

Unsent Letters

Jennifer Murphy

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Maya Sonenberg, Chair

Shawn Wong

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Jennifer Murphy

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Jennifer Murphy

Chair of the Supervisory Committee  
Maya Sonenberg, Professor  
Department of English

Unsent Letters is an excerpt of an early novel draft. A homeless man witnesses a man falling from a fifteen-story building in New York's financial district. The fact that the victim, Ian Blue, was the subject of a recent fraud investigation and mostly likely facing jail time, leads Detective Finnegan O'Leary to assume he is dealing with a straightforward suicide, but information soon comes to light that indicates otherwise. Money was found under and nearby Blue's body, and Mia Blue, the victim's wife just happened to disappear on the very same day, April Fools' Day, fifteen years earlier. Her body was never found, and the crime, if there was one, never solved. Detective O'Leary, not one to believe in coincidences, sets out to solve what happened to Ian Blue and why, which ultimately leads to the reopening of a seductive fifteen-year-old cold case, and the exposure of long-buried family secrets.

**UNSENT LETTERS**

**A Novel**

**By**

**Jennifer Murphy**

### **April Fools' Day, 2013**

He isn't like the *others*. He's merely suffered a spin of bad luck; he'll be back. In the meantime he makes his home where he once spent his days, on the wide, clean streets of Manhattan's financial district – Wall Street, Broad Street, John Street – where the only shadows are those of tall sleek buildings, and long suited men. Where the sun isn't forced to break its way through the slim, meandering cracks of decaying bridges, but proudly spills across the cityscape, reflecting off the vast expanse of squeaky clean windows, heating the broad sidewalks, pale roadways and voluminous lobbies, beating down on the heads of the chosen. The men and women who possess that unique skillset: charm, confidence, tenacity, perseverance, bravery, ruthlessness. The gamblers, the winners, the chameleons, even the posers. Those who do whatever it takes to conquer the Big Board. Like he once did. Like he will again.

By day, he blends in. He tells himself it's not that different. Instead of walking the investment tightrope, he walks the streets, carries the same briefcase he carried back then, affects the same resolute countenance. He still rises early every morning, long before the market opens, but instead of a thirty-minute train ride, he has only to retrieve

his gray hard-shelled Tumi suitcase from wherever he's slept the night before, wheel it over the concrete, through the rotating glass doors that lead to "his lobby," across the speckled white marble floors, up the escalator to the mezzanine and "his bathroom," past the twenty, gleaming white urinals, the urinals where he relieves himself, that sit opposite the twenty gleaming white sinks, the sinks where he cleans himself and his clothes, and into the furthest handicap stall, the stall where he takes his daily shit and changes into his poser clothes. He is fastidious with his meager belongings, periodically polishes his suitcase to its original shine, washes his two pairs of socks and three shirts, presses them and his two suits, suits leftover from his other life, with his portable iron. He takes great care with his hygiene. Four months ago now he found a small black leather travel bag on one of the sinks; someone had left it behind. It was filled with the toiletries of successful men: Old Spice deodorant and soap, Gucci cologne, Gillette razor with a pack of replacement blades, Edge shaving gel, Crest toothbrush and 3D White toothpaste, floss, hair balm and brush, shoe polish. He's made its contents last, has only had to replace the razor blade and pilfer new toothpaste once since his luck changed. Unlike the others he is practical, resourceful, practices self-control. That's what really separates him from them. That's how he rose in the world so quickly, and how he'll find his way back. He knows the game. He knows how to wait for it.

By night he sleeps in the subway, or in crevices that hide from street or building lights, large discarded boxes he finds near dumpsters, makeshift tents he builds from scraps he finds in alleys. Sometimes his temporary homes last for a couple of weeks, sometimes only a day. It depends on the weather, the garbage pickup schedule, and the unwelcome others, those who intermittently stumble into "his territory."

This night he's found a nice spot under a deli awning on Broad Street to camp. It's late, well past midnight. He sips from a bottle of Jack Daniels, luxuriates in the liquid's warmth. He found a one hundred dollar bill on the street, a sign that his luck is about to change, bought cigarettes too, and a new white shirt, not one of the expensive ones he wore back then, but from a distance the fabric will pass for Egyptian cotton. It's foggy, dead quiet. He likes nights like this one. They remind him of old movies where red-lipsticked women wearing spiky heels and trench coats bleed from the mist into view. Through the density, he thinks he actually sees her silhouette hovering there, in front of the building across the street, but then she fades. He hears a high-pitched sound, a squawk, coming from the sky. He looks up, sees a large bird swooping toward him, an eagle or phoenix, its wings outstretched in all their magnificence, a stream of particles fluttering like confetti behind it. He watches the bird and its celebratory entourage with fascination, and joy. It gets closer and closer, larger and larger. Just when he realizes the bird will crash, it hits the pavement mere inches away. A hollow thud, shallow bounce, reluctant wheeze, like air escaping from a sliced tire. Liquid sprays on his head, his face, his neck. He wipes it from his eyes, squints, searches through the fog, looks at his hands. They are covered in blood.

And then he sees the money. Hundreds, no thousands, of dollar bills – ones and fives and tens – float above him, land on him, before him. He rises, shoves what he can into his pockets, empties his suitcase, fills it too, gathers the remainder, every last bill he can find, into neat piles, wraps them in the clothes he emptied from his suitcase, buries them carefully in a nearby dumpster – he'll return for them tomorrow.

And when he is done, he raises his head and his arms, gives thanks to the smoky night sky, and walks away, leaving his makeshift home and the life of the others behind.

**Part One**

**PERSONS OF INTEREST**

*“Once upon a time,” he said out loud to the darkness. He said these words because they were the best, the most powerful words that he knew and just the saying of them comforted him.*

- Kate DiCamillo

Date: 15 April 2013

The following interviews were conducted as part of a routine investigation into the death of one Ian Blue. Mr. Blue died in the early morning hours of April 1, 2013 from massive injuries sustained as a result of a fifteen-story fall from a window at his place of business, Blue Enterprises. The deceased left a suicide note (Exhibit A). However, evidence found among the victim's personal effects, namely a series of letters (contained herein) written by the victim's first wife prior to her mysterious disappearance in 1998, has raised questions regarding the role, if any, the victim may have played in his wife's disappearance, and the role, if any, the letters and the wife's disappearance may have played in the victim's death. At this time, the individuals interviewed – Helen Madison, Jeremy Scott, and Alice Blue – are considered Persons of Interest only.

Respectfully submitted,

Detective Finnegan O'Leary, NYPD

**HELEN MADISON**

Relation to Victim: Mia Blue's Psychoanalyst

Interview Conducted: 8 April 2013

**HELEN**

Of course I don't blame myself. Why would I? She was a liar. I'm a good analyst, quite good according to the September 2009 issue of *Psychology Today* – but I'm certainly not clairvoyant. I admit that on occasion I wonder if I knew then what I do now whether I would have done things differently, but such rethinking is pointless, don't you think? We make choices. We move on. We don't look back.

You say he fell fifteen stories? How curious. That's the number of years it's been since Mia Blue disappeared, to the day actually. She went missing in the early morning hours of April 1, 1998. If that isn't synchronicity at work I don't know what is. I never met Ian Blue, and Mia didn't share much about him, up until the end that is, when she told me what he'd been doing to her. *The New York Times*, well that one columnist, that Barry Bishop – the man's an idiot – said it was suicide. He mentioned a note, but insisted death by jumping was proof enough. He went on about the Great Depression for three entire paragraphs – couldn't he have come up with something more current? – and wasted two on comparative statistics, as if readers care how many white men have splattered themselves across Wall Street's sidewalks in the last century. Why we've

more than enough white men to spare I should say. But he did get one thing right: Ian Blue did get away with murder. Back then everyone thought so, everyone except his mother and that bombastic lawyer of hers. Me? I'm happy the bastard is dead. I only wish public hangings were still in vogue. Not that I would have relished his stink, but it would have been satisfying to watch his face contort as he defecated himself. I must admit I envy whoever found him. It must have been quite the spectacle.

I met Mia in July of 1997. I recall it being a lovely day. Not too warm, with a slight breeze off the ocean. The patient before her had had another engagement so needed to cut our session short. Time has always been my nemesis. I'm actually more organized and productive when I'm thoroughly swamped. That was a slow day, and the combination of my patient leaving early and my decision to use the extra time efficiently by sitting down to review the week's case notes, caused me to nearly forget her appointment. When I looked at the cuckoo clock, it was already five minutes past the hour. I gathered my paperwork into a neat stack, and opened my waiting room door.

She was quite the beauty, in a delicate, ethereal kind of way. Straight, light blond hair, blue eyes, long limbs, so thin she looked as if she could be flicked across the room as easily as a tidily wink. She wore tattered jeans, a crisp, white shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, and those gladiator sandals that were all the rage back then. Not a stitch of makeup. I remember thinking that was a wise choice; makeup couldn't help but look cheap on such flawless, white skin. These young girls today and their painted faces. Don't they know how ridiculous they look? I wasn't certain how old she was, which was curious because I can generally determine a woman's age within a few years margin. She

exuded that freshness and innocence that usually spells teenager, but she carried herself with the grace and self-possession of a woman in her thirties.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m Dr. Madison. You must be Mia?”

“Thank you for fitting me in,” she said.

“I try my best to be accommodating.” My calendar was quite full when she called, but of course I didn’t tell her that.

Like you, she was taken with my live-work space. Most people are on their first visit. It used to be a grade school gymnasium. According to the office of records, it was built in the 1940s. I had it renovated, but wanted to honor its roots. I assure you everything is original – the red brick exterior, twenty-foot ceilings, exposed trusses, canned lighting, dropped ceiling fans, high windows, the backboard and wire hoop, and even the painted lines on the wood flooring. Marvelous, isn’t it?

I asked Mia if she’d like some tea, but she declined, so I gestured toward my seating areas, the one where we’re sitting and the one over there by the bookcases. I’m always curious to see which a new client prefers. Not that I necessarily believe gender is a determinant, but, curiously, most women choose the turquoise sofa – it was a garage find; I had it recovered of course – while most men, like you did, seem to gravitate toward the burgundy one.

By the way, Finnegan O’Leary, that’s an Irish name, is it not? My mother, bless her soul, was part Irish, and I dare say burdened with the same shock of red hair as you. Thankfully, mine tended more toward a lovely strawberry, not that you can tell now. Age is such a nuisance, don’t you think? I’m assuming your mother was a Joyce fan? I can’t

say that I share her literary leanings. I've scanned *Finnegan's Wake*, and I recall trudging my way through *Ulysses* in much the same way I imagine my grandfather did that knee-high snow he was forever whining about. But that was high school of course. Perhaps I ought to give it another look.

Where was I? Oh yes, my sitting areas.

She walked toward the brighter area first, but then she stopped, nearly mid-stride mind you, slid off her backpack, and plopped herself down in almost the exact same spot you're sitting in now. I settled in across from her –

I have a confession. I got this chair at Pottery Barn during one of their leather furniture sales. It's a good facsimile, don't you think? I tell all my patients that it's older than I am. I think people are more apt to trust professionals with serious furnishings, don't you? Your sofa, now that's the genuine article. It belonged to my grandfather, not the snow slogger, the other one, my father's father. He was a physician, a Dr. Madison like me. Half of this town probably sat on this sofa at one time or another while they waited for their appointments. Oh dear, I do apologize. I *can* go on. Especially when I'm a tad bit off kilter. I mean one doesn't welcome detectives into their home every day.

Anyway, I call it the "interview session." Like this one, it's always somewhat of an uncomfortable meeting – for both parties – I find. Being a firm believer in first impressions, I allot twenty minutes, and stick to it. Mia's obvious nervousness didn't surprise me; the decision to seek psychoanalysis is a daunting one. She'd be sharing very personal details with me, some she may have kept hidden for years, perhaps even from herself. I remember she took a little time to get situated, scooting her rear end here and there until she settled near the sofa's arm, and then she immediately set to picking at

those metal grommets with a thumbnail and shaking her foot. Instead of looking directly at me, she continued scanning the room. That's when I noticed it: a kind of breezy absence. It was almost as if while she was present, she was already gone.

"I see you didn't fill in the referral question on your paperwork," I said to her. "You indicated on the phone that one of my clients recommended me?"

"Did I?" she asked.

"Yes, you said you met her in a bookstore? I was just wondering which client, so I can thank her." The truth was, that patient would be due a free session.

She began twirling a lock of hair. "I'm sorry. I can't remember her name. She was kind of tall. Brown hair." She paused; bit her lip. "She said that you specialize in relationship issues. That you're the best."

"How kind," I said. I'm sure my head must have swelled a few inches; none of us are immune to flattery. She also hadn't filled in her birthdate, but I decided against asking that question. If there's one thing I myself abhor, it's being directly asked my age. "You're a long way from home."

"Only an hour by train." She quickly added, "I like trains. Something about the rhythm –"

I placed the clipboard on my end table, grabbed my notepad, and smiled warmly. I've been told I'm very good at putting my patients at ease.

"Tell me about you," I said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Why you're here might be a good place to start."

She straightened. "I have issues with love and intimacy."

“How so?” Although seemingly stated with sincerity, the response had seemed flippant. While I do have many patients with such issues, none have had the presence of mind to summarize it so bluntly on their first visit.

“It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Love or intimacy?” I asked.

“Both,” she said.

I nodded, knowingly. “How does that feel?”

“What do you mean?”

“What happens to you physically and emotionally when you get uncomfortable?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I get scared, I guess. I have trouble breathing. My heart beats faster. I get hot and sweaty at first, then cold, probably because of the sweat.”

“By intimacy, do you mean sex?” I asked.

She looked down, her straight hair sweeping over her eyes like a heavy curtain.

She began rubbing her hands together. “No, I like sex. A lot. It gets me in trouble.” She paused, looked away.

I waited.

“When I was eighteen I fell in love,” she said. “But I fucked it up. I always fuck it up.”

“Are you currently in a relationship?” I asked.

“I have a – um – husband,” she said. “And a daughter.”

“How old?”

“She turned two in February.”

“A lovely age,” I said.

“Do you have children?” Her eyes changed, as if challenging me, but as quickly as they had shifted, they calmed, so I dismissed it.

You see, I thought perhaps I had merely imagined it, but now, well, I wonder.

“Unfortunately no,” I said.

She didn’t respond; she just stared, directly into my eyes, no emotion. I would come to know that stare.

“Do you work inside or outside the home?” I asked.

“I – I’m a homemaker,” she said. “You know, a stay-at-home mom.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Being a mother? Yes, I love being a mother.”

“And your husband?”

“What about him?” she asked. Her tone was defiant.

“What does he do?”

She shared some details such as his occupation, “financier,” the location of his office, “Broad Street, but he travels a lot,” where they lived, “Manhattan,” etc., all the while pulling at a thread in the knee of her jeans. She did not disclose any personal information, including how her stated issues applied to her marriage. After some time, she paused.

“Can you help me?”

I said what I do with all my new clients. “I’ll help you help yourself.” Then I provided her with the particulars, that I preferred we meet every week, for fifty minutes, that I’d like her to keep a journal or perhaps write letters –

“Letters?” she asked.

“It’s merely a suggestion,” I said. “Sometimes it’s easier to address a person rather than a book filled with empty pages. You wouldn’t send them, of course. The point is to get your thoughts and feelings down on paper. That way we can discuss what you wrote when we meet.”

“Who would I write them to?”

“Your choice. A family member perhaps, an old teacher, friend. I had one client who wrote to his dog. How about Wednesdays at eleven?”

“That’s fine,” she said.

I noted that our time was nearly up. In my usual manner, I looked over Mia’s shoulder at my cuckoo clock as if I’d completely forgotten it was there. Her eyes followed mine. Then I looked back at her with a show of disappointment that could’ve won an academy award. I pride myself on this technique; I rarely have to tell a client that our time is up.

She rose from the sofa and extended her hand; we shook.

As I did with all my clients, I waited politely for her to travel down my walk and onto the sidewalk. Normally, I wait for my clients to get into their cars, but since she’d taken the train, I waited until she’d turned the corner at the end of the street.

We met for nine months, and then she vanished.

You say she actually wrote the letters? I had no idea. D-do they say anything about our sessions? Or me? I’ve always wondered what she thought of me.

## UNSENT LETTER

July 4, 1997

Dear W,

I go by the name of Mia these days. Mia Blue. My given name no longer suits me. If you knew me now, I think you would agree with this decision. I've changed. We all change, don't we? And besides it's been seven years. Why am I writing you after all this time? I have an assignment. I'm supposed to get my thoughts down on paper. She mentioned letters ("Some people find journals daunting," she said. "All those blank pages."), and somehow it seemed appropriate that I should write them to you. After all, now that I think about it, that's pretty much what we were: an unsent letter.

Who is *she*? My therapist. Whoops, I said therapist, not *analyst*. Apparently there's some big, important distinction that has to do with education and Carl Jung. Believe me, she went on about it ad nauseam. Funny, I expected to have this big moment of recognition. Like looking in a mirror or something. That's what always happens on TV or in the movies. That, and there are these tentative at first embraces, and usually some tears. I guess you could say there was a resemblance, but she was all *flowy*, what

with that floral-patterned, rayon dress and sickeningly sweet perfume. And what was with that bright pink lipstick? Aren't therapists supposed to be more subdued in appearance? Not to mention that the color clashed with her god-awful dye job – some gaudy shade of reddish blond.

Whatever. That's a whole other story.

So *you*. Where to begin? Ha! How about the beginning? Though, as you might recall, if you were one to recall, or dwell, or consider, which you weren't, and if you were reading this letter, which of course you aren't, I've never been one for order or orderliness of any kind.

If you could, you'd say we met in our dormitory cafeteria, at the soft serve ice cream machine. Our trays collided. The ice cream cup toppled, landed in my green beans. The truth is I don't remember this meeting. My resident advisor informed me of your interest and these particulars, except for the ice cream dump in the green beans (I added that for effect), later that night. When he knocked on the door, my roommate and I about lost our shit. He generally left us, and everyone else on the floor, alone. Our first concern was the joint. Our second was the kitten. While I flushed the joint and opened the window, my roommate shoved the kitten into her sock drawer. I did a quick arm sweep of the air, as if that would help, slid aside the rolled towel we'd jammed under the door, opened the door just wide enough to slip into the hallway, and closed it behind me. I swear I could smell the pot and hear the meows as he outlined your positive qualities: you were handsome, came from money ("his family owns a lodge on Laurel Lake" – as if I knew where the fuck Laurel Lake was), were an excellent water skier ("he can kiss the wave"), likes to hunt (strike one), and so on.

“Is it okay if he calls you?”

“I’m not really into the slaughter of innocent animals,” I said.

You called within the hour. You seemed self assured, confident. You explained to me that you and your floor mates held a hockey tournament in your hallway every Friday night. You boasted of being both player and commentator.

I asked how you could play hockey in a dormitory hallway.

You laughed, nice laugh. It’s one of those mechanical games, you said. We set it up on a table. Two guys play at a time. Loser gets eliminated; winner goes on. I usually win. So will you come?

*That* is how I remember it. A knock on a dorm room door, a skinny guy with glasses too large for his face, a perfectly good joint down the toilet, a sweet calico kitten shoved in a sock drawer, her meows twisting my stomach with fear as the earnest geek droned on about you, did your bidding, being awed by the power you wielded over him, feeling that fluttering way down. Those butterflies swirling into an odd combination of curiosity and desire, which clouded my judgment as I listened to your smooth voice on the phone. Begging my roommate to accompany me. You turning the red knobs of your dumb game, quickly, deftly, a lock of thick brown hair curling over your eyebrow, teasing your eyelid, as you spit play-by-plays from your full pink lips, and winning, just like you said you would. But mostly I remember you hardly talked to me. Periodically you glanced my way, but you made no effort to make eye contact. I remember worrying you’d made a mistake, called the wrong girl, leaving a little confused and slightly destroyed, thinking how stupid I’d been to even think someone like you – rich, attractive, confident, *normal* – would be interested in someone like me.

You called the next night to ask me for a date and I accepted. And so began our dance. You wanted me. You got me. You ignored me. I wanted you more.

My birth mother the therapist, whom I've decided I'll call Merapist for simplicity's sake, did say one thing that intrigued me. She said we subconsciously on purpose repeat situations so we have another opportunity to make them right. That the situations we are trying to correct most likely happened in childhood, or even a past life, meaning, as far as I can tell, that our souls actually go looking for wombs that will birth us into circumstances where those situations will exist. What about me, I'd wanted to ask her. Did I choose *your* womb knowing you wouldn't be keeping me, that you'd be passing me off to parents who would die, that I'd grow up an orphan? But I wasn't ready to ask her the questions I really wanted answers to. I wasn't ready to show my hand.

The thing is, I'm not saying I want this today, or even tomorrow, and I'm definitely not saying I'm anywhere near ready to seal any envelopes, hers, yours, but at some point down the road, it would be nice to do more than scribble random words on un-paper in an un-journal. It would be nice to send something out into the world – something small, noncommittal.

A postcard perhaps?

