

## BELONGINGS

There was nothing special about that guitar. It was second hand, slightly scratched and inexpensive. For that reason, he kept it at her house. It blended in so well with her plain furniture that he sometimes failed to notice it even when he was sitting across from it.

The thought of asking for it back didn't cross his mind during their conversation on the sofa, the one that eventually ended their relationship. He was trying to follow the movie on cable when she again brought up the subject of vacationing together in the Bahamas , something he had skillfully sidestepped on previous occasions.

“So, have you thought about it anymore?” she asked.

“I guess,” he said. “But see, here's the thing....”

It's strange how these things play out he later mused on his way home, alone. Eventually, it had to be said. No sense letting her believe he felt the same way. What puzzled him was why it took so long to realize it. She loved him, of that he was sure. In the beginning, it was nice and somewhat humbling to know she was out there, caring for him in a way he had never expected. She was so different from Tanya, his ex-wife. That woman kept him dangling over the pool of her affection, dispensing her love by the thimble. Kate was different; he didn't have to work so hard to please her. There were times when it seemed all he needed was sit and breathe to win her affection. But things change, people change, and they all needed to move on.

## Belongings

To her credit, she stopped calling after two of her voicemails went unanswered. Like him, she probably saw how useless it was to air their dirty laundry, picking out specific events or habits they found unattractive about each other. That was for adolescents. He was spared that last awkward meeting, the tears and insecurities spilling over everything and finally, her wrath. Both ended the conversation that night not fully realizing it was their last. Perhaps that's how breakups should be: natural and spontaneous. Maybe all this effort to let the other down gently and achieve closure only made things worse.

She slipped from his mind like spare change falling to the floor. There were other women but no one captured his interest for longer than a few weeks and he was fine with that. He did vacation in the Bahamas but by himself, something he found rejuvenating. He enjoyed sitting on the sand and watching the waves roll up to meet him, drinking under an umbrella in the late afternoon and dining outdoors serenaded by a local band. He savored this alone time knowing the need to find someone special was building again.

His wake up call came in the form of an email advertising upcoming concerts. He quickly scanned the list of performers, stopping when he saw the name of his favorite guitarist, a talented singer/songwriter. It was his admiration for this man's music that had made him to take up the guitar again, a passion that had all but disappeared during his marriage. Tanya did not share his love of the guitar or his taste in music among other things. Without hesitation—or thought—he purchased two tickets. It was only after, when he was putting away his credit card, that he wondered why he had bothered with the extra ticket. After all, it wasn't as if he was seeing someone. But he pushed the worry aside. The concert was a month away and there was bound to be someone he

## Belongings

could ask. In the meantime, he would spend his evenings practicing some of the performer's music and listening to his recordings.

Luke found himself remembering the first time he played these songs for Kate. On that first night, he carried his scratched guitar to her place and sat across from her playing. Her gaze followed his fingers as they moved over the strings. He played beautifully, not missing a note. She was quiet when he finished and he didn't know if that meant she liked his playing or was simply being polite. Finally, she smiled.

“Play another.”

This time, she did not take her eyes from his face. He was sure she fell in love with him that night. For awhile there, so did he.

They spent their evenings at her apartment. She cooked while he practiced. Sometimes, when he was too tired to play, they'd lay entwined on the sofa listening to a recording. Occasionally, one or the other would comment on a particularly nice segment or lyric. He liked that she enjoyed the music just as much as he did. It was after one such night when he was about to leave that she came up behind him, holding the guitar.

“Don't forget this,” she said as he pulled on his coat.

“Mind if I keep it here?” he asked.

She took a moment. “Sure.”

He dwelled on the meaning of that pause on the way home, worried that she saw it as an imposition, a sign that he was encroaching on her territory, assuming it was all right. Maybe she didn't like his playing as much as she let on. Tanya hadn't. Women do that, pretend to like something until they get a commitment and then renege.

## Belongings

But as he approached his apartment, it was apparent she viewed the guitar as a small commitment on his side. It would only be a matter of time before his sweaters and toothbrush would find their way to her place. This was how two separate entities merge, with the small things first then building up to the essentials. Where one's belongings are, one finds himself.

