

I

I will not call you “dear reader.” I will not call you “friend.” You don’t know me. I don’t write this for your benefit. I write it for hers, and for mine.

She seeks a pardon, a bit of bureaucratic absolution; I seek answers. Hopefully, before the end, you will grant her the former. And God, or whatever higher intelligence meddles with the universe, will grant me the latter.

It’s strange, talking to her face-to-face. I’ve known her so many years, but she’s only just met me. I’ve spent all this time watching her react to things, watching other people react to her. Now, she’s reacting to me. Now, I’m reacting to her.

She stands before me with the poise she has learned. Back straight, head high (not too high), hands folded at her waist. But her face displays a trio of emotions. Part distrust—because she’s talking to me. Part hope—because of what I’ve promised her. Part pity—because still, *still* she would try to see the best, even in me. She would still be praying for my soul.

I think, maybe, I love her. Not like a man loves a wife, or even a daughter. But in the way that it hurts when she looks at me; in the way that I’m proud of her.

Her gaze drops first. Then she turns to nod at the man standing behind her. He steps up to my window and slides a stack of blank paper through the slot. I sit, pulling the paper toward me on the little ledge that serves as a table. A pencil comes next. (Not a pen. Oh, the things I could do with a pen.)

“We have a deal, then,” I venture.

She hesitates. “He doesn’t like it.”

“Of course he doesn’t. But he wouldn’t stop you.”

She has no answer to that. The balance between the three emotions in her face shifts toward distrust. I have to tread carefully.

So I give her my most sheepish smile. “I wasn’t sure you would come.”

“Weren’t you?” Her tone is skeptical, but her expression softens—she can’t help it. She’s so easy. She sits across from me. “Where do we start?”

I twirl the pencil in my fingers, staring at the blank page. “The playground?”

She twitches, unsettled again. “You know so much. Why do you even need me?”

I look her in the eye. “Because I missed something.”

~

It started at the playground, for her at least. Her name then was Lael Farrow. She sat on a bench by the monkey bars, a denim jacket hunched over a paperback

novel.

Thinking she was alone.

Forty feet away were two men, one old and one young. They were hiding behind a couple of oak trees, for neither had children with him, and there were other little details proving they didn’t belong: their leather coats were too thick for the late spring weather; the older man sucked nicotine into his lungs from a black paper tube; and they tossed foreign whispers between them as they argued over whether to shoot the girl now, or later.

She was so small, so oblivious, waiting for her friends to arrive.

“*Fresh air*,” her mother had said; “*exercise*.”

Every Saturday, the same. Shooing Lael out the door immediately after breakfast. Lael liked the other children well enough, as they liked her well enough. She enjoyed most of the same absurd jokes and lunchroom dramas as any twelve-year-old. Lately, though, she had trouble concentrating on their games and conversations. She was increasingly distracted by a feeling in her stomach, like an emptiness (and yet simultaneously, also a heaviness). It was a feeling like the best part of their lives was being stolen from them. And she was the only one to notice. She feared that meant that she was also the only one who could do anything about it.

She had trouble pinpointing what exactly was being lost. But there were clues—whenever the feeling in her stomach wedged itself in deeper. When her

brother went out with his friends in the evenings instead of staying home. When her friend Rinny's sister left for college. When Mr. Washington retired to Florida and sold his little corner store to a shiny gas station franchise.

And every time it was her turn to set the dinner table, with its four plates. Just four.

She had only one idea for alleviating this black-hole sensation in her gut. It was to stuff her mind with as many stories as possible. This was not, as you might assume, a way to ignore or escape from the problem. It was tactical.

She had a short story collection with her at breakfast each morning. She'd have a reading circle with her friends at recess if she could find a novel with enough danger and romance to interest them. And every night, she'd finish her homework as quickly as possible so that she could crack open something really thick and read in bed until her eyes hurt. But every Saturday, Lael's mother put her foot down: *"Take a break from the books."*

Her mother did not understand. Lael often tried to think of a way to explain it to her, but somehow the reasoning got jumbled up on its way from her gut to her throat. All that came out were vague words, thick with something desperate.

