered if any of the other guys knew what was going on. There was nothing I could do. Eventually, I didn't hear his struggling any more, and I knew he had gone under. I couldn't stop thinking of him down there with my legs dangling in the water above. There was nothing I could do.

I should have been one of the dead, Liz, one of the buddies who were missed, one of the drowned. When I came back from the war, I didn't want a family because I didn't deserve one. I didn't deserve you, and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to hold on to you when you had someone else to love. You being pregnant that first time made me feel like I was at the bottom of the river just like Squirt, and I was looking up at you swimming away from me. I wasn't man enough to keep you near. There was nothing I could do.

There were four more babies after that one, diapers and tiny clothes on the line outside the house every day, enormous meals, two more houses – each one bigger than the last – and furniture for every corner of every room. I made pretty good money but not that good. You tried to help with your Avon business and piano lessons, but it wasn't enough. We couldn't keep up.

And when the kids began to have friends and lives of their own, you found others to love. Young men – boys, Liz – and you did it right under my nose. You stayed out all night. When you came home, we yelled and screamed and threw things at each other. I do not even remember where the kids were in all of it. I was so angry and nothing else mattered because it was over. There was nothing I could do.

Both of us moved on, lived entire lives without each other, and patched together our families with another's. But you were always the one for me. You were the love of my life. You were burned into my vision. Let me tell you now like I never did: looking at you was like looking at the sun and then turning away. I opened my eyes and still saw your shape between me and everything else I saw. You were a looker, no doubt about it, but it wasn't your good looks that really got me. It was that just looking at you made me feel good and solid. Until you didn't anymore. Until it was too hard to even be in the same room with you because of the things done and words said. I always thought love was permanent and inevitable, like gravity, but now that my feet are loose from the earth, I see that love is as brief and fragile as breath.

I could have done a lot of things different, most of which I can't change, but this is something I can make right. I have something to tell you. I took your piano. I stole it. After the divorce, I sold it to a buddy of mine and had him move it out of the house before you could find out what I had done. You never asked me about it, we never said two words to each other again, but I've wanted to tell you all these years. I know I wasn't a good husband, but I do love you. Even if you can't find it in your heart to accept my love, please accept what I am offering you now. This is something I can do. I beg you. Do this for me.

All my love,

Sammy

Liz looked at the truck and put the letter down on the bench beside her, letting a few of the pages flutter to the porch unnoticed. She knew all at once what Sammy had done for her. She stood and started to walk – slowly, always slow now – toward the truck. She felt the warm breeze on her face. She stopped in the middle of the driveway and turned her face toward the sun – something she never did, always conscious of aging too early – and let it heat her skin and aching bones. She looked down and pressed the ball of her foot into the gravel until she began to see the dark earth underneath. She closed her eyes and remembered being twenty-years-old and stepping in the door of the brand-new house Sammy had just finished.

She saw it and stared. "Sammy, it's my piano."

"Yeah," he replied. "Your mama wanted you to have it and told me I ought to put in the house for you as a surprise. I got it tuned and shined up for you. Should be good as new and it fits in here real nice, I think."

In the sweet two-bedroom bungalow, the late afternoon sun flooded through the front window and warmed her back as she walked to the piano. She could still feel the easy movement of her youthful joints and muscles as she sat down. She put her hands on the keys, her hips tilted forward on the edge of the bench, her back high and straight, and her arms at a perfect, square angle. She began to move her fingers and the room was filled with Debussy, Chopin, Bach, and Mozart. At twenty, she did not know, but at ninety-three, she was certain it was the best moment of her life: she was young and beautiful and had her piano and the love of a good and handsome man who built her a house.

She opened her eyes, took a deep breath and started walking down her drive again all the way around to the back of the truck, where the driver now leaned against the bumper smoking a

cigarette. He immediately flicked it onto the asphalt and ground it out with the toe of his boot.

"You finally ready to do this?"

She nodded her head, but he was already unlatching the back and letting go of the overhead door. It clanged as he released it along its track, and he climbed into the back of the truck.

"I tell you what; this is about the craziest delivery I have ever made. That lady and her – he was her nephew, right? Well, anyhow, they paid a ridiculous amount to that grumpy old fu—uh – Mr. Howard for this thing."

It was wrapped in layers of padding. The driver rolled it onto the middle of a platform and pressed a button. "I didn't even know Mr. Howard was still alive, did you?" She didn't respond. The lift gate slowly moved out from the truck bed and down to ground level. Her eyes didn't leave the cargo for a moment.

"Can I see it before you –?"

"Whatever you want, lady." He began pulling off the bungee cords. "You know, they paid an even more ridiculous amount to have it cleaned *and* tuned *and* for me to deliver it to you *and* wait around this morning. What a pain in the ass. I appreciate the extra money and all, but I gotta' get on with my day."

He pulled off the padding, and she stepped closer to touch the honey-colored wood of the baby grand. It still shined. All the keys were brilliant white and crisp black. She pressed the middle C, and it hummed in perfect tune.

"Are we good now?"

Perhaps she had a few years or only a few moments until her body could no longer move, her eyes closed, she exhaled her last, and the earth lost its grip on her limbs – a freedom youth

could not rival. But until then, while she could still feel the sun, the breeze, and the ground under her feet, she had her piano and the love of a good and handsome man.

She smiled and answered, "Yes. Yes, I am good now."