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KEVIN BROCKMEIER

A Fable for the Living

FROM *Electric Literature*

ONCE THERE WAS A COUNTRY where no one addressed the dead except in writing. Whenever people felt the urge to speak to someone they had outlived, they would take a pen and set their thoughts down on paper: *You should have seen the sun coloring the puddles this morning, or Things were so much easier when you were alive, so much happier, or I wanted to tell you I got all A's on my report card, plus a C in algebra.* Then they would place the message atop the others they had written, in a basket or a folder, until the summer arrived and they could be delivered.

In this country it rained for most of the year. The landscape was lush with the kinds of trees and ivies that flourish in wet weather, their leaves the closest green to black. The creeks and pools swam with armies of tiny brown frogs. Usually, though, in the first or second week of June, the clouds would thin from the air little by little, in hundreds of parallel threads, as if someone were sweeping the sky clean with a broom, and the drought would set in. This did not happen every summer, but most. Between the glassy river to the west of the country and the fold of hills to the east, the grass withered and vanished, the puddles dried up, and the earth separated into countless oddly shaped plates. Deep rifts formed in the dirt. It was through these rifts that people slipped the letters they had written. The dead were buried underground, and tradition held that they were waiting there to collect each sheet of paper, from the most heartfelt expression of grief to the most trivial piece of gossip:

You won't believe it, but Ellie is finally leaving that boyfriend of hers.

What I want to know is whether you think I should take the teaching job. The crazy thing is, when the phone rang last night, I was absolutely sure it was you.

Do you remember that time you dropped your earring in the pond and it surprised that fish?

I just don't know what I'm doing these days.

So it was that people surrendered the notes they had saved with a feeling of relief and accomplishment, letting them fall through the cracks one by one, then returned home, satisfied that they had been received.

This was the way it had always been, for who knows how long, with the dead turning their hands to the surface of the earth, and no orphans praying out loud to their parents, and no widows chitchatting with the ghosts of their husbands, and all the wish-it-weres and might-have-beens of the living oriented around a simple stack of paper and a cupful of pens. Then something very strange happened.

There was a woman, not quite old but not quite young, whose fiancé had died unexpectedly. It was barely a month into their engagement and the two of them were attending a chamber music concert when he began coughing into his sleeve and excused himself from his seat. Because they had quarreled earlier over the cost of the wedding, she did not worry about him when he failed to return. Instead, with exasperation, she thought, *What could possibly be keeping him?*—little realizing that what was keeping him was death.

When she went to the foyer to look for him, she found a ring of ushers clustered around his body as if he were a spill for which no one wanted to accept responsibility. She would never forget the sight of his tongue pressed to his teeth, struggling to form some word he had just missed his chance of saying.

More than a year had gone by since then, a terrible year of ill health, sleeplessness, and rainy days that layered themselves over her like blankets. Who was she? Who had she become? Her skin was paler than it used to be, her hair grayer. Recently she had noticed creases lingering around her eyes in the morning, and also across her forehead, as if she had spent the night squinting into a harsh light. These lines did not go away when she rubbed them, vanishing only gradually as the hours wore on. She could foresee a time when the

mask of age that grief had placed over her face would simply be her face.

She missed her fiancé terribly. Sometimes it seemed to her that he was only a beautiful story she had told herself, so quickly had she fallen in love with him and so quickly had he left her. It was hard to believe that the man who refused to button his collar, whose kisses began so shyly and ended so fervidly, who never once looked at her as if she were foolish or tiresome or even ordinary, was the same man she had found splayed across the theater's staircase like an animal pinned to a board.

Frequently she had the feeling that he was standing just behind her, his breath tickling her ear like it used to when he came prowling over to seize her waist while she was cooking. All the same, she did not speak to him.

Instead, like everyone, she accumulated letters that would never be answered. *I don't understand how this can be my life*, she wrote, and *What am I going to do?* And occasionally, late at night, when she could not sleep, something longer such as *Do you know what it feels like? Shall I describe it for you? It feels like the two of us got on a boat together, and the deck tossed me into the water, and you went sailing away without me. Thrown overboard—that's how it feels. So I want you to tell me, because I really need to know, why did I spend my whole life waiting to fall in love with just the right person if you were just going to leave and it would all be for nothing?*

That first summer, immediately after he died, she had barely been able to pick up a pen, but by the time the earth split open a year later, she had amassed three heavy baskets of letters. One afternoon, she went to the parched field where the fair sat in the autumn and the soccer team practiced in the spring and dropped them into the deepest opening she could find. The ground swallowed them as neatly as a pay phone accepting coins, except for the last page, which continued to show through the dirt until gravity gave it a tug and it slipped out of sight. That was where her heart was, she thought, cradled underground with the roots and the bones. As she stood in the dust listening to the insects buzz, she dashed off one last note and let it go: *Are you even out there?*

The next morning, she received her answer.

