

Melanie's Letter

When Alexander Blu checked the mail on the way out of his apartment building on a drab morning in November, he found a letter addressed to Melanie Waits, who lived a floor above him. He stared at the letter for an extra beat, calculating whether he had time to run it back up the stairs to give it to her. But he didn't know her very well, and he didn't want to be late for work, so he dropped it into the pocket of his tan trench coat.

Alexander spent the day in his office and was so focused on the Wilson and Wilson contract that he forgot all about the letter addressed to Melanie Waits until he hung up his trench coat in his closet late that night. He again thought about walking it up one flight and sliding it under her door, but he had to get up early the next morning and didn't want to interrupt his routine: glass of milk, feed the fish, iron his shirt, wash the bowl and spoon, brush his teeth.

As he did each of these things and then settled into bed to review the addendum to the Wilson and Wilson brief, he thought about Melanie: her red hair, her freckles, and most of all, her height—or rather, lack thereof. She appeared to be about four-foot-eleven, and though she was pretty in a girlish way, he had not thought of her as someone he could ask to dinner, considering he was six-foot-three. He would look ridiculous standing next to her.

When his eyelids started to droop, he slid the Wilson and Wilson addendum into its file folder and then dropped the folder into his briefcase next to his bed. He clicked off the light, and, in his pre-sleep haze, he had a hypnagogic hallucination. It

was the third time in his life that he had begun such an episode, in which people seemed to appear to him as he was lying in bed. Two years ago, after the most recent hallucinations, his doctor said they happened to about ten percent of people in his age group, although it was more common for young women. Nothing to worry about. His hallucinations stopped after a few days.

On this occasion, he thought he was lying in bed with Melanie in such a way that their height would be equalized, his head on her shoulder, her fingers gently caressing his neck, while his feet dangled into thin air, beyond the mattress. It was not sexual but a fulfillment of longing to be held by a woman. Would any woman do? Or did it need to be Melanie? He felt that he was objectifying her, and he scolded himself. He imagined Melanie would be disappointed in him, possibly offended, if she knew.

Melanie disappeared, and he drifted off to sleep, feeling depressed.

The next morning, he slept through his alarm. He jumped out of bed while it was still dark outside, threw his tie around his neck, grabbed his briefcase, punched his arms into his trench coat, and he was out the door. No time for the letter.

The Wilson and Wilson contract was signed, and he began working on Plywood Supply, a fraud case.

Days passed, and he moved the letter from his trench coat pocket to the first drawer in his dresser, and he forgot all about it. Or so he told himself. In reality, he had made a subconscious decision to keep the letter.

His relationship with Melanie progressed in his hallucinations. One night, he imagined taking her to dinner, despite her height, and discussing his favorite novel,

Jane Austen's *Persuasion*.

"It's her most mature novel," Alexander would say, as he cut into his steak. The center of the meat revealed no pink, the way he liked it. But at a restaurant like this, what would you expect but perfection?

"I think you're reducing her work to the age at which she wrote it," Melanie would say. "It's mature because she was *older* than when she wrote *Pride and Prejudice*?"

"Well, she was older, perhaps wiser," Alexander said. "Aren't you hungry?"

Melanie hadn't even unrolled her silverware from the cloth napkin, and he was already halfway through his steak. He didn't plan to eat his asparagus.

"You're projecting," Melanie said. "You're twenty-eight and unmarried, and you think you're wise."

Alexander looked at her, those blue eyes catching the lights from every angle in the restaurant, his heart aching for her, overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift of her attention.

"What is it?" she would say, suddenly concerned that she had insulted him.

"I just—" he would say, smiling now through tears, "I love it when you psychoanalyze me."

She reached out her hand, so delicate, such a short little arm. Fortunately, his arm was like a canoe paddle by comparison, and he easily reached across the table and smothered her hand with his.

He drifted off to sleep.

When he woke up the next morning, he felt exhausted but pleased. He

whistled off key as he swung his trench coat around his shoulders like a medieval cape.

