

1989 Alexandra
Beautiful Boy

Alexandra sits on a boulder blackened by spray from Purgatory Creek, mulling over what her friend said. “Sandra, did you hear me?” Behind Alexandra, Andrea sits on her own boulder, dried gray in the sun.

Alexandra does not turn away from the creek but nods in response to Andrea’s question. From where the friends are sitting, above Stiles Falls and about 10 yards up Purgatory, the falls might as well be the edge of the earth, a flat earth, and the creek rushing in that case toward nothingness. Alexandra studies the water hustling by, the frenzy of it, the determination (it seems) to reach that edge and plummet, down, down, changing in the plunge from creek to falls then back to creek but a different sort of creek then, a quieted creek.

Andrea wants to write a story about water. That is what she said. Alexandra considers this possibility while studying the creek that holds her, spellbound. Froth and ripples skitter on the surface, deceptively gentle, but the creek’s steady roar speaks of their collective strength. Ripples become peaks then return to ripples but the spumes that glisten hurry past in a blur that obscures the beginnings and ends of the processes at play. The unruly scene both mesmerizes and comforts Alexandra; she closes her eyes to absorb its static noise.

She and Andrea left early this June morning to make the 30-minute drive from Blacksburg to Alta Mons, a religious retreat center that claims to “nurture and transform lives.” The friends know nothing of the center’s purpose; they came only to walk the trail to the falls. Though privately owned, the trail head to the bottom of the falls is open to all. Andrea had run it several times before today, but this was Alexandra’s first time, and they walked the trail to the bottom of the falls, crossing the creek three times along the way. There they broke convention (and rules) to make the short but steep climb to the top, picking their way over and between roots exposed by way of intent or erosion, and intermingled with leafy trees and decaying stumps.

“What do you think?” Andrea prompts her friend a second time.

Alexandra looks behind her and sees that Andrea is lying on her boulder now, face toward the sun. Andrea’s reddish-brown skin absorbs the sun’s rays like soil welcoming water. Alexandra’s skin remains pale and freckled despite her recent months in Phoenix.

“*About* water? Or *like* water. Is that what you mean?”

“Oh, yeah: you’re right. A story *like* water. So, I’d tell it in the same way our minds work, right? Memories and thoughts surfacing from nowhere, sometimes, but other times, not really, you know? Like, if you think long and hard enough, you can find the connections, right? But the random ones, or the ones with connections, whatever, they surface, then slip away. Gone. What do you think?”

But Alexandra’s thoughts are far from this moment, crashing by in bits and shouts like the rushing waters of Purgatory.

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*He screamed in the cold, and I loved him—more than I have ever loved anyone.
We are connected, he and I. Our bond inescapable, unquestionably there, between us, holding us, as one.
I had not expected that.*

*My water broke in the kitchen as I stood from the table I was using as a desk.
“Henry, would you mind: Bring me the stack of towels in the hall closet, please.”
He flopped his head against the back of the La-Z-Boy. When he looked at me, his jaw was agape,
black hairs protruding from his tank top. Henry can’t help himself.
He reminds me—never on purpose—but time after time that
I am forever indebted to the powers that be:
Henry is not my blood father.*

*The woman in the waiting room, the one with the flat belly.
I thought I had five weeks.
(You only had three!)*

*“Henry wasn’t always like this, like he is now.”
Mom says this as a preface to whatever she needs to tell me.
“He saved me. Twice.”
I didn’t understand at age 12.
Twenty years later, I still can’t imagine it.
Henry, the beer-bellied layabout, a hero? No.
“He did, Sandra. He saved me.”*

*October 12. A Wednesday.
“You’re about twelve weeks,” the doctor said.
“But I’ve been losing weight!” (Only 12 pounds shy of pre-Dick weight.)
“That can happen, if you’re . . . well, overweight.”
“But is that okay? I mean, is the baby okay?”
“Let’s take a listen, shall we? And get you started on some vitamins!”*

*His face is all I can see of him, and it is gold.
Jaundice, the nurse said. “Not uncommon when they’re early.”
He’s wrapped up tight.*

A honeyed full moon in a bundle of blue flannel.