On the day the tickets arrived, he emailed Kate and asked her to join him. Enough time had passed, he reasoned, more than enough to look back and choose to remember the good. After all, they hadn't had a bad parting. They simply stopped talking to one another, two people realizing their feelings weren't headed in the same direction.

Her bolded name in his inbox the next day lifted his spirits in a way he hadn't expected. She thanked him for his invitation, writing in that perfect English that she was so particular about. Yes, she saw the advertisement and already bought tickets. He reread her email again, pleased. She hadn't pretended to like this artist simply because it was his favorite. It was only now that he realized a small part of him had doubted her all those years, as if she had convinced herself to like this artist only because he did. And she was willing to go knowing he'd be there, too. He found he wasn't so disappointed that she turned his offer down. Just admitting she'd be there was a step in the right direction.

On the night of the concert, Luke had a sandwich at his desk while finishing some work that had piled up over the week. If he had a date, they'd be dining at the French restaurant across the street from the concert hall. He didn't mind not having someone to go with him. There was a chance she'd not like the music and ruin the whole evening.

## Belongings

The concert hall was just a few blocks away and it made more sense to walk there from his office instead of going home first. It was a warm spring evening and he stood by the entrance watching the sun cast a warm orange glow over everything. He waited until the last trace of it slipped behind the tall buildings before attaching himself to a large group and following them in.

“Row D,” the usher said holding a flashlight to his ticket stub. The older gentlemen looked up and counted off the seats. “You’re next to that woman in the white blouse.”

Luke’s gaze followed his, coming to a halt at the sight of Kate. For a second, he was unable to breathe; she looked more beautiful than he remembered her being. Could it be that he’d have the pleasure of sitting next to her all evening? But just as he started up the aisle, Kate turned to the man next to her and patted his hand. Suddenly, Luke remembered her email. She bought *tickets*. Plural. How could he have overlooked that? Did it simply not register in all the times he read her email that she wasn’t going alone?

He took his time climbing the stairs, cursing both God and Ticketmaster for playing such a cruel joke on him. He decided it’d be best to leave the seat next to her empty since that would have been where his date—if he had one--would be.

She looked up just as he was easing himself into his chair. Their eyes met for what he felt was a painful eternity. If their parting had been without enmity, it was because it was being reserved for this moment. In an instant, the smile faded from her lips and her eyes grew small and dull. She looked away and leaned toward her date, whispering God knows what. Luke fumbled through his pockets for something to distract his attention. He watched as they rose and shuffled through the row of seats in the

## Belongings

opposite direction, making their way toward the door that led to the lobby. For a moment, he thought they had left for good, but then he spotted their jackets still on their seats and he couldn't quite tell if it was relief or dread that he felt in his gut.

Luke pulled out his smart phone. Pressing the letters with his thick fingers, he emailed Kate. Perhaps if he explained...of course, he had no control over where he was seated and seeing her was as much of a surprise to him. Reading it over, he added how nice she looked, how that blouse happened to be one of his favorites. Luke couldn't recall if he had ever complimented her on it, never one to gush about things like that. He finished by saying how happy he was she found someone to share these pleasures with. He wondered if she invited this man to her apartment and cooked for him. Were they entwined on the sofa afterward, listening to Luke's favorite musician? Or does the ritual change with partners? Was she doing things with this new guy that she hadn't done with him?

The hall was nearly full when Kate and her friend returned and took their seats, this time with the man sitting between her and Luke. He hit the send button and shut his phone, bracing himself for a long, distracted evening.

He arrived at work early the next morning after a restless night. If he wasn't going to get any sleep, he might as well try to put some of this nervous energy to good use. But he no sooner got down to one task when he'd be distracted by an incoming email. All morning, he waited for her reply, some acknowledgement that she read his email. He checked his phone every half hour but by noon, he needed a break. Leaving his phone behind, he took a walk around the block to clear his head. He had just rounded the corner when the flower shop on the opposite side of the street caught his attention.