One night after finishing a brief on Plywood Supply, he knew he needed to sleep more, so he watched a Jennifer Village movie on his laptop to distract himself. He was mesmerized by her; he thought she might be the most beautiful woman alive. In fact, he was certain of it. He Googled her to see if the internet agreed, and he found one list that did. And yet, many lists put someone else as No. 1, and that made him oddly upset. He felt that if others agreed with him, he might feel closer to her.

He imagined that Jennifer Village was lying in bed with him. Was it a hallucination or was he willing this one to happen?

She was terribly sad. She wore long-sleeved flannel pajamas and no makeup.

"Why would some people think you're not the most beautiful woman in the world?" he asked her, touching her arm lightly.

"You don't understand how important it is to be beautiful," she told him, muffled by the pillow. "My whole career depends on it."

"That doesn't seem fair," he said.

Then she sat up and looked at him, narrowing her eyes in accusation. "But isn't that why you're interested in me? Because you think I'm pretty?"

"He's shallow like that," said Melanie, who was sitting in the armchair in the corner, reading *Pride and Prejudice*. He was surprised that she wore reading glasses.

"I'm not shallow," Alexander said. "I don't think so, anyway."

Jennifer lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. Melanie kept her eyes on the book.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. "I don't want to be the stereotypical male, just interested in physical love. I want to be a new kind of man. Someone who will love a woman in a way that makes her feel like her very best self."

"Mm hmm," Melanie said, turning a page without looking up.

The next day at work, Alexander Googled Jennifer Village again and found a picture that captured the real her, not at a red carpet premier but on a vacation in the mountains. He printed it and cut it out. He opened his wallet and slipped the picture into a slot with one of his credit cards in such a way that only her head was visible, as if she were a passenger on his secret little bus.

The picture comforted him, just as Melanie's letter did as it lay in the top drawer of his nightstand. He felt that he had something to look forward to each day when he returned home from work.

Soon, a third woman joined the late-night pajama parties: McKayla Hudson. Alexander remembered her from high school, and, after asking Melanie's and Jennifer's permission, he found her photo from his yearbook and introduced them. McKayla had been his prom date temporarily, until she had changed her mind.

"Do you remember Mr. Thomason, the chemistry teacher?" she asked him, cross-legged on his bed. Jennifer was already asleep on the pillow in her flannel pajamas, and Melanie was tossing and turning on the couch, sighing in a passive aggressive way, trying to get Alexander and McKayla to shut up so she could get some sleep. But Alexander didn't feel even a bit tired.

"Yes!" he said. "Those eyebrows!"

"And Jason made his own out of pipe cleaners to be Mr. Thomason for

Halloween?"

Alexander couldn't control his laughter. The image was so clear in his mind; he had forgotten all about Jason.

He looked at McKayla, still seventeen years old, still with her whole life ahead of her. He reached out for her hand, and she let him, their fingers interlocking. Hers were shockingly slender, and he felt as though he were holding a kitten.

The next night, they read *Much Ado About Nothing* aloud together. There were only four of them, so they had to double up on parts, to hilarious effect. At one point, Jennifer was re-enacting the entire conversation between Leonato and Beatrice, changing her voice and dancing back and forth to represent their stage movements. When she finished, so tenderly, and with such good humor, Alexander and Melanie and McKayla gave her a standing ovation. She bowed deeply and looked so natural, but, of course, she was used to the attention.

Alexander looked at Melanie, who was beaming, and she said, "Just imagine!"

He wasn't sure what to make of that.

The hallucination ended, and when he tried to fall asleep that night, he was aware that he was alone in his apartment. He stared at the window, the reflected light from the buildings across the street, the whine of a distant siren.

