

Dial Her by the Water

Lara scribbles intensely in an orange phonebook. As she briefly pauses to look around the eggshell living room walls, her foot begins to tap the floor. Putting her shoulders back, she feels a brush of the sea's salty wind freshen her face as the back door to the house swings open. A young man with a short-sleeved lavender button-up, holding a t-shirt with a slightly sunburned face enters excitedly.

"You really should start locking the door," he says, throwing the shirt on the couch.

Clenching her jaw, Lara ignores him and continues scribbling. He scrapes his front pocket for his wallet, and with it comes a few lonely quarters. They clash as he drops them onto the side table by the couch. Lara looks up, and her foot starts to tap.

"What Patrick?"

"Lock the door next time. Any psycho at the beach can just walk in here."

Patrick locks the door while watching a seagull through the kitchen window swoop down to the ocean looking for fish to devour. He goes into the refrigerator and takes out a chilled water bottle. She slyly pushes the phonebook under the coffee table.

After a moment, she quietly says, "I locked it. I mean, I must've. There are like three other people living here, too."

"What?" Patrick says gently, raising his eyebrows as he abruptly sets down his water. He looks at her with kind, worrying eyes. He feels a lump in his throat.

"I said that I thought I locked it," Lara responds, paying no attention to how alarmed Patrick seems to be.

"No, *you* said other people are living here. They all left. And you know, May-."

"Why are you mansplaining to me? I misspoke. I know what happened to May."

“I wasn’t mansplaining, I was just making it clear that—.”

“Are you going to mansplain your mansplain right now? I’m not delusional, I know they’re gone. You’re the delusional one for calling some fucking L.A. hippies and vegans psychos when we were both right there with them like, four months ago.”

“*Ten* months ago. And I didn’t mean it derogatorily, okay? I mean, every time I walk into this house I’m reminded of what we’ve been through.”

He sits down on the chair across from her, his back turned to the beach.

“I’m sorry.” He puts his hand on her knee.

“You’re such a bullshitter,” Lara mumbles, poking fun. Patrick scoffs. She continues, “You don’t even know what it’s like out there. Both of our parents decided to hide us from the outside world even though we aren’t mentally fucked anymore, so to speak.”

“And that’s so much more politically correct.” He sarcastically laughs.

“We haven’t had real phones, social media, school, or anything. Just that useless landline.”

“I do agree that we are the same as monks.”

“And... how do we know that being exposed to real life won’t send us back to the facility?” Lara says, ignoring his remark.

“Because your parents and my parents put us up in a beach house. You really don’t think this is living?” He gestures to the wide-spread living room.

Lara looks at the walls and her foot starts tapping.

“We wouldn’t still be here if we were completely healed. We’re the only ones still here. I just think it’s delusional to act like this is real life.”

“Come on, you don’t think it’s a little hypocritical to complain that paradise isn’t enough for you to feel secure while you call me out of touch?”

“Money doesn’t translate to sanity,” Lara says. “And neither does your tan.”

“Fuck off,” Rolling his eyes.

Patrick gets up and walks to the staircase.

“Okay, so why haven’t you left yet?” She asks sharply, her back turned to him as he stops. “ ‘Cause it seems to me like you’d rather rot here with me and with the memory of May all over the walls. I guess finding someone dead on the floor still feels better than reliving our own deaths on our own floors.”

“Isn’t it your naptime? Go sleep,” He says, with an ounce of pity in his soft voice.

Her eyelids droop with insecurity.

“They all see us as dead anyway. Our families, our friends. That’s why our parents sent us to this expensive coffin that they don’t feel ready to bring flowers to yet. I mean, who do you think even renewed the lease?”

Patrick walks back to the couch, stands in front of the coffee table, and leans forward. His eyes pull towards his lifeless white t-shirt that lies flopped next to his right thigh.

“I saw my parents today and told them I’m ready to go back.”

The lump in his throat is matched by his loud, pumping heartbeat. He takes a full, heavy breath of relief.

“Cool. So the same thing that you say every day?” She stares at her nails, ignoring her own frown.

“This time they said... Well, um, *maybe*. I think my parents just agreed to renew the lease because they talked to your parents, and you obviously want to stay. It’s not like I’d leave super

abruptly. There's something else I have to do before, anyway, that I'll probably procrastinate even longer."

After a moment, Lara says, "But, they don't actually want you to go home. They're just using ugly linen blouses to soften the blow." She continues snarkily, "It was today's gift, right?"

Patrick looks down at his lavender shirt.

"Fuck you." He mumbles, feeling fazed.