Clearly not yours,

Mia

**HELEN**

This is all you need to know about Ian Blue. It took him three days to report his wife and daughter missing. *Three days*. Forty-eight hours later it hit the news, print media primarily, but, fortunately, if you can call anything about Mia's disappearance fortunate, that's not how I heard about it.

There were two of them, a man and a woman. I can't remember their names – I'm certain they're on one of your reports somewhere – but I can describe them. The man was somewhat older, around my age, but attractive, warm smile, full head of curly brown hair and light eyes. Hazel I think. Yours are blue, right? How silly. Of course they're blue. The woman was young, and trying hard to appear severe. Her dirty blond hair was plastered into a smidge of a ponytail, cheeks lacking even a pinch of color, lips thin and naked. Instead of uniforms, they wore dark suits. That, along with the fact that they'd driven up in a car very much like yours, black Buick, or are they Chevys, with smoked-glass windows tipped me off to their detective status. It also pointed to the potential gravity of the situation at hand, whatever that might be. I noticed that my

neighbors seemed to have reached the same conclusion. Some were peeking through their windows, others wandering outside to get the mail they'd already gotten, or to overwater their thick carpets of blue-green grass. Glenwood might be home to a highly educated group of stockbrokers, financial analysts, doctors, lawyers, what have you, but it certainly hasn't shed its small-town ways.

"Dr. Madison?" the man said when I opened the door. "Do you have a moment? We'd like to ask you some questions."

I told them my next patient was due shortly.

Then he had the nerve to add some time onto his initial estimate. Unless there's some form of new math where one moment is equal to "ten minutes tops."

I reluctantly invited them in. I did not offer them tea or a seat.

"Do you have a patient named Mia Blue, Dr. Madison?" the woman asked.

I was alarmed of course. So I asked if something was wrong.

"She's missing, ma'am," the man said.

"Missing?"

"Yes, ma'am. Her husband reported her missing this morning. Apparently she never returned home from a group exhibit at her studio building. She was last seen in the early morning hours of April 1<sup>st</sup>.

"April 1<sup>st</sup>? Why did he only report it this morning?"

No response.

"We're here to find out if you know anything about her disappearance," the woman said.

"Such as?"

They looked at one another, then back at me, but didn't say anything.

I could feel myself getting cold. The room began fading and spinning. I grabbed the edge of the table to steady myself.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" the man asked.

"I'm fine," I said.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last Wednesday," I said. "She missed her appointment yesterday morning."

"Didn't you find that strange?"

"Yes, a little," I said. "But she's missed appointments before. I hoped I would hear from her today."

"So you're saying she's unreliable?" the woman asked.

"Not exactly. It's just that she has a tendency to get preoccupied. I imagine that's not too unusual for artists."

"And have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Heard from her?"

"No," I said. "But it's barely noon."

"How long have you been seeing her?" the man asked.

"Since July of last year."

"Can you tell us why you were seeing her?"

"I'm sorry. That's confidential." I attempted a pleasant smile.

They looked at each other. "She's missing, ma'am," the woman said. "Surely, you'd like to help us find her?" Her tone was accusatory.

“I’m more than happy to help you in any way I can,” I said. “But I can only release her records under certain circumstances.”

“What are those?”

“Privilege would need to be waived either by the patient or, *in the case of death*, the next of kin or executor of the estate.” I stared boldly into their eyes when I said those in-the-case-of-death words – I mean who did they think they were dealing with, some sort of boob? “Do you believe foul play was involved?”

“Why do you ask?” The woman again, but both of their eyes narrowed.

“It seems an obvious question.”

“At this point, we don’t have any leads,” the man said. “We should be going. Here’s my card if she happens to show up, or you have a change of heart.” Stated as if I didn’t have one at all.

“Thank you,” I said. “Can you let me know if you hear anything?”

I walked them to the door, waited as they traveled down my walk. “Wait,” I called after them. “What about the child? Alice?”

“She’s missing too, ma’am,” the woman said.

Then they got in their car and drove off, I imagine utterly blind to the trail of curiosity and fear they’d left behind.

I remember I stood there in my doorway long after the car was out of sight. I felt swollen, lethargic, like the fat lady at a carnival, but also insignificant, powerless. And angry. Not that I recognized the emotion as such at the time, but I’ve done a lot of inner work since. I’m certain the detectives didn’t notice; given my profession I’m quite good

at hiding my emotions. But, of course, I don't have to tell you that do I? I imagine detectives are nearly as good as analysts in that department.

**UNSENT LETTER**

Date: July 11, 1997

Dear W,

I'm obsessing over these fucking letters. I mean if I'm going to go through this solipsistic exercise, I'd like to be as true to its intent as possible. The thing is I'm having a hard time shaking my programming. I keep trying to honor your memory of how stuff went down, which is fruitless at best, and ridiculous. I mean why the fuck am I worrying about what you remember. You're not part of this game, or any game. The fact is I have a hard enough time with this memory stuff. The only thing that seems to work is closing my eyes, willing my eyesight inward, focusing but not orchestrating, allowing those junctures of time and place to find me.

Right here, right now, *this* is what I see.

It's a windy Saturday night in September. I wait for you on the edge of the circular drive in front of our dorm building. I smell burning leaves, hear the scraping of rakes on pavement, and laughter; I follow my senses. A group of students, volunteers,

are trying to contain piles and fires. Each new gust causes more leaves to fall from nearby trees. Some float to the ground like miniature parachutes; others get caught, swirl furiously or pause in uncertainty. In the distance a band plays, people cheer, a man's voice sounds through a microphone. I look toward the stadium. A car approaches on the road of its foreground; I can't see the driver through the sun's reflection on its windshield. The silver mustang pulls into the turnaround, stops in front of me.

The car window glides down. You dip your head into my frame of vision, push open the door. "Get in," you say. (Strike two.)

I smell new leather, hear a soft pale voice coming from the radio.

"Joni Mitchell," you say. (Add back in half of that last strike.)

I don't know what I'm wearing, I never see me in my memories of you, but you are wearing a red cardigan sweater over a white Polo shirt, khaki pants, brown loafers, and *red* socks. Only rich boys or golfers match their socks to their sweaters. Only rich boys drive spanking new silver mustangs. I admire your profile as you drive, its chiseled perfection, Roman nose, high cheekbones, a sculptor's dream, and your easy laugh that causes dimples to form near the corners of your mouth. You keep the conversation going while I try to get out of my brain and into the world of idle chatter. We go to a movie, thank God, so social interaction isn't a requirement. I can't see what's playing on the screen, my mind's vision is better up close, but I'm going to say it was some sort of disaster film. After all, don't all movies, all fictions, have something to do with a disaster? Plane crash, car crash, burning high-rise, earthquake, tsunami, broken marriage, death of a loved one, love gone wrong.

Afterward we go to a pizza parlor. You touch the small of my back as the hostess leads us to our table. I rub my fingers over the smooth plastic coating of the checked tablecloth, red and white like your sweater and shirt while the waitress takes our order. You cock your head (in surprise, confusion, admiration?), say you don't know any girls who drink beer. (Back to strike two.) I study you as we eat, or rather you eat; my stomach is churning. You are of average height, muscular and trim, dark wavy hair and brown eyes. You are attractive, charming, comfortable summarizing the entirety of your existence into a brief resume, some of which I've already heard from my resident advisor. You enjoy water and snow skiing, sailing, and most of all hunting. You think the opening day of deer hunting season is better than Christmas –

I stop listening, start obsessing. What happens later? Will you kiss me when you drop me off? What will it be like? Will you want more?

The memory blurs, then fades. You're just chatting away and then you're gone.

Obviously you dropped me off back at the dorm, and obviously we parted ways amicably, but we must not have kissed. I would remember a first kiss, wouldn't I? And yet, I don't, not that night or any night. It's as if kissing you was something I always did, that like hair or eye color it was a trait I was born with. If I think about it real hard, I remember the way your lips felt, soft and wet, and what the sensation would do to me, how my throat would tighten, how, like dew on a flower, a tickling sensation would roll down my chest, into the depths of my belly, and open me. So I'm confident we didn't kiss that first night because I was still intact when you left, metaphorically not physically. Jeremy, my best friend and studio mate once told me that boys are like homing pigeons

where virgins are concerned. It was long after my first date with you when he told me this, which is good because it would've been one more thing for me to obsess over. I already wasn't enough for you: pretty enough, rich enough, pedigreed enough. Not being virgin enough would've put me over the edge.

I do remember the first time you held my hand. It was the very next Monday when you walked me to class. I see us as if from a distance, like I'm one of those floating leaves, walking out of the dorm building, you in jeans and an off-white cable knit sweater, me merely a shadow. I hover perhaps a car length behind us, watch the two of us cross the street, follow the path of the small lake, see you grab my hand as we climb up the hill toward the art school. Then I'm inside the shadow; I'm me back then. And I feel safe. My body lets loose. The ground disappears. You laugh when we enter.

"Seriously," you say. "You have classes here? It's like a party house."

I suppose to a business major it might've looked like that, its walls plastered with paintings and drawings and tapestries, concrete floors dripped and smeared with color and clay dust, the cacophony of ghetto blasters and jigsaws and hallway critiques. And that's the thing: we weren't anything alike. We disagreed on politics, art, religion, sports, hunting, almost everything. We were the proverbial ships in the night. Always crossing, never merging. And yet, there was *something*.

An intersection.

Like that moment when paint meets canvas.

To *some things*,

Mia

## HELEN

New York rallied of course. That's what it does. People left flowers, cards, stuffed animals, balloons, and what have you at the door to Mia's studio building. Search parties formed. Pictures of her and Alice plastered the city: the backs of cabs, the sides of busses, billboards, tree trunks, garbage cans. "Have you seen us?" they read. Even in my little town someone, I have no idea who, made flyers and tacked them to utility poles, tree trunks, shop windows and such. I still remember how unsettled I was when I walked into town one particularly windy day and saw the sea of pale pink. Pale pink flapping and snapping against windshields. Pale pink blowing across sidewalks and streets. Pale pink caught in the branches of trees. Here I was trying to forget her and it was as if she was calling to me. Trying to tell me what happened, who killed her. I knew she was dead you see. I *felt* it.

Then there was the funeral that wasn't really a funeral. There was no body or death certificate, but the cultural elite obviously didn't care. I didn't go of course, but it was on TV. Rows and rows of mourners in the latest funereal fashions. Reporters hounding celebrities. Ian Blue pleading to the camera, his empty blue eyes welling with

tears as he urged the non-existent kidnapper to give himself up, return his dear wife, his daughter's loving mother, offering anyone who could provide information that led to her whereabouts a reward, and so on. The entire thing was a sham, a sick sham. I knew who the bastard really was. I knew his type inside and out. In the distance, Penelope Blue, Ian's mother, held the hand of a small child. They'd found Alice by then you see. One week after she and her mother had gone missing she was found curled up in a tight ball on the stoop of Mia's studio building.

Memory is odd, don't you think? Generally there's a trigger, a smell or a sound or a sight from the physical realm that one associates with a particular person or experience. This physical trigger will bring about a spiritual recognition, which then gives birth to a collage of mental images. My patients speak of such things as perfume or cologne, perhaps a song, or seeing someone with a similar look or bounce in their stride. For me, where Mia is concerned, it's those flapping and snapping smiles, the pure brutality of it. Now, whenever I see or hear flyers trapped under windshield washers or floating through the sky, I look away, sometimes I even get nauseous, but though I might physically spare myself the sight of another's smile, I rarely spare myself the memory of hers.

**UNSENT LETTER**

July 14, 1997

Dear W,

I want to tell you a fairy tale. It's a love story (of sorts) about a little girl and older man who lived in Victorian times. Their names are not important. Let's just call her *she*, and him *the magician*.

Once upon a time there was a four-year-old girl who was playing with her sisters, one two years older and one two years younger, in the gardens outside their deanery while their nanny snoozed beneath a large oak tree. Caught in the excitement of their games, she didn't notice the man approach.

"I am a seminary student of your father's," he said. "I saw you from my window up there and wondered if you might allow me to photograph you."

Although his smile appeared kind enough, his black attire – top hat, gloves, coattails – and the box he coddled as close to his heart as one would a precious baby made her circumspect.

“We would be delighted, sir,” her older sister said in a very grownup voice.

The man attached the black box to a three-legged apparatus and buried his head beneath its pleated black skirt, and she soon understood that he was a maker of magic, for he had certainly cast a spell upon the precious box, imbued it with supernatural powers. Lights popped and flashed from it like shooting stars. Between poses, he allowed each of them opportunity to look through the glass prism he called its *eye* and there she saw miniature reflections of her sisters, albeit they stood on their heads. Her sisters complained of spots in their eyes, but she, so smitten with the man and the box, experienced no such blinding.

Later, to her surprise, the magician joined her family for dinner. It appeared that her mum had already made his acquaintance, and this only elevated his importance in her eyes; if her mum endeavored to make someone’s acquaintance, the person most certainly had unique social status. That night began her family’s seven-year friendship with the magician, and while her mum was forever saying that she preferred privacy in personal matters, it seemed in this particular instance she had forgotten that privacy demanded discretion, for she freely boasted of her friendship with the magician in the manner a breeder would of his finest dog.

The following day, the magician invited her and her sisters to his studio for photographing. His rooms, though modest of design, were filled with the tools and props of his magic: tall standing light fixtures, other black boxes of various shapes and sizes, pictures in gilded frames, fine china tea sets, velvet settees,

plush carpets, shelves and shelves of leather bound books, a mahogany desk finer than her father's, ink wells and quills and deckle-edged paper, and a dining set fit for a king.

"I have some costumes for you." He led them to a tall Japanese screen and handed each of them the loveliest gowns she had ever seen. Though as before he was dressed all in black, his head and hands were bare, and she found herself drawn to the sight of his long, delicate fingers. "You may dress behind here. I will busy myself with preparations for our party."

"Party?" she inquired.

"Our tea party," he replied.

When she and her sisters emerged, the room was transformed. The royal table was set with white lace, a beautiful pink roses tea service, and a flower arrangement larger than her. Rose pedals fashioned a path to the table.

"You look lovely," the magician said, his eyes on her.

"You are too kind," her older sister responded.

"What sort of tea is this?" She had little idea what else to ask.

"Why, it is English tea, my dear child."

But of course she knew it was English tea. She was not a ninny. "It is quite good," she replied.

After tea, the magician danced with each of them to a lovely Mozart waltz. She vowed never to forget that day, never to forget him whisking her around his rooms, the satin of her blue dress swishing, her silk slippers floating. It was as if she pranced on a cloud. That day, the magician crowned her and her sisters

princesses, and in the weeks that followed he did so again and again. He visited them at their home and they returned to his rooms, and, when he wasn't photographing them, he bestowed them with gifts, stories of faraway lands, tea parties, and games of lawn croquet.

One day he extended an invitation to her alone.

It is said that magic like art is manipulation. The painter seeks to manipulate her canvas; the magician seeks to manipulate his audience. Both draw their creative energy from their souls. Isn't it then the soul of the manipulator that determines the type of magic he practices? The troubled artist projects her demons. The dark sorcerer preys on his victims. Some say the making of art is the artist's therapy. But what if one's canvas is a young girl?

Once upon a time,

Mia

**HELEN**

I found out Mia was a painter about a month into our sessions, though it was perhaps another month or so before I found out she enjoyed modest fame. *That* I discovered some time later when by chance I was reading the art section of the *Sunday Times*. You see I never read the art section because it reminds me of personal failings. As I recall, the session in question began with me asking about Mia's family – for the third time. She was, as I've indicated, evasive. Whenever I'd ask how her week had gone, she'd say, "Fine." When I asked about her journal, she responded with variations of "I haven't had time to begin a journal." These responses were polite, non-confrontational, and voiced with little to no affect. I was beginning to worry that I might have difficulty drawing her out, so imagine my surprise when she turned into Chatty Kathy.

"My parents owned a lodge on a lake in northern Michigan," she began.

She sat on the burgundy sofa stroking one of my cats. They had attached themselves to her in a way I hadn't seen before. They kept their distance from most of my patients.

"Parents?" I asked, as if I had no idea she had any. "So you grew up in Michigan?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "Isn't that implied?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Go on."

"There were twenty white cottages surrounding a white dining hall. My mother cooked and cleaned; my father managed the grounds. Behind the cottages, there was a game room with a stone fireplace. Many a night I sat on my mother's lap in front of that fireplace listening to the crackling embers and my father's stories –"

I stopped listening. Not intentionally of course. My mind has a tendency to wander, you see, when I know someone is purposefully lying to me, obviously a bad habit given my profession, but something about knowing a person needs to steal a life rather than claim her own makes me sad, *and* apprehensive. It's as if the conversation is suspended on tenterhooks. I fear that moment of recognition, that moment when a patient *sees* that I *know* she is lying.

I participated in a seminar called *The Liar's Truth* while I was doing my studies to become a psychoanalyst. Generally, I despise those sorts of things, me and a few hundred other tired faces listening to a dry, clinical lecture that goes on ad nauseam, but that one turned out to be a much broader and more interesting topic than I had imagined. The lecturer, a PhD from Berkeley, discussed how unreliable characters were presented

in great works of literature such as *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The White Hotel* by D.M. Thomas. We looked at paintings by the great masters, Dali, Van Gogh, and Paul Klee, watched videotapes of actual patients in mental institutions, and studied a patient's choice of wording, body language, and eye contact. What I took away from the three-day affair is that to some patients a lie isn't necessarily a falsehood; it is sometimes *their* truth – thus the seminar's title. One of an analyst's most important challenges is helping clients find their truth because only by finding their truth can they find their true selves. The fact is, we all lie, especially to ourselves, but usually we aren't aware we're lying, or, if we are, we're doing it to save ourselves from someone or something. Mia was different: she *knew* she was lying. Though, at that point in my work with her, I wasn't certain whether her lies were pathological or duplicitous.

“May I tell you a story?” She didn't wait for my response. “Once there was a boy and a girl. The boy was handsome and wealthy. His family owned a castle. The girl was timid and this aroused the boy's desire. And so he pursued her. He called often and, when they were together, he was kind and attentive. The girl was flattered by the boy's attention. She felt feminine, engaging, and witty. She felt pretty. They played with each other. They touched and they kissed. She was nervous. She felt butterflies swimming in her belly and crawling up her spin. She wanted him inside her.”

“Was he a prince?” I asked.

“Who?”

“The boy you wanted inside you.”

She leaned back in her seat, stared icily into my eyes. “I said it was a *story*, not a fairy tale. As far as I know there are no princes in stories, or life.

“Did you want him to save you?” I asked.

Averted eyes. Thumbnail picking at usual grommet. Eyes back on me. Show of defiance. “Do you know the term, *chiaroscuro*?”

“Excuse me?”

She repeated the word, pronouncing it slowly: kee-ar-uh-SKYOOR-o. “The term comes from the Italian *chiaro* for light, and *oscuro* for dark. Rembrandt and Caravaggio used it. By creating strong contrasts of light and dark in their paintings, they could manipulate viewers into perceiving depth and form on a flat canvas. I think that’s what analysts do. They insert carefully considered moments of light into long periods of darkness. You could say that analysts manipulate their patients, that patients see and believe only what their analysts paint. What do you think?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I said. “But it’s an interesting concept.”

“Why do you think it’s interesting?” she asked.

“Do you paint?” I asked.

She made a point of looking at all the abstract paintings on my wall. “I do. You?”

“I used to, but not so much anymore.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Time, I suppose.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I find it interesting because though I hadn’t thought about it before, the two processes seem similar, psychoanalysis and painting. Both the psyche and the canvas go through developmental stages, some forward, some back. And yes, as you indicated, both seek spatial and spiritual balance.”

“And both are controlled by another’s whim,” she said.

“I prefer to think that both are created.”

“Is there a difference?”

“In my opinion, yes.”

“What?”

“Intent,” I said. “Both the analyst and painter seek truth.”

“What about Jackson Pollack?” Her posture was challenging.

“What about him?” I asked.

“You’ve obviously got some sort of fixation on him. All of these coffee table books. That teapot you always use. And your paintings are practically Pollack knockoffs.”

I felt myself getting defensive.

You see, it had been a long time, a very long time, since I’d painted, since I lost myself in a canvas, and I sorely missed that sensation of time fading away. I’d be listening to the waves, a Beethoven symphony, Bach sonata, perhaps Simon and Garfunkel or Janis Ian, depending on my mood of course, breathing in the smell of the turpentine, gliding the brush across the canvas – all such a rush – and before I knew it the sun was setting. I hadn’t eaten, or relieved myself, or interacted with another soul.

There was a time I thought I'd missed my calling, that I should have been a painter, like Mia. But how many of us do actually *catch* the life we were intended to live? I've decided that the universe presents us opportunities, usually in the form of messages, like me getting lost in those canvasses, and if we are aware of these messages we hear them or see them. The best comparison I can make is kite strings. One moment you're holding them, and then, seemingly unexplainably, they slip from your grasp. And there it is: you have maybe a split second to grab them before the wind does. If you're paying attention, it seems as if time pauses for you and you alone, and everything, the kite, the strings, the wind pauses right along with it, but, if you're not paying attention, or you're timid or unsure, well, then, by the time you even realize the strings have escaped, they're already out of your reach.

