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## *Next Year, For Sure*

**I**F YOU PUT ALL the religious books on one shelf, it makes God look like a phase you went through. Like a deck you were going to build until you got the books and all the tools and then didn't. No, it's better to have the religious books scattered seemingly at random, snuggled between a history of French anarchism and a slim volume of found poetry. Then it's clear that spirituality is just one facet in a richly lived life. It says you are open to possibilities.

He doesn't even know if Emily believes in God, *per se*. He knows that she swears impressively but never says goddammit—not once in their seven conversations. He knows that she lives in a crowded, bustling house called Ahimsa, but that house would have been named long before Emily moved to town and took over this part of his brain. And he knows that when he asked if she'd like to come apartment-sit over the long weekend, she used the word *sanctuary*, and said it in a way that stilled the air.

I think I have a crush on Emily, he tells Kathryn in the shower. This is where they confide crushes.

A heart crush or a boner crush? she says.

He doesn't know how to choose. It's not at all sexual. He hasn't thought about Emily that way. And he would never say boner. But it's not just his heart, either. It's his molecules.

So he tells Kathryn about his molecules. How the first time he met Emily, it felt like his DNA had been resequenced. How he felt an instant

kinship and a tenderness that was somehow painful. How, whenever he talks to her, he comes away feeling hollowed out and nauseous like after swimming too long in a chlorinated pool. And how—this, sheepishly—he has spent days arranging and rearranging their books and postcards and take-out menus, not just to make the apartment as welcoming as possible, but as informative. As compelling.

You're awesome, Kathryn says.

And this is why he loves her. Everything he does, she loves. Everything she does, he loves.

Kathryn gets into bed still wet, the way she likes, and he makes the bed around her. A pillow under her knees. One arm tucked between the sheet and the blanket. She does this thing, this purring sound in her throat, which he has never been able to approximate.

He slides under the covers and wraps himself around her. She purrs and burrows, nestles with contentment, and then seems sad.

I wish Sharon and Kyle were coming, she says.

Me too, he says, and he holds her and waits. When she is ready, when she has had a chance to feel all that is wrong about this weekend, he starts to tell her all the ways in which it is going to be right. Four days in the woods—no cars, no phones, no people. Four days alone with her favourite person in her favourite place with her favourite foods. She smiles. He walks her through each meal they've planned, the ingredients premeasured and packed into satisfyingly compact little bundles on the backs of their bikes. She nods and mmmms until she starts to twitch and is away.

He tries to let himself be pulled down by the warm suck of her undertow, but he is left lying in the dark. In his head, he starts to compose the off-hand note he will write as they rush off the next morning. Hi Emily, Please make yourself at home. There is white wine in the fridge, and red—Hi Emily, Everything you see is yours. Hi Emily, I love you. Hi Emily, We'll be back Monday night. Hope you have a great weekend! Love, Chris.

Love, Chris & Kathryn.

Kathryn & Chris.

It's a two-hour ride to the big ferry, then another two hours on the other side, then a smaller ferry, another ride. By the time they get to the campsite, it will be dusk. But right now it's still dewy and cool and they are taking it easy. Normally, there'd be the four of them riding in

a line, and he knows Kathryn's favourite thing is to ride at the back and watch them all snaking through the city, loaded with gear. Today they are riding side by side because it is too lonely not to.

Kathryn has been a little sad all morning and, to cheer her up, he has been amusing her with all the fussy, imperceptible measures he has taken to prepare the apartment for Emily: vacuuming the coils behind the fridge, re-labelling their ragtag spice jars, hiding their exercise tapes. Nothing invigorates Kathryn like a good crush—more often hers, but especially his—and she was quick to make it into a game they could both play. After they put on fresh sheets for Emily, Kathryn insisted they should roll around on the just-made bed.

If it looks too neat, she said, it seems forbidding. What you want is a deep, deep sense of clean, yes, but then a surface that is—

(And here she made a gesture at once inviting and indifferent.)

They rolled on the bed together until it needed to be remade.

On the last ferry, they stand away from their bicycles so they don't have to field questions from the bored drivers. They lean on the railing and gaze out over the water.

I used to always see whales on this ferry when I was a kid, Kathryn says. She is stretching her calf muscle without taking her eyes off the horizon. I thought that was the whole point, she says, the whales. The first time they didn't come, I told my dad he should get our money back.