Patrick goes upstairs and takes off his blouse immediately. Lara stares at his bare back while keeping her feet still now, and his door creaks as he gently pushes it to a close. She looks at the grip socks on her feet, with a small label that reads, *Carrison Hill Hospital*, and sweetly smiles at them.

Patrick looks at a cardboard box, one that he still hasn't unpacked, that stores surf competition trophies, an iPod that only has Kenny Loggins and Radiohead, a beginner's watercolor palette, and a thick binder of old homework. He begins to zone out. Catching himself, he clears his throat as if he's about to speak, as if someone is watching him just stare at his past life.

From the top of the stairs, he checks to see if Lara is awake. She is sprawled over the couch, drooling and cutely snoring. Her dirty blonde hair, damaged from years of dying, falls over the edge of the sofa. Drawn on her eyes are two perfectly symmetrical wings of eyeliner. Patrick goes into her room, which is routine for him while she sleeps, to make sure that there isn't anything new to worry about with her. On the floor of Lara's room sits a Diptyque candle, and four votive candles that she bought in honor of May, and they are coned at the sides. As Patrick walks, he steps on something sharp. Blue bracelet beads are covering the floor, a plate with a piece of boring toast, and a baby-pink teddy bear sitting on her windowsill. Lara isn't

naive to the room checks that Patrick conducts. She hides ripped-out notebook pages under her bed of a boy and a girl smiling, with tears streaming down their faces. One doodle is a scribbled stairway to a cloudy sky behind the two.

Bored now, Patrick decides to go into May's old room, which lies further down the hall. The walls are still painted black, and the room has nothing inside of it except dust in the corners. Lara and Patrick have never talked about how to repurpose the room, it was essentially a gravestone since neither of them could ever muster up the courage to visit her actual one. Lara never goes inside of it, but Patrick does about once a week after he checks Lara's room.

He then approached Claudio and Jake's room, which they had shared. They left everything: their two twin beds, a silver tin of pins and needles, dumbbells, chocolate bunnies wrapped in foil from Easter, a DVD of the Yves Saint Laurent documentary, and an evil eye stone. He spends thirty minutes sorting through their things, thinking about what their lives are like now. His anxiety falls, as he thinks about rejoining them and his family. But every so often,, Lara's cruel words would stick the bad butterflies back in his stomach and make him hole up his aching desires. He uses Jake's old dumbbells and the pull-up bar attached to the top of the doorway, and after his anger and anxiety dissipate, he draws himself a bath.

Patrick goes to the Malibu farmer's market every Sunday morning. Lara never goes anywhere. He used to go with Claudio, a schizophrenic fashion designer, whose symptoms worsened after taking mushrooms. Jake was addicted to steroids and lost his track scholarship because of it, which led to severe depression. He ironically channeled all of those feelings into running, which he initially was scared to do, until he got some advice when they first moved into the house. A woman with their facility came to visit, and Jake was the least settled into the house. For those three months, he walked around it like it was a foreign planet. He couldn't

associate himself with the idea that he's mostly recovered, or past his worst days at least. Lara sent her specifically for him because she could tell he wasn't accustomed to their new phase of life. The lady told him to run miles and miles, to prove to himself that he was capable and to face his trauma. When he started running, he was still detached from the house, and everyone in it, but he had a goal: which was to retrain and be back in his world of green juices and a father who put tons of pressure on him. For Jake, his hope for a new future involved getting back to his past. Which wasn't unbelievable, since his healing and his trauma were found in the same Nike shoes. Even though he was better, he was still disconnected from the house and everyone in it. He was the first to leave.

For Claudio, feelings were a part of his personality as an artist. He was the ray of sunshine in the house, always inspired, and had wavy hair and a tattoo that read "My king is McQueen" (for Alexander McQueen), even though Lara always joked that he was just a closeted fan of the *Cars* movies. After moving out, Claudio and Jake never checked in with Patrick or Lara, or May. At May's funeral, Jake was just an ice sculpture with blood keeping alive a heartless heart— and Claudio cried his eyes out. Patrick and Lara couldn't bring themselves to attend.

On a Sunday towards the end of last summer, Patrick got tomatoes, plums and honey sticks. When he went upstairs, Lara's door was closed. May heard his footsteps.

"Pat?"

All the color in her face was gone, and her eyes sank as she lay in bed.

"Hey May, how're you feeling?" He said while sitting on the foot of her bed.

"I want carbonara pasta. It's the only thing that'll make me feel better."

"Are you sick?" He touched her forehead. It was cold.

“Would you make it for me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a lifesaver. *Thank* you.” May replied.

As Patrick was plucking ingredients for the pasta out of the fridge, he couldn’t find any garlic.

