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Among the Ten Thousand Things

Written by Julia Pierpont

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Among the Ten Thousand Things

JULIA PIERPONT



ONE WORLD

A Oneworld Book

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*For my parents,
as a matter of course*

Little sleep's-head sprouting hair in the moonlight,
when I come back
we will go out together,
we will walk out together among
the ten thousand things,
each scratched too late with such knowledge, *the wages
of dying is love.*

—Galway Kinnell

PART ONE

New York,
the End of May



Dear Deborah,

Do you go by Deborah? It sounds so uptight. I bet you hate Debbie. I hate Debbie, too.

Jack calls you Deb.

This is a letter about Jack.

I began sleeping with your husband last June. We were together for seven months, almost as long as I've known him.

We did it in my apartment. Or I went to his studio, a lot. One time at the Comfort Inn in midtown, last August. He used his Visa. Look it up. I know about Kay, her getting bullied at school, and I know about when Simon got caught shoplifting at the Best Buy. I never asked to know about your family. It's just that sometimes, he needed me.

In movies, when the woman is dumped, one thing to do is to take all the love letters and pictures from photo booths and old T-shirts, and to set them on fire. This is to help the woman move on.

I don't have any pictures from photo booths. What I have is email, and a little blue folder on my hard drive called "Chats." So, look what I did. I printed them, at a FedEx on Houston Street. \$87.62. I haven't had my own printer since college. The hours and hours made pages and pages, none of it so romantic, a lot dirtier than I remembered. I bought a handle of Georgi at the liquor store so it would really burn—the Jamaican behind the register gave me extra bags because it was hard to keep the pages together—and I carried everything back, the sum of my love rolled in black-and-gold plastic, and dumped it all out into the bathtub.

But it didn't seem fair, that I should be left with the mess, when I use this tub, when I stand in it almost every day. So I got this box together, to give to him.

And then just now I was looking at it, and I realized whom I should be giving it to. You.

Falling in love is just an excuse for bad behavior. If you're fucking someone in a way that you mean it, the rest of you is fucked also. Did I care about you, your children? Did I care about my work? Ask me if I cared. If I care, even.

The thing that kills me, that I can't get over, is I didn't do anything to make him stop wanting me. I didn't change. I held very still on purpose. I weighed myself the other day for the first time in a long time. I thought for sure I'd gained weight, like twenty pounds. Twenty pounds is maybe enough to change the way someone feels about you. But no.

You get migraines, right? He told me you do. I get them too, Deb. Do you think maybe it's him? That the migraines are coming from him? Like if we drank the same dirty

water and got cancer, or if we both lived a block from 9/11 and got cancer, or if we did anything the same and got cancer, then we'd trace it to the source, right, and expect a settlement, wouldn't we. What are you settling for, Deb? How much did you get?

There were things you learned early, growing up in the city, and there were things you learned late, or not at all. Bicycles were one of the things Kay had missed, along with tree swings and car pools, dishwashers and game rooms in the basement. The only style of swimming Kay knew was the style of not drowning, any direction but down. Instead of a dog, they had a cat, and before that a cockatiel and a cockatoo, sea monkeys, lizards, gerbils that made more gerbils, one regrettable guinea pig.

She made up for what she'd missed with things New York had taught her. Like how long you had to walk after the DON'T WALK started to blink. The way to hail a cab (hand out but still, fingers together). She knew where to stand in an elevator depending on how many people were on it already, when to hold the poles on the subway and when it was okay just to let go and glide. She knew how to be surrounded by people and not meet anybody's eye.

“If you push harder, you won’t shake so much.” That was what the other girls all said. They kept a few yards away, pigeon-toed, with hands on their hips or as visors over their foreheads. It was the Sunday morning after a sleepover. Their eyes worked at pinching out the sun.

“Just bike to here, Kay.” Racky, on the only other bike, made figure eights around the rest of them, Chelsea and the Haber twins with their twin braids. It had become a group project at these New Rochelle playdates, teaching Kay to ride. She could never get past the wobbly, the fear of falling. That jelly feeling would hit after the first pump, and her foot would come down like a gag reflex, like the time she smacked the wooden stick out of Dr. Frankel’s hand when he tried to depress her tongue with it, her foot would hit the pavement and drag her to a stop. Cycle, stop. Cycle, stop. Twenty minutes of this, most weekends, and finally the others would get bored, would propose trips to the multiplex, to TCBY, to the kitchen for facials with an issue of *Allure* and someone’s mother’s old avocado.

“I can’t.” It was a hot day and probably there was something good on TV, in the air-conditioning. Central air seemed the greatest of suburban luxuries. It was like living inside a Duane Reade. They had AC units at home, wheezy ones that dripped puddles under the windowsills.

“If Kay bikes to here,” Racky said, “she can choose what movie we watch.”

“I don’t want to choose what movie.”

The girls whispered, negotiating behind long strings of

blonde that they tucked behind their ears as they came up with new terms.

“If Kay bikes to here,” said one of the twins, “she can choose the movie *and* if we get pizza or Chinese.”

“I don’t care what we eat.”

“Lo mein, Kay.”

“I can’t.”

Racky rang the bell on her handlebar. “If she bikes to here,” she said, counting off on her fingers, “she gets the movie, Chinese, *and* twenty bucks.”