## Belongings

Without so much as an acknowledged command, his legs changed course, crossing in the middle of the street and taking him to the florist and ordering a hundred dollar bouquet.

Sweat broke out across his forehead as the florist pick out an array of flowers, gathering them skillfully in his hand, looking over at him occasionally to get his approval. Luke grabbed a small card, aware of the slight tremble in his fingers, and scribbled an invitation to dinner on it. He needed to talk to her, face to face, and tell her just how he felt, about her, the breakup, everything. He wasn't sure just how he did feel but he was certain when the time came and he looked into her eyes, the words would come.

She answered him the next day, a short reply thanking him for the flowers but passing on dinner. She obviously didn't see the point of seeing him again. Could he blame her? He hadn't talked his feelings when she wanted to hear them. It was as if they didn't matter anymore because he didn't matter anymore.

He refrained from sending out another email. It was clear he'd have to try another way to reach her. He spent the better part of the evening after work walking around the city, lost in thought. When his legs tired, he found himself near Union Park. He found an empty bench and tried to see things from her point of view.

If he had to name one thing she wanted when they were dating, it was a commitment. After two years, she was looking for something more than Hallmark cards and gift cards to fancy stores. She was looking to spend more time with him, vacationing, perhaps living together and eventually, marriage. Time, from her viewpoint, was running out. Neither one of them were in their twenties or even thirties. Perhaps fifteen years earlier it would have been the desire to have babies but now, it was the race

## Belongings

to find someone while there was still some trace of youth left in her face. Gray hairs, laugh lines, and gravity was gradually winning the war from this point on. He understood this. He saw how time had changed his own appearance over the last decade. Maybe Kate realized something he didn't. What was he waiting for, thunderbolts? He told himself he wanted someone who understood his interests, his moods, who loved him as he was, not as he could be. Kate gave him that and more. She accepted him unconditionally. What more did he want? As the sun slipped behind the tall building, Luke feared that he failed to recognize the love he wanted. Perhaps at this stage, it was less about fireworks and lovemaking and more about a steady, constant comfort.

That night, he wrote Kate a long letter. He allowed his feelings to slip out onto the page, holding nothing back. That's where the problem is, he thought, not sharing this with her as she had with him. But it wasn't too late to correct his mistake, to let her know how proud he felt sitting across from her in restaurants, how nice she looked even when they spent the evening in, the way she brushed her hand over his shoulders and stroked the back of his neck after their lovemaking. He put this down on paper, reading, editing and rereading until it had the perfect rhythm and tone. It was after midnight when he folded the pages and addressed the envelope. Emotionally exhausted but optimistic, he collapsed onto his bed and slept.

The next morning, he thought things over carefully before mailing the letter. He knew she would not answer right away. She had always been careful with her words, never one to speak without considering the ramifications of her responses. The only time she spoke impulsively was to compliment him. But something like this would cause her to think, to go for one of her long walks, perhaps settle herself on a park bench and watch



## Belongings

the neighborhood kids amuse themselves. After hours of deep contemplation, she may call a close friend and relay the story, ask for advice. This being Saturday, he expected it would be some time the following week before he heard from her. There was nothing to do but wait.

Luke began the week in good spirits, having treated himself over the weekend to a few movies and a nice dinner. He kept a draft of his letter which he read whenever he felt nervous. It calmed him and offered hope that in a few days, he would hear her response. But the contents of his mailbox disappointed him every evening. When Saturday came without a reply, his optimism began to sour. Kate was never one to ignore something as important as this. Perhaps his letter had caught her off guard more than he expected. After all, he had put everything he had into that letter, years of reserved caution giving way to the emotions and feelings she had been waiting for. Of course, she would need more time. And wasn't she with that other guy now? Surely that complicated matters for her.

He attempted to comfort himself with these rationalizations for the remainder of the week, telling himself no news was good news, but with each new day of silence he could not deny the possibility that she might not answer, something he hadn't expected nor could accept. Had he underestimated her anger? Had his declaration of love only caused her to resent him more for coming too late?