*“It’s a harvest moon and a supermoon,” Richard explains.
The moon is rising behind the Appalachians. I have never seen a moon like this one.
It’s too huge to be our moon, and
it’s not white. Not on this night. It’s gold.
This moon, massive and other-worldly, casts the road in front of us in gold-plated light.
(Highway 81. You were driving back to Blacksburg from Fairfax, Richard’s parents.)
This moon slowly reveals its face, adoring and loving, like Madonna beholding her child.
This moon shouldn’t have a name that Richard can toss about, dismissing the spectacle by ascribing a label.
“It is explained,” he thinks.
But I will not name this moon.
This moon is too special to be named.*

Graduation.
Richard tried to hug me.
I shook his hand.
“Congratulations. What now?”
“The department is paying me to research grammar applications over the summer.
Next year, full-time instructor. Then on to post grad.”
Richard raises his brow. (He doubts you. Ever thus.)
“Well, good luck. You look good—almost as thin as you were when we met.”
I move away.

*April 12. Another Wednesday, this one with
a golden moon. A dimpled chin. A pout of full lips.
His lips are not mine.*

Nooks & Books, before graduate school,
its pulse of minds in flight to faraway lands searching for what they lacked, maybe: adventures, or
Mothers. Lovers. Fathers.
That labyrinth of shelves arranged to create recesses.
In every nook, a floor lamp offered just enough light
for the reader nestled into the soft chair or oversized cushion that comforted their private escape.
I used and reused them all while I worked there. Twenty nooks in ten years.
And, there, I met Professor Armstrong—John.
He was married with two children.
Kind, gentle, attentive. He held my gaze when we spoke.
He was different than the other men in my life:
He listened to me, respected me, adored me.
John encouraged me
to apply.

Graduation.
John and I exchanged a warm embrace.
“I thoroughly enjoyed your thesis—we *all* did!
At last, Lady Caroline receives a modicum of respect, arguably overdue.”
*Lying on my back, Aiden on his side, cradling his head in his left hand.
The day is warm; the room is bright with old light, a September sun.
He is caressing my body with his eyes.
The way he looks at me.
Lightly skimming his fingertips down the underside of my arms, stretched over my head.
Circling my face, a butterfly's touch, leaning in, kissing eyelids.
Those lips, they barely touch, then glide down my nose, across my mouth, landing then lingering on the small of my neck,
His left hand again holds his head. His right travels my body.*

Back toward him, my naked body (a tall triangle)
stands in front of Richard, seated on the bed, clothed.
The way he looks at me, like he's looking at his car,
most days without any sort of real awareness, but occasionally honing on details: Is that a scratch in my door?
Are Sandra's legs fatter today than they were yesterday?
Richard motions for me to turn around.
(You didn't expect it! No! No, I did NOT.)
He raises my buttock and places a pencil under the fold, then releases both buttock and pencil.
I hate him.
(You hate *him*? You just stood there!)

Slippery. The rocks under the water, near the creek's shore. I imagine how they must feel.
Like ice cream.

*Henry was away. (Where was he?) I felt free; Mom felt it too.
She laughed a lot. (Yes, but she wasn't sick yet.)
We chose a video, together. (What did we watch?)
We got Jiffy Pop and picked out TV dinners. I got macaroni and cheese.
And we got ice cream: I don't like nuts, she didn't like chocolate, so we got Strawberry Cheesecake.
"People say you have 'strawberry' hair, but it's not 'strawberry' or 'red,' is it?
It's terra cotta!"*

Pull back the blue, and there it is: terra cotta, downy soft on his golden head.

Water. Rushing. Crushing.