He always likes this story. He likes to look inside her brain and see how it works, like an ant farm or a cutaway model of a submarine—he never gets tired of looking.

He tells her, again, about the time his family went camping and how he woke up one morning to find two killer whales playing in the water just off the shore, and how he stood there for half an hour, just twenty feet from his family asleep in their tents, and never woke them up.

Her eyes well with fresh love. Sometimes he wonders if she remembers his stories; it always seems like she's hearing them for the first time. Other times, she will pluck a thread from a story he has long since forgotten, and he feels profoundly plumbed.

I hope you'd wake me up, she says.

I would definitely wake you up, he says.

But he doesn't know why he hadn't woken his family. Or why he had hoped, almost prayed, that they wouldn't wake up on their own. Why, after just a few minutes, he had started to wish the whales would leave, even while he couldn't stop staring and gasping with joy.

Kathryn presses into him, and they stare out over the teeming ocean. They see no whales.

Setting up the tent is awkward. He gets agitated by small objects when he is tired and sticky. Usually, Kathryn does the tents with Kyle while Sharon and he make dinner. They have this whole system.

Tonight the tent seems needlessly complex. Kathryn, though, is a good teacher. She talks him through each pole and peg as if she were talking him down from a very wide ledge. He likes learning things from her. He has a list in his head: how to develop film in the bathtub, how to can tomatoes, how to spell his name in sign language. By the time the tent is up, it is past dark and they are too tired to cook. They sit in the tent and eat a jar of peanut butter.

Kathryn falls asleep in her clothes, mid-sentence. He feels through her backpack in the dark and finds her mouthguard. He holds it up to her lips and whispers in her ear. Baby bird, he says. She opens her jaw and feels for the plastic guard with her lips. He watches her pull it into her mouth and hears it snap into place.

He lies back and listens to the tide coming in or going out. He wants to stay in this moment, this ache of contentedness, but his mind is already starting to skip and skitter. He tries to tunnel down into his body, to feel the way his muscles are singing from the ride, the way his cells are feasting on the fat and protein of the peanut butter, the way his bones know that they are resting on the earth. But he thinks: Emily.

Emily.

Emily.

Emily.

Kathryn calls it the Tuna Voice. On their fifth anniversary, after almost a lifetime without meat, Kathryn woke up in the night to a voice in her head. The voice said TunaTunaTunaTunaTuna. She couldn't sleep. She couldn't read. She couldn't eat. Or she could, but it didn't matter. For weeks she tried fatty omega acids and vitamin B, but all she could think was TunaTunaTunaTunaTuna. Finally, she gave up and ate a damn tuna-fish sandwich and the voice stopped. She almost cried for two days. About a year later, the voice came back, and she immediately ate a tuna-fish sandwich. Now she buys one can of tuna a year and keeps it in the cupboard and doesn't call herself a vegetarian.

Maybe you just need to eat Emily, she says over breakfast.

He makes a face.

It's only once a year, she says.

He'd like to change the subject, but he can't think of anything else.

Without Kyle and Sharon, the day feels long.

Without Kyle and Sharon, they eat lunch too early, and then dinner too early. And then the sun won't go down.

Years ago, before Kyle and Sharon, they had come here with other friends. Lori and Brett the first time, but Lori and Brett seemed to believe that the point of camping together was so the men and the women could get away from each other. Lori kept saying things like, Why don't you boys go explore while we get dinner organized. And later, to Kathryn, conspiratorially, Why don't we make the menfolk wash the dishes.

Michael and Pat had come another year, but what made Michael and Pat such sparkling dinner guests made them exhausting campers. They were funny, inquisitive, and always on, quickly filling each silence with witty banter and innuendo until after three days it felt like the most important thing in the world was for four people to be able to sit in the woods and not talk.

Then there was Susan and Mark, whose irony and just-kidding insults gradually became toxic. And Michael and Rhen, who were fine, but who never stopped feeling like company.

Really, Kyle and Sharon were perfect. Kyle and Sharon took turns telling stories. Kyle and Sharon asked questions and listened to your answers. Even when you paused to take a breath, even when you circled back to find the words you'd never found before, they didn't interrupt. Kyle and Sharon got tipsy from the same number of drinks. Kyle and Sharon never said, Too bad—it's three against one. Kyle and Sharon went to bed at the right time and didn't sleep all day and make you tiptoe around the campsite. Kyle and Sharon got different stories from Kathryn—stories he had never heard before.