This way of seeing things is rather defeatist I dare say, but I'm nothing if not a realist. Of course there are those who do live their destinies – athletes, artists, even doctors or lawyers or carpenters – and when I encounter those individuals, especially the artists, I admit I get envious, which breeds insecurity, which puts me at risk for less than admiral behavior toward them. That is what we less-than-actualized humans do. We subconsciously perceive the envied one's success as our failure, but rather than take responsibility for our own failure, we blame the envied one for her success. So anyway, yes, I felt myself getting defensive, but I shooed it away. And then Mia snapped. Her voice raised a notch.

“He was a selfish asshole, a selfish dick that drank and fucked.” Louder. “Is that what you mean by seeking truth?” The grommet picking quickened. “He was a fucking magician.” The grommet popped off the sofa, flew across the room. Her eyes followed

it. Cheeks flushed. "I'm so sorry," she said. Her body appeared to shrink inside her skin.

I remember wondering whether she was still talking about Jackson Pollack.

I reached toward her, took her hand in mine. "It's okay."

And it was. It was actually more than okay. The show of emotion, however confrontational, was welcome. We had touched truth.

**UNSENT LETTER**

July 21, 1997

It is said that the magician knows where to throw the stone into the pool of the Universe in order to get exactly the ripples he wants.

Magic is many things. It's waking in a boy's bed to a pink-spotted dawn and blood-soiled sheets. It's beer and Doritos shared on a long, weathered dock. It's the sun beating down on youthful flesh, flesh that no longer feels clothed without touching the skin of the other. It's a yellow boat speeding across a bright blue lake. It's the jerking and bobbing and crashing of the hull as it braves wake upon wake. It's the feel of the wind drying my eyes, pulling my hair, snapping it about my face. It's the sound of the motor spluttering and spitting, and the anchor splashing. It's the heat of the black vinyl seat against my back, the weight of your wet body atop mine. It's lightness and darkness, sincerity and trickery, innocence and manipulation. It's lies covering truths.

It's a fairy tale.

Once upon a time there was a camera.

A camera that could transform lonely little girls into princesses, princesses that wore satins and silks and shimmering gauzes, and over time more “curious” attire, billowy boys’ shirts and sheer knickers and loosely woven gunnysacks. A camera commanded by a magician, a magician whose sole desire was to capture memories, memories of sweet little girls in costumes, costumes that fit *his* fancy. But the magician was never satisfied. With all the costumes of the land at his disposal, only those with the scantiest of yardage met his true desires.

Now it came to pass that the princess’s nanny became aware of the magician’s inclinations, and in a most unforgiving tone she shared what she’d heard of the magician with the princess.

“Beware of gossip,” the nanny warned.

“Gossip?” the princess asked.

“There’s been talk of the magician photographing young girls without their petticoats on.”

“What do you mean without their petticoats?”

The nanny’s eyes shot from side-to-side. She leaned in close, whispered, “He photographs them without any clothes on at all.”

Two thoughts scurried through the princess’s mind. The first was to wonder whether there was any truth to the nanny’s accusation, and the second, and by far of most concern, was to worry whether the magician preferred other little girls to her.

The next time the princess visited the magician’s studio, still plagued by that second thought, she inquired after her nanny’s accusations.

The magician did not deny his lecherous ways. “Ah, but this is *art*, my dear child,” he said. “The human body is the most exquisite of forms.” And then he smiled, stroked the top of the princess’s head, and added. “My other models are not nearly as accomplished as you, my dear child. You know you are my favorite, my *white stone*.”

Love is a unique journey. For the princess, it began with naïve curiosity, curiosity about an odd man dressed all in black, a man who carried a strange black box, a box that made lights flash in the air, a box surely born of magic. Curiosity turned into fascination, and fascination into jealousy. Over time, jealousy blossomed into shyness, shyness into comfort, and comfort into trust. One day a sleeve fell over her shoulder, and soon thereafter an entire frock slipped from her slight frame onto the floor.

And so the Magician claimed his pebble, and, knowing full well he’d get exactly the ripples he wanted, he threw her into the pool of his Universe.

Drowning,

Mia

**HELEN**

There are rules, you see. It's not like they're actually written down somewhere, but believe me they exist.

Analyst Rule number 1: listen.

Analyst rule number 2: take detailed notes, not only of what your patient says, but how they say it, including their body language.

*That*, by the way, is how I've been able to provide you with such detailed recollections. When I knew you were coming, I reread my notes.

Analyst rule number 3: check your own psyche at the door.

Now, if only I had remembered rule number 3 the day Mia Blue called Jackson Pollack a magician. Instead of hearing her, I was talking to me, defensively I might add. *It isn't that I adore Jackson Pollack*, I was telling myself. *Yes, I did go through a short period where I experimented with dripping paint, as exhibited by the large paintings in my living room, but I was by no means a Pollack groupie. Why on earth did Mia dislike Jackson Pollack so? The man was more of a tragic figure than a cad, and there was no arguing his contribution to the art world. His action paintings were the 1950s New York*

*Abstract Expressionist movement. They put America in the forefront of the art world, which was previously defined by European artists. And so on.*

What I failed to see that day was that Mia's anger had little to do with Jackson Pollack; he was merely a deflection. The real clue to her fragility was in her reference to the magician. And yes, I had wondered about the reference, but, again, I had relied on my own association with the word. To this day, I have fond memories of my parents taking me to see Doug Henning, later going with a boyfriend to see David Copperfield, and I admit to having a crush on Harry Houdini, or more accurately Tony Curtiss, the actor who played Houdini in the movie named for him. I recall swooning over his curly dark hair and bedroom eyes. I can certainly understand an association with darkness where magicians are concerned, but to me that darkness runs more toward the exotic, mysterious, and titillating.

It was weeks before Mia mentioned the magician again. *Lost weeks.* I remember we were talking about the ancient Tarot. Mia had gone to a reader.

"She looked pretty normal," she'd said.

"What did you imagine a Tarot reader might look like?" I asked.

"I didn't. I mean I only went because Jeremy talked me into it. One of his boyfriends had gone."

"Jeremy?"

"Our studios share a wall."

"Did he go in with you?"

“She wouldn’t allow it,” Mia said. “She was all mysterious. Said she felt darkness around me. Her exact words were, ‘you are entering the dark side of the soul.’ Do you believe that? *The dark side of the soul?*”

“Perhaps she meant analysis,” I said. “Analysis can feel very dark at times.”

“Maybe...”

“What do you think she meant?” I asked.

“I – I don’t know. Only – ”

She paused, began picking at the grommet (I’d replaced it), but caught herself. Instead she coiled a lock of hair around her finger.

“Only what?” I asked.

“It was about the cards.”

“What about them?”

“The last one she turned up was the-the *Magician*.” She practically whispered the word.

“Does the Magician scare you?” I asked.

She quit twirling the lock of hair, scooted to the front of the sofa, straightened. “I think you have a broken spring.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said. “The sofa’s quite old. Why does the Magician scare you?”

“It doesn’t,” she said. Her tone was short, biting. “What do you write in that notebook anyway?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re always writing while I’m talking.”

“Do you think I’m not listening?” I asked.

“That’s not what I said. I just wondered if you’ve diagnosed me.”

“Diagnosing you is my job. Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“You mean being pigeonholed? Wouldn’t it make you uncomfortable?”

“Not really,” I said. Which is true. I’ve been seeing an analyst since I became an analyst. All analysts have analysts.

“Yea right,” she said.

“I was hoping we’d talk more about your Tarot reading,” I said.

“It was fun,” she said. “You should do it sometime.”

“Perhaps I will,” I said, and, with that, the wooden bird announced that Mia’s time was up.

She rose. I walked her to the door, said the usual things: I’d see her next week; I was happy with our progress; I thought her keeping a journal could only enhance our progress; I looked forward to her sharing it with me soon; and so on.

I remember I watched her disappear into the dense fog rolling in from the ocean, a sign that autumn was fading into winter, and feeling a sense of curious detachment, as if she were an actress in a movie. As if the world she inhabited was as brittle as an old roll of film.

A few days later, I decided to do some research into the Magician. The occult store in our little town center is tucked between *Sweets*, an ice cream/candy store, and *Margie’s Bakery*. It’s always hard to pass *Sweets* in particular – the smell of those waffle cones is about as irresistible as I imagine those sirens were to Ulysses. On the other hand, I’m really not one for *Central Sun*; it gives me an instant headache – “incense

freeze” I call it – and Edith is always playing this hideously whiny flute music. As I recall, Edith was sitting on the stool behind the counter reading a book on chakras when I walked in. She was so engrossed I had to jiggle the door so its antique bell would ring again.

“Oh, hey Doc,” she said. “How’s that serotonin working?”

“I’m sleeping, but now I wish I weren’t,” I said. “I’m having very unusual dreams.”

“That can be a side effect,” she said. “You want to try something different?”

“No. Not yet. I’m actually here for something else. Tarot cards.”

“Tarot cards?”

“Yes, I’m considering buying a deck.”

She walked out from behind the counter, led me to some shelves in the book section of the store. The selection was extensive: the Masonic Tarot, Egyptian Tarot, Ancient Tarot of Marseilles, Ancient Italian Tarot, Pierpont Morgan Visconti Sforza Tarocchi –

Edith handed me a deck. “This is the Rider Waite. It’s one of the more popular.”

“What’s this one?” I asked.

“That’s the Visconti. Gorgeous isn’t it? It’s one of the earliest. A little hard to shuffle at first, since the cards are so large, but I’ve been told they break in nicely.”

“Can I try them out?” I asked.

“Oh my, no. Tarot cards are very personal. They take on the energy of their readers. You need to keep them covered in silk to protect them when they’re not in use, and you must never ever share them.”

“I suppose I’ll buy both then. Do you have any books?”

“What sort of books?”

“You know, how-to books.”

Edith kneeled, ran her fingers across the row of books on the bottom shelf, pulling one out here or there as she did. “I like this one the best for learning the meaning of the various cards. This one is more of a step-by-step guide to the various types of readings. And this one I just like because the pictures are so lovely. Look at the color plates. Aren’t they stunning? The gold leaf? It highlights fifty different Tarot decks, their artists, their history, etc. Some people like to collect the decks for their artwork alone.”

“I’ll take all three,” I said.

George, our neighborhood mailman, was standing at the counter when we returned.

“Hey George,” Edith said. “Funny, I didn’t hear the doorbell.”

He handed the mail off to her. “Mostly magazines today. How do you like that *Real Simple*. Pretty popular on my route.

“I’ll have to let you know. This is my first issue.”

“Oh, hey Helen. I didn’t see you. Buying Tarot cards and books? Thinking of casting a love spell on someone? I’d be happy to be your guinea pig.” His smile was impish.

“Oh, George,” Edith said. “You know damn well you can’t cast spells with Tarot cards. You just leave poor Helen be.”

“Just razzing her.”

I remember I felt myself blushing. It was one thing to flirt with me at the house, but doing it in front of Edith, who isn't the most discrete of women, was another.

"See you both tomorrow." George said, and winked at me.

"That man," Edith said as she rang up my sale. "Cute though, don't you think. A full head of wavy hair at his age. If I weren't married, I'd be all over him."

"Really," I said. "I hadn't noticed."

I headed to *Sweets*, ordered a butter pecan cone, and found a bench under a tree in the town center park across the way. It was a lovely day; I could smell the ocean, and the breeze was divine. Strands of my hair blew softly about, tickling my forehead and the nape of my neck, causing those pleasurable goose bumps on my skin. When I finished my cone, I fished inside my bag for the Tarot decks, removed the cellophane wrapping from the Rider-Waite. The Magician was the second card I came across: wily eyes, long white robe, like those worn in biblical times, under a red cloak, a bed of pure white lilies entangled with thorny red roses at his feet, a symbol of eternity above his head, a snake biting its own tale wrapped around his waist. Most interesting, however, was the table in front of him. On top of it were a rod, a sword, a chalice, and a coin. According to one of the books I'd purchased, these objects represented the four suits of the Tarot deck, which in turn represented the four elements of the alchemists: earth, air, water, and fire.

I sat there under the shade of that tree studying that card and reading up on the Magician for a long while. After a bit, I started to feel warm, very warm, claustrophobic, tight chested. I remember I shed my jacket, my tight chest turning to heart palpitations, and soon I was having a full on panic attack. I had meant to pick up a cheesecake at

*Margie's* and a nice bottle of chilled Riesling at *Wineaholics*, but I didn't do either. I headed home, practicing my deep breathing the entire way.

I can't say why that happened, what brought on the attack.

Somehow, that one time, I must have channeled Mia's fear of magicians. It's never happened since you see. Not the panic attacks; I still get those. Just not panic attacks or any fear whatsoever to do with magicians.

I still have those Tarot cards. I take them out and study them now and again. Sometimes I even do readings on myself. Which is silly of course. Reading one's own cards is an exercise in futility. None of us are good at seeing our own truths. We have too much at stake, too much hope, too much fear, and so it's easy to read positive things where they may not exist, and the same with negative things. You know, like thinking that getting a majority of coin cards means you'll win the lottery, or getting rod cards means someone will walk into your house one day, see your paintings and, even at the ripe old age of fifty-eight, offer you a one-woman exhibit at the Guggenheim.

Ah, well, one can dream, can't one?

**UNSENT LETTER**

August 3, 1997

Dear W,

I think memory chooses us, not the other way around. Why else would I recall certain junctures of time and space but not others? I've heard it said that we tend to remember the good and discard the bad, but if that's true, then why did this memory come to me?

We traverse a long, dirt road with tall trees either side of it, the trees so close to the edge of the narrow road that it feels as if they're closing in on us. I smell pine, fresh air, dead leaves. It's sticky and hot out, but the leaves are changing, which is not uncommon for a Michigan autumn. Although I'm not yet certain where this memory is taking me, I know its exact timeframe. It's the end of our first summer together at the lodge, our magic summer. School will resume in a week's time. I feel the bittersweet intensity of this. I want to cry.

We're further down the road now. The smells of nature have given way to that of horses, stables, and shit, and I remember where we are. You're taking me horseback riding at a stable a little ways down Route 1 from your parents' lodge. I feel happy, and then I'm pissed. The emotion overwhelms me, and then the frames in my mind start rapidly flipping. I see the girl. I see you walk up to her as we wait for the stable boys to saddle our horses. I see her cozy up to you, brush her shoulder against yours, smile. I see you touch the small of *her* back for a brief moment, but then you catch yourself, look back to make sure I haven't seen, but I have, only I don't want you to know that so I look away, pretend I'm admiring the barn's architecture or breathing in the glorious scent of horseshit and hay.

Why did you buy this ruse so easily?

Later, I mention the exchange. You're standing on the dock, practicing your golf swing, driving little white balls into the lake, trying to get the exact ripples you want. I'm sitting far enough away from you not to get smacked by a club, dangling my feet in the water. I didn't intend to say anything, I'd planned to let it go.

Nonchalantly, in between swings, you ask me what girl I'm talking about.

"That redheaded stepcunt," I say.

You pause your swing midair, turn, look at me, your eyes incredulous, hurt. "You mean Rita?"

"I saw your hand on her fucking back," I say. "The two of you looked pretty chummy."

"What? I never had my hand on her back?"

"You're really going to do this?"

“Do what?”

“Lie. I know what I saw. Who the fuck is she?”

“You’re overreacting. She’s just a singer, an entertainer at *O’Reilly’s Pub*, you know *O’Reilly’s*. I hardly know her. And she’s not a cunt.”

“Saying she’s not a cunt makes you a dick.”

“She’s nothing okay? She’s just some girl I know.”

“Some girl you know? You mean like some girl you’ve met once or twice? Passed on the street? Are you saying I’m crazy? That I imagined what I saw?”

“Alright. She’s a friend. I don’t think we should talk about this now, you’re obviously upset.” You bend at the waist, place another white ball on the dock.

“Upset? You want to see upset.” I stand, pull a golf club from your bag, give it a good strong toss.

You hear the splash, stop, look at me over your shoulder, open your mouth as if you’re dumbfounded. *You dumbfounded? You hurt?* The look fuels me. I grab another club. You hold up your hand, palm to me, say “stop,” as if I’m a dog you’re trying to train.

I toss.

“That’s enough,” you say.

But it wasn’t. At that moment nothing would’ve been enough. I don’t remember how many golf clubs I threw into the lake that day before you talked me down. I do remember that you never raised your voice, never swore, never touched me, never lost your composure, all of which made me even angrier. I wanted a good fight. No, not

wanted. *Needed*. It wasn't even the redheaded stepcunt anymore; it was you. Things between us had become routine. Though I didn't understand this at the time, I'd needed to revive us, to raise the stakes, to recreate us.

Later, we had great sex, the best sex we'd ever had, and afterward we held each other like we were afraid to let go, like our love had capsized and the water was freezing.

Fucked,

Mia

**UNSENT LETTER**

August 4, 1997

Dear W,

I've changed my mind about that last letter I wrote you. I need to elaborate. That's the good thing about writing letters that aren't sent. I can change words, sentences, entire paragraphs. I can add and subtract. And I can do it over and over again until I get stuff fucking right. I wonder if Merapist's other patients do this. I wonder if any of them, like me, came to therapy under false pretenses, all the time thinking they didn't need the therapy part at all, only to come to the grave realization that they might. Why else would I be so addicted to pouring my heart out to some guy that now only exists inside some fantasy world I've conjured in my mind? And what a fucked up world it is: backwards and inverted and whopperjawed and catywompus and upside down.

It's about my mud.

After I threw your golf clubs into the water, after we had phenomenal makeup sex, after we thawed, after we continued for another year, I buried you in my mud, and

just so you understand, once I bury someone, *I* decide when he can come out. Just like I'm doing now. Every time I write you a letter, I'm essentially giving you a furlough, and each furlough I give you is for my benefit, not yours. I'm in charge. Do you understand? *I'm* in charge. Right now I want answers. I need to jump forward to when we ended, to that day I buried you, so I can be certain we have no unfinished business. With that put to rest, I can start over from the beginning again and try to figure out why we ended. Whether I could have done something differently, changed the outcome.

It's morning. A year has passed since that previous autumn, and I no longer smell the pine, the fresh air, the dead leaves, the horses and stables, the shit. I no longer see the redheaded stepcunt. Instead I see you. You're working the rudder as we sail across endless waters. It's so still. A gentle breeze curls itself around me and I reach down and draw up the blanket I've pushed aside during the night. Tiny pink roses on a white field slowly show themselves to me. I look further at white lace curtains billowing in the breeze, a stately oak armoire, and my favorite stuffed rabbit plopped atop a matching dresser, his ears like the curtains fluttering. And for some reason I feel safe, and happy. But then I wake to my rabbit atop an altogether different bureau, and there are no roses or lace curtains or stately armoires, just a single bed in the low rent apartment I now share with a roommate. *Dreams inside dreams*, "Mother Superiority," the queen nun at the orphanage, once said to me. *The soul playing tricks on you during transition from sleep life to waking life*. I smell coffee, fresh pastry, sizzling bacon. My roommate must be making breakfast. I try to visualize her at the stove, but instead I see you holding the knife, deftly chopping the vegetables, tossing them into the pan. I feel such love, and for

this reason alone I know it is time to call you. I get up, go to the toilet, brush my teeth, and go down for coffee. I chit chat with my roommate while she clears the table about things like the weather, our classes that day, our plans for the evening. Then she leaves and I stare at the phone. I memorize it. I imagine that I dial your number a thousand times as I start shaking from too much coffee. And then I am dialing as I replay the message I intend to leave on your machine, ringing, ringing, I'm mouthing the words, ringing, you answer –

“Hello,” you say.

Emptiness responds to you. You say it again.

I find my voice way down in my throat. The words stumble forward banging into one another on the way. I make it about me. I say I have decided I've become a weight on your shoulders, that you don't need me in your life. You need someone who doesn't fight so much, doesn't want so much. You need to get on with your life. You say a few right things, but mostly you verify my suspicions. You negotiate a continued, but less fulfilling, relationship. Then you make it about you. You make yourself out to be cold, heartless, uncaring. At first I disagree with you, but later I realize you want me to berate you so that you can exit our past with justification. It's a good trick. If you want to rid yourself of someone who loves you, set the person up to berate you. So I give you what you want. And then I request you never call me again.

And you don't,

Mia

**HELEN**

I must say I was very intrigued by Mia's mud. Of course she knew the mud wasn't real, at least not in the physical sense, but, like a child who creates an invisible friend, she used the mud as a refuge, a place to hide everything she didn't want to remember or wasn't prepared to address. But was the mud indicative of a darkness inside Mia? A dangerous darkness?

Well, Sigmund Freud probably would have thought so. He believed that all human beings were born with a dark side, a frightening, perverse side they must fight or confront in order to abide within the laws of society. He believed those that didn't fight or confront their inner demons were destined to be social misfits, perhaps even murderers, serial killers, rapists, etc. On the other hand, I think Carl Jung would've considered Mia's mud an opportunity to dig further into her psyche, a way to get to what was actually causing her pain and anguish. He believed every individual was born whole, you see, with a specific nature and calling, but that most of us lose touch with important parts of our selves. By listening to the messages of our dreams and waking imaginations we can reintegrate the lost parts.

