# PRIVATE TURMOIL

I've moved to this town in Vermont after a traditional Vippasana in Saranac Lake—ten days without speaking, reading, or writing. That was my third insight. The year before, I did two for-women-only groups in Taos, New Mexico and Asheville, North Carolina. These retreats offer no teachings to decipher, no prayers to give to deities, no music to listen to. The point is to shun the extraneous culture, break through logjams we've created in our personal lives, and see what can be discovered about the soul. Through silence, one hopes to raise the body and mind to the next level of understanding.

I worry, though. The retreats are indulgences, eccentric, and mystical, but no more so than other ways of coping with our everyday needs and worries. My new town is a few hundred people clustered on a grid of streets on either side of the state highway. Six churches tend to the lost souls. The houses are old and ordinary, though summer homes and rural businesses help the economy—a welder, craft and antique outlets, a feed store for dairymen. Now, in late September, the maples and oaks, beeches and alders are turning yellow, red, and gold. Snow's already fallen in the mountains north of here.

I repair silver jewelry, solder broken eyeglasses, and sharpen knives and scissors. I create my own earrings, bracelets, and rings, and I can custom-make odd things like cribbage pegs, door handles, and latches for chests. My shop hours are ten to twelve, and one to five, but I've been here only since May. I put up ad posters at the market, the community center, and the general store. I'd like more drop-in tourists, but my business is on a side street because I can't afford a central location.

I live above the shop, which is convenient. In summer I had a garden in pots on the roof—beans, tomatoes, lettuce, and herbs, all harvested now. What I want is a normal life, adagio, lento. I hope to achieve an interior music, symbols arranged to give me power to reach beyond myself.

It's surprising how many ordinary things we could all do without saying anything. I pass acquaintances on the sidewalk and raise my hand to say hello. In the grocery, if the clerk asks, "Paper or plastic?" or "Did you find everything?" I point or nod. I deposit money in the bank, mail letters, and order meals in a restaurant without making a sound. If words are needed, I use them, but my goal is to divert attention from myself, reduce my noise, and, eventually, become invisible.

Mornings, as a prelude to the day, I walk along the river. Waxwings and thrushes are eating the blackberries and currants, some of which I've already picked to make jam. Evenings, I use the library computer to check online orders, buy turquoise and silver for my jewelry, and, read books I can't afford to buy. The library's a low-slung glass-and-brick building with landscaping of shrubs and dead flowers. Light arrives from high windows, but there's not much wall space for paintings or displays. The main desk is a broken circle near the entrance, with a view out to the children's room and the reference area. Modern feels cold to me, so behind one of the shelves I've found a homey nook with a blue chair.

The head librarian is Saint Edith, six feet and one-hundred-and-twenty pounds, who believes her authority is moral and absolute. Her pathway through town is from the Presbyterian Church to the bank to the library. She's recently divorced, which isn't surprising. How could a husband put up with her stringent demands? Her assistant is Valeska, who has two heads with one brain,

or one head with a brain divided. At the desk, she delivers brilliant one-liners and the most vapid clichés. She coddles me because she thinks I'm smart. Silence has this easy connotation.

The other paid part-timers are Tim, a skier and trail runner, and Luce, my favorite, who's seventy-one and has an essential tremor. A half dozen volunteers also help out, because a library says something about the community they live in.

Dusklight is silence descending, and, in my blue chair, I relax. Silence doesn't require thinking, though often I drift back to the past, which is never far behind. My hometown is Wayland, a suburb of Boston. It had a town center, streets with age-old houses, and roads that meandered through the treescape. My father had a simple place close in on the town square. One morning he was weeding the curbside flowers, and a car careened across the sidewalk and killed him. I was twenty-seven.

After his funeral, I was allowed to do what I wanted. I returned his new television to the store, got rid of his clothes, and moved my studio into the living room. Afternoons, I drove to the grocery store or walked to the post office, or had coffee at Has Beans.