The Haber twins laughed. Kay understood that no one expected her to make it, that they were already telling the story on Monday in the cafeteria, the great lengths they had gone to teach Kay, how hopeless she was.

She pushed off the pavement with the girls still laughing and forced herself to pedal a second time, through the uneasiness. For once, she wasn’t afraid to fall. If she fell, then at least this all would be over; they’d stop laughing, maybe even feel bad.

She rode right past them—past them!—went another eight or nine yards before sailing into a curb. But still, she had done it. Been bullied into it, but still.

She chose *Harry Potter* and beef lo mein. She never did get the twenty dollars from Racky, but then she never asked.

It was half past nine by the time Racky’s mom’s minivan pulled up in front of Kay’s apartment building. “Your mother’s going to have me arrested for kidnapping.”

“She won’t care.” Sometimes Kay caught herself making her mother sound neglectful for no reason. She said thanks, for the ride or the weekend generally, to the whole of the car and worked the handle to slide herself out. She could feel the minivan waiting for her to reach the lobby before it lurched away.

Kay’s favorite doorman was on. She never called him by his name, although she knew it, had heard other people address him this way. She was afraid that in her mouth it would come out wrong, that she’d been mishearing it all this time—what everyone else was saying *sounded* like Angel, but no one was named Angel.

“Okay, Kay,” he said when she came shuffling through the lobby, backpack heavy with weekend things. She got to the elevator door just as it opened, and inside her button was pushed already. A magic trick Angel liked to perform. Kay stuck her head out to gape at him, as always, the suggestion of applause, and Angel laughed high and long, different from his laugh with the adults.

The door was sliding shut when Angel held up a finger—wait—and ran around to the service elevator where they kept the packages. He came back with a box.

“For Mommy,” Angel said.

Riding up in the elevator, she turned the box around in her arms. Its flaps were tucked instead of taped together, and there wasn’t any postage or even a street address. And another thing: It was addressed, in black Sharpie, to Mrs. Jack Shanley. No one called her mother that except for Kay’s grandparents, her father’s mother.

In the light of the hall, she noticed something pink where the flaps left an opening. The one thing she would not confess to after that night, for which she would always feel a flush of shame, was the thought that inside the box was a present for her.

Her birthday was not until September, and they observed Easter only in candy aisles the day after. However. If it was a gift for her, she didn't want to wait until the fall to get it, and if it was for her mother, or her father, or for Simon, then there wasn't any harm checking.

Inside, it was just paper. So many pieces of paper, thrown together like tickets in a raffle.

i went to that dinner party in red hook tonight. all the talk was about what's happening in syria, what's happening in egypt, and i can only think about what's happening with you.

The feeling that her domino eyes were running over something she wasn't supposed to see. She tried to make them stop, or to see without reading, but they could not, would not stop.

i can't explain why i get so sad when you make me so happy

i've been thinking of how you pressed my hand against your neck

show me your cunt

And right there, slid off the top, the winning ticket, the pink that had drawn her in: an envelope. This, too, was addressed to her mother, but it wasn't sealed, and so she opened it. The letter was the only thing in the box that had been written by hand.

Dear Deborah,

And:

I began sleeping with your husband last June.

And:

I know about Kay.

She redid the flaps, held the box under her arm, and let herself into the apartment. Clenching all her parts as she passed her mother and brother in front of the television.

“Kay?” her mother called. “Why so late?”

Quickly to her room, head down to hide her face. There was that little guy in her throat, the one that hurt when she wanted to cry.

Her mother’s shoes clicking nearer, she buried the box under a tangle of shirtsleeves on the floor of her closet just as the door swung open. “Babe? What happened to you? I tried Arlene.” Kay pretended to look for something in her bottom dresser drawer. “She never picks up. I don’t like that woman.” Kay was moving handfuls of clothes from one end of the drawer to the other. “Did you hear me?”

“She’s a good mom.” She hadn’t meant to defend Racky’s mother. Feeling herself start to cry, she dug deeper into the drawer. Nightgown. Where was her yellow nightgown?

“Baby, did something happen?” Deb’s hand touched her shoulder and Kay twisted away. Her mother was quiet and so pretty, with her shiny hair and tiny waist, the evenness and natural tan of skin that Kay had not gotten from her. “Did you have a hard time with the girls, with learning the bike?”

The bike, the sleepover, those things seemed small and

far away now, but remembering made everything worse: yet another place where her life was not as she wanted it to be: She had unkind friends. But in a way it was good to remember, it allowed for her tears. Her mother held her, and she let herself be held, in the orb of Deb's Deb-scented perfume.

"Did you fall?"

Kay nodded. The wet skin under her eye stuck to her mother's arm.

"Where does it hurt?"

She could follow instructions and give the box to her mother. She could throw it away. She could give it back to Angel, have *him* throw it away. What she couldn't do, she knew in that moment, was go to her father, who might never tell her mother, if he had the box, because how could she live with him then.

For now the safest thing to do was nothing. The box was a secret she kept, the whole next day at school. She found herself in history, in math, in science, not knowing how she got there, not remembering the halls. Lockers slammed too loud, and Racky, the twins, everyone was always laughing about something, and what was so fucking funny all the time? She felt faraway and alien, her teachers going on about fractions and photosynthesis and the Underground Railroad. What did these things have to do with her life, where did they touch her?