It had always been obvious to me that Mia's psyche wasn't integrated. When referring to herself, she sometimes flipped back and forth between first and third persons. Yet, although she didn't share much about her past, there were times I could tell she wanted to. She would lean forward. Her face and eyes would light up like a child's. Then, as if she didn't want to remember, she shut down.

Yes, there was definitely darkness surrounding Mia. I'm not one to share such information – I strongly believe in doctor-patient confidentiality – but as I'm sure you know, all this information ended up coming out during the 1998 investigation. I'd prefer to put it in context however. So you understand how I found out about the abuse.

It was the week before she disappeared that first time.

“Where is this mud?” I'd asked.

“In my head.”

“Do you mean it's imaginary?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don't believe there's actual mud in my head, if that's what you're asking. I'm not crazy. It's a metaphor. Well, not really a metaphor. More like an illusion.”

“An illusion?” I could tell she was getting irritated, but I wasn't ready to forgo my questioning. “So you see mud in your head, but you know it's not there.”

“Something like that,” she said. “It's hard to explain. It's just there sometimes. Like there's this brook babbling through my head, only the brook is filled with mud.” She noted my narrowed eyes. “It's a nice meandering creek, not a fucking waterfall.”

“And you bury old boyfriends there?”

“Wrongdoers, not just boyfriends. People who cross me.”

“You bury them alive?”

“Yes.”

“So you kill them?”

“I don’t think of it that way,” she said. “It’s more like I’m pausing them. Like on a remote. Like the little girl paused her uncle.”

That was the first time she’d ever mentioned a family member, so of course my ears perked.

“Go on,” I said, as I reached for my pink journal.

Mia’s eyes followed my movements. She was a watcher. For the most part, I have two kinds of clients: watchers and talkers. Watchers are more cautious than talkers. They often hold back information, but when they do share, they study my reactions. Talkers can’t seem to tell me about themselves fast enough. Tears come easier for them, and generally they aren’t concerned about me, or my reactions. That’s not to say they don’t seek my advice. At least in the beginning they do so more than watchers do. I have found that this behavioral distinction has little to do with personality, and more to do with trust. Watchers tend to have had traumatic or abusive pasts. My role as analyst automatically places them in a receiving position. In their minds, or perhaps *bodies* is more accurate, I am the authority figure – the caretaker or the spouse or the father or the uncle or the teacher who hurt them. I always tread lightly with watchers, some more than others.

“He’s making a bedroom for the little girl,” Mia said. “The little girl doesn’t think she’ll ever move in. That reminds me.” She paused. There it was, the light in her face and eyes.

“Reminds you of what?” I asked.

“The wallpaper,” she said. “I remember being in a store with my uncle. It was filled with fabrics and books of wallpaper samples and my uncle told me I could choose any wallpaper I wished and I paged through the books and I ran my palm over each page and then like magic it found me. Small pink roses on a white ground, just like the wallpaper that was in my old bedroom. So pretty. That afternoon my uncle allowed me to help him dip the roses into a pan of water and roll them onto the wall. The very next weekend I moved into my rose garden.”

“What a lovely memory,” I said.

“It wasn’t a memory,” she snapped. “I told you it was a story.

“My mistake,” I said. “I’d love to hear more of the story.”

She looked at me as if she was deciding whether to continue.

“She remembers the fragrance,” she said. “And the candlelight. The door to her new room is closed the entire day and her uncle says she can’t go in until dusk. So she waits right outside the door, and just when she thinks she can’t wait any longer, her uncle appears. He holds a candle that smells like roses and he tells her she can open the door and what she sees is something so beautiful, so ethereal. There are lit candles everywhere, and she wonders how he lit them with her sitting there all day. Then she sees the open window, the sheer white curtains moving in the breeze, and dozens of real roses on her dresser and nightstand. She barely hears him say that the electricity doesn’t

work yet, that he will get to it next weekend, that he hopes she doesn't mind the candles. She tells him she loves the candles and she doesn't care if he ever makes the lights work."

She stopped, bit her bottom lip, started twirling a lock of hair.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The roses grew thorns."

"Why?" I asked.

"All roses have thorns. Isn't that what protects their flowers?"

"Do you have thorns?"

She shrugged.

"Do you think your mud is a thorn?"

"My mud is just a bunch of wet sand."

She didn't show for her next several appointments. I called the number she'd listed on her intake forms, but either the phone had been disconnected, or she'd lied about the number. I worried, of course – an analyst always worries when patients don't show – but it didn't paralyze me. Although it's by no means a common occurrence, I lose clients now and again. They just stop coming. No warning. No follow up. I assume analysis has become too much for them. They can't handle those initial milestones, the ones that pick off their scabs.

At the beginning of the fifth week of her absence, I came across that article I mentioned earlier, the one in *The New York Times* where I discovered the extent of Mia's fame. She was one of five "up-and-coming" artists highlighted in the Sunday art section.

An entire page was devoted to each of them. The title of Mia's was *Fugitive Pigment*. That was what the critics had coined her unique style, the layer upon layer of fleeting pigment. There was a black-and-white photograph of Mia in her studio. She stood in front of one of her canvasses, its size overwhelming her small frame. Light streamed in from a nearby window, fading her; she looked like a ghost. The four remaining artists' photographs were sharp and in color. The contrast was unsettling. I remember I got that same eerie feeling I'd gotten that day when I watched her walk into the fog, like that sense you get at a funeral, or in the cancer ward of a hospital, like I was touching death.

I read the story of Mia's rise to fame with interest. Much of her success was attributed to her husband. Ian Blue, it said, was a wealthy international finance mogul and serious art collector. He'd arranged his wife's first exhibit at the Mary Boone gallery, and managed her career. There was mention of his being from a prominent family and of the family's numerous contributions to the arts, but little was disclosed of Mia's background. An Internet search yielded a similar lack of success. It was as if she didn't exist before her marriage. I was, however, able to find information on Ian Blue. He'd gone to Phillips Andover Academy, one of the top thirty prep schools in the country, went on to Harvard where he was Captain of the varsity rowing club and a member of the oldest and most prestigious finals club, the Porcelain, graduated at the top of his class, joined a Wall Street finance firm, and within three years made partner, the fastest rise in the firm's history.

I'd returned to the *Times*, studied the black-and-white picture of Mia, and there it was again, that sense of dread, the dry taste in my mouth, the heart palpitations: the onslaught of fear. When I was younger, you see, I considered myself unduly suspicious,

of circumstances primarily, but also of people; after I'd been in the business of studying human psyches for a long while, I became more trusting of myself and any nagging feelings of discomfort that overwhelmed me, especially those that spelled danger. I had always found that something about Mia Blue wasn't quite right, and I felt similarly about her marriage to Ian Blue. I couldn't say what, but I felt the need to chase my instincts. I tracked down the address of Mia's studio, and decided I would hop a train for Brooklyn the following morning. But, when I picked up my phone to cancel all my Monday appointments, there was a message from Mia.

“Dr. Madison? This is Mia Blue. I apologize for not calling you sooner, but something – um – happened. I can tell you more about it when we meet, that is if you still want to see me. I – I understand if you don't.” She left her phone number – her correct phone number – and I returned her call, told her not to worry, that I looked forward to seeing her.

At eleven o'clock Wednesday morning, she showed up in my office exhibiting the telltale signs of physical abuse – turtleneck sweater, long sleeves, makeup used to cover bruises that still hadn't faded, jittery movement, shifty eyes – and offering what I've come to consider a standard battered woman's excuse for absence and injuries: she'd fallen down a flight of stairs.

I tried to press her of course, I even came right out and asked her if her husband was abusing her, but she denied it. Four months later she disappeared for good.

**UNSENT LETTER**

September 15, 1997

Dear W,

When I look back and try to pinpoint what it was about you that attracted me, three things come to mind: you were normal, you felt safe, and you desired me. Being wanted or pursued was flattering, but being desired *felt right*. I must admit I felt your desire before I even met you, from the moment I stood outside my dorm room listening to a boy with glasses larger than his face bestow praises upon you while a small kitten meowed in a sock drawer, and I felt it even as your eyes didn't meet mine while you played your silly hockey game in your dorm hallway that day. I felt it when I sat beside you in your silver mustang and sat across from you at the pizza parlor. I felt it when you held my hand that first time. I felt it all the while we dated, every night and every day. But what I didn't understand at the time was that your feeling right wasn't necessarily a good thing. Nor did I understand that your feeling right had very little to do with you.

I didn't bleed the first time we had sex. I remember feeling anxious; worried your desire would fade when you went to wash your sheets. Waking in the night and

swallowing four Aleve in hopes they could relax my mind. Then waking up next to you, your eyes already open, locked on mine, having sex again. I remember finding it odd that I could *feel* my body while it was happening, getting oozy and wobbly like Jello, and especially odd that I began to cry. You asking me why I was crying.

“I don’t know,” I said. And I didn’t.

*Chiaroscuro*: the treatment of light and shade, darks juxtaposed next to lights so as to bestow a flat canvas with depth, so as to manipulate a subject of psychoanalysis into perceiving hope, so as to fool a young girl into believing in magic. Beginnings are like skeletons. The clean bones reflect the light creating shadows, but as you add layer upon layer of flesh, the bones obscure and the shadows bleed. It’s the same with painting. When the canvas is white there’s promise. Promise holds possibility for success. And disappointment. Either way there’s that rush, that combination of fear and hope. While it’s different for every artist, there’s a point when paint becomes flesh, and that’s the point when process becomes as important or more than its resulting creation. For me it’s also the point when my confidence melts, when I’m overwhelmed with thoughts of running.

Layers and layers of fugitive pigment.

And the critics? They praise my “brilliance,” my “distinctive style,” the “fleeting and nuanced subtleties of my brushstrokes,” when in reality my paint is merely an extension of the chicken shit that holds its brush.

Forever the fraud,

Mia

**HELEN**

As I mentioned, they found Alice on the front stoop of Mia's studio building a week after the two of them went missing. Just sitting there all curled up in a little ball shivering. No one knew how she got there, or where she'd been during that week. She was only three years old at the time. They tried to ask her, but she didn't speak. She was traumatized. The police told me they took her to several so-called experts – therapists, doctors, social workers and such – but nothing was helping. They showed back up again, those detectives, asked me all the same questions. As if they were trying to trip me up. As if I knew more than I was telling them or I had something to do with her disappearance. Can you imagine? Me? I'm a recognized and well-respected psychoanalyst. Obviously their trail had dried up, or gone cold, or whatever it is your types say.

“The little girl had a note in her hand,” the man said. “Had the name Martha and a phone number on it. We checked into it. Seems this Martha was some sort of contact person for a battered women's organization, an underground railroad. You know anything about that?”

I was evasive, said I didn't know anything about an underground railroad for battered women, but what else could I say? I'd given Mia the phone number you see, but I couldn't tell them that. Not because I was worried about getting into some sort of legal trouble, or because I'd been involved in any sort of foul play, because in order to help women like Mia, the organization needs to remain secret. And at the time, I was still hoping that Mia *had* gotten away, had left her husband, I mean it was possible, and that I'd be placing her in grave danger if I fessed up.

"You sure?" he asked.

"I don't know anything about a Martha," I said.

You see they had it all wrong. Martha wasn't a person at all. Martha was a cipher, you know like a password, a way to ensure that callers were really who they said they were, and like any password it changed regularly. So did the phone number.

"Funny thing," he said. "That number doesn't work anymore; it was for a disposable phone. And we hit a dead end with Martha too." He paused, tapped his foot. "We could really use your help, ma'am. I know you think you're trying to protect your patient, but... the thing is... we're pretty sure that Mrs. Blue never made it to her intended destination."

That's when they told me about the bank account Mia and Jeremy had set up and how Mia had never gone to withdraw the money. And they also told me something else, the most upsetting news of all. They'd found traces of Mia's blood in the apartment she shared with her husband, a large amount of blood. Well, as you can imagine, I was very troubled by this news, and though I generally maintain my code of confidentiality at all

costs, I felt compelled to tell them everything. About the bruises I'd seen on Mia, her victim-like demeanor, my suspicions regarding Ian Blue, the underground railroad.

A few weeks later, they arrested Ian Blue and charged him with Mia's murder.

**JEREMY SCOTT**

Relation to Victim: Mia Blue's Studio Mate

Interview Conducted: 9 April 2013

**JEREMY**

Sorry about the mess. I'm in the middle of getting ready for a show at the Museum of Modern Art. Be careful where you walk. One of my canvases fell flat on its fucking face right before you buzzed. I thought it was dry, but obviously it wasn't, not that the floor matters, as you can see it's covered in paint already, but now I have to touch up the canvas. It's always something. Hey, now that I think about it, it actually looks better smudged. Not so contrived. That's the problem with abstract art; it's all about color and form and how many *new* combinations of color and form you can come up with. For instance, I'm known for my innovative use of the color yellow.

Just messing with you.

I just poured myself a glass of wine. Care to join me? A little early in the day I know, but believe me, if you were getting ready for your first show at MOMA, you'd start drinking at noon too. Here, let me clear a chair for you.

I've been painting since I was a kid. Grew up in Louisiana. Along the bayou. Hard for a skinny and sensitive kid there. Got beat up pretty regularly, and not just by the

other kids. Old man had a different sort of son in mind. Left home when I was fifteen; worked my way up here. Lived on the streets for a while. Ate out of garbage cans, stole, tagged, you name it. But I figured it out; and I did it all on my own. How many people can say that?

Blue? Guy was an asshole. One of those rich boys who have no idea what they have, who throw money around like wedding rice. I've always wondered why he married Mia. Not that Mia wasn't a looker; she was definitely that. But he was such a player. Had his way with most of New York's richest debutantes, models, and actresses. Nobody thought he'd get married, especially his mother apparently. The *Times* interviewed her when they heard wind of her son's impending nuptials. That was the only time I remember ever wishing I had a different profession, like, say, window washer. Would loved to have seen the bitch's reaction when she got the news. I don't think she ever did accept Mia. Mia didn't bring pedigree or cash to the table. And maybe that was it. Maybe Mia was an in your face move.

I met her the first day of graduate school. She was one of those angelic waif types. Rail thin. Hair so blond it glowed in the dark, long, super straight, and she had the clearest, bluest eyes I'd ever seen. My initial reaction was she was damaged. I didn't know how, not in the beginning, but I did know it wasn't something minor. It was the way she held herself. Graceful yet skittish, like a deer. Ready to run at the slightest sound. And trust? The word wasn't part of her vocabulary. But it wasn't just that that drew me to her. You know how it is. Sometimes you meet people that you feel you have

an immediate connection with, like you've known them forever, and will know them for the rest of your forever. Well I can count the number of times I've had that feeling on one hand and I'd still have three and a half fingers left. I never much believed in past lives before Mia. But after, well, I figured there had to be some sort of explanation.

She was sitting next to me in this big auditorium while the head of the art department welcomed us to Yale, told us we would be the next big artists of our time, that we were at the best school in the country, in the best city in the world – we figured he meant New York – at the most auspicious time in our school's and city's artistic history, and all this other crap we peacocks wanted to hear, and I leaned over toward Mia, and whispered something like that, like it was all bullshit, and I've got to tell you, her smile, wow, it brightened her whole face. And man, in that moment I was so in love, and not just sexual love, everything love. It wasn't that I *wanted* her. I didn't need to want her; I knew I already had her, that she would be part of my life no question. It was just a matter of what form our relationship would take. I was fine with any form, and trust me when I say I'd never been fine with a relationship that wouldn't be leading to sex. With a man or a woman. But with Mia...well, with Mia it was different.

We were inseparable after that orientation. We hung out all the time, ate together, painted together, discussed art and life and the cosmic order of things together, told each other our most embarrassing and private secrets, slept together. *Slept* not fucked. It was during one of our all night solve-the-problems-of-the-world conversations that we came up with the idea to have our first exhibit. I mean shit the odds of being invited to be a part of a group show in New York, even somewhere like Brooklyn, which back then wasn't the cool address it is today, were greater than alligators giving you a free pass. So

we decided to make our own fame happen. We found this alternative space over in China Town of all places, but hey, you got to start somewhere. We'd gone there to have an authentic dining experience - the two of us were always looking for authentic experiences – and saw the place on our walk back to the subway. They had this show going of flying penises, some chick working out her angst no doubt. They were tiny, the pieces I mean, well therefore the penises too I guess, and stunning. Like little jewels: gilded frames, gold leaf borders, intricately patterned backgrounds. The penises were in the foreground, and Christ, the detail, on the wings especially, was uncanny. The pieces were like six inches square. Mia started admiring one, she had this thing for wings, and before I knew it she'd purchased it. At the time five hundred dollars felt like a million to a poor starving art student. She said she'd just gotten her financial aid check, but I don't know. I can't say for sure, but there was something about Mia, a kind of nonchalant air, that made me think she was getting money from somewhere other than the school. Not that she was a spendthrift, but she never seemed particularly concerned about money one way or another. If she had it, she spent it, and not only on herself; she was generous. I kept strolling along, checking out the titles of the paintings – Pink Penises, Purple Penises, Plaid Penises, Paisley Penises, Pumped Penises, Pontificating Penises, Posing Penises, Pissed Penises, all PPs, which was funny and curious at the same time – while Mia paid. Then we left.

We were all the way back to campus when she said it. “I got us a show.”

“What do you mean, a show?” I asked.

“You know, an exhibit,” she said. “At that space. Just you and me.”

“Are you shitting me?” I asked. “How did you pull that off?” I didn’t say this to Mia, but I was thinking I wouldn’t have thought twice about how she’d pulled it off if the person working the space had been a guy, but it was some rude bitch.

“I think she liked me,” Mia said. “You know, *liked* me.”

“You’re saying she was a dyke?”

“A lesbian, Jeremy,” Mia said. “You can be such a shit. Here, look. She wrote her home phone number on the receipt.”

Then Mia laughed, and laughed, and started skipping around saying, I got us a show-ow, I got us a show-ow, in that way little kids say na na na na na.

“When?” I asked.

“January,” she said. “They had a cancellation.”

I counted out the months on my fingers. “But that’s not even three months from now.”

“You’re right. That is pretty quick, isn’t it? Want me to call Patricia and tell her we can’t do it after all?”

“You’re serious?” I asked. “Her name starts with a P? Why don’t you let me call her?”

“You don’t like girls,” Mia said.

“That’s not true. I’ve done girls before. Plenty of them.”

“Ah, but the question is, would she like you?”

The two of us set to work. Our all-night talks turned into all-night painting and crit sessions. Looking back, those three months were some of the best of my life. There I was 24/7 with the person I loved most in the world doing what I loved doing most in the

world. I didn't know that then of course. Do we ever really appreciate a moment when we're actually inside it?

Anyway, we got the show together, and it looked fucking awesome. We had this opening, invited everyone we knew, and didn't sell one painting. We told ourselves all the things young artists tell themselves. You can't expect stuff to happen overnight. You've got to get your name out there. The road to fame is long and tortured. Etc.

The show had been up for three weeks when Mia got the call. Some big collector had been in and bought every fucking last one of her paintings. He wanted to meet her.

I still carry that; tell myself I should've told her that stuff just doesn't go down like that. I'm not saying Mia wasn't a good painter. She was a fucking amazing painter. She deserved every accolade she ever got and then some. But this guy, this big important collector, I recognized his name right away, Ian Blue. Everyone knew who he was; and he *liked* women, if you know what I mean. Shit, he was in the social pages of the *Times* practically every week, always with a new chick on his arm. But how do you tell someone that? How exactly do you ask someone you've just shared a show with, someone you love and admire, whether she finds it at all suspicious that the guy bought every last one of her paintings and not one of yours without it sounding like sour grapes? How do you tell her that you think the guy might be looking to her for another kind of talent as well?

The thing is if I knew all this, then Mia did too. The guy was a *Collector* with a capital C – he spent millions of dollars on art – and we were artists. It was our business to know our market.

Mia's career took off. She got pregnant. Quit school. They got married. Moved to Paris. *Paris?* What a fucking stereotype. We made a point to stay in touch, but you know how that goes. If you have to make a point to do something, it's not going to happen. They moved back to New York after Alice was born, and it was maybe six months after that that she contacted me about getting a studio together. I didn't think much of it at the time. I thought she'd just missed me or that she needed to get away from the kid now and then. For a while it was good. Motherhood seemed to agree with Mia. Her paint got more substantial too. The critics had coined this name for her style: fugitive pigment. They said it looked like the paint on her canvas was always running from itself, which is true I guess, but that description doesn't really do her paintings justice. If I had to describe them, I'd say they were like this combination of Degas and Rothko. Figurative elegance meets bleeding color fields. Impressionistic expressionism, if you will. And, she was an amazing colorist. I don't mean she could mix pretty colors; I mean she could *create* color from seemingly nothing. Wave her magic brush and voila. Then, one day, I saw the bruises. I've got to tell you I'd never felt so angry in my life. I asked her about them of course, but she was evasive, said she'd fallen or something. It was the first time she'd outright lied to me. And you know what she said when I pressed her? She looked at me straight on and said, "Please Jeremy, please respect me. Okay? I need to handle this in my own way in my own time."

