

Dying

Priscilla Parker died seven minutes before Emmy Latham began toting boxes of old magazines into the downstairs apartment. By the time Emmy dragged her futon frame up the front stoop and into the hallway with a great clanging, Priscilla had mastered the art of weightlessness and was hanging over her own body like a thick cloud of fog. From this angle Priscilla could appreciate how the cancer had ravaged her tiny body, the way her skin had taken on the sickly yellow hue of an old bruise and the way her open eyes had divorced their sockets. When she saw that the green irises were beginning to dry in the warm air, Priscilla dropped down to close the eyes, but each time she lowered an arm from the foggy mass and made contact with her dead body, the arm broke off like a stray cloud. She found that if she waited long enough, the errant cloud would eventually return to the whole, but the discomfort of watching parts of herself floating independent of the rest of her forced her to give up the idea of closing the eyes altogether.

The phone on the floor beside Priscilla's bed began to ring at about the same time that Emmy's tea kettle began to whistle. Priscilla could see that the call was from her mother, and she chuckled at her own morbid humor as she imagined that her chipper voice recording had been replaced with one that said, "Hello. This is Priscilla. I can't come to the phone right now because I'm dead." Soon Priscilla grew bored of hanging over her bed and of the shrill buzzing of the phone as it rang again and again, and she floated towards the window where a light mist had just begun to soften the view of the neighboring park. She didn't know how much time had passed before she heard the screech of tires against the

damp pavement and, a few seconds later, the unmistakable sound of her mother's heels on the stairs that led to her door.

"Priscilla," her mother called. "It's Mother. I'm coming in, okay? I'm coming in." She knocked twice, and Priscilla could hear the key turning in the lock. "Priscilla? You sleeping?"

It took Priscilla's mother a long time to enter the bedroom, and Priscilla could imagine her on the other side of the door, perhaps leaning her head against the wall, savoring the last few seconds before her daughter became a memory.

When her mother finally opened the door, Priscilla sucked herself into a tight ball and stuffed herself into the chimney of the pink hurricane lamp on the bedside table. Priscilla's mother did not cry as Priscilla was certain that she would. Instead, her mother sat on her bed, pulled Priscilla's body into her arms and began to rock, slowly at first, and then faster and faster until Priscilla could hear the cracking of her mother's hips under the strain of the action.

And Priscilla flew away.

Priscilla found, on her first flight, that she could not move very fast without leaving behind parts of herself, so she was still creeping along the downstairs hallway when the men arrived to take away her body. Though Priscilla had been glad to free herself from the body that had become nothing more than a scarred shell, she hadn't considered that someone would come to take it away. Her death seemed very real now as the first man

grabbed the end of the stretcher and complained to the other man about the rain. In an effort to shield herself from the panic of watching her body being hauled away, she floated to the left and into Emmy Latham's apartment.

When Priscilla first entered the apartment, Emmy was just pouring her third cup of tea. She looked up with the kettle at an odd half pour and opened her mouth as though she might speak, but then she closed it again and returned the kettle to the stove. She cradled her mug and sank into the lone chair before pulling it up to the table. Emmy wet her fingertip and leafed through a stack of papers. After a few minutes she returned to the top page and began to make red marks in the margins. Emmy sat for a considerable length of time before she finally stretched, put the tea kettle on for a second boil, and returned to the papers. Priscilla watched Emmy from the top of the door. There was nothing remarkable about Emmy, but Priscilla enjoyed cataloguing Emmy's habits, how she wound her hair around her index finger, how she bit the side of her bottom lip as she considered her marks. In fact, so engrossed was Priscilla that she let out a huff of surprise and almost tumbled back into the hallway when Emmy looked up towards the ceiling and said, "I'm an editor. It's a dumb job."

After Priscilla recovered from the shock, she tried to speak, but found that she could only make muted whistles. Emmy had gone back to her marking and didn't look up as Priscilla's whistles became louder and longer. Finally, as Emmy was nearing page eight of her document, Priscilla was able to refine her whistle enough that it became a buzz of words.