*Henry saw me standing in that puddle of my own making.
He sighed, placed his beer in the arm rest's cup holder
(as fucking tender as a mother laying her baby down to rest),
then sauntered off.*

*When he came back, he dropped the towels at my feet.
"Now what?"
"Now I clean this up and drive myself to the hospital. Not your problem, Henry."
(Mom, what were you thinking when you married Henry?
"He was different." I hear her still.)*

That pencil held,
and I didn't say, 'What are you doing, Richard? Who do you think you are?'
An opportunity presented itself there, and there, oh, and there again, and I? I stayed the familiar course.
I stayed with Richard.
For ten years, he was no different and neither was I.
I remained quiet, acquiescent.
But that last year, I was at last my defender.
A brave warrior.

That girl. What was her name?
She'd been in Nooks & Books before. Remember?
(Yes! Because that first time she came in, she'd just finished *The Sound and the Fury*,
which she loved — so you *knew* you'd love her — and you lead her to Mrs. Dalloway.
She was two years too early for *Beloved*. Oh!)
That time though, when she saw me, she started to cry.

I lead her between the stacks to the right of the antique register, then to the left, then right again to the nook with the two barrel chairs, ragged and yellowed with use.

And there, she poured out her grief.

She'd been hiding him for months, a stray she'd found near campus, but now she was heading home for Christmas, and her mom *hated* cats. Anyway, she said: It's not fair.

He's stuck there, all day, alone.

Would I take him? Please!

"Spartapuss," she told me. "But I call him Art."

I can see it in his eyes.

He's exhausted from his recent effort to free himself.

Already a Hero.

Art loved John.

(True, but Art loved everyone, cuddled up with all the readers tucked away in their nooks.

No, not true! He didn't like Aiden.)

I am sitting alone in Our Daily Bread in June, after the divorce, looking at the results of hours of effort hanging on the walls all around me. Local art. It's Open Mike Night, and I turn again to the center of the café's wall, where a single chair sits behind a silver mike. Aiden is reading his own poem. We are both taking John's summer course on the romantic poets, notably Byron, Keats, and Shelley. I can hear their influence in Aiden's work.

Now he's starting to recite another poem, not his own. He's memorized it.

(Ah, that should have been your sign! No, lots of us memorized poems.)

This poem is Lord Byron's.

Art is purring and rubbing against my legs. When I continue writing, filling up yet another legal pad, he jumps on Henry's table and seats himself on the yellow paper with blue notes.

"You're making this really hard, Art."

Art doesn't care, not at all. He just looks at me with those big round eyes.

His are cloudy, mine are clear. Both are green, like turquoise in southwestern jewelry.

John tapped the end of his pencil on his desk while I spoke to him, hands warming, nose and cheeks burning, adjusting to the heat after my walk across the drill field, dusted with snow, then dotted with grassy footprints, from the War Memorial to the empty parking spaces in front of Williams Hall, home to the English Department (and to you).

I stood there a moment, breathing in the burning cold, staring at blanched branches against a crisp sky, listening to the stillness of new snow, the vacuous quiet of semester's end.

I kept my coat on.

When John saw me looking at it, the pencil stopped.

I saw in that moment what John saw:

An exhausted woman, overweight, pasty skin,
dark circles under green eyes.

*He's holding his puffy eyes shut. He's tired,
my boy.*

"Portia?" The receptionist held up paperwork.
The flat-bellied woman, Portia, was talking to a woman seated next to her.
She leaned toward the receptionist, holding up a finger.
The receptionist dropped her head to the side, and said again, "Portia."
Portia carried her flat belly from her chair across the room, talking all the while, looking back
over her shoulder, never at the receptionist. She glanced at the paperwork long enough to grab
it, then returned to her chair.
And through it all, she never stopped talking.