And so I said, "Okay."

Fuck me for saying that. Fuck me.

After that, things went downhill quickly. She began to fade. Physically. She got even thinner. Her skin lost its color. She looked like shit. That's when I started really worrying. But the more concern I showed the further she ran, and not just from me, from herself. Just like her paint.

**UNSENT LETTER**

September 23, 1997

Dear W,

It's time I told you about my family: my husband, my daughter.

I was working on my Master of Fine Arts degree and was part of a two-person exhibit. *The New York Times* said I had been discovered – by the art world, by the critics, and by a wealthy collector: a financier named Ian Blue. Our first meeting, lunch at a waterfront café along Front Street in New Haven, was one of humorous payback. I remember it was snowing that day. We were sitting inside the enclosed back porch surrounded by heaters that resembled gaslights.

“You at least owe me a drink,” he said. Cocky grin. Tan, chiseled face. Tall. Lean muscles. Thirty something. Not an inch of belly fat. Full head of wavy dark hair, and very deep blue eyes, so dark that at first I thought they were black.

“Really,” I said. “I think it's the other way around.”

“And why is that?” he asked.

“Well, it’s Friday, and Friday is my standing critique day. Missing a critique will not sit well with my advisor, so either you get me a cab or you buy my advisor a bottle of Patron. That should take the edge off his disapproval when I see him next Friday.”

I knew I would sleep with him. My body has always had a mind of its own. But I never thought the relationship would last. I’d heard of Ian’s history with women. I figured we’d have sex until the lust wore off and then we’d part ways. I was wrong.

One drink became two, then three, and then we talked and walked the city all night. Two days later we slept together. Two weeks later we moved in together. Two months, and the beginnings of a child later, we left for Paris and married. Ian’s family owned a chateau south of Paris in the hilltop village of Vézelay in the region of Burgundy. It was idyllic. Our chateau was surrounded by a patchwork of vineyards, and, in the distance, brunette furrows of farmland, and stacks of hay, appeared to reinvent impressionism. I painted some while there, but mostly hiked and walked and biked with some women I’d met at a bakery in town, Americans like me, and also pregnant like me. It’s funny how simply we found one another, how effortlessly we shared conversation, how close we got during those months, and yet now I can’t even remember their names.

I loved being pregnant. I would listen to my new friends complain about their sore backs, morning sickness, tiredness and weight gain, and I just smiled. I loved every pound I gained, every cramp I got, and I, who had always worn black, started shopping at Laura Ashley. Caught up in that euphoric cloud of obtuse self-importance specific to pregnant women and new mothers, I didn’t notice that Ian had been growing more and more irritable. I took his statements about missing New York to be bouts of nostalgia or

anxious misgivings rather than extreme dissatisfaction, but to my surprise, on my return from the hospital, I found the furnishings covered and our bags packed.

Things didn't get better when we returned to Manhattan; they got worse. I wish I could say that Ian's change of behavior happened overnight, that I didn't see it coming, because that would make me feel better about myself. But the signs were there. I just didn't want to see them. It started with a put down here or there. My hair wasn't the right color. I should wear more make-up. My ass was getting big. I didn't fold his socks right. My cooking sucked. I was a lousy mother. I didn't give good blowjobs. Then one night, after we'd been back in New York for about a month, Ian woke to Alice's cries before I did. He shot out of bed screaming at me.

"Get that fucking little bitch of yours to stop crying," he said.

"She's colicky, Ian," I said. "Remember, the doctor said it would stop in a few months."

"I don't give a shit if she's colicky," he said. "Get her to stop crying. I've got a seven a.m. flight. You try to go into a meeting with a big investor with no sleep."

I got up and rocked Alice. I held her upside down with my hand under her belly and swayed her back and forth. I tried to feed her. I heard Ian slamming kitchen cabinets shut, then his stomping footsteps. I started humming *Stairway to Heaven*. Alice's cries turned to a soft whimper.

"What the fuck," Ian said as he entered the nursery. "Now you're singing in the middle of the night?" He slammed his fist on the table next to me. The lamp fell and broke. The loud sounds startled Alice and she started crying again, even louder.

"I'll get dressed and take her for a walk in the park," I said.

It didn't dawn on me until several months later how strange it was that Ian wasn't even concerned about his wife and daughter strolling through Central Park at two o'clock in the morning.

I wish I could say that I was shocked when he hit me. Don't get me wrong; no one sees a punch coming. What I mean is I've read enough of those dentist office magazines to recognize the signs. I've heard enough battered women tell all to Oprah and Dr. Phil to get it. But, if I'm honest, I didn't think those magazine articles and talk shows had anything to do with me. If I thought about those women at all, it was with distaste and superiority. They'd been irresponsible, married losers, were uneducated, weak, or were just looking to be in the limelight, hanging themselves out on the media clothesline in search of their pitiful fifteen minutes of fame. *They weren't me.*

So I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when Judy Perrigo treated me with similar disdain. The four of us were at *Daniel* having dinner together. Ian and Joe Perrigo went to Harvard together. Although Judy was ten years my senior we'd become close, or so I thought. We'd gone to the girls together. She was looking in the mirror, applying her lipstick when I came out of the stall. I rolled up the sleeve of my blouse to wash my hands.

"Where on earth did you get that bruise on your wrist?" Judy asked.

I told her that Ian had grabbed me by the wrists the previous day, twisted them until I fell to the ground, then kicked me in the stomach. I unbuttoned my blouse, showed her the bruise on my stomach. When I looked up she was staring at me through the mirror, her eyes wide, her mouth open in astonishment. She stepped back, told me to button up my blouse.

“I don’t believe you,” she said. The statement was cold, dismissive. Then she turned on her heel and marched out of the restroom.

I was stunned, thought perhaps she hadn’t understood that I was confiding in her. Ian and I didn’t see much of Joe and Judy after that, and Judy, whom I’d considered a friend, quit asking me to sit on committees or go to lunch or shopping or the ballet. She quit calling me altogether.

I’m not sure why I’m telling you this other than the fact that I know with absolute certainty you aren’t reading this letter. You can’t ask me to explain how I got myself here. You can’t urge me to walk away. You can’t say you don’t understand why I stay. You can’t judge me.

Wallowing in self-pity,

Mia

## **JEREMY**

Mia and I started drinking when we moved into the new studio. It started as happy-to-be-back-together-again drinking, but somehow along the way turned into just plain drinking. I'd paint for a while, then head over to her space and plop my sorry ass down on her orange sofa and complain about whatever. It never failed: she'd stop painting, head to the fridge and pour us both a very large glass of wine, white usually – I only drink red now, white gives me brutal headaches. Mia was like that, gracious. I used to tease her that she should've lived in the south. We primarily, well exclusively, hung out in her space. She'd taken time to decorate it, create this nice little seating area. She found most of the furnishings in the alley out back, by the dumpster. The stuff looked like shit, but she always said she could do something with it, and she did, like the orange sofa. It was a ripped up mess when we found it, springs poking out, cushions soaked with cat urine, but she tore the thing down to its bones, sanded and polished its wood, re-stuffed it, recovered it. It was gorgeous when she got done with it; it looked like it belonged in an art nouveau museum. But it wasn't just that her space was more

comfortable. She wasn't one to put down her paintbrush without a little prompting. I used to tell her it wasn't healthy to leave the real world for hours on end.

“You're a numbskull,” she'd say. Do you believe that? A *numbskull*? Who uses that word anymore? She was an original – that's for sure.

We'd play this drinking game where we'd tell one another first lines from books and then give each other clues until the other guessed it. It was her idea. She said she used to play a similar game with some uncle. The game was meant to keep our drinking in check. The idea was that if we both lost three turns in a row, we had to punish ourselves by quitting the juice. But, what kind of drunk wants to stop drinking? We ended up breaking the rules more times than not.

Those were the days. The days of wine and painted roses we called it. Shit I don't even remember exactly where that name came from. I think numbskull was from Sesame Street; she watched Sesame Street with Alice every morning. And, oh yea, the painted roses, they were from Alice in Wonderland. She told me once that that was where Alice's name come, the kid I mean; she'd named her after the Alice of Wonderland.

Mia brought Alice to the studio a lot. She fucking adored that kid. Granted the kid was pretty cool and all, but Mia thought she was beyond perfect. Like she was some Disney cartoon princess and animated birds and rabbits and other forest animals gathered at her feet. It could get a little sickening sometimes, but you know how moms can be. I just wasn't there. I didn't, still don't, have kids. But like I said, Alice was pretty cool – and curious. Most moms would've parked their kid in front of the TV with a video so

they could get some work done, but Mia didn't have to. She just set up this kid-sized easel, put a canvas on it, and let Alice paint. It was funny seeing the two of them, side-by-side, painting away. Alice mimicked her mother's movements exactly, and she'd paint and paint and paint until either Mia said it was time to stop or she'd literally fall asleep standing.

Blue got the kid after Mia went missing. At first, I went to see her quite a bit, I'd even paint with her, but then that fucking bitch Penelope Blue put down the hammer, said no more me in Alice's life. I might upset the kid. Too much of a reminder of her mother or some shit. The kid was practically living with the grandmother back then. Between his travels and women, Blue was too busy to care much.

I used to hear about Alice now and then, even saw her some when she was old enough to figure out the subway system on her own, but somewhere along the way I lost track of her. Christ, she'd be eighteen now, right? Fucking weird. Never thought I'd say this, but time does just get away, doesn't it?

**UNSENT LETTER**

September 30, 1997

Dear W,

Lately I've been craving wine. Chardonnay mostly. I love the dry buttery taste of it, but also the entire ritual, the elegance of the wine glasses, the sound of the cork popping, the slow pour of the liquid into the glass. The glorious loss of inhibition.

A few days ago, I confided something totally embarrassing to Jeremy. I was at that good drunk place, maybe three glasses in.

"Did you know that Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* is considered the epitome of the romance genre?" I asked. "Although arguably one of the finest literary masterpieces of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not all time, in my opinion, the sexual chemistry between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy falls short of that between Heather Simmons and Brandon Birmingham in Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's saucy *The Flame and the Flower*."

"Who the fuck is Kathleen Woos?" he asked.

“Woodiwiss” I said. “She’s a romance writer. You know handsome, strapping ship captain captures beautiful young girl and ravages her. *The Flame and the Flower* was in fact the first novel ever to include a detailed sex scene.”

“How detailed?” Jeremy asked.

“Probably not detailed enough for you,” I said. “But when you’re a young girl who has been forbidden to read such things, it was shocking. And compelling. Katie, my friend at boarding school, and I used to sneak into the drugstore whenever we were in town and head straight to the trash rack; it was one of those ones that spun around, and no matter how slowly we’d turn it, it squeaked. We were terrified we’d get caught and sentenced to hell, but we always managed to slip a few books under our sweaters and leave undetected. At any given time, we had several hidden in our drawers or between our mattresses, and we read them so much the bindings broke and the pages fell out. Maybe that’s what it was about W.”

“W?”

“My first love. We met in college. He was a hunter – I hate hunting – but there was just something about seeing him standing over my bed in all his hunting gear that turned me on. What I wouldn’t give to have one more roll in the sack with him.”

“The ship captain?” Jeremy asked.

“No, W,” I said.

“Who the fuck is W?”

“My college boyfriend, you numbskull. Weren’t you listening?”

Then Jeremy said something like “what was it about him” or “what exactly did he do to you” and I said I didn’t really remember. Isn’t that weird? That I don’t remember

and yet I know that whatever it was, whatever you did, it was and you did it the best. I'd completely lose myself inside you, and I haven't been able to do that with anyone since.

"That's sad, love," Jeremy said.

"I know, right? I was so confused about this guy. I mean I fucking dropped him."

"Are you sure about that?"

"What?"

"Maybe he just wanted you to believe you dropped him. Guys are pretty good at that?"

"You know sometimes I really hate you."

"You don't hate me, love," Jeremy said. "How could you hate this pretty face? Tell me all about him." Slurring.

And so I told Jeremy everything I remembered about you, everything I've already written about in these letters, and many things I haven't. I told him how I'd sit on your lap when we watched TV at your parents' house. I told him about that winter when you grabbed a key, and we snuck into one of the empty cabins. I told him how fucking freezing it was, and how we didn't care. I told him how fast you used to drive on those two-lane roads up at the lodge, and how you told me that your driver's training instructor said you wouldn't live to be twenty.

"Have you ever looked him up on the internet?" Jeremy asked. "Tried to contact him?"

"I wouldn't be able to find him," I said.

"Why not?"

“I just wouldn’t.”

“Oh come on,” Jeremy said. “I’ll do it. What was his name?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. And then I started crying. Not regular crying, drunk crying.

“Word game time.” Jeremy stood, waved an arm in the air as if he was the greatest of orators. “Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically.”

“Fuck,” I said. “The floor is moving.”

“Wrong,” Jeremy said.

“No, that wasn’t a title,” I said. “I’ll take my first hint.”

“There’s a character in the book named Lady Cha – ”

“Lady who?”

He’d slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes.

I shook him. “Jeremy, are you sleeping?”

After shaking him a few more times with no response I got this bright idea to go to the bookstore below our studios. It’s situated between a Starbucks and Harry’s, a pricey restaurant. Sometimes, instead of drinking, we head down there for PE (personal enrichment) breaks. In addition to loving paint, Jeremy and I both love books. Note “book lover” as opposed to “reader.” Jeremy and I also love to read, but loving books is an entirely different thing. It has to do with their smell, and the way they feel in your hands. Used books are even better. There’s that mystery of all the past readers, their energy.

The stairs were as wavy as the floor. I felt nauseous. I held onto the railing for balance. “Tragic,” I muttered over and over as I carefully maneuvered each step. I needed to remember the clue.

A few hours later, Jeremy found me passed out at the bottom of the stairs.

“I thought you were dead, love,” he said.

Do you remember our word game? There was a time you gave long, glorious backrubs, better than any masseuse I’ve had, but that didn’t last. Before long your hands wandered over my nipples, the mysterious crevices behind my ears, the base of my neck, inside my toes, between my thighs. Erogenous zones I didn’t know were there. Not that I had any complaint against lovemaking. It was the confusion of the circumstance: two different sorts of pleasure combined into one. I wanted them separate. I wanted to experience each individually. So I taught you the words.

“I don’t get it,” I remember you saying. “What do you mean write on your back?”

“With your fingertips,” I say. “You write one letter at a time until it makes a word, then you make the next word and so on, until it becomes a sentence. And the sentences have to be long. Otherwise it’s not challenging.”

“Why does it have to be challenging?” Your hand wandering under my armpit, finding its way to my breast.

I push it away, glue my elbows to my sides. “It just does,” I say.

Your first *sentence* was the score of the most recent Michigan-Notre Dame game.

“No,” I say. “It’s a word game. You need to make letters, not numbers.”

“There are way too many rules in this game. What kind of sentences?”

“I don’t know. How about quotes from books?”

“Books? Seriously? You know I don’t read.”

“You must have read when you were little. Or maybe your mother read to you?”

You pondered the question for a long while. “I am Sam,” you began, and then you spelled out your own version of *Green Eggs and Ham*.

Lately, I drink every day. I worry I’ll end up dead. That Alice will grow up *without* her mother. Or worse, that Alice will grow up *with only* her father. Reason enough to quit drinking. But I’ve tried, and I can’t.

Sincerely a fucking waste,

Mia

**JEREMY**

I've told the police this shit a thousand times. I *know* that fucking asshole did it. It happened at least four times that I know of, but I'm sure there were more. The fourth time she actually called me from the hospital. That bastard came to visit her while I was there, and he acted all like what a great guy I am. Said hey to me. Kissed the top of Mia's head. Brought flowers – a dozen fucking red roses. What kind of sociopath brings red roses to someone they've beaten nearly senseless? It was like he had no memory of doing it, or he figured she hadn't told me. I don't know which is worse. The guy was sick. I saw it the first time I met him. Handsome, slim, muscular, sexy. Shit, he could've been gay. He had these dimples in his cheeks when he smiled, and his eyes always looked directly into yours when you talked, as if what you were saying was the most interesting thing in the fucking universe.

I think it was a few weeks after she got out of the hospital that we came up with the idea for Mia's solo exhibit at our studio building. There were six total of us sharing the space back then, and I pulled in all my favors to get them to agree to give up their

spaces so Mia could spread out. The plan was to do it on April Fools Day because Mia said Ian would be out of town on some extended trip to the Middle East. Dubai maybe. Something like that. But we also thought it would be funny, a real fuck you to the world. We had clear roles. Mia was supposed to call and set up her rendezvous with the contact from the underground railroad – Martha somebody – and I was supposed to open the bank account. We didn't have those flash mobs back then, but there was a street network. All we had to do was tell the right people, the "big mouths," and the word would spread faster than kudzu. And man was it packed. It exceeded our expectations. Seemed like most of the art world was there. Mia was late. The story was that she'd planned to leave Alice with a babysitter, but the sitter didn't show. That way the two of them disappearing together would seem more real. The show sold out within an hour of opening the doors.

Mia and Alice left at about five minutes after midnight. I stayed until every last person was gone, cleaned up, waited for the bank to open, and deposited the money.

The next day proceeded without incident. Since Ian was out of town, there wasn't anyone to report her missing, so I just sat tight and waited for his return. It was another one of those times I wished I were invisible, so I could've watched the asshole's expression when he realized he'd been duped. He wasn't dumb. He'd find out about the show, figure out what went down, but it would be too late. He wouldn't find them. That was the whole idea about using the Underground Railroad. That's what they did. Hid battered women, gave them a new identity, set them up in a whole new city. Even I wouldn't know where she was until enough time had gone by to ensure the police or any of Ian's thugs weren't watching me. In the meantime I kept checking the bank account to

see if she'd picked up the money. After two months went by with no activity, I started to worry, and then I got this sick feeling in my stomach, like something was wrong. So I went to the police and spilled the whole story.

They nodded a lot, pretended to listen to me, but didn't seem too convinced. He had an alibi you see. But then, just a week later, the asshole's alibi got busted all to hell. He'd been with some chick. He'd never even left Manhattan, or his neighborhood. Turned out the chick lived not even a block from the penthouse and Blue was there with her the entire time. And then they found Mia's blood in the kitchen of the penthouse. That's when they arrested him, and had that sham trial. Do you fucking believe it? That's what a name and money will buy you: a get out of murder free card. Later I found out that Penelope Blue, the mother-in-law, and Blue's lawyer went way back, to college or something, and that the lawyer knew the judge.

I kept hoping that the judge was right and I was wrong, that Mia was out there somewhere, had decided to wait as long as possible before she claimed that money, or maybe thought it best not to claim the money at all so Blue would never be able to trace her. But I just couldn't shake the fact of the kid showing up on the stoop. Mia would never have left Alice alone like that in a good neighborhood, not to mention a sketchy one, which back then ours surely was.

Suicide? I don't know. The *Times* said something about financial trouble, some sort of Ponzi scheme, but fifteen floors seems pretty desperate. Or brave. Blue wasn't brave. Guys that hit women aren't brave. And I find the whole thing about him jumping in the middle of the night strange. Nobody even knew he was in the building until they

identified the body. He hadn't signed in at the guard station. I did hear the ID wasn't too easy. Asshole's head exploded like a watermelon. A couple of dead eyes buried in red slush. Fitting as far as I'm concerned.

I figured that question was coming. I was right here, painting. Wish I could say someone in the building could verify that, but I do most of my painting at night, after everyone else has left. I love the quiet. And the darkness. I mean look at my work. The critics have called it depressing and "demonic." I know I joked about it before, but I really do use a lot of yellow, and black, and see all those swirly scrolls, the critic of my most recent review, Joyce Bernstein, said they were "tunnels to the underworld of a sick mind." I fucking love that. I don't know; maybe someone saw my light on.

By the way, here's an invite to the exhibit. Two more weeks. Fuck I wish Mia could see me now. You heard about her retrospective? Mary Boone's doing it. Opens this weekend. Fifteen-year anniversary of her... well her *disappearance*. I'll be there, engaging in shameless self-promotion. If you knew Mia you'd know she'd be fine with that. Hell, she was my biggest promoter. She was selfless. The kind of person you wish you could hate, but no one could hate Mia. God, I miss her. Did you notice the painting at the top of the stairwell? The one with the dancing rabbits? That's hers; truck dropped it off earlier today. It'll be in the show; her people just haven't picked it up yet. I think it's one of her best. Belongs to her therapist. She bought it that night – the night Mia disappeared. I have to say I thought her being there was kind of weird. I mean what kind of therapist attends her patient's art exhibit? Then again, I'm the last person who should be questioning someone's professionalism.

Here, take several. Pass them around. The opening party is at seven. Not Mia's, mine. I'm expecting the *Times* to cover it. You cannot believe how fucking good it feels to have finally arrived after all these years. All I've got to say is fuck the naysayers. I've got MOMA.