Her mother could sense the something desperate—and that was the reason she relented at the breakfast table and at so many other times. But on Saturdays, Lael must get some sunshine. She must leave all the books behind.

Which was why it seemed particularly comforting—meaningful, even—that

Lael had found this book beneath the park bench. Almost like it had found her.

It was true, of course, that a new story was risky. You couldn't be sure it would have the right kind of ending. But she would dive into the adventure anyway. It could be the story she needed; it could be the turning point.

Of course, Lael's mother *thought* she knew the problem. She had jumped to the obvious conclusion: that all the stories, all the fairy tales and swashbuckling sagas, all the burying herself in fiction, was merely Lael trying to hold on to *him*. To Granddad.

He used to beg to take her on some "proper adventure," to India or across Europe, but her parents always objected.

"*It would just be too much trouble for you, carting a little girl around the world,*" her father would say.

"Nonsense," Granddad would argue back. "*The girl never broke a rule in her life, she's not going to wander off and get into scrapes.*"

"*We just don't think it's a good idea,*" would be her mother's sheepish reply as her father sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"*It isn't you, it's that they don't trust me,*" her grandfather would tell her later. "*I'm a feeble old man who couldn't keep his head on even when he was young. I don't know how your dad turned out so responsible. From his mother, I guess. You take after them that way. That's good. That's good, I guess.*" And he had peered at her with a sad look in the eyes that normally danced.

She'd been sad, because he was sad. But a part of her was also relieved; she had no great desire to travel the world. She did love the stories he told, sitting at the kitchen table. His eyes, bright; his voice, magic—transporting them all to a thousand different lands, with strange, dark mysteries and yet always also the clever and courageous hero. Yes, she loved the stories.

But she loved the kitchen table more.

She loved when her friends used to come over for snacks after school, and they would sit spellbound while “Grampa Farrow” told them something too absurd to believe and yet so real they felt like they could reach out and touch it. How they would forget all their other plans until the phone on the wall started ringing because their mothers were calling them home to dinner.

She loved how her family would sit there for hours after their own dinner, smiling knowingly as he recounted favorites they'd heard a thousand times—or gasping at the twists and turns of something brand new he'd seemingly pulled out of thin air. She loved how their father would forget the game was on. She loved how their mother would forget to tell Lael and Ryan it was time to do the dishes. She loved how late they would accidentally stay up, and the comically horrified exclamation their mother would make when she looked at the clock. She loved how they would sigh as they all got up from the table. She even kind of loved how tired she felt the next day when she hadn't slept enough, because even the tiredness was a comfort.

Yes. All of that. That was what she loved more than anything else.

But Granddad's chair was empty now, pushed back from the table into a corner, out of the way. Meals were quiet, their mother trying to prompt them with questions about their day, receiving only short and mundane answers. She would give their father a meaningful look; he would tell them something funny about work. It would take about thirty seconds. They would chuckle, trying. But he never could tell stories the way his father did. The silence would take over again. Lael and Ryan cleared the table and washed the dishes before the sun was down. Dad never missed the opening pitch.

Lael would go into the living room and sit with him, and he would try to explain the rules of the game. But her eyes would stray from the TV screen through the door to the kitchen table, dark and empty. She would scoot closer, right up against Dad's shoulder, to feel his warmth, to feel his *thereness*. And her mind would brush up against the horrible question: Would they ever get back?

And what else would they lose?

They all tried. They were all a little gentler with one another after he died. But they still had nothing to say at the kitchen table.

Lael felt the failure more deeply every time, because she knew the worst of it was hers. She'd been the closest to him. She was always the one to seek him out, the one to go with him on excursions around town, the first to beg for stories, the last to leave the table. If the king of storytelling had an heir, it was supposed to be her.

There was a magic to it, which she didn't have, or couldn't tap into.

Yet, she told herself. It simply hadn't happened yet.