“Lara? Did my mom get us any garlic with the groceries? Lara?” He called out. “Lara!”

Frustrated, he barged into Lara’s room. She was gone, and so was her Ann Demeulemester coat.

Patrick drove up PCH trying to find her and turned around when he reached Point Dume’s end. On his way south now, about five miles down from the house, he found Lara who had been lying on the side of the road in her thick coat and Ugg boots in 90-degree heat. Men were catcalling her as they drove by. He got out of the car to wake her. She opened her eyes.

“Were you sleeping? Do you have narcolepsy? How long have you been here? I thought you were dead!”

“I just fainted, that’s all. I wanted to go to a boutique.”

Patrick carried her into the car and questioned if she was hallucinating again. She kept defensively saying that she wasn’t. By sundown, he was too tired to not believe her. They went back to the house.

She blushed as she said, “Sorry, Pat.”

By the time they got back, May was dead. Lara tried to convince Patrick that it wasn’t his fault and that she must have planned to do it. Patrick was convinced that if he just made her the carbonara pasta, she would’ve still been alive.

Fresh out of the bath now, Patrick comes downstairs wearing suede moccasin slippers. Lara is still deeply sleeping on the couch. He takes a red apple from a fruit bowl that sits under the kitchen window. Looking through, he searches to see the seagull take its prey from the salted ocean again. The cotton candy-painted sky reflects onto the ocean fondly, making the water look pink. He crunches into the apple. Lara opens her eyes ever so slightly, to see the back of his shaved head stand at the forefront of the sunset. Half asleep, she shuts her eyes.

“Lar?” Patrick whispers. He approaches the couch and kneels. “Lar.”

“Hi, hi.” She says, tiredly. “What time is it now?”

“It’s like 7,” he says.

She sits up and yawns, noticing the sensation of her chalky mouth. She looks into his brown eyes which are dotted with sincerity.

“Come here.” She gestures with her hands, sweetly. He wraps his arms around her.

“I’m sorry.” She says sadly.

“Awh, Lar.” He says, happily surprised.

“I love you.” She says, seriously.

“I love you, too.” He says, laughing.

Lara sits up abruptly and goes into the kitchen. She rubs her face.

“Can I eat the rest of your apple?”

“Sure.” Patrick clearly states.

“It makes me feel like I’m a part of it. Of you going to the farmer’s market. It’s like you’ve grown it and I miss you, you know?”

“Is everything okay? It’s just an apple, Lar.”

She stares at the apple, and her heart hurts. Entering her mind are rapid thoughts, bouncing back between the fact that Patrick won't ever see her as *real*. As *sane*. That he wouldn't leave, not really. But most of all, she wishes that she had thought more about love instead of loyalty. As she listens to the argument that lies deep within herself, her grip on the apple is so tight, that it leaks around her skinny fingers. The window is completely black now, except for glistening nodes of light touching the ocean from the moon's beam.

Patrick continues, "Well, go ahead. Eat it."

"Nevermind." She sets the apple down intently.

He turns on the TV and puts on a cartoon.

"Soup Days? We haven't watched this since—"

"Since day two of in-patient. I'm surprised you remember," Patrick says.

"Ah, the good old days." She smiles, with what Patrick hopes is a slight sarcastic undertone.

"Shut up," Patrick briefly shoots a concerned look her way and looks back at the television before she has a chance to notice. She sits down next to him.

"Why don't you leave if you want to so badly?" Lara says genuinely, fighting to get those words out.

"My parents said *maybe*, remember?"

"Right," Lara nods, as her foot halts. "Right, but I feel like if you asked for your own apartment they'd be okay. It's cheaper than this place and you'd still be out of their hair."

"Because I'm like a piece of lice to my family?" He jokes.

Lara looks at him with loving, bright eyes.

"Seriously, Pat. Why haven't you left?"

Patrick clears his throat.

“You know, you asking me this is giving me the courage to do it.”

“Do what?” Lara’s heart pounds. The words of rationale in her head are silent now. She fixes her hair, ready for Patrick’s heartfelt confession. *Maybe Patrick isn’t too delicate to love me*, she thinks.

“Listen,” Patrick begins. “Before I– you know... there was this girl that I hid everything from. All the horror that I was going through and stuff. But, she was one of those girls who really brought out the best version of myself. She felt like *healing*. But the smooth parts, you know?”

The beat in Lara’s heart drops through her chest and into her stomach.

“That’s nice.” She sadly smiles, and tears fill her eyes.

