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Songs Without Words

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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Six o'clock in the morning. It was one of Liz's favorite times of day: everyone else asleep, Brody still motionless in the bed she'd just left, the kids upstairs, in sleep not teenagers anymore but simply larger versions of their younger, childish selves, who, she could almost believe, would wake and seek her for body comfort, as they used to. They were thirteen and fifteen, but she could still open their doors and look at them sleeping: how Joe lay on his back with half his blankets kicked to the side, his mouth slightly open; how Lauren folded her limbs in close, her head sandwiched between two pillows, a fist curled under her chin.

In the kitchen, Liz spooned coffee into the Krups and leaned in for a whiff of the dark, rich smell. She got out four plates and four juice glasses. Moving to the calendar, she did a quick pro forma check of the day, but she knew: soccer practice for Joe, and Brody home a little on the late side because of his tennis game. Lauren did nothing after school this year, and Liz had taken to planning labor-intensive dinners so she'd be in the kitchen if Lauren wanted her. Jambalaya tonight? She'd go grocery shopping after her yoga class.

Outside, the newspaper lay on the lawn, its plastic wrapper wet with dew. She bent over for it, then looked up and down the street. The houses in this neighborhood were at once ample and modest, with lovingly

tended small front yards. Sixteen years ago, buying here had seemed a compromise: it wasn't Palo Alto, but it was nice, and the schools were good, and she and Brody reassured themselves that Palo Alto would still be there when they had more money. Now they had more money, but they stayed. They were comfortable here. It was home.

She left the paper in the kitchen and tiptoed through the bedroom to the bathroom. She loved the first blast of the shower on her face; she opened her mouth and used her hands to cup water at her cheeks, her eyes. She massaged shampoo into her scalp, then turned and let the water course through her hair. When she turned back it beat at her nipples, and she twisted them, felt a tingling between her legs. It had been a while since she and Brody had made love, and she was ready. Was he? They were a little out of sync, she sometimes felt.

In the bedroom she began to dress, opening drawers as quietly as she could, though he was beginning to stir.

"Time is it?" he muttered after a short while.

She turned around, saw he hadn't moved. "About six-thirty."

He raised himself up and looked at her, then sank down and lay on his back. She skirted the bed and sat near him on the edge of the mattress. His chest was bare, and she laid her hand over his breastbone, its bloom of graying hairs.

"OK," he said, covering her hand with his own.

"OK," she said with a smile.

She left him and went upstairs to the kids. Lauren was likely to be awake already, and Liz hesitated, then turned the doorknob slowly. She pushed the door open but waited a moment before moving over the threshold.

Lauren was on her back, looking at the door. It seemed to Liz that she had been waiting for this moment, had even girded herself for it: pulling the covers all the way to her chin, making sure her head was in the very center of her pillow. She stared hard at Liz but didn't speak.

"Morning, sweetie," Liz said, but still Lauren didn't speak, didn't react at all. Something was going on with her these days, Liz didn't know what. It was almost as if the last three years had never happened, and she was still twelve: sullen and aggrieved. Though Friday night she'd abruptly changed her mind about spending Saturday in Berkeley with some friends, and Liz knew that at twelve Lauren never would have canceled anything involving even one other girl.

"Almost time to get up," Liz said now.

"I know," Lauren said with a sneer. "I'm not stupid."

Liz pulled the door to and headed for Joe's room. Lauren's tone seemed to have lodged inside her: she felt it harden like a fast-drying coat of shellac on her lungs. Outside Joe's room she took a deep, slow breath to break it up.

Long ago she'd replaced Joe's curtains with blackout shades, and it was very dark in his room, the only light coming from the hallway behind her. She crossed to his bed and sat down. Already he'd turned off the alarm clock that he set, every night, for six-thirty. He was crafty, never just hitting the snooze button but actually sliding the setting to off.

"Joe," she said. His head was turned to the wall, and she put a hand on his shoulder and shook it a little. "Joe."

He burrowed deeper, and as always she felt torn: she wanted to adjust the covers over him, to encourage his sleep, make his bed the nicest place possible; and she wanted, needed, to get him up.

She shook his shoulder again. "Joe."

"I'm awake."

"Right."

"I am. I swear."

She patted his shoulder and left the room, knowing she'd come again in five minutes. She tried hard to make them independent, but there was a cost to her, and some things she couldn't give up. Yet.

In the kitchen she began breakfast. She sliced a pear into a bowl of blackberries, unwrapped a loaf of challah, and cut it into thick slices. She put jam and honey on the table, then went back to Joe.

"It's time," she said to his sleeping body.

He hunkered farther, bringing the covers over his face.

"It's time," she said again, shaking his shoulder. "It's almost seven."

"Urf," he moaned, but the position of his body changed, and after a while she could tell he was awake. "No," he said.

"I'm afraid so." She tweaked his foot and then left the room and headed toward Lauren's nearly closed door, but before she could speak Lauren's voice came at her, brusque and preemptive: "Mom, I'm up!"