During some of my outings I was stalked by a neighbor. He was behind me on the sidewalk, in the next aisle at the grocery store, or waiting at the corner by the post office. At night, though I didn't see him, he came into my front yard and sang to me. I went to the police, but I couldn't provide a name or any evidence, so they didn't believe me. I was an unattractive, single woman. Their take was I should be glad for the attention.

My therapist suggested yoga, meditation, and a support group for people who suspect they're being followed, but my involvement in these solutions was halfhearted. The therapist also thought I had an aptitude for silent reflection and recommended a retreat on Martha's Vineyard.

“Hear no evil, see no evil,” she said, “know no evil.”

That retreat showed me the power of silence, which made me feel better.

The library’s my place of solace, which is where I am one evening reading *The Invisible Messages of the World*, when whoever’s on the main desk turns on the lights. Instead of seeing red maples outside being enveloped by darkness, I glance at my own reflection in the window glass. My hair is loose over one shoulder, my nose is large, my eyes are shadowy. I’m a drab, thirty-five-year-old woman, holding a book.

Then Saint Edith comes into the glass, and I turn around. “Adele?” she says. “May I call you that? It’s on your library card.”

I don’t answer.

“I’ve noticed you read our new fiction. Do you have a minute to talk?”\

I nod.

“Come to my office.”

I get up and follow her around the bookshelf, past the main desk, and into a cubicle with a window to the parking lot. She sits at the desk, but I remain standing. “Tim’s leaving the staff,” she says. “I need a person evenings, Monday to Friday.”

I nod again.

“Valeska says you’re a jeweler. You’ve noticed, I’m sure, that after Labor Day business slows down. I thought perhaps you could use the extra money. The shelving is mostly done during the day, but you’d have surveillance of the children and the newspapers and magazines people like to walk off with. I give you an hour’s overlap with someone on the day shift, but you’d close and lock up.”

Edith pauses, as if waiting for an answer, but she hasn't asked a question.

"I could start you at fifteen dollars an hour," she says. "What about a month's trial? You could decide whether you like it."

I shrug and nod again.

"Is that a yes?" Edith asks.

"All right," I say.

"Good. Come in Monday, and fill out the paperwork."

We imagine the past stays where it is, that what's over is gone, but events I think have disappeared rush forward. Last May, my two weeks in Saranac Lake were not merely staying quiet and turning away, but also fending off memory. I pondered whether to work at forgetting the past or embracing it in hopes of rescuing myself. My goal always is to look forward without fear—at the trees, the sky, and the clouds.

My mother died when I was seven, and my father was protective of me to a fault. I did well in school but was socially awkward. My father claimed other kids pestered, teased, and persecuted me because I was smart, but his opinion didn't help. I was afraid to mingle with cousins, say, or the neighborhood children. I hid in dark places and had to be lured out.

In high school and college, I went days without speaking. In my sophomore year at Amherst, I quit and went home. My father taught me how to buy quality stones and silver, and to use pinch-nosed pliers, awls, and polishers. I made jewelry because I loved beauty.

People think silence is merely *not talking*, but it's also not clattering dishes or banging chairs, not having a dog that barks, not sighing. Silence allows the mind to flow wherever you let it. And within silence is more silence. From my father's window, I observed passers-by, dogs

unleashed, rain and snow, and the brilliance of the sun. These observations required nothing but sitting where I was at my jewelry table. These are richer silences than staring at a wall. The neighbor appeared once, too—a glance, another person's eyes meeting mine—and held a key up to me as an invitation and made sure I saw him put the key in my mailbox. I was being asked for my body and offered admission to another person's life, but how could I say yes to a stranger? So I put the key in his mailbox.

Monday morning, a local woman comes in to check on the earrings, necklace, and bracelet I'm making for her to wear to her daughter's wedding. People's jewelry reveals the money they have, their aesthetics, and their proclivities to pretension or modesty. "My husband says I should wear what I have," the woman says, "but I want people to notice the bride's mother. Don't you think that's important?"

I shrug.

"It's a *wedding* in Florida, for Christ's sake," the woman says. "I want to show off."

I nod.

"How did you get into making jewelry?" she asks.

"I had to," I tell her.

