

Kathryn Kulpa

Dear Heap and Wendy in Rehab, from Lives of Lost Objects: A chapbook

Dear Heap:

This is just to let you know that I have decided not to leave my room until you marry me.

I'm sure you mean to marry me someday. I'm sure you just forgot. You forgot me that night, the night I climbed out my window carrying my suitcase. I had to be quiet so Father wouldn't hear. I hated to leave my little cat Bella. She stood in the windowsill mewling and I was afraid Father would hear, but how could I take her? She would get tired of being carried. She would jump from my arms. A logging truck on the highway would squash her flat. My mind is filled, every day, with the worst things that can happen. It emits fear like the rendering plant on the Old Post Road emits its terrible smell of smoke and offal. This is the price of love.

So I left Bella crying for me. Such an eerie sound, a cat's cry. Like the call of a sickly child, a premature babe born too young, destined only to die.

But I digress.

And we transgressed, but it was not sin, though Father says otherwise. It was love. For love I climbed out my window that summer night. For love I dragged my suitcase down River Road to the place we had appointed to meet. The moon was bright that night, and full, and I stayed in the shadows, as we had agreed. I sat on my suitcase at the side of the road. I could smell yesterday's rain, and mint blooming on the riverbank. I heard cars go by, but they weren't your car. I heard trucks, heavy enough to shake the world. I smelled the trucks, their tar and diesel. I felt their rumble through the thin soles of my shoes. They weren't the best shoes to wear. I felt blisters rising on my feet from that long walk in those skimpy peep-toe shoes, but they were your favorites. The first night we danced I wore those shoes. I'd painted my toenails and you said they looked like seashells, such tiny pearly toes. You said, how could anyone have such small feet? Everything about me

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was small, to you.

Miss Julie from my old youth group said you were a big lummoX. She said your tie was too loud, and why weren't you in the war? Then your hand slipped around my waist.

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I painted my toenails again, that night, the night you didn't marry me. I painted them just before I left. I stretched out my legs and looked at my tiny pearly toes under the bright yellow face of the moon. I thought how happy you would be when you saw my feet in those shoes. But you never saw them. I waited until the moon faded under the brighter light of the sun. I never saw you.

Where did you go that night? Why did you leave and not take me with you?

At first I was sure I hated you but now I know. Something happened to you. An accident. You're in a hospital right now. All these months later. You still can't speak; you still can't remember. No one knows your name. You sleep and sleep. The coma man. That poor unknown patient in 12-C.

Someday you will wake up and remember everything. Someday it will be your voice I hear outside my window and not Bella's poor cries. Although why should she cry like that, silly kitty? Like something lost and alone, though she's right outside my room. Like a hungry infant no one feeds. Like a sickly babe, born only to die, buried in a place no one goes, under a pale cold moon.

But I digress, again. I am so easily distracted these days. So tired, as much as I sleep. I think sleeping makes me tired. Perhaps it's dreaming that tires me. I see too much in my dreams. My eyes ache from so many dreams.

Still I don't see half of what the moon sees.

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But when I sleep I'm closer to you. You're sleeping, too. You're sleeping in a clean white room with a clean white nurse. I hope she's kind to you. I hope she talks to you, though you can't answer. It's what I would do.

I keep these letters in a shoe box. Someday I'll send them to you. It's hard to mail them, because of course I can't leave my room until you come back and marry me, but I'll find a way to get them to you. Then you'll come and whistle for me underneath my window. I'll put on my dancing shoes, my summer shoes with the open toes. And we'll be gone.

Until then, dear Heap, sleep well. Don't let the moon look at you too long while you're sleeping. Don't dream too much, because sometimes dreaming opens doors that ought to stay closed. Tell your nurse to trim your hair, or I won't know you when I see you. Tell her to be kind to you--but not too kind. I'll know. Tell her I'm watching her too.

Forever your,

Little Bit

* * *

Wendy in Rehab

Sometimes, life just hands you a jolt. You might wish it was a Jolt cola, cold and frosty, more speed in that bottle than a gram of cocaine, but you might not get that wish. You might get, instead, a jolt to the brain, 10,000 volts running through your head. Once you had a boyfriend who liked to quote what you didn't know then was a country song, I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy. Not that they do those anymore. You hope. But this is you, post-arrest, post-sentencing, and people like to scare you with their Cuckoo's Nest stories, like the man who had such violent seizures

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during rapid detox his eyes actually blew out of their sockets. People are mean here. They're pissed at life: aren't you? Haven't you come to this: sweet Wendy Alright, the queen of perky prime-time preteen pulchritude, rosy apple of every wistful grandparent's eye, pigtailed May who'd starred in a thousand pervy December's wet dreams. Now just another clever headline, squinting in the flashbulb's glare with your eyes unfocused and your hair all bed-head from that cop b**** who'd shoved your head into the car: THE KID IS NOT ALRIGHT! Soon you won't be a headline anymore. Soon (you can see it in the puffy eyes, the poochy belly, circled in red in some quarter-page tabloid clip and labeled CELLULITE, in case anyone missed it) you won't even be cute anymore.

But you haven't given up the war yet. You're still fighting in your own quiet way. When the counselors get on your case you draw them as the animals they most resemble: whiskery Don as a grey squirrel with a red fez, hippy chick Marta as a long-faced llama. There are too many greys in this place and way too much beige, so you cherish color, paint your nails goth eggplant, stain your lips orange, draw sharpie tattoos on your arms. Squiggles and swirls. Circles inside circles. Bluer than blue, bluer than you. They're cerulean, azure, they're pool-bottom aqua.

You lived in a house with a swimming pool once. It was never filled anymore, no money, but you and your brother Brian loved that pool. You'd climb down the rusty ladder and chase each other across the dry, cracked blue bottom, playing Jedis with old pool noodles you found in the shed. You find it remarkable now, how unsupervised your childhood was, how many hours of glorious neglect you enjoyed. This was before you saved your family. Before you were cast as wise-cracking, level-headed Andi Cook on *Too Many Cooks!*, America's tomboy sweetheart.

Your mother was broke. Your father was gone, Benelux or the Bahamas, someplace without an extradition treaty. The housekeeper disappeared, then the gardener. Weeds grew tall and spiky in the yard, while grass burned and flowers shriveled. On the day you had to move, Brian disappeared. Your mother pulled boxes aside, sweating and swearing at the father you barely remembered. She screamed Brian's name until her voice broke

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and took two Xanax and said she was through, tired to death of both of you, and it fell to you to find your brother hiding in the old pool with the tarp pulled back over it.

We could live here, Wendy, he said, and how you wanted to, for a moment. He had it all worked out: oranges picked from the trees, for food, and the Piggly Wiggly down the street, for a bathroom. You'd live there together, forever, foraging, growing tall and spiky like the weeds.

You knew you couldn't stay but you sat with him for a while in the heat of the tarp-filtered sun, Brian crying himself to sleep finally with his head in your lap saying I don't want to go with her, I don't want to, and even now you think, what if you hadn't made him?