Liz retreated. Down in the kitchen again, she put challah slices in the toaster and poured herself a second cup of coffee. She sometimes regretted the second cup at yoga, but she missed it too much when she skipped it.

In a few minutes Lauren came into the kitchen. She moved slowly, and her unbrushed hair fell in clumps past her shoulders, collected in the hood of her oversize gray sweatshirt. "Sweetie," Liz said without meaning to, and Lauren gave her a sour look.

"What?"

"Nothing. Hi." Liz put a second round of bread in the toaster and watched in her peripheral vision as Lauren moved around the table and pulled out her chair. When the toaster popped, Liz buttered the new slices, put them all on a plate, and took them to the table. "Here we go."

Lauren reached for a piece of toast and took a bite, and Liz thought, You're welcome. Then she wished she could unthink it. She hated how pissy she felt—it wasn't the kind of mother she wanted to be.

Brody came in, dressed in a white shirt and tie, and she remembered that he'd mentioned a meeting out of the office today. He passed close by her on his way to the coffeemaker, and she caught a whiff of his soap smell, watched as he found a mug and pulled the coffeepot out of its base. His nice broad back seemed broader in the white shirt. He turned and faced her for his first sip, and she thought about how much it had always pleased her to see him in a dress shirt and tie. *That's because he reminds you of your father,* Sarabeth had remarked about this, in her usual perspicacious way.

Now Joe arrived, reaching for a slice of challah before he'd even sat down, then consuming it in two bites and chasing it with a large gulp of juice. He'd shot up over the summer, and he was gangly now, with enormous wrists. She took her seat and watched as he helped himself to fruit, took more toast, pulled his juice glass a little closer: gathered what he needed to stock himself for the day.

He looked up at her as he stabbed a pear slice. "Are you driving us to practice?"

"I'm not sure yet," she said. "I'll drop your gear at Trent's if I'm not. Are you packed?"

"How is our friend Trent?" Brody said as he came over and sat down. "That was quite a play he made on Saturday. That kid can kick." He unfolded his napkin and then unfolded it again and tucked a corner into his collar. He turned to Lauren and said, "Did you know that the entire purpose of the necktie used to be to protect the shirt? Now we have to protect the protector!"

"That's the fullback's job in soccer," Joe said, and Brody winked at Liz as he turned back to Joe.

"You're quick this morning."

"No, I'm not," Joe said, but he smiled with pleasure, a wash of color high on each cheek.

Liz looked at Lauren. She was spaced out, her expression vacant as she played with one of the many thick silver rings she wore. Let's try again, Liz thought, but she wasn't sure how.

"You could get one of those plastic ties," Joe said. "Like for a Halloween costume."

"Maybe I will," Brody said. "That could solve all kinds of problems." He smiled at Liz again and reached for the challah, and she saw there was only one piece left.

She said, "Oops, sorry, I'll get some more of that."

He shrugged. "I can."

"No, no, I will." She slid the last slice onto his plate and went back to the toaster, thinking for a moment that this wasn't the best model for Lauren—or Joe, for that matter. The woman leaping to her feet. But she *wanted* to do it—she liked doing it. Was she supposed to pretend she didn't?

It was funny: most of the women she knew complained about their husbands' uselessness at domestic tasks, but of course it was they who'd allowed them to be useless. Liz did it, too—complained, too. There was this sisterhood out there, a sisterhood of eye rolling and head shaking and sighing over the helplessness of husbands. Liz had always enjoyed it, the standing around at the kids' schools or soccer games saying, *My husband* cannot *hang up a towel,* or *I'm going out and leaving my kids with my husband tonight*—before *dinner,* and everyone laughing. With Lauren and Joe older, Liz had less of that: the talking, the standing around. It was a little lonely with the kids older.

Very soon the rush began: Brody looking for his BlackBerry; Lauren disappearing into the bathroom; Joe all over the house at once, searching for his backpack, his math homework, his lunch—oh, wait, he had hot lunch, and he'd just remembered, he needed ten bucks for a student body card—no, today, today was the last day, it had to be today; and then they were all gone.

In the sudden silence Liz sat down again, licking her fingertip and pressing it to the toast crumbs on her plate. She found herself thinking of the brief conversation she'd had with Sarabeth Saturday morning, when she'd called to tell her Lauren wouldn't be in Berkeley after all. Lauren and her friends had planned to stop in on Sarabeth if they had time, and

Liz hadn't wanted Sarabeth wondering all day if they would come. "Oh, too bad," Sarabeth said in response to the news. "I was going to make chocolate meringues." And Liz had gotten a clear picture of the picture Sarabeth must have had, of Lauren and her friends filling her funky little house with their teenage giggles and intermittent high seriousness. Liz was sorry they'd canceled. She'd call Sarabeth after yoga, see if she could come for dinner sometime soon.