Was it the exact order of the words? Or the way he raised and lowered his voice? Or something in his eyes? She'd spend hours trying to remember every detail of some of his most-repeated stories. She'd draw a line down the center of her notebook paper, with the narrative of the story on the left side and all the little quirks of tone and delivery on the right side. She'd try to practice sometimes, in a very low voice alone in her room, because she felt instinctively that she would only have one chance to get it right in front of other people, or have to face their awkward smiles, polite but sad; their belief dying.

Still, with all the preparation and practice, the magic had not come.

So perhaps the magic was in the stories themselves; perhaps she merely needed more of those. Perhaps there was a little bit of magic in every story and you absorbed the magic when you read one. You had to gobble up hundreds of them to build up the substance inside your soul, the way some people gobbled up protein all day to build their muscles. Granddad had been a lifetime ahead of her; she had catching up to do. She simply had to get there before it was too late.

It hurt, almost physically, when her mother made her leave the books at home. She'd felt empty-handed, empty-hearted, as she biked the five blocks to the park.

But hope was something she held in abundance, likely because of the sheer

number of stories she had read, which told her, over and over again in black and white, that the hero always struggled and suffered before he succeeded.

And so it seemed quite fitting that she had found this new story, lost by a stranger; placed by fate.

The Invisible Man, said the cover.

She held it like it was treasure. Like it was the answer.

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<“This isn’t right,”> whispered the old man in his native tongue, watching her from the trees, his gnarled hand shaking as he raised the nicotine tube to his lips.

<“Tell that to the Governor,”> said the other.

Still, the old man stood watching—too long, the young man would tell me later. Both men played such small parts in her story. Yet I made them each tell me this scene, again and again. I squeezed every last detail out of them: How the girl had found the book beneath the bench. How she ran her fingers over the front cover, then the back.

How the old man had imagined the waxy texture in his own hands.

<“Why the book, do you think?”> asked the young man.

The old man shrugged. <“He didn’t say.”>

She held it the way he used to hold such things. Half reverence, half curiosity.

She cracked it open right in the center. She pressed her nose into the pages.

She breathed deeply.

As he watched her suck in that sweet, dry, bready scent, the memory of a similar scent filled his own nose, until he couldn't bear the thought of what he was about to do.

But the young man sighed loudly and shifted his weight, so the old man covered his eyes with a bony hand.

<“Do it.”>

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, the young man had drawn his weapon, his finger easing back the trigger. The sky seemed to dim for a moment. A low note buzzed in their teeth. The old man shuddered.

The other chuckled and crossed the gravel to claim his prize. He nudged her still form with the toe of his boot, then knelt and touched the side of her neck.

<“Still beating.”> He hoisted her up; the paperback slapped the gravel. <“Think she'll sleep the whole way?”>

The old man bent to pick up the book. He sniffed it and remembered a time when ink and paper were all he knew.

<“I think,”> he said, <“she'll wake up.”>

He dropped the book back into the dirt.

They dumped the girl in their metal machine, outside of town, where the sights and sounds of takeoff would inspire sensational theories from

basement-dwellers, and tongue-in-cheek reports from local journalists, but nothing more.

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I prod her for more of the scene, but there's nothing else in her memory. It doesn't matter. Already I have stumbled on a mistake.

Her motives weren't what they were supposed to be.

The love of stories, I knew. The kitchen table—that was unexpected. She should have thought home dull. She should have sought adventure as an escape.

It seems inconsequential; I can't immediately see how it affected anything important. And yet it *was* a mistake, and an early one.

There's a chance those weren't her real feelings at the time—instead, an idea she invented after the fact. People often lie to themselves to avoid admitting their own errors.

Maybe I'm the one lying.

She looks up from her hands, tangled in her lap. I look up from my notes. We look at each other. Lots of looking.

“Well,” I say. “That wasn't so bad.”

Her face does that funny, twisty thing where I can't tell if she's pleased or upset.

“It’s only the beginning,” she says.

“Well,” I say, “it’s a start.”

She lets out a short, kind of snorting laugh, more polite than amused, more gracious than graceful. I like that about her.

Feeling encouraged, I flip to a blank page. “Chapter two,” I prod. “You wake up.”