

POTENTIAL

I do hope you have resolved those quarrels with Nick. The two of you make a charming pair and I would hate to see you torn apart by something as commonplace as adultery. He does love you, Barb. Truly.

Please do pay us a visit down at Dartmouth this season. We have been missing your bemused comments in the face of societal formalities. Besides, there are a few new acquaintances of mine just itching to have a conversation with you. Everyone is quite eager to meet the child prodigy they heard so much about in their youth. Some would like your signature in copies of that novel of yours, and I am afraid stories of your time here cannot satisfy that request.

Sincerely yours,

Audrey

Child prodigy.

It is a curious title to hold at 25. Even stranger is that no agency will even humour the publication of my newest work.

One may venture to say the world was done with me by the time I turned 13.

I had gotten into the habit of writing down my true thoughts only to throw them away. It is difficult to imagine another person reading what you are barely brave enough to share with a sheet of parchment.

Audrey had not received a sincere letter from me in months - though I doubt it bothered her much. She spent three quarters of her letters recounting her every movement, then remembered right around when her hand began to cramp and her lettering became sloppy that the envelope was not addressed to a brick wall. She meant well, though. Dartmouth could be rather isolating for those accepted through merit rather than status - even more so for a young woman pursuing passions outside of homemaking.

The inked phrase *child prodigy* turned stiff and sank further into the parchment. Whenever it was used to refer to me, I felt a juvenile desire to duck under the nearest table and refuse to resurface until judging eyes had turned elsewhere and the palpitations in my chest had settled. To be a prodigy is an

expectation. *This one's different. She'll do more, be more, grow faster.* I was introduced to the spotlight before being taught the concept of consequences.

Audrey had no interest in reading my true concerns, nor did I want to burden her with them. I scrunched the parchment into a tight ball and tossed it to the corner of the study. In my effort to do so, I bumped my ink pot and quill, spilling thick black liquid over my hand and into my shirt sleeve. I scrambled to get them upright again, sighing exasperatedly at the ink stain now deep within the redwood layers of my desk.

Above my desk hung a pinboard collage I'd made before meeting Nick. Among the mess of memories hung postcards from travels to Fiji and Samoa with my mother back in the 20s, sketches of mushrooms and butterfly anatomy I drew in my teen years, and letters from my parents wishing me safe travels for journeys overseas.

A reminder to myself was plastered under the pinboard: *Write for yourself.*

It becomes difficult to 'write for yourself' when you have lived your life in constant pursuit of the next words of praise. Perhaps a new review on my novel - 'The House Without Windows, *particularly Eepersip's boundless curiosity, is the epitome of childhood wonder.*' Maybe a compliment from one of my mother's acquaintances - '*she's quite remarkable*'. The word 'potential' came up frequently, and I was not sure what to do with it. Potential required a destination. Any promising destinations seemed to have passed me by as I was trying to figure out where I wanted to go.

I pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment, checking the clock by the study bay window. Nick would arrive home in fifteen minutes. Home, as if that was how I ever thought of it. As if my heart could be satiated by suburbia, or by Nick and his weary desire to seek pleasure in any bed other than ours. Fifteen minutes was plenty of time to write for myself.

My creative passion is buried back in New Hampshire.

I spent my childhood paying regular visits to Dartmouth college - my father taught lectures there, and let me stroll the campus freely under the pretence of "refining my craft". Roaming empty corridors and stuffy lecture theatres quickly bored me, and I found myself venturing, notebook in hand, to the small stretch of woodland behind the campus.

The trees commanded attention; crimson and burnt orange and olive forming a fuzzy kind of warmth. Thin branches from white oaks and maples intertwined overhead, each tree dense with broad leaves that dripped rainwater into my hair and sent goosebumps down my spine. Roots drove paths crooked and turned up dirt, making the earth sink softly beneath steps. The woodland was unrestrained,

untamed, unknowing of the vicious and self-destructive tendencies of the creatures it found itself surrounded by. Nature simply existed and did so unforgivingly, a notion I quickly became engrossed by, and eventually turned into the story of Eepersip. Eepersip travelled far from civilization, exploring mountains and meadows and never even considering returning to the life she once lived. She did everything I wished I could do.

If nothing else, Massachusetts winters are consistent. This holiday season has proven to be as cold and harsh and painfully grey as every other since I moved here. Grey skies sick with acrid smoke; grey-haired inebriated men stumbling through the streets in hopes of finding work; grey walls inside my husband's house where I stare at a grey ceiling as a phantasmagoria of my youth in New Hampshire plays on repeat in my mind. The following lines are inscribed on the autumnal-toned cassette tape of my childhood:

You obsessed over the unforgiving.

Nature has run its course.

You have penned your own fate.

The study darkened and an elongated silhouette spread across the floor. Nick stood by the study door. I hastily flipped my parchment upside down and placed it over the desk stain, standing to greet him.

Nick did not utter a word. Instead, he turned his attention to my stained shirt.

His nose twitched and his lips curled at the edges; the kind of fleeting glance of disgust perfected only by men who have never known solace nor provided it.

He extended a hand to test the ink's freshness, gripping my sleeve cuff tightly and disregarding my flinch under his touch. In realisation the ink had fully hardened in the shirt material, he lowered his head, tossed his trenchcoat onto the study floor, and dredged out of the room without uttering a word.

"Nick." I chased him down the upper floor hallway. "Nick, it was an accident. I know you said to take a break from writing but Audrey sent a letter and I—"

"I'd like to be left alone this evening, Barbara."

"You say that every evening." He made a beeline for our bedroom and I sped up to catch him. "For God's sake, Nick, don't run away!"

“Run away? You’re one to talk. The papers had a field day when you took off to San Francisco without warning and nearly got yourself killed. I’ve been trying to stop you from pulling more stunts like that, but you never listen.”

“That was nothing more than a lack of forward thinking. If I were to run away again I would never come back. Then their words would be irrelevant. I would be free, living like Eepersip and they-”

“Here we go again. Eepersip. That novel’s got you stuck in the world of a perpetually precocious child, no sense of responsibility. Move on.” He attempted to shut the bedroom door but I swung my foot out to stop it.

“Move on? That book is all I’m known for. I can’t make any further name for myself without a man with connections in my corner - my father’s name attached to the manuscript was the only reason that book was given a second glance.”

“I’m a man with connections.”

“I see no *man* before me.” He let the door hang open. His hand twitched and I momentarily froze in place. “I see no future for me here.”

I took a step back and he swiftly slammed the door shut.

My mind was made up.

I went back into the study and removed his wallet from his trenchcoat. \$30 - I pocketed it. Grabbing a winter coat from my closet and heading downstairs, I scoured the kitchen for anything else of use. A pocket knife, small notebook, and medication - I took them all, and stepped outside into the frigid evening air.

Any form of escape seemed a better fortune for me than that house. Potential required a destination. I was going to chart my own.

Barbara Rogers - 25, 5'7" - last seen December 7th, 1939 - we are requesting any information on her disappearance or whereabouts be presented promptly.