*Mom strokes my hair. I lie my head on the mattress next to her waist, all the while looking at her.
Mom's head looks shrunken. And she looks tired, too tired.
I see tiny sprouts of downy hair on her bald head.
"I need to tell you something, Sandra.
I wanted to tell you when you were older, maybe when you started dating. You're too young now,
too young to understand. But..."
The way Mom looks at me.
I feel safe and whole.
Special.*

After the pencil, Richard sees something other in my eyes—not anger, but what? Embarrassment? Shame?
He says I don't need to worry. (Big man.) "You're still so young," he says.
"Just eat less and run more. You'll be alright."
He smiles and lays me on the bed then stands over me, unzipping his pants.
I roll to my side and slip away.

Algae floats in green masses just below my feet and on the other side of the creek,
huddled up against the creek's shore, where the water is still.

*John helped me through the divorce,
and everyone in the department knew about it,
although I don't know how. I never talked about it.
The divorce.*

*I huddled up at home. I studied, I taught, I graded papers. I had control over those things, so I immersed
myself that first year, then over the summer, and through this past fall.*

And I gained weight, the side effect of divorce, I guess, even though I knew it's what I wanted, and the
details were easy: We didn't own a house. We owned cars but we each paid for our own, so...

We had shit furniture.
I didn't care about any of it, told Richard the Dick he could keep it.
I got what I wanted: Art.

Charlie! Art's former owner. Yes! That's it! The girl's name!

He is sucking on a blue pacifier. When I take it out, he keeps sucking, so I rub my pinkie against his gums, and now he is sucking my pinkie. I raise him close to my face, nestle my nose against his cheek. 'I love you,' I whisper.

'I love you, my beautiful boy.'

I could never give you away.

Mom found me in Kansas, she says. "You were two years old and living in The Waldorf when I found you.

I fell in love instantly!"

I couldn't stay. I was showing, kept my coat on in John's office.

Hiding it was harder and harder. I didn't want him to know.

Didn't want anyone to know.

I had to leave, had to ask John for leave.

"Your course work is done, Sandra, and I'll find someone to cover your classes next semester.

Go! I think it is a good idea. You can focus on your thesis, cozy up with Lady Caroline Lamb.

Where did you say you would stay?"

With Henry, the Ass. Although staying with Henry had its associated costs, I didn't have to pay him.

He didn't even ask why I was coming to stay "for a few months."

He made sure I understood the rules: I take care of myself; he takes care of himself.

I buy my bread, he buys his. I don't make my problems his problems.

Henry felt obligated to take me in.

He's my "adoptive father," after all. (Ha!)

The single blessing of staying with Henry was that he allowed me to bring Art, the only man in my life worth a damn then.

But not now,

my beautiful boy.

"He saved me," Mom said. "I'm not sure what I would have done without him."

I hear her daily but still don't understand.

His brow, nearly hairless, is furrowed, and his dark eyes peer out from wizened sockets to study me.

He knows me, I think, knows who I am to him.

As he recites the poem from the open mike at Our Daily, Aiden looks at me like no man has before.

His want for me is palpable. His eyes undress me, caress me.

Aiden recites Lord Byron, his eyes penetrating mine.

"She walks in beauty like the night. . ."

The focus of my thesis, Lady Caroline Lamb's Glenarvon, is open, as always, on Henry's kitchen table, which is littered with hours upon hours of research.

I am reading the letter Lady Caroline wrote to Byron,

the letter that she sent with a clipping of her own pubic hair.

Byron was no longer interested, and Lady Caroline could not bear it.

*Lord Byron, the romantic, the poet, the lover.
The Cur.*

In the table's center is a wooden bowl draped with a cloth napkin covering sourdough from Our Daily.
The Dick is sitting at our table with Andrea and Kevin.
They drink Coke; Richard drinks whiskey. I drink Coke, with a little whiskey.
This is a celebration. It's June 1987.
Andrea and I have been accepted into the program, a master's in literature.
"Of course, you were accepted," Richard says.
"It's Virginia Tech, Sandra. Liberal Arts savants aren't exactly beating down the doors to get in."
Andrea and I both received teaching assistantships and have been assigned to share a cubicle.