"Where are you from?"

"Baltimore. My husband was killed in Afghanistan."

"Oh, shit," she says. "I'm sorry. I talk too much. But let me tell you about this wedding. . ."

She rambles on about the daughter, who can't see trouble ahead with the idiot she's marrying. While she goes on, I see Luce in front of the hair salon across the street. She's acknowledging passers-by, and several times she glances at her watch. It's almost eleven. At the

hour, two clocks chime in my store, and Luce strides to the pharmacy on the corner. The door opens from the inside, which is odd, because Mondays the pharmacy is closed.

The woman taps on the counter. “When do you think they’ll be ready?” she asks.

I point to Wednesday on the calendar.

“Good,” the woman says. “Thank you for listening.”

A little before noon, Tim from the library comes in. He’s lean, wears a T-shirt with a toucan on it, and has two earrings in one ear. For a minute he examines my displays of bracelets and anklets, then looks at me. “I wanted to give you a heads-up,” he says. “You have to watch yourself.”

I wait for more.

“They harassed me, too,” he says, “but I’m local.”

I nod, though I’m not getting what he means.

“I didn’t quit the library,” he says. “I got pushed out because I’m gay.”

The door opens again, and a red-haired matron lugs a cloth bag to the counter. She looks at Tim, as if asking whether he’s finished with his business—he isn’t—but I pick up a pair of broken eyeglasses from my workbench. “I’ll call when these are ready,” I say.

“Thanks,” Tim says. “I’ll hear from you.”

Tim escapes, and the red-haired woman dumps the contents of her bag on the counter—gaudy jewelry of all kinds. “Some of this is as worthless as my ex-husband,” she says. “I want to know what I should get fixed and what is junk.”

I smile at the woman and know I’ll hear more of her story.

During my first week at the library, Saint Edith shows me how to scan books, use the inter-

library loan, and how to log out the computers. I overlap an hour either with Valeska or Luce, whose clothes tell a lot about their personalities. Valeska likes clashing oranges, reds, and yellows, and some days wears a short skirt with a long-sleeved shirt. Other days her top is revealing, but she has on running pants. Luce wears honest clothes — plain slacks with a print blouse. Her tremor makes her seem ditzy, but her conversations are full of innuendo and intelligent teasing. I gather her life with her husband is more give than take. “He pays for groceries,” she tells me once, “but I put up with his shit.” Mostly I check out books. If someone asks a question, I answer with measured words.

In my free time, I write in my journal, which is an experiment. At retreats, one is supposed to be absent of words and let thoughts pass through the mind unimpeded, so a journal is the antithesis of this. Writing is commission, acknowledging, confessing, *testifying.* But I’m hoping the journal will be a way to consolidate in the present what I’ve been trying unsuccessfully to put behind me.

At the end of my shift, I put the magazines and newspapers back in the racks, make sure the windows are locked, and search the bathrooms, including the stalls for stragglers and homeless people. The alarm is a simple code, and I have thirty seconds to leave the building.

I walk home past the town park, where, at each corner, a street light casts shadows of trees and branches onto the skittering leaves. Occasionally, teenagers congregate at a picnic table in the middle of the park, or a couple is walking a dog. The shadows are sometimes playful, sometimes melancholy, sometimes sinister.

In the past two days, I’ve put up twelve jars of blackberry-currant jam, created four sets of amethyst earrings, and judged the redhead’s ex-husband was a cheapskate. I’ve delivered the

jewelry to the woman who's going to the wedding in Florida. Then, on Wednesday, mid-morning, while I'm repairing an Indian necklace, Valeska makes an entrance. She's dressed in a red skirt and a colorful patterned shirt, a blue gypsy scarf over her head. "I smell fruit," she says.

I point to the jars of jams I've made, stacked up for sale.

"Did you know I came to town on a llama?" she asks.

I don't answer.

"I was in a movie filmed in Brattleboro. When the director moved the shoot here, she asked me to come with her. You can't ride a llama. It was a camel, and I didn't actually ride it into town, but it's a better story if I tell it that way."