Chocolate meringues. That was the treat Sarabeth used to make for Lauren and Joe when they were little, when every few months Liz would load them into the car for a pilgrimage across the bay. In anticipation of these visits, Sarabeth would tape giant pieces of butcher paper to her living room floor, and once the meringues were consumed she'd launch the kids on some labor-intensive drawing project—a giant forest, a city of towers—so that for a while at least Liz could sit on her couch and they could talk. What a respite those conversations were: hearing about Sarabeth's romantic adventures, or learning more about a new project she had going—anything to interrupt the day-in, day-out sameness of life with small children. *I'll trade you,* Sarabeth used to say. *You couldn't stand it for more than a day.* Which was true, of course.

The high school was on the north edge of town, across the street from a little shopping center with a Starbucks, a Subway, and a Jamba Juice. Kids weren't supposed to bring food over from the center, but everyone did, smuggling their Starbucks or Jamba Juice cups into their morning classes. The teachers didn't care, but it was a rule, and if the vice-principal saw you, you got busted. It was called getting cupped. Lauren had seen a freshman guy get cupped before school today, and it was so obvious he'd done it on purpose. It was probably the highlight of his life, proving what a tough ass he was by getting detention in high school.

Lauren was in chemistry, hiding inside her conscientious student look. Notebook open, pen in hand, thoughtful expression. It was ridiculously easy. If she felt Mr. Greenway's eyes on her, she bit her lip as if she were struggling to understand something, then made a mark in her notebook. From far away she would look like she was taking notes, but in fact she was adding details to a picture of a tree she'd drawn yesterday. A Japanese maple. She was terrible at the leaves. In fact, she sucked at drawing. Everyone used to say how good she was, but they were wrong.

Across the aisle and one desk forward, Amanda twisted her copper-red hair around her finger. Her jeans were a little floody, and Lauren saw that she was wearing socks with smiley faces on them, as if she were still in middle school. Amanda could be so weird that way, not caring about stuff.

They had four classes together this fall. "That's great," Lauren's mom had said when Lauren told her, although it wasn't, exactly. It was Amanda, and it was great in exact proportion to how it was not so great: it gave Lauren someone to hang out with, and it made it impossible for her to hang out with anyone else.

"Great." With Lauren's mom everything was either "great" or "too bad." *What would you like me to say?* Lauren imagined her mom asking, and she turned away, then realized that she'd actually turned away, actually moved her head, here in chemistry. She looked at Mr. Greenway, worried that he'd noticed, but he was writing on the board, oblivious. The periodic table hung to his left. Lauren had not meant to look at it, but she'd caught a glimpse—those rows of little boxes, the meaningless letters inside them—and her stomach flipped. It was the middle of October, and she could no longer maintain the pretense that she was going to start getting it soon. Every time Mr. Greenway talked about the periodic table, she thought, OK, listen, but something happened to his voice, like he just *loved* the periodic table, and she couldn't listen. She spaced out. Sometimes she thought of the quilt on her parents' bed, how when she was little she'd lie there and play a game of mentally connecting like fabric with like fabric, a game to explain why the quilt was exactly as it was, as if it had to be. Or she'd think about lunch: where she and Amanda might sit, and whether or not she'd see what's-his-butt.

Who, speaking of: class was almost over. Her heart pounded as she watched the classroom clock click from six of to five of. Just five minutes until the after-chemistry pass. She ran her fingers through her hair, then lowered her head and examined her teeth with her tongue. She cupped her hand under her mouth and exhaled, but her breath just smelled like the classroom, not that she ever got close enough for her breath to matter. Some idiotic magazine article had said you should pinch your cheeks to bring color to them, but color wasn't a problem—her face was always on fire when she looked at him. At the moment she was also sweating between her boobs, which she absolutely hated.

"Lab tomorrow," Mr. Greenway was saying. "Don't forget your

flameproof suits." He smiled his pathetic aren't-I-funny smile just as the bell rang, and Amanda turned and rolled her eyes at Lauren.

"Don't forget your dick brain," she said, meaning Mr. Greenway's, but Lauren was in no mood. She'd missed the before-school locker pass, so she didn't even know what he was wearing today. She preferred this pass to take place out beyond the science complex, under the open sky rather than on the busy covered walkways, where she always felt invisible. Plus she could see him for longer out there, see him leaving his English class if she got out there early enough. Walking that swinging walk. His arms, his legs. She imagined him naked walking like that, and her face got even hotter, if that was possible. Herself naked near him—she wanted to barf.

"Laur-en," Amanda said, and, nearly at the door, Lauren looked back. Amanda for some reason was still at her desk, still putting her stuff in her backpack. Fuck—now the pass would take place on the science walkways, no question. She might even be too late altogether.

"Do you mind waiting?" Amanda whined, and Lauren waited, and by the time she got outside it *was* too late: he was past her, heading for his physics class, wearing his blue T-shirt with the faded red ladder on the back, from his painting job two summers ago. On the front, she knew, just over his heart, it said: JEFF.