"Do you know that I am here? I mean, can you see me? Or hear me?"

Emmy nodded. From the stove, her tea kettle whistled.

The next morning Emmy left the apartment. While she was gone, Priscilla crawled from room to room peering into the open boxes. By the time Emmy returned, Priscilla had added to her catalogue the knowledge of Emmy's enjoyment of Disney films, her haphazard way of dumping her shoes into the closet with no regard for their pairing, and Emmy's fondness for collecting suicide notes. Though Priscilla could not leaf through them, and thus was restricted to only fragments of those that lay underneath the top note, she could see that many of the notes were dated in the upper left hand corner, and she could see in the fragments the language of death. Words like "ending" and "enough" and "over" peppered the edges of the notes, and Priscilla read the top note, dated several months earlier, over and over until the words began to bleed together into a mass of gray ink above an ornately drawn "Emmy."

That first evening, Emmy had become increasingly chatty. She'd told Priscilla about her first period at school in seventh grade, about how she'd bled through her gym shorts and had, in an effort to protect herself from the ridicule of such a profound disgrace, hoisted herself onto the toilet bowl, with one tennis shoe on either side of the seat, and remained crouched there until 5:30 in the evening when she'd finally felt certain that everyone else had gone home. She'd told Priscilla about her last boyfriend, Frederick, who'd come home with her one night after a party several years earlier and pushed her down on the futon and held a knife to her throat while he ripped her panties and pumped inside of her for a long time. After that, he'd fallen asleep while she scrubbed her blood off

of the black mattress and made a cup of tea and planned how she'd break his heart by refusing to see him. In the end, he'd never called again, and Emmy tried to think of it as a small victory. When Emmy told the story about Frederick, Priscilla had tried to comfort Emmy by telling her about Sean, the boyfriend Priscilla had had since college and who she had planned to marry until the doctors lopped off her second breast and he stopped returning her calls.

When Emmy returned from the store, she kicked her boots off in the middle of the floor and carried her bags to the kitchen counter. She pulled out a potted basil plant, two cinnamon scented candles and a bottle of caffeine pills. She placed the plant and the bottle of pills on the windowsill, then she propped her elbows on the sill between the plant and the pills and mashed her nose into the glass. After a moment or two, she pulled her face away from the window and rubbed at the smudge where her nose had been. Then she returned to the table and took up her pen.

"It's a report on the toxicology of caffeine specific to postpubescent boys who have had frequent exposure to the spider monkey. It's really boring. Plus, it turns out that there's no significant change in the toxicology, so why write it down? Still, it's a paycheck, you know?"

After a moment, she asked, "How did you die?"

"Cancer."

Emmy moved her finger over a weathered section of the tabletop. "Were you sick for a long time?"

“A few years is all.”

“Did it hurt?”

“What? The cancer?”

“No. The dying.”

Priscilla considered this. “No, it didn’t hurt.” After that, Priscilla had remembered the popping of her mother’s hips as she’d cradled Priscilla’s body and suddenly she’d felt a rage that consumed her. She spread her arms out wide and launched herself into the air, circling above Emmy’s head faster and faster until she was a whirl of white, long and thin, and the front of her connected to the back of her and she was an unbroken circle rushing like a tornado in the room, and when she was finally spent, she stopped so suddenly that the window rattled.

It hadn’t been until the third day that Emmy had finally gotten around to telling Priscilla about the suicide notes. “I started writing them after Frederick,” she said. “Just for, you know, fun.” She paused for a long time, until Priscilla thought she had fallen asleep, then she spoke again. “How does it feel to be dead?”

“It’s peaceful.”

“Do you miss your life?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. I’ve only been dead a few days. Right now, it’s like a vacation.” Priscilla, who was lying on her back about a foot from the ceiling, crossed her arms behind her head, and Emmy laughed.