*Sitting in the writing center late at night, end of September, I think, although it might have been the
beginning of October. I was working on a paper: 'When was my last period? July? August?'
I was annoyed with my body, thought I was still stressed, like I had been during the divorce, didn't have a
period for months. So, July, August, I wasn't worried.*

*And anyway, I was losing weight.
Andrea was talking to me about her paper.
I said aloud but not loudly, 'How old is my IUD?'
"What? What are you talking about, Sandra?"
I didn't answer. '10 . . . no, 12 years old!'
I got it just before I was married.*

What if I had known sooner? What then?

The Dick had too much whiskey, which he chased with too many beers.
In his drunken stupor, he chose to talk about his philosophy on marriage.
"In every couple, one of the two is the lucky one. Take your marriage, for example.
In your marriage, you Kevin are the lucky one." I glance at Andrea; she is disgusted.
Kevin instinctively laughs.
"Wait," Kevin says. "What about yours? Who's the lucky one in your marriage."
"Oh, Sandra knows. Don't you Sandra?"
The timer beeps. Dinner is ready.

*The machines are beeping. They never stop. The nurses are looking in Mom's room, shaking their heads.
Where is Henry? Outside is dark; inside light, but less so than it was an hour ago. I don't like this.
It's all wrong.*

*A nurse walks in and says, "How about we get you that cot again for tonight? How does that sound."
I nod.*

I'm looking at the Dick, nodding.
"You know Richard, I do know, or at least, I think I'm beginning to figure it out."
And then I smile at Andrea, who returns my smile, though hers is embarrassed.
"Who's hungry?" Andrea, relieved, takes the bait: "I'm starving!" She reaches for a slice of the bread from Our Daily.

*I'm hoping to catch Aiden at Our Daily,
It's Open Mike Night. Friday, October 14.
I've seen him in class the last couple of weeks, but he keeps leaving early.
I think I should tell him.
I open the door to Our Daily, and Aiden is reciting a poem.*

*His meaningful gaze is already directed, at a girl, an undergrad.
"She walks in beauty like the night. . . ."*

May 19. A Friday.
Graduation.
Aiden hugged me.
I moved away.

The nurse comes back with my cot. I'm embarrassed but relieved that Mom is sleeping, but when the nurse draws the curtain, Mom wakes up. She sees the cot and her gaze lingers there a moment longer than I wish it would. She looks at me, smiling, but she shouldn't. Even smiling looks hard.

*"What would I have done—who would I have been—without you?
So curious how life goes.*

*You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Sandra, the best thing.
And yet, you wouldn't even be here, in my life if it weren't for....*

What I need to tell you....

About the two worst moments of my life."

*I understood nothing of what she was trying to say in that sterile hospital room,
what she was trying to explain without using the words that would allow her to do so.*

*My head is on her mattress, she strokes my hair
Until the window turns black.*

*Outside is black. Inside, his face glows in bright light. I breathe in the scent of him, rub my nose in his hair.
I bore the unbearable.*

*I didn't know what she meant, know precious little still.
Pregnant at 17, she "lost" the baby and could not have more.
And then she "found" me.*

I could never give you away.

My beautiful boy.

I was to be married to Richard in a few weeks.
Knowing I had no means, the Jones's took over the wedding plans.

I was relieved
and able then to look.

I thought maybe—just maybe—I could find my birth mother.
She could come to my wedding.

I found "The Waldorf,"
what some people called

The Willows Maternity Sanitarium in Kansas City,
a mansion on a hill.

That was as close as I will ever come to my birth mother.

The Willows closed their doors in 1969.

Rumor has it that the nurses burned the records in the yard.

And if Mom had lived? What then?

Flat-bellied woman sat down. Her friend muttered a question.