I concentrate on the turquoise stone I'm trying to fit into the necklace.

"This town reminded me of Poland," she says. "I've never been to Poland, so, isn't that odd? My grandfather died there, though." She looks through my wares and picks out a silver bracelet with garnets. "How much for this?"

I reach over and turn the price tag.

"Luce is having an affair," she says. "Did you know that? I say good for her. Her husband treats her like a serf. But at her age, an affair—that takes courage."

I don't answer.

Valeska eyes me. "You don't speak," she says, "but I know you can. Do you want to come over for dinner some night? I mean, you must be lonely."

I say nothing.

"I like you," she says. "I don't know why. I think we could be friends, maybe sisters."

"We aren't sisters," I say.

Valeska turns the bracelet in her hand. "I must this. Did you make it?"

I shrug and ring up forty dollars and subtract ten percent for a local's discount.

Valeska gives me a fifty. "Think about dinner," she says. "You know where I am."

At Edith's request, I make up a shelf of recommended fiction, each book accompanied, on the library's website, by my review. I help Valeska draw posters for the children's reading room and collaborate with Luce on an art show and reception. I woman the desk, sign out books and movies, and delegate the computers.

But working in a public place has drawbacks. People now notice me in the market, at the bank, or on the sidewalk. They say hello and want to chat. In the places I frequent for supplies— the thread shop or the hardware store— I'm more aloof, and, to minimize discussion, I pay in cash. The hardware store the clerks joke with me in a way that's part flirting and part ridicule. In either case, the appropriate response is silence.

Then this: on Tuesday at the library, a note appears in my box, mixed in with flyers about library events, instructions from Edith, and questions about the books I've recommended. The note is in a three-by-five envelope and is handwritten but unsigned. It says, "Let's fly away."

On Thursday, there's another one— "Meet me in my dreams."

Luce overlaps with me that day, and I show her the two notes. "You have an admirer," she says. "Maybe he's a reader who notices your reviews."

"Have you seen anyone put anything in my box?"

She examines the handwriting. "They're from the same person, wouldn't you say? More young than old. Is it a man or a woman?"

I don't answer.

"Every life should have mystery," she says. "I'll keep a lookout."

The notes force me back into my private turmoil. Who would leave notes for me? Valeska's too direct in her insinuations. Is it a customer from my shop or someone who frequents the library? Is it the man I pass most days on my river walk, or the woman in the coffee shop where I stop for a latté? The notes are like stalking. I've been here five months, but my business has taken hold, and I don't want to leave. I like Luce, who dares to live her own life, and Valeska, too, even if she works too hard to be my friend. I like Saint Edith, who may be a control freak, but she recognizes I have something to offer others.

Friday there's a new note— "What do you feel now?"

My inclination is to alert the police, but no crime's been committed, and I remember what happened in Wayland. Valeska's at the desk that day, but I don't tell her anything for fear she'd meddle in my affairs.

Saturday's the opening of hunting season. Few customers come in, so I close early and ride my mountain bike, abandoned by the previous tenant, out the dirt road north of town. Clouds crawl down the through the golden trees, and rain threatens. The temperature hovers around forty. I pedal up a side road toward Tim Tyler's cabin in the pines. His Subaru is parked in the driveway next to a Prius, and I hear the crack of an axe. I push my bike a little way up the hill past the house. Tim's splitting wood, and a friend in a plaid shirt stacks the pieces near the door. I want to ask Tim who I should watch out for — *why did he come to warn me?* — but, as he gathers up kindling, his friend comes over and kisses him on the mouth.

The next Monday, after her tryst with the pharmacist, Luce comes across the street to my studio. I'm soldering a watchband and raise my protective eye-mask. "I want to buy an ear stud," she says. "My friend thinks he's ready to take a risk."

I bring out a velvet board that has on it fifty ear studs.

"You know," she says, "no one has authority over me—not Edith, not my husband, certainly not god."

I'm silent, because silence refers to all possible answers.

"Who else knows? Valeska? I don't care about her, because no one believes what she says."

I shrug.