**UNSENT LETTER**

October 5, 1997

Dear W,

The air conditioner in my studio was on the fritz, but I was trying to paint anyway. I was playing with browns and yellows, trying to make the painting appear old and tarnished, as if it had lived forever. I dipped my brush into the yellow ochre paint, then the raw umber, and then the turpentine, which caused the paint to thin. I applied a translucent layer to the three shadowy figures that danced in the painting's foreground. But it wasn't quite right, so I took the cloth and carefully rubbed the layer away. It had been like that all day, failed experiments. I tried a different mixture –

“Fucking hot in this building,” Jeremy said. He was cursing and throwing his arms in the air as he entered. That isn't unusual for him. “What's with this heat? It's October for Christ's sake. I'm flat out of demon water. You don't happen to have any do you love?”

I told him I had a couple bullets and a warhead.

“Knew I could count on you.” He wove his way to the fridge and grabbed the warhead. “You thirsty?”

I swore to myself I wouldn’t drink.

“Come on, take a break. You’re way too diligent.”

He rooted in a drawer for the corkscrew, retrieved two glasses, headed to the orange sofa, all the while spewing expletives and criticisms about our landlord. I dipped my brush into the turpentine, cleaned it, stuck it in its designated coffee can, wiped my hands on my coat, joined him.

“They’re rabbits, are they not?” he asked.

“Rabbits?”

“In your painting.”

I studied the canvas as he poured the wine into my glass, something I rarely do. Generally any studying I do takes place inside the painting, inside its world, which when I’m in the process of painting is also my world. It was misty and wet inside this painting, wet everywhere, the air, the ground, my face, every ridge and crevice of my body, and it smelled dense and musty, yet sweet, as if outside my frame of vision there were flowers, honeysuckles and roses and lilies, and I couldn’t quite hear the bees feeding off their succulence. As if I was waiting for the season to change, or perhaps willing it to, my two shadows and I danced in a circle like that game I played as a child, Ring Around the Rosie, and with every circle, our feet burrowed further and further into the wet earth until our movement was labored, exhausted, but as much I wanted to stop I couldn’t because if I did the mud would swallow me. And yes, I felt this same sense of wetness and apprehension as I observed the canvas. And I felt the earth’s layers – the crust then the

upper mantle then the mantle then the outer core then the inner core – oozing through my toes, smothering my feet, crawling up my ankle, my calves. I almost smelled those flowers and heard those bees. I almost gave in to the weight. But I hadn't imagined myself, or my shadows, having those long wispy ears or elongated bodies or wiry tale-like extensions protruding from our backsides because, like my memories, I never see myself in my paintings.

“I hadn't thought about it,” I said.

We toasted to working air conditioning.

Jeremy continued his orations on the state of the art world, the ozone layer, and other topics of interest to no one, and everyone. It's never what Jeremy has to say that's interesting. It's that Jeremy is the one saying it. Before long, I was as irritable as he was. Lately the wine seems to get me this way. We forgot about art and the cold, and bemoaned the problems of the world.

We finished off the bottle, and he went to get another. And another.

The next day, my head was pounding as Merapist and I sat through one of our waiting modes. The pounding was so bad I don't even remember what she asked that put us in that mode in the first place. It was hot again, and humid, and the long train ride had only increased the irritability that started the day before. That's where I seem to be these days, in a constant mode of irritability and anger. Everybody and everything pisses me off. That was how I broke our silence. I told her about my anger.

She answered as if she hadn't noticed the long period of silence. “You need to feel your anger. Depression is untapped anger.”

What the hell did that mean, I wondered. Untapped anger? What about tapped anger? How do I turn off the fucking flow? I was sitting on her burgundy sofa, my two trusty companions beside me.

“Who are you mad at?” she asked.

“Who? Shit, I don’t know.”

“Yes, who?” she says. “Who are you *really* mad at?”

“W,” I finally said. My parents, my husband, all the men in the mud. Everybody. I’m mad at everybody. But mostly, I guess, I mad at me.”

“Why are you mad at you?”

“Because I was bad, and stupid.”

And then, I don’t know why, but I told her about that last party my father gave when I was a little girl. “Her father likes having parties,” I said. In my memory, I saw a house on stilts with weathered shingles, and a back deck with stairs that went down to the ocean. “Her father is grilling. He loves to grill. She can see him pouring the coals into the spit, generously soaking them with lighter fluid. There is a container, a square metal box with a drawer attached to one of the outside walls. He extracts a match, strikes it on the wood rail, tosses it on the coals. The smell of sulfur, she loves that smell, and that sound, that whoof, like a gas furnace kicking in, and then there is fire.

My analyst interrupted. “Why did you say *she*? Don’t you mean *I*?”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“You said *her* father is grilling, and *she* can see him. Who is *she*?”

“I’m sure I said *I*.”

“No, you said *she*.”

I laughed.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because we sound like Alice and Humpty Dumpty.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t you remember? The *Labyrinth of Language*? Alice is somewhere in her journey through the looking glass when she comes across the *Labyrinth of Language* and Humpty Dumpty. And Humpty Dumpty says to Alice in a very haughty tone, ‘When I use a word, it means just what I want it to mean, neither more or less,’ and Alice answers, ‘The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things,’ and Humpty Dumpty says, ‘The question is, which is to be master, that’s all.’”

Then I told her how sometimes I feel like Alice, like I live in a world where Humpty Dumpty is master and I’ll never be able to figure out his language system. And I laughed, nervously, told her I was sure I said *I*, and I asked her what I’d been talking about, and she said the party, and just like that I was back at the house on the ocean.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“The guests are starting to arrive. Old friends, familiar faces. My father sends me to bed. I remember lying there listening to the sounds, laughter and music floating in the distance, but then I must have dozed off, because I wake to the smoke. It’s in my nose and throat. I start coughing. Someone, a man, is calling my name. Then he is carrying me out of the house, and we stand in the sea and watch the house burn like it’s coal on the spit.”

“How old were you?” she asked.

“Five.”

“What happened to your parents?”

“They died in the fire.”

Caught in the looking glass,

Mia

**JEREMY**

She never talked much about her past, before grad school that is, but I didn't figure that out right away. It felt like we were sharing all these secrets, but, as I sit here this minute, I can't tell you one thing about where she came from. She was adopted, that I know, but it wasn't until after she disappeared, when the police began asking all those questions, that I realized I couldn't answer many of them. Strange when you think about it. Here you figure this person is as stuck to you as your own skin, and then you're faced with this truth that makes no fucking sense. She did talk about this lodge in northern Michigan once, said she grew up there, that she learned to water ski before she could walk, said she got so good that she could "kiss the wave." Her words. And now that I think about it, she did mention an uncle. I can't say why exactly, what she said, but I got this strange feeling like something wasn't right with the uncle, with their relationship.

There was something else. There was this guy at one of the openings we went to, some kind of magician. Black mask, topcoat and tails, and one of those tall hats. The artist's show was all about illusion, so he'd hired this magician to walk around the room and do these tricks, find money behind your ear, or prove he knew the card you'd secretly

identified from a deck, parochial shit. The guy kept following Mia and me around, probably Mia more than me. Mia got pretty upset, asked him to stop. Then she just freaked out, boxed her ears, started screaming, bent down and curled into a ball. I had to carry her out of there. When we got back to the studio, I set her down on the orange sofa, put her head on my lap, and ran my fingers through her hair until she fell asleep.

**UNSENT LETTER**

October 11, 1997

Dear W,

I remember their funeral. I remember we all wore black. I remember their caskets were closed; they close caskets when people burn to death. I remember the pattern of the carpet - very small blue curvilinear lines, filigree I think they are called, on a blood red ground. I remember counting the filigrees from the entrance of the church to the coffin, from the coffin to the pew. There were two hundred and eleven.

I remember my uncle. My mother's brother, he said. I remember we flew on an airplane; he lived far away, somewhere where it snowed, in a big house, much bigger than my old house. He had a wife and two little boys. The house had a big yard and a barn and a pool and a room full of books. We all went on trips together, and I got to play in that yard and swim in that pool and read those books, and my uncle was nice to me. He helped me decorate my room. He taught me how to ride a bike and a horse, how to play croquet and tennis.

And, at night, after his wife and the two little boys were asleep he'd come into my room and teach me magic.

I remember the night my aunt walked in on us, how she screamed and cried. I remember the day my uncle drove me to "boarding school." I was ten years old. I never saw him or my aunt or the two little boys again.

ABRAKADABRA,

Mia

**JEREMY**

The therapist practiced somewhere in Greenwich. Mia took the train there every Tuesday morning, or was it Wednesday. Fuck I don't remember. It seemed to do her some good. She talked about it some, but mostly to say she was irritated with her or something they'd talked about. You know, like that. She never said she went because of the abuse, but that's what I thought, at least at first. But one time when I mentioned a therapist that one of my exes had gone to, a really good therapist here in Brooklyn, you know so she wouldn't have to go so far, she said she was only interested in the therapist she was going to, that they had "unfinished business." Whatever the case, I was just happy she was going. I figured anything that could get her to leave Blue was a good thing.

**UNSENT LETTER**

October 14, 1997

Dear W,

Once upon a time there was a magician, a magician with a black box, a black box called a camera, a camera with an eye, an eye that watched her every move. “Snap, snap, snap,” it went as it captured a coy smile, a fallen sleeve, a naked body. Moments frozen in time. Pictures viewed over and over again, touched, coveted, until they alone could no longer sustain the magician’s desire.

And so the magician took the object of his desire on a boat ride, a boat ride down a river on a hot July day, and told her a story, a story about a land below ground, a land filled with unusual creatures, mad hatters and hares and smoking caterpillars and rabbits who carried pocket watches and a cat with a smile wider than any she’d ever seen, and she listened in fascination, allowed the story to seduce her. And after the magician moored the boat and they shared lunch under that newly made hayrick and she undressed for his camera, *and him*, she asked him to write the story down for her.

And one day he did.

“Click, click, click,” went the quill as it dipped in the ink jar. “Flow, flow, flow,” went the pen on the paper. And when it was done the magician cast a spell on the book, a spell greater than any he had before, and the book sold to a publisher, and the story, the story the magician said he’d written for the princess’s eyes alone, was shared with the world. And the queen, who had learned of the ride down the river and the magician’s ways, banned him from her castle forever.

But, sometime later, unable to forget the promise he’d made to the princess, for her light still flickered in his heart, he sent her a special copy of the book, a copy that bore the inscription, “A Christmas Gift to a Dear Child in Memory of a Summer Day.” And when the princess opened the book and read the magician’s words and looked at the pictures the magician had drawn, she realized that the little girl frolicking through the story’s pages was gone from the world forever. Time had tricked her. Love had tricked her. Innocence was lost to her. And alone in her sadness, for no one understood the magician’s power as she did, she wept for that summer day, she wept for the hayrick and the blanket and the story and the camera, and she wept for the memories which had once so warmly caressed her heart, but now pierced it.

Happily ever after,

Mia

**ALICE BLUE**

Relation to Victim: Daughter

Interview Conducted: 11 April 2013

**ALICE**

Supposedly corner rooms are bigger. I know, right? I've heard that sometimes they put three single beds in one of these, can you imagine? Forget the space factor. The real issue is the closet. There is no way three girls could begin to fit their shoes alone in one of these things. It's a stretch to even call it an armoire. When I first moved in, I was like, no way. Give me a sledgehammer so I can knock down that wall during the night and make off with the room next door. I went right out to the nearest Container Store and bought these rolling hanger thingies, shelving units, and hooks. I call it Closet Wonderland since the ambience consists of either clothes or Alice in Wonderland books. I imagine you're wondering about those. Everybody wonders why I have so many editions of the same book. They were my mother's. Well, most of them. I've added to the collection here and there over the years. Here, you take the futon; I can use my desk chair. Can I offer you something? Chips? Ramen? A beer?

My major? This will blow your mind. Prelaw with an emphasis in Criminology. So believe me, while you're studying me, I'll be studying you. And just so you know,

you're not going to get anything over on me. So you might as well just be straight with me about why you're really here. God, I love that: absolutely no expression on your face. Do they teach you that in detective school? There is no way you're interested in a fifteen-year-old cold case, or me. I hardly remember my mother. Ha! That's why you're here. You found the letters, didn't you? So he did keep them. I knew it.

Yes, I read them. *I* found them. Geez, eight years ago now. I was ten. The same age Alice Liddell was when Charles Dodgson took her and her sisters on that boat ride down the River Isis. You know, the infamous one? Bet they don't teach that in detective school. But, if you did your homework, meaning you read *all* my mother's letters, as I assume any good detective would, you know all about Alice Liddell. And it's telling don't you think? The age similarity? Like I said I don't remember all that much about my mother, but I do have memories of her reading the book to me, and me always begging for more. I was one of those pain-in-the-ass kids, the kind that continually want their way, that only see their side of things. It wasn't my mother's fault; it was my father's. He spoiled me, gave me whatever I wanted, bought me. Looking back, I get it now. I get why he was always so eager to please me. He needed an ally, and he felt guilty, or should have. He was a philanderer. He liked them young, but thankfully not as young as Dodgson did. But that other stuff, the stuff my mother said in her letters about his, well, his abuse, I never saw that side of him –

Sorry, I don't know where those tears came from, and the shaking my hands thing, well, I've convinced myself it helps fight tears. Not that I cry that often; as far as I'm concerned crying is a waste of energy. The thing is, yea my father was a drinker and

a womanizer, but he was also my world. It's so weird, sometimes for no reason at all I'll get a whiff of his aftershave or I'll be sleeping and I swear I hear him calling my name, and I get this warm feeling, the same feeling I'd get when I was a kid and he carried me on his shoulders. And just like that I feel his neck against my thighs, or his long, smooth fingers winding their way through my little girl hand. I hear his laugh as he tosses me high in the air, and his smile as he helps me fly –

I digress. You're not here to talk about *my* flying feats. It's my father's you're interested in. Did he fly out that window on his own, or did someone help him? If you ask me someone helped him. He just wasn't the suicidal type. He was way too proud of himself for that – and if he were inclined to cut his brilliant life short, he certainly wouldn't have done it that way. He wouldn't want anyone to see him looking so unattractive. All that blood, his face smashed nearly beyond recognition like something out of a horror movie. How undignified. But, now that I think about it, if I were going to murder him, if I wasn't me I mean, that's probably exactly how I would do it. What better way to get back at the phantom of Wall Street? Reveal the ugliness behind the mask.

I can think of several people who'd want him dead. Practically every woman he dated. Every person he swindled out of money. And then there were all those people that loved my mother. A revenge killing. That's what you're thinking too, right? And I'm a suspect too. Cool. I can see that. Little girl's mother disappears. Her father tells her she left her. She thinks it's something she did, that her mother didn't love her. She

finds the letters. Finds out her father lied to her, that her mother didn't leave her, that it was very likely her father killed her mother. So now the child hates her father, and over time her resentment towards him grows and grows. She fantasizes about getting back at him. But she can't. She needs him. She's just a child after all. And so she bides her time and builds her bravery and when she's eighteen, when she's gone to college, when her trust fund has kicked in, not to mention she'll inherit a bunch of money after her father dies, she finally works up the nerve to kill him, so she lures him to his office, complains that the room is stuffy and can he open a window, and when he does she sneaks up behind him and shoves him to his death. It's genius really. Everyone will think it's a suicide because Ian Blue is up to his ears in a very public financial mess, which she plays up to the police while sobbing over his untimely death, and going off about him carrying her on her shoulders and helping her fly when she was a kid, and of course he left the suicide note. But then the case gets assigned to you, the Dudley Do-Right of the detective world, and you see right through her sobs.

Case closed. Get out the handcuffs. Drag her down to the station.

But here's the thing, we both know it's unlikely I'm the only one who knew about those letters, and we're both aware how incriminating they are. For my father, yes, at least where my mother's disappearance is concerned, but as far as my father's untimely death – well let's just say I'd be very surprised if anyone else admitted to knowing of their existence. Me? I'm betting that's how you'll find my father's murderer: by finding out who else read those letters.

Like I said I was ten when I found them – the same age my mother was when her “uncle” sent her to the orphanage, the same age Alice Liddell was when Dodgson took her on that riverboat ride. She’d rolled them up, tied them with a piece of twine, like one of those ancient decrees, Martin Luther and the 95 Theses for instance, put them in one of the portable art bins that held her oil paints. I imagine she figured my father would never go looking inside her paint boxes. Don’t get me wrong; I’m sure my father liked that my mother was a painter, but from what I saw later, he didn’t seem to care all that much about art. I’m guessing art collecting was just something his family had done, what their type of wealthy status-seeking people do. People who want other people to envy them. They buy large paintings by young, talented artists and hang them in their large homes on their vast walls, and then, years later, once those artists are famous, brag about how they bought the pieces way back when, long before anyone else had even heard their names. They like thinking of themselves as having foresight – in everything: the stock market, real estate, art, talent, sex.

Ha, speaking of sex, in one of my grandmother’s and father’s many arguments, I overheard her say, “You are just like your father.” Meaning my grandfather. “The only thing that matters to either of you is commodities, clout, and cunt.” She’d pulled the last letter of the last word, as if she bitten into a tough piece of steak and had finally caught the meat in her teeth. I had no idea what any of those words meant at the time, but not long after, when I was in a restaurant with my father and one of my “aunts,” I heard my father repeat that last word using an entirely different tone. The woman had smiled, got up from her chair, walked around the table, sat on his lap, and kissed him on the lips right

in front of me and everyone else in the restaurant. I remember being embarrassed, and repulsed; my mother hadn't even been gone a year.

The point is, my father never entered my mother's studio, and definitely wouldn't open one of her paint-smearred, turpentine-smelling art bins. That was way too messy and unorganized for my father, posed way too much of a threat to his perfectly coifed hair, manicured nails, pressed white shirt.

It took me awhile to read them all, mainly because I wasn't allowed in my mother's studio. My father, in his infinite wisdom, had decided it was best that I wasn't presented with any reminders of my mother, so he'd locked the door. Obviously, he had no idea about the tenacity of ten-year-old girls. We live for secret rooms and hidden boxes. Even better, he kept the key to the room on his key ring, so I had to stalk him and my latest aunt, wait in hiding for them to start their mating ritual, and when he was duly enchanted, and on his way to the "privacy" of his bedroom, I'd grab his keys from the bowl on the entryway table, and scurry to the studio. I figured I had twenty minutes max before my father would wander out and pour them each a post-ritual beverage, generally some sort of martini or chilled dessert wine, and so I'd set the time on my *Finding Nemo* alarm clock, lower the volume until I alone could hear the onset of the movie theme song, and read.

There were thirty in all, the first dated July 4<sup>th</sup>, which interestingly enough was the same date, some one hundred and forty years later of course, that Alice went on that riverboat ride with Dodgson. The last was dated April 1<sup>st</sup> of the following year: in total, a nine-month span. Even at ten I understood the letters were written to a past lover, someone name W, but I didn't understand why my mother, not W, had them. Upon

reading, I understood she'd never sent them, never meant to send them, which confused me even more. Why would someone write letters they had no intention of sending? A mystery – everything about the letters was mysterious. Suffice it to say, they occupied my formative years. They got me through my father's ever-changing string of women, ever-growing drinking habit, and ever-worrisome bouts of depression. When he went to the place where his pain resided, I went to the world of the letters. I began fantasizing that I was actually W's daughter. I was a *love* child.

My fantasizing grew into a kind of fanatic religion. I created entire lives. Besides being the product of a great romance, I came to believe that Alice Liddell was in fact my great, great grandmother. I mean why else had my mother written about her, and why else would these strange coincidences have occurred? I developed an extensive family tree that proved my lineage, which I shared with my teacher and classmates on show-and-tell days, and spent hours on the Internet or in my school library researching. Which is how I discovered the suspiciously sexual relationship between her and Charles Dodgson. And, when the coast was clear, I'd crawl under the high table that held her brushes and rags and palette knives, open the magic bin, untie the twine that fastened the roll of parchment paper, and read. Looking back, the time I spent secretly visiting my mother's studio, surrounding myself with the heady smell of turpentine and paint, and reading those letters, sometimes late into the night by flashlight, was the only thing I really had.

Then everything changed. When Alice and I were both eleven years old, two very terrible things happened. My father decided to destroy every last piece of my mother that remained, and Alice Liddell's parents cut ties with Dodgson. Worse, Alice's mother burned all the letters Dodgson had written to her, and my mother's unsent letters were in

grave danger of meeting a similar demise. I *had* to save them. For me and for Alice. I had to stop history from repeating itself, and free both Alice and myself from the prisons that were our destinies. Yes, Alice was dead, but I truly believed, though I hadn't actually worked the whole thing out in my mind, that I alone held the power to release Alice Liddell's forlorn spirit from its captivity.

I woke that morning to the sounds of crinkling paper and packing tape. I say morning, but it was still dark outside and snowing, so I looked at my clock. 4:36 AM. I could easily sleep for another hour; my school was only three blocks away. I got up; wandered out to the kitchen, saw my father wrapping up my mother's salad bowl, as if it were just a lump of glass. Once he'd secured the paper with the tape dispenser, he shoved it into an already too full box. I was horrified.