The next day at work, he took an early lunch, and, alone in the break room, next to the row of upside-down mugs on their paper towels, he found McKayla (Hudson) Barrett on Facebook. She had gained so much weight that he couldn't be sure at first that the picture was of her. Her face was round and puffy, and yet she was smiling as though she were truly happy. Had she forgotten how pretty she was

in high school? The smile seemed to show that she had apparently become comfortable in this bloated version of herself.

And yet he also knew he was being shallow, just like Melanie had said, and he felt awful, like something was burrowing into him.

That night, he hallucinated again: McKayla (Hudson) Barrett was sitting alone with him in his bedroom, plucking at her shirt so that it didn't accentuate her present-day belly. Short of breath.

He looked at her with such compassion, and he knew he didn't deserve it. It was as though she were trying to comfort him, to forgive him for his unkindness.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish I could change it, whatever makes me feel this way."

"I think it's admirable that you're at least trying," she said.

"I mean, it's the same you, right? You remember Mr. Thomason, with the pipe-cleaner eyebrows?"

"Have you kept in touch with him?" she asked.

He shook his head. It hadn't occurred to him.

"He's on Facebook," she said.

It was a rebuke. McKayla (Hudson) Barrett knew him now as person, had learned to see him for who he really was, not just as a pair of eyebrows. Truly, Mr. Thomason was not a lot older at that time than Alexander was now.

Alexander had missed something in the past decade. A part of him was still in high school, refusing to grow up because he was afraid.

He got up the next morning before dawn and worked on Plywood Supply. On

the train back to the office, he felt as if his body were thinning out, become two-dimensional.

That night, the image of Melanie Waits was in his armchair, reading *Persuasion*. He was lying in bed, still in his trench coat, with Jennifer Village on his left arm and the teenage McKayla Hudson on his right. He was staring at the ceiling, listening to the girls talking, their soft voices soothing. They weren't including him in their conversation, but there was nothing intentional about their exclusion; he was certainly invited.

Then he got out of bed and found Melanie's letter his drawer. He tapped it on his hand and brought it to her, setting it on the arm of the chair.

"This belongs to you," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't give it to you earlier."

Melanie looked up at him, her book splayed open on her lap. When she realized the letter had been withheld for several weeks, she looked wounded. She looked betrayed.

"You've been distant," he said, feeling defensive, knowing he had been caught.

"You don't cuddle with me."

"So you steal my mail?"

He exhaled and almost imperceptibly shrugged.

"Can you open it?" he asked. "I feel bad."

She scraped her finger along the flap and pulled out a hand-written note.

Melanie put her hand over her mouth. She read it a second time.

"What is it?" Alexander asked.

She shook her head. When she looked up, her tears became his tears. He was

inside her, breathing with her. He knew what the letter said without her reading it aloud: it was her aunt, writing on behalf of Melanie's estranged mother, who was in hospice. She had a couple of days to live, and this address was the only way they could find to reach her. Could Melanie come right away? If you could see her, it would mean so much to your mother. She's so sorry about everything that happened.

Melanie let the letter fall.

She refused to look at Alexander, and he didn't want her to. He didn't apologize again; with his trench coat still on, he crawled into bed, feeling like he had suffered both her own loss and the loss of his own mother, as well as the loss of Melanie and Jennifer and McKayla all at once.

He hallucinated about his own mother that night. He was a toddler, sitting on her lap, and she was stroking his cheek, the smoothest, softest flesh in the universe.

He woke up feeling like a mole, at home underground, in this thick darkness. He heard his alarm but ignored it.

Finally, when the room began to grow gray, he, too, thawed, and ideas began to flow again. He would call in and apologize that he would be late to work. The worst thing that could happen was he would lose his job and have to find a new one. He might then lose his apartment and have to find another one. Somehow, in this moment, all these problems seemed manageable.

He got dressed and buttoned his trench coat. He found the letter in the drawer and walked up the stairs to Melanie Waits' apartment and knocked and waited.

She opened the door and looked confused.

He cleared his throat, unsure how to begin. He ran his finger along the seal of the letter, wondering, in spite of himself, what was inside.