"I worry about you, sweetheart," she says. "We all have pain in our lives, but you have more than the rest of us."

She selects the most expensive ear stud—$25—and hands me a fifty-dollar bill. I point to the sign that says there's a ten-percent discount for locals.

She nods. "Whatever we do, we only have to explain our reasons to ourselves."

Business slows way down, so I make apple butter, I read, I do sporadic repairs. The proceeds from the sale of my father's house will get me through the winter. Anyway, I need time more than money to build inventory. So, on my next day at the library, I tell Saint Edith I'm not renewing our arrangement.

"But you've done such a good job," Edith says. "You're conscientious and responsible. The reviews you write are brilliant and so helpful to others. I can bump your wages up a little."

I don't answer.

"May I ask why you want to leave?"

"No," I say," but I'll stay the week."

"I hope you'll reconsider," Edith says.

That afternoon, the note in my box says, "I'm waiting for you."

I stare at the words for a few seconds. Then I take my journal to the women's bathroom. The tile is glaring white, and I smell disinfectant. I go into one of the stalls, sit, and open to a blank page. I'm confused and angry. To choose what to write is to choose what to leave out. I wait for the interior music I hope will come to me, but, when it doesn't, I describe Tim's getting in wood, the redhead's consignments, and Luce's purchase of the ear stud. These words are distractions, not the *point*, and, in frustration, I toss my pen at the metal door, shove the journal into my pack, and snap open the lock on the stall.

At the desk, Luce, with shaky fingers, is entering data into the computer. "The ear stud didn't go over," she says. "My friend thinks people will know where he got it, so I'm wearing it myself." She turns her head and shows me. "Don't tell me, you got another note."

I take breath but don't answer. I hand over the piece of paper.

Luce reads it, pauses a moment, and looks at me. "Why do you do this?" she asks.

I stare at her, still holding my pack.

"It has to be you," she says. "Edith would never do this. I asked Valeska and Tim. I thought he might have sneaked in, but he wouldn't flirt with you, anyway. I'm here everyday and pay attention to who comes and goes. There are no other suspects."

I don't say anything.

"We all do weird things," Luce says. "We take drugs and drink alcohol. Look at me, having an affair with a pharmacist. We cope however we can. But why tell yourself these lies?"

I turn and run, break through the door to the air outside, and race toward the river. I've forgotten my coat and the gloves in the pockets, but I can't go back. My pack slides around on my shoulder. After a block, I stop running, because no one's chasing me. My breath comes in heavy gulps. I walk along the river, its edges rimed now with ice. A cold wind bears down

through the town.

Instead of eradicating the past or dealing with it, I've let it insinuate itself into the present. Evil's like that. I told my therapist and the police in the person in my neighborhood in Wayland was a man, but that was a lie. The neighbor woman held up her key to me. I knew what she wanted. And she knew what I wanted. How I wanted to say yes! Yes, oh yes, yes.

I'm chilled, so I backtrack through alleys and side streets to my studio. The bell sounds when I enter. My answering machine blinks red. Right off, I start a fire in the wood stove — paper, kindling, and three pieces of split oak. I should pack my tools and inventory, the food in the fridge, my clothes, the jams I've made, but I refuse to think of that now. Luce knows.

Out my window, leaves fall through the graying air. A car passes, and its headlights fly across the ceiling. For a few minutes I hold my hands close over the stove and watch the red light blink on the phone.

Then I rummage though my pack and find my journal. I page through the words, but what a useless hope it was to think the past wouldn't follow me. I open the door to the stove and throw the journal into the fire.

The fire crackles, the clock hums, darkness comes in from the outside. The present is real. On my work bench are eyeglasses I haven't repaired, a watchband I'm working on, bracelets and necklaces I've started but haven't finished.

Someone else is in my studio — who? I empty my pockets, undress by the stove, and throw my clothes into the fire. The flames get suffocated but come back and lick at the colors of the cloth. I damp the stove down and walk naked to the stairs. "I'm coming up," I call out.

There's no answer, only silence in the room above — silence that can mean anything.