"Daddy," I said. "We use that." We didn't, but I didn't know what else to say. I was disoriented.

He looked up but didn't say anything. His eyes were watery. I remember wondering whether he'd been crying. I remember wondering why he'd decided to perform this cleansing ritual now, after eight years. He'd hired someone to remove her clothes, books and some of her keepsakes a few months after she went missing – that's when he gave me her Alice books – but nothing had been removed since.

I smelled alcohol on his breath, noticed the open whiskey bottle on the kitchen counter; realized he must have drunk himself through the night. I sat at the dining room table, watched the rest of my father's invasion from a safe distance, my foot moving rapidly up and down, my heart pounding. I wanted to leave, but, like a spectator at a fatal car crash, I couldn't take my eyes off the scene, the spoils of destruction, the paper-

enshrouded remains of my mother. I held my breath as he stacked the boxes, one-by-one in our entryway, as the building maintenance manager piled them into the elevator, pushed the button to the basement.

“Is that it?” Percy asked.

“Can you come back in about an hour?” my father asked. “I’ve got one more room. Oh, and, would your wife like some jewelry?”

Percy stole a look in my direction. “Maybe your daughter would like some of it sir?”

“Alice has everything she needs, thanks.”

“Well, okay then, sir.”

My father grabbed his keys, headed to my mother’s studio. I still remember my heart bouncing inside my chest like it was a glass ball in a pinball machine. I followed him.

“Daddy,” I said. “What are you doing?”

He began ripping the empty or unfinished canvasses from their stretchers, then breaking them down. I made my way to the art bin, opened it, grabbed the twine-tied roll of letters, hurried toward the door –

“No running,” my father said.

I stopped in my tracks. My entire body tensed. “Sorry. I have to pee.”

“What’s that in your hand?”

“Just some paper.”

“Let me see it,” he said.

I handed it to him, watched him untie the twine, unroll the pages. At first his face registered shock, and then something really weird happened. Tears started rolling down his cheeks, and then he was crying. He took the letters, went to his bedroom, and shut the door. That was the last time I saw them.

When I got home from school that afternoon, with the exception of the Alice in Wonderland books, any physical memory of my mother was gone. A few days later, his current girlfriend, Cynthia, moved in.

**UNSENT LETTER**

November 10, 1997

Dear W,

I've been away awhile. Preoccupied. I apologize. I had this big, important one-woman show in one of the best galleries in SoHo. It nearly sold out. There is some satisfaction in knowing that paintings sold. But deep inside I feel like a fraud. I'm aware that my work hasn't reached its full potential and that much of the sales are due to collector frenzy. Word is out that I'm "up and coming." This word, I'm sure, came from Ian, my biggest promoter. Ian is a natural "dangler" – he has that sixth sense, the ability to read people and the market, to know just how much to dangle, and when to pull it back in, make them want more. He can make people believe that shit is a delicacy.

When I think of the current state of my paintings, their fleeting pigment, the fact that they and I still struggle to find our peak, I think of us. We were making love – we no longer fucked – on the living room carpet. Our coupling was intense, furious. We were risking discovery. As I began to peak, you stopped the rhythm, held back. I came to you but you'd have no part of it.

You just smiled, impishly, and then said, “Marry me.”

“No,” I said.

You started rocking, slowly, slowly. I felt I would die from the need of you. I pushed in closer, sought the rhythm. But you did it again, stilled the motion, held back, and with your jaw firm, your eyes fixed in desire, you said it again.

“Marry me.”

“Yes,” I breathed.

You wrapped your entire self around me, and I fell into you.

But, like my paint, the perfection of that moment ran from me.

You didn’t call for a time after that weekend. In desperation I finally called to find out what I’d done wrong. I thought maybe that’s what you wanted. Maybe you were doing what I had that other time: trying to break the pattern, kill the boredom. You seemed annoyed, said you thought I wanted more from the relationship than you did. You needed your space. Several weeks and stripped emotions later you returned. And I, being the fucked up person I was, the fucked up person I am, wanted you all the more.

Your willing slave,

Mia

**ALICE**

I don't remember Jeremy Scott from before, from when I was a child, but I did meet him later, in this weird roundabout way. I met him because of Butch Cassidy, who I met because of Sonja, who came after Cynthia, who lasted less than six months.

Ha. Yes, Butch Cassidy, but sans the Sundance Kid. It's kind of a long story.

Well, my father had decided to go cold Turkey. I was thirteen. Now no one who knew him would have believed he'd actually go through with it, but to everyone's surprise including mine he started going to AA. Later, we found out it was because of Sonja. She was a stewardess. He'd met her on one of his international flights. Apparently he asked her to have a drink with him, right there on the plane, and she said she couldn't because she was working, and then he asked her to have dinner with him after they landed, and she said she couldn't because he drank and she was a recovering alcoholic, and he said he'd been meaning to quit drinking, and she said she'd have dinner with him once she saw him at three AA meetings in a row. I honestly don't know what

he saw in her. She was born again everything – Christian, virgin, you name it – and she was one of those righteous, soberer-than-thou types.

It was Thanksgiving and I was riding up the elevator with Sonja, who was taking her maiden voyage to Chateau Blue. I had a grocery bag over each shoulder and two in my hands, while petite, way-too-bubbly Sonja was carefully balancing her “famous pumpkin pie” and jabbering on about how much she loved Thanksgiving, when the elevator stopped at the fourth floor, the indoor pool and gym floor, and this guy got on. No shirt. Dripping hair and armpits. Smelling like dirty socks and sweat.

“I apologize for my appearance Miss,” he said to Sonja. “I forgot to grab a towel when I left the gym.”

Now though I’d never actually met Butch Cassidy before, I’d seen him at school and in the lobby, and I’d ridden up the elevator with him at least ten times – he always got off at the floor right before mine, which meant he lived in Penthouse II – and not once had he acknowledged me. And if that wasn’t reason enough to despise him, he just had one of those faces: the I know I’m hot and don’t bother talking to me faces.

“You should be apologizing to *me*,” I said. “*She* doesn’t live here.”

“Why would I apologize to you? You’re a kid.”

“I’m fifteen,” I said.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t care what you believe.”

“Then why lie in the first place.”

“Okay, I’m fourteen.”

“Yea right.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

I rolled my eyes.

The elevator bell rang, and the doors opened straight into the well-appointed apartment entryway complete with its grouping of black-and-white photographs of nude men in their various acrobatic positions lining the wall. Only Penthouse I and Penthouse II were directly connected to the elevator.

“Happy Thanksgiving, ma’am” he said to Sonja, and stepped off. He didn’t even glance in my direction.

“What a nice young man,” Sonja said as the doors closed.

My father was waiting at the elevator door when the door to our floor opened. He took the pie from Sonja and kissed her on the cheek.

“You smell nice, sweetie,” he said.

*Sweetie?*

She smiled, demurely. I wanted to throw up.

He led her to our kitchen, while I lumbered after them with the four bags of groceries. Back then our apartment was what you’d call elegant and spacious. Because it was the top floor, it had sixteen-foot ceilings, and my father preferred sleek design, spare furnishings, wood floors, no area rugs, and white walls. Even my room had to meet these specifications. I’d never had your standard little girl’s room. No pink. No ruffles. No shelves of stuffed animals. Sliding glass doors led to a deep balcony that wrapped around the entire building. A similar balcony accompanied each of the twenty-five floors beneath us, but with the exception of Butch’s floor and ours, all of the others fed into four

separate corner apartments. In contrast to the chrome and leather interior, the balcony furnishings were plush and comfortable. Our kitchen was a cook's dream: industrial, stainless steel appliances, granite and wood counter tops, glassed cabinetry displaying copper cookware and white dishes. An eight-foot long island separated it from the dining area. Sonja was obviously enthralled. Her eyes got so big they nearly took over her face, but at least she had the sense not to gush. Whether or not my father knew it, she had designs on him from the get go, so she had an act to play, and gushing wasn't part of it.

I put the grocery bags on the island and headed to my room.

"Where are you going?" Sonja asked.

"To watch the Macy's parade," I lied.

"Aren't you going to help me cook?"

"My father and I don't cook. People cook for us."

He and Sonja shared a conspiratorial look, as if to say thirteen-year-olds are such a pain in the ass. "Now, Alice," my father said. "Of course we cook. Why else would we have this nice kitchen?" *Good question.* "Now, you be a good girl and help Sonja. She's gone to a lot of trouble buying these groceries and lugging them up to the twenty-fifth floor. The least you can do is dump the attitude. Got it?"

*She* lugged the groceries? "Sure," I said, though I didn't have a clue what helping entailed. I had scant memory of my mother cooking on Thanksgiving, and no turkey or celebratory food of any kind had been prepared in our state-of-the-art kitchen since she left. Even during Cynthia's brief tenure, all meals had either been catered, or we went out. The only consumable items in the house were random snacks, bottled water and every possible alcoholic beverage and associated mixers in existence.

“Want me to open a bottle of dry Riesling?” I asked – in a helpful manner.

“Dry what?” Sonja asked.

*Seriously?* “Reisling,” I said, as snottily as I could. “It’s a type of wine.”

“Alice is just kidding,” my father said. “She’s such a jokester. Aren’t you?  
There’s no alcohol in this house.”

*No alcohol in this house?* The thought of my father not drinking was unfathomable, and thus worried me, mostly because in that moment I understood the extent of his interest in Sonja. A quick sweep of the room, specifically the glass liquor cabinet, verified my fears. All traces of alcohol and its companions had been removed. But when had that happened? While I’d gone to meet Sonja in the lobby, to help with the groceries? I swore the cabinet was fully stocked the night before. I was 99.9 percent certain that that brown liquid he’d been drinking in his favorite crystal snifter was brandy.

“I-I guess,” I said.

“I bought you some Perrier, darling,” Sonja said.

*Darling?*

“Perfect,” my father said.

“And for you, Alice,” Sonja said, as she pulled a bottle out of one of the bags, “I got kids champagne. My nieces just love it.”

For the next four hours, *half of an entire day*, I helped Sonja make “low country” food concoctions that I had no idea existed: green beans and cornflakes casserole, fried cream corn, five-cup salad, oyster and cornbread stuffing, sweet potato balls, cranberry

raisin muffins. It was bad enough to have to mix all these obviously mismatched ingredients together, but then I had to eat them.

Sonja moved in with my father and me a month later, and she and I got “right busy” planning their June wedding to which most of the New York social elite were invited. I was a flower girl. I was utterly embarrassed walking down the aisle with Sonja’s two and three-year-old nieces wearing a similar white chiffon dress and halo of baby’s breath. I’d hoped to be a bridesmaid, but in all honesty I understood my being in her wedding pictures must have posed a challenge for her. I certainly didn’t have the boobs or other curves necessary to pull off the slinky light blue dresses her six bridesmaids wore, so better to stick me in a few wedding party pictures than to have me continuously pop up in her precious bridesmaid photos. After the wedding, Sonja had our apartment redecorated southern style, I got the pink-ruffled room I always never wanted, and my father quit traveling so much.

The second time I had occasion to talk to Butch Cassidy I was reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. It was early October, nearly a year since the Thanksgiving elevator ride where I’d sworn to despise him forever. I’d seen him a few times in between, but we’d ignored each other; actually it was more like I ignored him. I was at the part where Alice is arguing with the hookah-smoking caterpillar, which is actually one of my least favorite scenes in the book because the caterpillar is so pompous and dismissive with Alice, so I found it ironic that that’s when Butch showed up. I was sitting on a turquoise leather sofa-bench in our building’s lobby. The building management was going through an art deco phase, which in retrospect is still my favorite

of all their period remodels. I especially liked all the Tiffany-style lamps and floral carpets. They're into Ralph Lauren now. I saw his shoes first –black leather tie-ups.

“Alice in Wonderland?”

I looked up. I had to admit he looked pretty good in his school uniform. “It’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, actually. You forgot a word and a punctuation mark.”

He smiled. “It’s one of my favorites.” I tried not to act interested. “What’re you doing down here?”

“The cleaners. Their noise drives me nuts. Vacuuming, jabbering, music. I keep telling my Dad that he needs to forbid them from bringing that iPhone player. Even Sonja leaves when they’re there. She tapes her shows.”

He sat down next to me, without asking me first, and took the book from my hand. “Ah, the caterpillar. I don’t really like that part. It’s kind of frustrating. He’s not a very good listener.”

“I know, right?” By now I was glowing with that happiness that comes over you when you think you’ve found someone that inhabits the same trillionth-of-a-micro-speck of space in the universe as you do.

“Colin’s favorite part is when she gets stuck in the house. You know, the Little Bill part.”

“Who’s Colin?”

“One of my dads. He’s an Alice junkie. He’s a pretty famous photographer. Colin Cassidy?”

I nodded as if I had heard of him, but I hadn’t. “What’s your favorite part?”

“The painted rose tree. How about yours?”

“The Mock Turtle,” I said. “I love all those words he makes up like Seaography and Drawling.”

“Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils,” he said.

We both laughed.

He gave the book back to me. “Want to hang at my place?”

“Okay.”

My legs felt all wobbly as I followed him to the elevator. He reached out to shake my hand. “I’m Butch, by the way. Butch Cassidy.”

“I know,” I said.

He looked at me curiously.

“I’ve been to a few of your soccer games,” I said. “It’s kind of a, well, *recognizable* name, don’t you think?”

“Yea. Brian – that’s my other dad – thought it would be funny.”

“Is he a photographer too?”

“No, screenwriter.”

I felt a twinge of envy. Though I couldn’t recall specifics, I did have hazy memories of my mother and her friends: artists, writers, musicians, actors, and intellectuals.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Butch,” I said. “I’m Alice. My father’s an investor.”

“As in Wonderland?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What does your father invest in, Alice?”

“Corporations mostly. He buys and resells them. It’s a family business.”

The elevator door opened; Butch waited for me to step off first. I saw that the naked men photos wrapped their way around the entire entryway space, the various positions of their bodies creating a kind of lonely, silent ballet.

“They’re so beautiful,” I said. “Did your dad take them?”

“Yeah. You want something to drink? Hot chocolate, tea? It’s pretty cold out there.”

“No. I’m good.” I was sweating; I’d been sitting in the lobby in my coat for an hour. I slid it off, draped it over the multi-sectional, leather sofa, and sat on the end closest to me. I looked around while Butch made hot chocolate. The apartment, while the same size, and similarly laid-out, was the total antithesis of ours. It was warm, filled with books, large paintings and photographs, folk art, and antique toys – a jack-in-the-box, rocking horse, wind-up figures, and several rusted tin soldiers. Oriental rugs on the dark wood floor created three separate seating areas, all with their own unique style. It was as if the decorator couldn’t decide, so did it all. And yet, it worked. It was eclectic, but at the same time rich, homey, lived-in.

Butch sat down opposite me on the three-sided sofa, a large, square recycled-wood coffee table between us. I could barely see him around the wide grouping of candles in its center. He felt far away from me, the distance between us fragile, ethereal, yet connected by a charmed thread, as if we were the king and queen of a fairy tale kingdom, sitting on either end of our mile-long dining table.

“You sure you don’t want anything?” someone behind me said. “Brian made cookies before he left for LA this morning. Oatmeal raisin. They’re scrumptious.”

I was startled; I hadn’t heard him arrive.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. I’m Colin. Butch’s dad. Is he treating you okay?”

“Just fine,” I said.

“Alice lives upstairs,” Butch said. “She’s waiting for the cleaners to finish up.”

“Alice Blue?” Colin asked.

“How do you know my name?”

“I admired your mother’s work. I’m sorry about what happened. You must miss her. She was a vision, your mother. You look like her.”

“You knew her?” I asked.

“I can’t say I knew her,” Colin said. “But I talked to her once.”

I remember I wanted to ask Colin a million questions about my mother like what she was like, why she painted what she did, if he knew anyone else that knew her, what her favorite song was, favorite movie, favorite ice cream, what made her laugh, and especially, did she love me, but the words were blurry and mushy, like they were buried inside the pages of a book left out in the rain, so all I said was, “Thank you.”

The inside corners of my eyes tickled; I realized they had filled with tears.

“I have a catalog of hers. Would you like it?” In that moment, I discovered what a special human being Colin was, compassionate, respectful. He’d obviously seen my tears, but knew I hoped he hadn’t.

“Yes,” I said.

He left the room. “You – um – okay?” Butch asked.

“Fine,” I said. “Where’s your powder room?” I knew exactly where it was since our apartments were carbon copies of one another.

He pointed.

I walked as slowly as I could, went inside, shut the door, shook my hands and my head, took two deep breaths, wiped my eyes, blew my nose, took two more deep breaths, patted my face to get rid of the red, waited, checked my reflection in the mirror. I looked fine.

Colin had already returned to the living room with the catalog. “Here you go,” he said.

I looked at the cover of the catalog. UNDERGROUND: An Exhibit by Mia Blue, March 31, 1998. It was the catalog from that final exhibit, the night she’d disappeared.

“You were there that night?”

“I was. A friend of a friend invited Brian and me. Jeremy Scott. I actually saw you that night too, though you probably don’t remember. You were no more than three years old.”

“Jeremy Scott?”

“His studio was in the same building as your mother’s.”

I don’t know what compelled me to, but I asked, “Do you know if the studio is still there?”

“I’m not sure,” Colin said. “But it wouldn’t be too hard to find out. The address is on the back of the catalogue.”

So that’s how I found Jeremy Scott, and how I began to know my mother.

**UNSENT LETTER**

November 18, 1997

Dear W,

Merapist told me about the Underground Railroad. Actually, she just wrote down the name on a piece of paper and handed it to me with a knowing look on her face.

“Do you know what that is?” she asked.

“No,” I lied.

“It’s a network for abused women,” she said.

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked.

I watched her face as she tried to figure out how to respond to that. I love to fuck with her.

“I thought perhaps you might want to contact them,” she said.

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t.”

But inside myself, I was like, *finally*. I was beginning to wonder if all the “obvious” signs had been lost on her. It is after all the main reason I came to her. I mean, yes, there is the mother stuff and all, but in all honesty that was always just a

means to an end. I keep wondering if I'm going to have to come right out and tell her she's my mother. I had hoped she'd figure it out on her own, but obviously she's clueless. Who in their right mind would travel an hour to see a mediocre therapist when there are tons of brilliant and acclaimed ones in the city? Why would someone like me, someone who can afford any fucking therapist they want, choose her?

Partially relieved,

Mia

**ALICE**

What *do* I remember? Just bits and pieces here and there, like all the hubbub and flowers and media and police, lots and lots of police, oh, and the ceremony, the big church, all the black, the limousine ride, though that was much later, three months or so later. But, since then, being the budding Criminology student I am, I've found out some things. For instance, that my grandmother was the one that arranged the ceremony. That it was at St. Patrick's Cathedral. That it wasn't a funeral per se, you can't have a real funeral without a death certificate, and when there's no body you can't get a death certificate until seven years have passed from the time the person went missing. I can only imagine what a spectacle the thing was. My grandmother never misses an opportunity to be in the public eye, and though she'd I'm sure been on the front page of the *Times* social section at least a hundred times by then, I'm nearly certain that none of those well-planned photo ops had allowed her to show off her still youthful figure in a black Yves St. Laurent suit and to publicly grieve with such admirable aplomb. I heard, from Jeremy actually, that half of New York and most of Connecticut showed up,

including many movie stars. I've no doubt my grandmother was, as she'd hoped, the belle of the ball.

Me? Like I said, nothing. I've seen some pictures of me draped in black, looking the "poor, sweet child" as the media was saying, "who had barely escaped the same demise as her mother," the lucky one that got away, that was found huddled and shivering on the stoop of her mother's studio building a week after she went missing. I'm sure I don't have to tell you how sketchy the facts of the case were. How Jeremy changed his story three months after my mother disappeared because she never withdrew the money from the bank account they'd set up. How witnesses gave conflicting statements. Someone saw us on the subway that night. Someone saw us getting into a car. Someone saw us getting off a bus near our apartment. And how the media made the entire thing into some sort of Black Dahlia movie: my mother walked into the night never to be seen again. But I have no idea what happened between the night of the opening and the morning they found me. For all I know I was on that stoop the entire time, or hiding somewhere nearby. You tell me. You're the detective.

Sometimes I think I remember things about the opening: my mother putting me on the orange sofa, telling me to go to sleep, people hovering near me as I dozed off, the sounds of clanking champagne glasses, laughter, intellectual buzz. My mother waking me up, buttoning up my coat. Feeling cold. So cold. But I can't even say if those memories are real. Believe me, some of the great psychological minds in New York tried their hand at me. I'm told I went completely silent for almost a year, wouldn't eat, couldn't sleep, had nightmares, mostly about a dark figure coming into my room at night

and trying to kill me, which everyone decided meant that my memory was trying to come back.