Her house was built like all the others, with its roof projecting over the front door to keep it from opening directly into the rain, and it was her pleasure upon waking in the morning to step out onto the porch and take stock of the day. This particular morning arrived hot and bright, with the sky that oddly whitened blue it became when there was no moisture in the air. She was surprised to find a fissure interrupting her lawn. She kept the grass carefully trimmed and watered, and she was sure she would have seen the rift if it had been there the day before. The crack ran as straight as a line on a map. She traced it with her eyes, following it across her neighbor's yard and a few others before it vanished into the woods at the end of the block, and then back again until it dead-ended at her front steps.

But that was not the strange part. No, the strange part was the sheet of paper that was protruding from it. She picked it up and unfolded it.

Of course I am, it read.

The handwriting was familiar to her, with its walking-stick *r* and its *o*'s that didn't quite close at the top. But it took her a moment to figure out where she recognized it from.

She spent the next few hours twisting her engagement ring around and around her knuckle. A potato chip bag was dipping and spinning in the middle of the road, and she watched it ride the breeze until a boy rode by and flattened it beneath his bicycle. Finally, on a blank sheet of paper, she wrote, *If you are who I believe you are, tell me something only you would know about me.*

She was unaccountably nervous. She knelt on the porch, closing her eyes as she slipped the note into the fissure. Something deep within the ground seemed to wrest it from her fingers, like a fish plucking a cricket from a hook.

For the rest of the day, every time she went outside, she expected to see a flash of white paper waiting for her in the grass. But it was not until the next morning that she found one: *I love your gray coat with the circles like cloud-covered suns.*

She stared closely at the breach in her lawn. If she followed it on foot, she calculated, she would eventually reach the scorched field where she had gone to deposit her letters.

On a fresh sheet of paper, she replied, *Everyone we know has seen*

me in that coat. It doesn't prove a thing.

Early that afternoon, an answer arrived: *I love how you laugh with your mouth wide open, and how you snort sometimes, and how embarrassed it makes you when you do.*

She wrote, *Well, yes, that's definitely me.*

I love the joke you told at Zach and Christina's wedding reception.

She wrote, *If this is a trick . . . this had better not be a trick. Is it?*

I love how easily you cry when you're happy.

So the correspondence went on, hour after hour and day after day, pushing across the distance of the soil. All his letters were love letters, delivered while she was sleeping or mopping the kitchen, weeding the garden or out buying milk. When she held them up to the sunlight, the faded marks of earlier messages emerged through the stationery: *Bailey had two kittens last week, and I named the first one Bowtie, and the second one Mike! I hope you're better now, I truly do, because I am, I tell you, I am. I think there's something terribly wrong with me.*

They came in a variety of hands and were often hard to decipher. She presumed he had salvaged the pages from under the ground, a few dozen among the many hundreds of thousands that had rained down over the generations of the dead.

I love the way you stand at the mirror in the morning picking the lip balm from your lips.

I love the inexplicable accent, from nowhere anyone has ever visited, you use when you're trying to sound French.

I love that first moment, at night, when you trace the curve of my ear with your fingernail.

Soon the situation no longer seemed strange to her. It was as if the two of them were kneeling on opposite sides of the bedroom door, sliding notes to each other along the floor. Then it was as if the door had vanished, vanished entirely, and they were simply sitting in the bedroom together. When she had crossed the threshold she could not say, only that she had. He was her fiancé—she did not doubt it—but what had brought him back to her?

The next day, a message came while she was sitting on her front steps. She glanced away for a moment, and there it was, nestled in the thick fringe of grass around the fissure, like a mushroom spring-

ing up after a thunderstorm. *I love you*, it read, and *I want you to join me. I want us to be together again, my jewel, my apple. Whatever the cost, I want it, I want it. And I don't want to wait until you die, because God knows how long that will be.*

It was his longest letter yet. She sensed that every word had demanded some mysterious payment from him, a fee that could only be understood by those who had already been laid to rest. What was he asking? That she end her life? That she suspend it? Or something else altogether, something she could hardly imagine?

For the next few days, he left no love notes in her yard, no entreaties, only a single question that appeared late one night on the back of a chewing gum wrapper: *Hello?*

He was giving her time to think. He was waiting for her below ground—she knew it, she knew it. Every day, the crack by her porch grew a little larger. At first, it was only a chink in the dirt, no wider than the slot where she dropped her mail at the post office, but gradually it stretched open until it was as big as an ice chest, and then a steamer trunk, and then a gulf into which she could easily have fit her entire body. She wondered what it would be like if she accepted his invitation. She began to dream that she was living beneath the field on the far side of the woods, moving through a long procession of rooms and hallways where the dead milled around like guests at a trade convention.