The only problem with Kyle and Sharon is the question too important to ask: Will they come next year?

They go to bed before dark, and wait in each other's arms for sleep.

I hope you don't leave me for Emily, Kathryn says.

I'm not going to leave you for Emily, he says.

He doesn't want to leave her for Emily. He wants to be smart, to be a grown-up, to learn from his mistakes. Besides, it wouldn't work.

He knows, just from their few conversations, that Emily's days are bursting with potlucks and benefits and this friend's opening and that friend's closing, and he knows how this would go. For a couple of weeks, it would be extraordinary. He would rise to every occasion. He would be fun and vibrant, full of fresh stories and observations. Her friends would love him. Because he can be impressive. Then, he would reach the bottom of his reserves. He would need a night to recharge. He would need *most* nights to recharge. Emily would go out without him and be lonely, or she would stay home to be with him, but either way, her friends would take it personally. Because when he says that he needs to recharge, they say: Exactly, all the more reason to come out. They say it'll be just what he needs. Because they can't understand that the thing that rejuvenates them is the thing that drains him. That going out and having fun is harder than work.

And then Emily, after months of feeling isolated and losing touch with who she is, finally breaks up with him. Or she should. And everyone is miserable. Him, Emily, Kathryn. Kathryn who had been the perfect fit all along.

While the tent fills with their exhaled breath, he plays the scenario out in his head like a film reel, watching the relationships implode in real time, then watching in reverse, trying to inoculate himself against the voice whispering at the edges of his brain.

When he wakes up, Kathryn is gone. There is a note on the picnic table, waiting under a rock. She has seen people in kayaks and has gone to look for the rental place. She loves him. And under this, she has drawn a picture of him sleeping, all furrowed and earnest.

He cooks breakfast like a ceremony, channelling all his errant feelings of tenderness into her food. She is Kathryn the Amazing. His favourite person in the world. He tries to prolong the preparation, to tease the food along, so that when she returns, everything will be moments from ready, like magic. But then suddenly it is done, and she is still gone.

He putters around the campsite, tidying their gear, folding the discarded clothes that have accumulated at the foot of their sleeping pads. He oils her chain. He adjusts his brakes. After a while, he eats breakfast alone, and sets hers aside for her. He reads her letter again. He stares into the loops of her *g's*, the cavities in her vowels, and senses he has said too much. It is time to stop talking about Emily. But he doesn't know how to not share everything with Kathryn. He doesn't

know how to keep a secret from her. Or how to just shrug and smile when she asks what he's thinking, which is what she does when she comes back. She is wearing a life jacket.

The kayak is a two-person deal, and big. It was the last they had. Cinched into the rear cockpit, he feels he is part of a two-headed sea-monster—half human, half boat, half human. They negotiate their way along the shore, too nervous for the open water where the current sometimes takes people away.

For years, Kyle and Sharon have been trying to hike round to the other side of the island, seemingly impossible to reach by land. This, he knows, is where the kayak is headed. They will see the other side of the island, he and Kathryn, and they will tell Kyle and Sharon, and Kyle and Sharon will say they can't believe they missed it, and next year for sure.

He watches Kathryn's steady strokes and eases his rhythm to complement hers. He tries to stroke left when she strokes right, right when she strokes left. He thinks one of them is supposed to be steering, but they seem to be finding a course together, pushing wordlessly toward the far point of the shore, and then the next point, and then the point beyond that.

Do you want to kiss her? Kathryn says.

He didn't even know he was thinking about her.

From the rear of the kayak, he can't see Kathryn's face, just her back, her hair, her elbows. He studies the back of her head, trying to read her. She is leaning into her strokes, getting tired.

I don't want to kiss her, he says.

And he doesn't want to kiss her. He wants what comes after. After the kissing and the undressing and the confiding. After the discovery and the familiarity and the gradual absence of kissing. He wants the intimacy of friends who used to be lovers.

They paddle around an outcropping in silence.

Because if you want to kiss her, she says, tell me and we can have that conversation.

Okay, he says.

Across the back of her life jacket is stenciled the word *MEDIUM*. He thinks: Medium. Seer. Soothsayer.

They turn back, unsure of how far they've gone. They take turns paddling, and sometimes let themselves float along.