They pretty much gave up on me after a few years, but when I was eight, my grandmother got this bright idea to take me to this world renowned child psychologist in Switzerland. Do you believe that? The woman is either totally wacko, or she was looking for an excuse to spend a month in Switzerland. I remember being so bored, and upset. I missed my friends and school activities. Of all the things I might've wanted to do, spending quality time with my grandmother wasn't one of them. She isn't exactly one of my favorite people. And Dr. Bickensdorfer not only irritated me with his cooing, sweet baby talk, he made me play with dolls. I was eight! Our conversations went something like this.

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Do you remember the time your mother fell down the stairs?

Me: Yes.

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Was your father there?

Me: Yes.

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Can you show me where they were standing.

Me: (Moving the "daddy" and "mommy" dolls. Putting the daddy doll's hand on the mommy doll's face.) Bang. (The mommy doll falling down the stairs.)

Or this:

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Alice, do you dream about your mommy?

Me: Yes.

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Do you ever dream about the night the bad thing happened to her?

Me: No.

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Have you remembered anything about that night?

Me: No.

Dr. Bickensdorfer: Can you show me what you think happened to your mommy?

Me: (Laying the mommy doll on its back.) She died.

As far as I'm concerned, the only good things that came out of Switzerland and Dr. Bickensdorfer were learning to ski and finding a nice copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

I remember I had this one therapist I liked. It was right after the Swiss therapist. She was young, maybe in her late twenties at the time, and she was so nice. She never pressured me. I told her once that I didn't want to remember what happened that night, or that week after, that I'd rather not even think about it, and she said that if I didn't want to, I didn't have to. She said my memories were my memories, and that some day if I wanted to "introduce myself to them" then I could. We didn't play with dolls. We colored and did puzzles and read and talked about favorite things. Hers was rain. She loved rain. She said sitting inside watching the rain, or listening to it hit the roof, made her feel so happy, so safe.

"What makes you feel happy?" she asked.

No one had ever asked me that before, so I remember I thought about it pretty seriously, and when she saw me thinking like that, she said, “Don’t think. Feel. Is there something that makes you *feel* really safe?”

“Wonderland,” I said.

“Wonderland?”

And then I told her about how my mother used to read it to me, and that when she did it felt the same way it does right before I go to sleep, when I’m cuddled up under a blanket and getting just the exact right kind of warm and cozy, and then I find myself drifting into my dreams.

“That’s the way it is now every time I even see the cover of a copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*,” I said to her. “Just the sight of it brings on that same sensation of drifting off into dreams.”

And yes, I know that sounds odd given the story behind the story, Charles Dodgson and the camera and the nude photos and his pedophilic ways and his inappropriate relationship with Alice Liddell, but my mother read the book to me long before I knew about all that, and it’s one of the only memories of her that I have. And, I don’t know, this might sound crazy, but I think Wonderland is the key. Somewhere inside it there’s a clue to my mother’s disappearance.

So I’ve told you about how I met Butch Cassidy and reconnected with Jeremy. Well, the three of us became somewhat of a tag team. Butch and I took the train to Jeremy’s studio often during the Sonja years, after school, on weekends, sometimes even in the middle of the night after our respective parents were sleeping.

Sonja, and thus my father's sobriety, lasted a lot longer than anyone, especially me, could ever have imagined by the way. Two years actually – everyone gave it three months. Poor Sonja. Her new best friend, a since-she-married-a-rich-and-powerful-man-type friend, saw my father lunching with a Victoria's Secret model at the Waldorf when he was supposed to be on a business trip in Germany, and she stupidly gave my father an ultimatum.

Butch and I loved hanging out with Jeremy. He was fun, and I suppose you could say he broadened our minds – with alcohol and marijuana primarily. Sometimes we'd get so high that we'd just stare at his paintings for hours. I never did think Jeremy was that great of a painter, still don't; it's something about the paint application, too flat if you know what I mean, and those concentric swirls have always felt contrived to me. They look a lot like those doodles you make during boring math lectures. But geez when I was high and the three of us were zeroed in on his paintings, I've got to tell you, I thought those circles were messages, pathways to some new cosmic reality.

Those were good years. Sonja turned out to be a pretty good substitute mom. She was patient with me, cared what I thought, didn't try to impose her beliefs on me, and she lived through a lot of firsts with me. She bought me my first box of tampons, my first bra, my first pair of panty hose, my first pair of cool boots, my first tube of lipstick, and, most importantly, my first book on Criminology. I was surprised how much I missed her after she left. We still keep in touch some.

And then everything changed.

My father caught Butch and I kissing on the penthouse balcony one day - well, actually we were doing a little more than kissing – and he lost it. God knows why he all

of a sudden decided to be a parent, but he sent me to Venice for a year, which would've been cool except I lived with this family that had four young children - my father had gone to Harvard with the man – and I was to help his overwhelmed wife with the cooking and cleaning. It was brutal. I will *not* be having children; that's for sure. That was bad enough, but somehow I lost touch with Jeremy, and Butch Cassidy moved to Hollywood for Brian's job. So there I was, nearly seventeen years old, and utterly miserable, and the one person who always understood me, and with whom I'd shared that same trillionth-of-a-micro-speck of space in the universe, was gone.

Don't get me wrong, Butch and I write, but he's got a pretty serious girlfriend now, who by the way has never actually read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

**UNSENT LETTER**

November 30, 1997

Dear W,

My husband drops the soap when he showers. I hear it from my daughter's bedroom as I ready her for preschool. Always at the same time, I hear him rise, shuffle still half asleep to the bathroom, do his business, and turn on the shower. And then, within minutes, I hear the clunk sound of the dropped soap. Then sometimes a bit of muttering followed by a few more clunks.

"Daddy do clunks," Alice says.

And we laugh.

"Daddy always do clunks," she says again.

And we laugh more.

And then I smell her feet, wrinkle my nose, pretend disgust at the smell of each in turn. And she giggles until she hiccups. Just like her father when he shaves. When the razor brushes over the Adam's apple, he hiccups. When my daughter laughs uncontrollably, she hiccups.

“Read,” she says as I finish tying her shoe.

“Maybe if we have time after breakfast,” I say.

Clunk!

There it goes again. Alice’s eyes twinkle. She hugs me and I pick her up and we dance our way to the kitchen pretending that her feet prance right alongside mine. I put her in the booster chair with her bananas, cheerios, and juice, and then excuse myself for a minute while she concentrates on Kermit singing a lullaby to Miss Piggy.

You see, there is a game my husband and I play. I sometimes sneak in while he is showering, peek over the curtain, and catch him in a clunk. Silly, I know, but a moment of levity in an otherwise mundane morning routine.

And so I begin to leave my daughter joining Kermit in song, when I hear the clunk yet again. Briefly she catches my eye and smiles, silently mouths the word “clunk,” and continues her lullaby.

And off I go to play our game. I enter the bathroom, perch atop the rim of the tub, and see why the clunks are a bit more prevalent this particular morning. And I begin to laugh at the absurdity of both of our situations. My catching him. His being caught. And for a fleeting moment, I feel very close to him. I love him with all my being.

It starts with his eyes. Then his jaw stiffens. Instinctively I brace myself, but it’s too late. Then darkness...

Down, down, down,

Mia

**ALICE**

I figure at least four people knew about those letters: Jeremy, my mother's therapist, my father, and me. My father's the victim, so that rules him out – for his murder at least. But, it's possible there were others, W for instance. Who's to say she didn't make copies and send them? And what about Sonja? Not that I take Sonja for a murderer, but you just never know. Or my grandmother. And since the letters were found in his office, well, there's any number of people who could have read them like his assistant, one of his many interns. But my bet's on the therapist. I went to see her once, recently in fact. I didn't tell her who I was – according to my mother's letters, she thought Helen Madison was her mother, so my maternal grandmother, but I've never really been too sentimental. I didn't know the woman growing up and I don't know her now. And since my mother never told her, why would I? I lied about who I was and why I was there, said I was writing a paper on unsolved crimes, which I am, but that wasn't my only reason for going. I was curious. I wore a suit and put my hair in a bun. I was going for mysteriously official.

“I'm Dr. Madison,” she said when she answered the door. “Come in.”

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,” I said.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Oh, no thank you. A glass of water would be good.”

“You said you’re a pre-law major?” She filled a glass with water, and then walked me to a sitting area that contained a very comfortable-looking burgundy velvet couch and leather chair.

I sat, put the water glass down on a coaster, and took in the space. It was really cool, filled with books and paintings and weird knick-knacks. I noticed the floor first, its painted lines, like a basketball court, and then I saw the white backboard, no net, but the metal hoop was still there, and the old-fashioned canned lighting and high windows. When I looked back at her, I saw she was studying me, which worried me. I wondered if she recognized me. Well not me, per se, but I’ve been told I look a lot like my mother.

“Yes,” I said. “But I’m not really thinking of practicing law, at least as a lawyer. I’m more thinking law enforcement. FBI, CIA, or private investigation maybe.”

“And the paper you’re writing? Why Mia Blue? It’s not like the case is that well known.”

“The article in the *Times*,” I said. “Three weeks ago?”

“What article?”

“Didn’t you see it? You were mentioned.”

“I was mentioned? By name?”

“Why yes, that’s how I found out about you.”

“What did it say exactly?”

“Only that she’d been seeing an out-of-town analyst. I think it mentioned your credentials, and that the police had interviewed you. Nothing damaging, or too informative.”

“That’s it?”

“Pretty much. It was in the art section so primarily highlighted her painting career. You know, a fifteen-year anniversary thing. Lots of photos of her paintings. But it did provide some information about her disappearance.”

“Like?”

“Well, that it happened the night of a group exhibit at her studio building. That her studio mate insisted her husband did it. That the police looked into it, well more than looked into it, that they exhausted all leads, but couldn’t find anything other than circumstantial evidence against him. Oh, and that they’d found her blood in the condo where she and her husband lived. The kitchen floors had been cleaned with bleach, but some had gotten into the grout. It’s fascinating, don’t you think? Everybody else in my class is doing these notorious unsolved cases, you know Black Dahlia, Marylyn Sheppard, Whitechapel, but I thought maybe I could kill two birds with one stone so to say.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Oh, sorry, that was a bad choice of words. What I meant was, I could learn about the case, and maybe, if I got lucky, also help her.”

“Have you talked to anyone else?”

“You’re my first.” I said. “I’ve made a list of others.” I handed her the list of names, which included the witnesses from that night.

“And – her husband?”

“Yes, of course. Ian Blue. Isn't he on there?”

“Not that I see.”

“Quite the oversight,” I said, and smiled knowingly, but her face didn't register anything one way or another. “Can you tell me anything about her?”

“Her personally?”

“Yes. What was she like?”

“Lovely,” she said. “And secretive.”

“In what way?”

“I can't really describe it. It's true she wasn't very forthcoming, but it was more than that. She had this mysterious air about her. It was like her mind was always elsewhere. Like she was one step ahead, or inside one of her paintings. I've only seen them in pictures, but I'd say she reminded me of her paintings, or perhaps it was the other way around. Fleeting. Ethereal.”

“Were you surprised when she disappeared?”

She contemplated the question. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Have you ever known someone you want to hold on to, but you know, deep down, you can't, Miss, um...”

“Alice is fine,” I said.

“Well Alice, sometimes it's just easier not to reach for them at all.”

“Do you think her disappearance may have had something to do with the abuse?”

“Abuse?”

“The article mentioned that Jeremy Scot had accused my – I mean Ian Blue of physically abusing his wife.”

“Jeremy Scott?”

“The studio mate.”

“Oh yes. As you’re probably aware, I really can’t talk about that. Doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“Of course,” I said. “What about W? Can you talk about him?”

“W? I don’t know who you mean?”

“The ex-boyfriend. The one she wrote the letters to.”

She studied me for what seemed several seconds, and then said, “I don’t know anything about letters.”

“Really,” I said. “That’s odd. It seems as if they were written specifically for therapy. They make mention of that fact actually, that you told her to write them.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I ask all my patients to keep a journal, and letters are one form of that. But she never indicated that she had.”

“By the way, you mentioned earlier that you hadn’t seen one of her paintings in person. Are you certain?”

Same blank expression, but this time I knew she was lying, and not only because of what Jeremy had said, because I’d seen her name listed as the painting’s owner in the catalogue that Colin Cassidy gave me.

“It’s not something I would forget,” she said.

“That’s strange,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh nothing. Just that I would’ve thought you might have. She was quite famous. And you have a lot of art on your walls. Are you a collector?”

She smiled. “No. They’re mine.”

“You painted them?”

“Yes.”

“Their beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

We talked for a while more about her practice, and my assignment. Then, I said, “Can I ask you something?”

“What’s that?”

“What was she like the last time you saw her? Her demeanor I mean.”

“Happy,” she said.

“How so?”

“I can’t quite explain it. It was as if she was at peace. As if she’d made a decision.”

“What sort of decision?”

“I really couldn’t say.” Her eyes shifted for a brief moment.

She told me then that her next patient was due shortly. I gathered my belongings and followed her to the front door. We wished each other well, and said our goodbyes. I could feel her eyes on my back as I travelled down her walk. I haven’t seen or talked to her since.

**UNSENT LETTER**

December 14, 1997

Dear W,

The ending? I hate endings. Maybe that's why I still miss you. Because when I think of you, the first thing I think about is the ending.

I wonder if that's how it was for Alice Liddell after her mother cut ties with Charles Dodgson, after she ripped up all his letters, after she forbade Alice to speak to him again. I wonder how much she thought about him, missed him. I wonder at what point she stopped believing in fairy tales.

After I stop trying to raise the volume, to incite fights, after you leave me behind and go to law school and I miss you more than I can stand, that's when I realize I love you, that's when I realize I've no choice but to leave you. I don't invite you for the weekend and I don't take your calls. You appear on my doorstep one night during finals week. You look a little drunk and your eyes are swollen as if you've been crying. You say you've been out with some friends and had the urge to see me, you've driven all

night. I let you in, take you up to my bedroom. We don't talk. Instead we make love. Afterward, we cling to one another. Rock each other back and forth.

We stay together for a nearly a year after that night, and I work one last summer at the resort on the lake. I know from experience that our dance has ended, but that our feet, like windup toys, still patter. They finally slow, then stop the final week of summer. You take me to that local bar, the one where the redheaded stepcunt sings. I watch your face as you watch hers. You're mesmerized.

I return home, and after a few days I know it's time to call you. I'm afraid. I stare at the phone, memorize it, imagine I dial your number a thousand times, as I start shaking from too much coffee. Then I'm dialing as I replay the message I intend to leave, ringing, ringing, I'm mouthing the words, ringing –

You answer,

Mia

**ALICE**

I have this fantasy. Well, actually, I've created an entire person. In my fantasy, I've somehow found him, W, and traveled many miles to the lodge on the lake, the one in my mother's letters. When he answers the door, I quickly explain who I am, and why I've come – the truth: that I want to know my mother.

“Come in,” he says.

We shake hands. Strong, calloused hands, so unlike my father's.

His home is lovely. All man, but tasteful, except for the occasional animal head on his walls. Dark wood floors, stone fireplace with a blazing fire in it, leather sofas and chairs, and paintings. My mother's paintings. What I don't see in the house are family photos.

“Is your wife home?” I ask.

He laughs. “Not too subtle, are you? You get that from her. I'm not married.”

He is older, though not as old as my father, but very handsome, a rugged kind of handsome. He's wearing worn in jeans and a deep brown flannel shirt, the same color as his eyes, with the sleeves rolled to above his wrists. Not too tall. Five foot eleven

maybe. Solid build, broad shoulders, muscular, thick. Smooth voice; neither too deep nor too high. He smells a combination of fresh laundered fabric and hickory. It's obvious to me what my mother saw in him. He feels comfortable, like worn in leather.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” he asks. “Or a drink? I've got a bottle of fifteen-year-old McCallum.”

“Scotch sounds perfect.”

We sit in his living room, a great room with twenty-foot ceilings and floor to ceiling windows on one end looking out to the lake. Several small boats are moored to the long dock. I'm not good at boats, but it looks like most of them are sailboats. But, there is one speedboat, a yellow one.

“Did you know my mother wrote you letters?” I ask. “Love letters?”

He cocks his head in confusion.

“She didn't send them. I found them years ago, but then... well... I lost them. My father took them. I have no idea what happened to them.”

“I wish she would have sent them,” he says.

“Pardon my boldness,” I say. “But is my mother the reason you never married?”

He doesn't respond, but I can tell by his demeanor that I've struck a cord. Then he says, “Tell me about you.”

And so I do. I share my entire life with him, and he does the same. Tells me about his childhood, the first time he saw my mother, how they fell in love. It's as if I've known him forever. We sip our scotch, listen to Rachmaninoff and Jim Croce, and watch the sunset together. It's one of the most perfect days I can remember. I feel as if my mother is there with us. Hovering. Smiling. The three of us a perfect family.

**UNSENT LETTER**

December 29, 1997

Dear W,

I often wonder what would have become of you. Would you have realized your goals? Would you have lived in the town, been a respected member of the community, where you were born, where everyone knew you, recognized you on the street? Nodded hello while you lunched.

Would you have secrets?

What would your life have been? Would we have married? Would I have cooked your dinners? Ironed your shirts? Would you have fixed my car? Emptied the garbage?

Did you have secrets?

I imagine you walking through the woods or the brush. I am behind you, following you. You hold a long blade of grass between your teeth as you move stealthily, seek surprises, search for wildlife hidden among nature. You don't carry a gun. Not this

time. Up ahead, the sound of a partridge cooing, then fluttering its wings. You stop, reach your arm behind you, take my hand softly, lovingly. There you say; do you see it?

I imagine you waiting silently in a blind for the sun to show. You are holding your bow. A rustle of leaves alerts you to your prey. Your jaw sets with quiet determination, your elbow pulls back, and the arrow flies through the air.

I imagine your tears as stop your car on the freeway after just hitting a young doe. You get out quickly, run to her rescue, but it's too late. They aren't supposed to die this way, you say. They're supposed to die in the wild with the gun or the arrow. It's God's way of selective life. Order out of chaos. Without this, they would starve. It's merciful. I'm confused by this notion, confused by your tears.

I imagine your face, your ever-easy smile, your eyes filled with delight as you unwrap my gift to you, Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. Your favorite author, favorite book, you say. One of the few you have read.

I imagine you above me, tickling me. I'm on the living room carpet, my arms and legs flailing, trying to ward you off as I laugh, and laugh. Then beg you to stop. Instead, we wrestle like children, until your mother comes in and tells you to stop. You get up, chase after her, warn her she's next.

I imagine you coming home to your mother on a break from school. You hug her, lift her off the ground, swirl her around. She laughs, embarrassed yet proud.

I imagine your body as it sprays through the water golden and lithe on one ski. You are so beautiful, so graceful.

I imagine you driving the boat. One leg on the floorboard, the other bent at the knee, resting on the seat, your hair streaming behind you, your smile wide, carefree, your body arching forward, preparing to hit the waves.

I imagine you swimming towards me. Laughing at my misfortune after you've purposefully dumped the Sunfish. I want you to face your fears, you say, so now you can enjoy the sail.

I imagine behind me, supporting, as we ski down my first mountain, slowly, cautiously, first right, then left, until we reach the bottom.

I imagine a field of brown hairs covering the landscape of your chest. I try to count them with my fingers as you sleep, softly, so as not to wake you.

I imagine your brown eyes, your ears, your eyebrows, your long beautiful lashes, the bridge of your nose, your full lovely lips, the curve of your waist, the indents in your hips, the strength of your knees, the hair on your toes.

I imagine your taste and your smell.

I imagine the lovely shape of your nostrils as you lay above me, the feel of your smooth, hard back as you bear down on me, your stomach against mine as you enter me, your lips as you trace my nipples, my neck, my face, my eyelids, then my lips. Your neck as it strains far above me in ecstasy. Your head as it rests on upon my breast as you begin to leave your body behind and enter sleep.

I imagine you walking down the steps of the lodge toward me as I lay in the sun. You're wearing a suit, holding the neck of its jacket as you fling it over your shoulder. Your hair moving in the breeze, glistening in the sun. You are so sure, so perfect. You have the world at your fingertips. No worries, no fear.

You were meant to live.

You surrounded life. You were the beloved, God's gift, the perfect man. What would have become of such a man? When would the realities of life have penetrated the armor? Or would they have? Would it still be intact? Would you still be invincible?

Would you have secrets?

I imagine you walking toward me in a crowd somewhere in the middle of the universe. I feel pressure under my eyes. My skin tingles. My chest tightens. There's no doubt it is you. You are the same. You keep walking, almost pass me by. I reach out, touch you. Recognition slowly shows itself on your face. Still within its spell, you reach out, touch my hand, my hair, my cheek. Time and space cease to exist. We are alone. As before, I know you, all of you. It is merely the next day, the next hour, the next minute. There's been no in between. We are a fiction of time. Part of a parallel universe. I long to stay in this moment forever.

I imagine you walking away. Back into the crowd. I follow the back of your head until I can no longer distinguish it out of the density. I wait awhile, then step back into pace.

In memoriam,

Mia

**Part Two****THE INVESTIGATION**

*In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.*

- Lewis Carroll