“Of course, I’m going to keep it!”

Her friend tilted her chin and whispered another question.

“Because I want too!

What kind of question is that?”

I wanted to.

Desperately.

I couldn’t give you away.

I didn’t give you away.

Unbearable.

Do you understand?

Do you believe me?

I bore the unbearable,

I bear it still, but

I didn’t give you away.

The unbearable:

I gave them to you.

I gave them, gave that couple, gave your parents

—young, happy, lovely, and in love, with each other, with the very thought of you—

I gave them to you.

I had nothing more to give.

I gave you my all.

I bear this pain, this loss, your absence,

willingly and always

for you,

my beautiful boy.

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“SANDRA!”

“What?”

“Geez! I said your name, like, three times!”

Alexandra looks at Andrea and shrugs.

“So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

Andrea rolls her eyes. “About my story idea? A story that reads like water?”

“Oh, right. I’m not sure it would work. I think it might be frustrating. I mean, few readers these days have the patience for Benjy’s ramblings or Sethe’s confusing narrative. Fewer still sign up for *Mrs. Dalloway* and, be honest, who reads *Ulysses*—for fun.”

“You do. You *loved* all of those books.”

“Yes, well.... My point is, they’re not easy, so they’re not today’s favorites.”

“Who says I want to write one of ‘today’s favorites?’”

“Fair enough. But there’s still a problem with your idea. You wanted to write a story that reads like water flows, with random but cohesive thoughts surfacing then floating by, right? Okay, well, the problem is that thoughts don’t surface as words. They’re snapshots, images that blast by in a second, a *split* second. Now describe one of those split-second images. It takes a *lot* of words—and reading those words takes *minutes*. So, a mess of words is a poor substitute for a split-second thought and, therefore, a poor representation of water.”

Alexandra took a breath, and Andrea started to respond, but her friend dove in first.

“And you know what else? It’s not always true what you said. Not all thoughts surface and ‘slip away.’ Some of them surface again, and again and again. The same damning image, the same sad scene, the same pain ad nauseam.”

Andrea looks at her friend, puzzled. Alexandra looks almost angry. Alexandra in turn looks at her friend. Andrea looks deflated.

“What the hell do I know, Andrea? Just try it and see how it goes. Why not?”

The two friends stay quiet a moment, both watching, listening to the creek.

“Listen Andrea. I want to tell you something. I want one person—one person who gives a damn about me—to know this, what I want to tell you. But I need you to promise that you’ll never tell anyone—not even Kevin.”

Andrea leans forward and brings her hands together on her lap. “Sandra, you know you can tell me anything.”

“Well, yes, but do you promise you’ll keep this a secret—even from Kevin?”

“Yes! I promise. Of course!”

Alexandra pulls an envelope from her backpack and hands it to Andrea.

“Don’t open it yet. Listen first. Let me explain.”

From where we are, you and I, above these two friends on the shores of Purgatory, we see only their body language, a leaning into one another, a stillness in Andrea, a stiffness to Alexandra. We hear nothing, only the creek’s white noise. But then we see Andrea curl into herself and cup her hands over her mouth. We see her clambering, crawling, scrambling across the boulders and rocks to reach Alexandra. When she is near enough, Andrea grabs her friend, awkward, both a little unsteady, but finally, the one wrapped in the others’ embrace. Alexandra’s arms hang at her side for just a moment longer than we expect and just when we think that she will not return Andrea’s hug, she does. We see Alexandra’s body releasing, relaxing into her friend’s care.

And we notice it then, the eddy on the shore, just in front of these two women.

A green leaf circles, trapped in the eddy’s vortex. That little spot of green circles and circles then circles again. Around and around it goes, but then, for no discernable reason, the green leaf escapes the eddy. It joins the rushing water and it too appears compelled to reach the falls. It too crashes over that edge. It too floats gently, rocking ever so lightly downstream, freed from the eddy, quieted after the fall.