“Yeah, it was. But, uh, I don’t know. You know, my parents told everyone that I was in contact with that I’d been on some sort of meditative retreat in the Alps. So, um, I know she doesn’t think I’m a psycho or anything– sorry, I mean ‘mentally fucked,’” He laughs, embarrassedly.

“Right.” She tries to laugh with him, but a scoff slips out instead.

“I think I should call her. Callie– her name’s Callie.”

Patrick breathes quickly as he starts to gain excitement.

He continues, “Yeah. Okay. I’m gonna call her.”

He gets up to grab the cordless landline phone on the counter. Lara’s face gets hot and she starts to seem sick.

“Wait, do you have the phonebook?”

Lara hazily points towards the orange notebook. He picks it up.

“Why is it all blacked out?” Patrick looks at the first five pages. “Shit! Shit, Lara, what the hell?”

Dizzy, Lara stands. “What’s her last name?” He throws the phone book across the room.

“Fuck.” He puts his hands to his face.

“Patrick,” She says. “What is her last name?” Her vision starts to blur, and she feels the couch beneath her spin. She falls off.

“You know, Lara, you *are* actually fucking insane,” He yells. “Who scratches out every name in the phonebook? How were we gonna contact anyone? You don’t think it’s ridiculous to say that our family sees us as dead when *you’re* the one putting nails in our ‘expensive coffin. I mean, what if we needed someone? Do you think at all? You’re still sick, Lara.”

Lara begins to feel clear. She sits down.

“What’s her last name? Because if it’s after the L’s I haven’t gotten there yet. I fell asleep.”

“It’s Sun.” He firmly says.

“You have to be joking.”

Patrick ignores her and stomps up to the phonebook.

“Callie Sun. Capri Sun?” She mumbles to herself. He scrolls through the pages quickly.

“Oh my god, I found her. I found her!”

“Alright, well don’t get too excited after screaming at me. It’s tasteless.”

“I guess luck won over your insanity.” He says coldly.

“I hate you for talking to me like that. You talk to me like I’m a broken Baccarat glass. Like I’m nothing.”

“You were about to take away the only link that we have to the outside world. You

were about to take away someone I have been thinking about every day for the last ten months!”

Patrick says in a rage.

“Fine, go see what happens! Go dial her by the water!” She screams.

Patrick opens the back door and sits on the shore, while he stares at the moon. Lara sobs loudly. Holding the page open, he dials her number while the oceans roar. The phone stops ringing.

“Hi, could I speak to Callie?” Patrick says nervously.

“Hey, this is her.”

“Hi, hi. It’s Patrick Martin. How are you?”

“Patrick? Is this some sort of joke?”

“Oh, uh, I know it’s been like a year but I was in the Alps you know, and um, I’m back so—.”

“I was told that—.” She says, quietly.

“Sorry, what?” He said, trying to hear her. She exhaled.

“I thought you died.”

Patrick hangs up, realizing what his family has done. ‘Was there a fake funeral? Did they pose the dead dog’s ashes as mine when guests came over?’ he wonders, as he takes the sand into his hands.

Patrick hung up. The sounds of Lara’s cries were on a loop, her sobs breaking as she needed to take a breath, and then picking up speed again. He looks back at the large, wooden house. He turns back to the ocean and throws the phone and phonebook in the water.

As he walks into the house, he goes straight to the kitchen, while Lara tries to muffle her sobs with a couch pillow that is now stained with mascara runs. Patrick goes into the sink

cabinet, pushing all the paper towels and sponges aside, and reaches deep within it. First, he grabs a bottle of bleach, mistaking its shape. He looks at it for longer than a moment, yet decides to set it down. He then goes further into the cabinet for a bottle of vodka, and bangs against the kitchen counter as he sets it down. He twists the cap open and drinks a few swigs. He winces and takes a breath.

Patrick quickly runs upstairs and grabs the cardboard box of untouched memories from his room. He goes into May's room and throws every item individually to break against the wall.

Lara already knew the truth. She always wanted him to stay, and they didn't want him to leave. She only had decided to let him go in a moment of empathy, but after he told her about Callie, she was pleased to hear the loudness of his rage, so pleased to know that he could still be with her, that she sparked something intense in him still. All she ever wanted was his 'death' to do them together in this house.

Patrick sits on the couch with Lara.

"Pat, why do you smell like alcohol? You aren't supposed to—."

He takes her head into his hands and kisses her.

"For the rest of my life, I can die and revive over and over again right here."

Lara nods, puts her head on his chest, and her foot falls to rest. She turns up the television volume so they can continue to watch Soup Days.

Patrick— paralyzed now, sheds a single tear on his tan, sun-kissed cheek.