That settles it, he thought. They needed to talk, face to face if possible but more likely on the phone. Luke thought carefully about how to approach this. If he called her at the office, chances are they couldn't talk for long. If he called her cellphone, they could talk openly and longer, but that's if she didn't send his call to voicemail. He

## Belongings

decided to go to the office early on Monday and leave a message on her office voicemail. He would keep it short and light. He would say he hoped she was well and that he'd call her later. She would be expecting his call, then. It wouldn't be a surprise.

He practiced what he was going to say in front of the mirror, smiling so that his voice sounded free of worry. He ran through it a few times until it came naturally. When he got to the office, he shut the door, took a few cleansing breaths and dialed.

*Hi, Kate. It's Luke. Just wanted to catch up on things, see how you're doing. I'll call you tonight. Speak to you then.*

But that evening, his call went straight to voicemail. He paced the kitchen waiting for her to call. He waited until his physical energy was spent and he collapsed into bed at midnight. His mind was far from still as he stared at the ceiling. Maybe she wasn't ready for an emotional conversation just yet. Maybe what's-his-name was there and now she was spending the evening talking to him about all this. He imagined she had kept his flowers, the dinner invitation and call to herself. Now, the other guy knew he had competition. He didn't get much sleep and when he did, it was restless and full of images of her.

The phone was especially busy the next day but Luke didn't want to hear from anyone but Kate. By late afternoon, his last reserve of patience was spent. She still wasn't taking him seriously and he had only himself to blame for that. How many times did she start a conversation about her feelings or the course of their relationship only for him to change the topic with some joke? He foolishly believed that things were going too well for them to have 'the talk'. He simply wanted to let his feelings take their natural course and when she finally brought it up again that time on the sofa, he blurted the first

## Belongings

thing that came out of his mouth. It wasn't to push her away but to give him time to catch up to her feelings. He needed some elbow room to figure out just how he did feel and this past year had given him enough. Now he was sure that he loved her and the only way she'd take him seriously was to propose.

This was what she wanted all along, the point of all those conversations. So what if they hadn't seen each other in a year; they dated for two before drifting apart. A few months didn't negate years they spent together nor take a back seat to the attention of this guy she was seeing. Did Kate have a reason to be angry with him? Absolutely. But surely, she could not deny how serious he was now. He knew he should propose in person, but she wasn't making it easy for him. He left her another voicemail.

The next morning, Doug was waiting for him when he arrived at the office. Taking a seat opposite Luke, he fidgeted, as if he had come on a mission he hadn't asked for. Doug said he came at the request of Kate.

"Is it true?" he asked Luke. "Did you propose?"

Luke could hardly contain his emotions. "You spoke to her? What did she say? How did she sound?" She may have avoided talking to him but she did exactly what he predicted: she confided in a friend. Only it was his friend, his close friend.

Doug sat quietly, listening to Luke explain what had been going on for the last few weeks, how he couldn't sleep, that all he wanted to do was spend the rest of his life with her. It felt good to get it all off his chest, to tell someone what he had been pent up for close to a year. When he finished, Doug stared at his shoes and chose his words carefully.

## Belongings

“Kate’s moved on, Luke. This guy....she’s serious about him. No use knocking on that door anymore.” Doug paused. “Actions can sometimes be misunderstood, misconstrued. There are all sorts of consequences if you keep pursuing her. She’s not coming back. Ever.”

Doug’s words sunk in slowly. How clever Kate was, more so than he gave her credit for. She sent his best friend to do what she couldn’t do herself. She knew he couldn’t argue his case to Doug. She painted him as a lonely kook a heartbeat away from turning into a stalker. He was backed into a corner with no way out except to concede. He walked Doug to the elevator and asked his friend for one more favor.

“Get my guitar back,” he said.

Doug stepped into the elevator, sounding like an exasperated parent refereeing a fight between two children.

“Give it up, Luke,” he said.

As the doors slid shut, Luke shouted, “I want my guitar.”

He stood by the elevator bank, dizzy. Now that the guitar was gone, he feared he’d never play again.