“What?”

“You look like you’re sunbathing.”

“See. Vacation.”

“How long are you going to stay?” Emmy picked up an old *Cosmopolitan* magazine and said, “I hope you stay forever.”

“I don’t know.” Priscilla turned over so that she was face to face with Emmy and shook her head. “Maybe I’m just here for a little while. Maybe this is just like a train depot – here – where I used to have my life.”

Emmy looked away and wrapped her arms around herself the way she imagined a dear friend might do.

Five days later, Emmy came home with a second armload of bags. Priscilla had wound herself into a taut ball, and she was resting atop a blade on the dusty ceiling fan. She expanded and floated lower as Emmy unpacked her bags. This time she’d bought two lemons, a parsley plant, and three bottles of caffeine pills. Once again, she placed the plant on the windowsill alongside the caffeine pills. She abandoned the other items and put on the tea kettle.

“Why do you keep buying caffeine pills?”

“I’m going to take them.”

“But that’s enough pills to last until doomsday.”

“All at once.”

By the following week, Emmy had amassed a considerable knowledge of Priscilla, and the number of bottles of caffeine pills on the windowsill had grown to ten.

“You can’t do it,” Priscilla said.

“Why not?” Emmy said. What Emmy didn’t say was that she wanted to be a ghost, just like Priscilla. If this was a train depot, Emmy had no intention of being left behind.

“You have so much to live for.”

“Toxicology reports and rape memories? Yeah, so much.”

“It’s not that great being dead.”

“You said it was peaceful.”

Priscilla pulled herself into a tiny ball and forced herself into an empty mug. Emmy went to the windowsill and scooped up the bottles of caffeine pills. One spilled to the floor as she dropped the other onto the table. She popped the cap on each bottle and made neat rows of white tablets.

“It’s not great. Do you know why I came into your apartment? To escape the image of my mother cradling my body. It’s very gruesome, watching those you leave behind.”

“I’m all alone. Except for you – now.”

“Have you considered that my....” Priscilla broke off and searched for the right words. “...That my ghostly presence is a fluke. We don’t know where other people go. Case in point. Have you seen any other ghosts hanging around?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t there. Maybe I just can’t see them. Maybe each person is assigned a ghost to be the deliverer. That’s it! You’re like my personal angel. You’re responsible for delivering me to the next life.”

“That makes no sense. Where was my personal angel when I was dying?”

“You were probably strong enough not to need one. I, on the other hand, am a coward.”

Emmy picked up one of the capsules and laid it on her tongue. “I’m going to take 200 of these, just in case. There are plenty of case histories where people have lived after taking 100 pills. None survived after 200.”

“I’m not going to watch you do this.”

Emmy laid a second tablet on her tongue and chased it with a long gulp of tea. She walked to the stove and turned on the fire beneath the kettle. Casually, she propped her hip against the counter and said, “Don’t then.”

“I’m going to leave.” Priscilla scooted across the ceiling and allowed her head to drift into the hallway.

“I’m going to follow you. I want to be a ghost, too.”

Priscilla popped back into the room. “You don’t want to be a ghost.”

“Why?”

“You want to know? You want to know the reason?”

Emmy nodded. Priscilla floated down until she was hovering just above the weathered table.

“I can’t feel myself breathing.”

“So?”

“So? So? Imagine never feeling the sensation of pulling air into your lungs ever again.”

Emmy breathed deeply. She picked up one row of the tablets and worked them in her hand like marbles.

Priscilla allowed her entire body to float into the hallway. A small tuft of her lingered near the air conditioning vent. Emmy raised the pills to her mouth and held them there for a long time. Emmy lowered her hand and moved to the smudged window. She looked out just in time to see Priscilla floating higher and higher, moving beyond the

treetops and into the sky until she was just another cloud. In Emmy's apartment, the tea kettle whistled.