Throughout the day, at various angles, the sun pierced the hills and the pastures, sending bright silver needles through the ceiling of the earth, so that it was never completely dark, and at night, when the land was soaked in shadows, the people around her glowed with a strange heat. She watched them flare and shimmer through their skin, their bones going off like bombs, every limb a magnificent firework of carbon, phosphorus, and calcium. It seemed that the surface of the world had two sides: on one were the bereaved spouses, the outcast teenagers, the old men and women who had no one left to reminisce with, and on the other were the lovers and friends and parents they had outlived—all of them, whether above or below, aching for those who were gone; all of them, whether above or below, pressing their fingers to the soil. Her eyes flickered in her face and her teeth shone in her mouth, and when she woke, before the dream had lost its color, she felt that she was recalling some earlier exist-

tence, like a house she had lived in as a child, familiar down to its last curved faucet and last chipped floorboard.

The truth was that the thread connecting her to the world was as thin as could be. A sunrise here or there, the feel of suede against her skin, the aroma of strong coffee in the morning, and a few moments of forgetful well-being—that was it, that was all she had, and she knew that it could snap at any moment. She had always believed that one day someone would come along and love her and she would understand how to live. Maybe the idea was juvenile, but she had carried it with her all her life, like an ember smoldering in a pouch of green leaves. It was only the past awful year that had forced her to give it up. And now, here it was again, the hope that she had finally found him, the man who would wrench her into the world, the good and beautiful world, where people got married and had children and slowly grew old together.

One afternoon, as she was standing at the kitchen counter eating a turkey and diced olive sandwich, she realized that she had made up her mind. She swept the bread crumbs into her palm and brushed them gently, caressingly, into the sink, as if she were stroking a cat. Then she went outside and knelt at the edge of the crevice. Her neighbor was grilling a steak in his backyard. A forsythia bush rustled in the wind.

There she was, and then there she wasn't, and two large, pale ants were exploring the impression her knees had left in the grass.

It was the last the world would see of her, or at least the last the sun would, the last the sky. I am here to tell you what happened next.

Soon after the woman went to join her fiancé, as the final sweltering days of summer came to a close, an unusual event took place. Late one night, while everyone was sleeping, something shifted beneath the brown pastures and the dry creek beds, and a hundred thousand fissures spread across the landscape, leading to a hundred thousand front doors. Shortly after the sun rose, in one house after another, the lights went on, and people showered and got dressed, and then they stepped outside to go to work. Earlier that week, a mass of clouds had been seen at the horizon, which meant that it was almost time for the rains to begin again, but this particular day had dawned hard and clear. The heat rang out like a coin. The grass twitched and straight-

ened in the morning air. And the lawns—they were split down the center, and from every rift projected a sheet of paper:

I love that perfect little cluster of freckles on your wrist.

I love the way your hair curls when you work up a sweat.

I love how good you were to me when I got sick.

I love watching you sit at your desk, the sun shining on you through the philodendron leaves.

I love your many doomed attempts to give up caffeine.

Once there was a country where it rained for most of the year, and everyone resided underground, and no one was quite sure who was dead and who was living.

But it did not matter, because they were happy. And they were ever. And they were after.

JUDY BUDNITZ

■
Tin Man.

FROM *This American Life*

“WHAT KIND OF SON ARE YOU?” asks Aunt Fran.

Aunt Nina says, “Your own flesh and blood!”

“What your mother wouldn’t do for you . . .” Aunt Fran goes on. “She’d do anything for you, anything in the world—”

“And now you won’t give just a little back. For shame,” says Aunt Nina. The heat is stifling, but she pulls her sweater closer.

We’re sitting in the hospital waiting room, Aunt Fran and Aunt Nina and I. My mother suffered a heart attack this morning. We’re waiting to see her.

The doctors told us her heart won’t last much longer. Her old ticker is ticking its last. “We can’t fix it,” the doctors said. “She needs a new one, a transplant.”

“Then give her one!” the aunts cried.

“It’s not that easy,” said the doctors. “We need a donor.”

The doctors went away. The aunts looked at me.

“Arnie,” Nina said, “what about your heart?”

“My heart?!” I shouted. “Are you crazy?”

That started them both off on what a bad son I was. It’s impossible to argue with Nina, especially with Fran to back her up. They wept, at first, but now they sit grimly. A Styrofoam cup of coffee steams next to my foot but I can’t reach for it. The aunts don’t care, they are amazed that I bought it, amazed that I can even think of coffee at a time like this.

Aunt Fran wears a bally sweater and sensible shoes. Her lips are