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Kate E Lore

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River
The river she is beautiful. She stretches many bridges. After a good rain she charges forward like a stampede of horses where she meets the small dam. She splashes like an explosion against it's sharp rocks.

When its dry out she becomes calm, and thin, as if starving. As if weak. Her breath becomes a trickle at the dam. But It's a good time for fishing if you are a heron.

She lays down smoothly then wiggles, an S shape, right in the middle, like a snake. She is framed in a halo of dirt and mud. In places she is shaved clean. Here water slashes up against flat man-made cement walls. In other places tree roots burst out of the earth reaching forward to kiss the water. Thick green clumps of algae collect in the corners hugging the shade.

I lived along the river for a long time, but eventually she moves past me. She and the bike path keep going. Like a faithful dog always to the side of his master. They come to mark the edge of campus. A straight line of respect.

From there it's off into the city. She goes down town. Things are built up around her. In the city she has her own skyline which she wears like a crown. Here she sparkles her brightest in the sun as if smiling for a picture.

And then she rolls on like nothing ever happened. She and the bike path still clinging together keep going south through more metro parks, and another town. They keep going and flowing and it all passes by so quick. She's wondering when it will happen. Will she get caught up and merge into some other bigger river?

Or, perhaps, will they make it to the ocean?

Are you fan of Kate's work? Then let them know! Be sure to put their name, your email, title of their work in the subject, and your message so they can see your comment!

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Everything You Never Had By Delanie Beach

When the ceiling creaks at night, picture your eldest daughter pacing above you— her restless feet tracing patterns in the carpet. Imagine throwing off the covers, hurtling up the stairs, and putting an end to the entropy.

Life still. Remind yourself she no longer lives here.

If grief spreads its wings in your chest, banish it. Turn your back on the cold stretch of bed where her father once slept. Wrap the blankets tight and curl into the dark.

You're picking out crumbs and molded bits of candy between the seats of your aging twelve-passenger van when your eldest daughter calls.

"Do you have a minute?"

"I'm sort of in the middle of something."

"I'm sorry," she says quickly. "I just really need someone to talk to."

Cradle your cell phone against your shoulder and duct-tape the seatbelt your twelve-year-old daughter snipped nearly clean in half during a road trip several years ago. "What's the matter?"

"I'm lonely. And anxious."

"About what?"

"I don't know. Everything."

Get over it, your own mother would say. It's just a feeling. You can't be so harsh with your daughter; the slightest misunderstanding sends her reeling.

Put her on speakerphone and open the double side doors of the van. "Are you sleeping?"

"I have nightmares."

"Are you eating?"

"Mom," her voice is strange. "I need you to listen."

"I am listening." Toss forgotten objects out onto the driveway: a dirt-encrusted soccer cleat, a rortem-smelling pillow a torn paperback—likely the unreturned library book you paid for last month—crumpled wads of used tissue, a pair of broken headphones, endless amounts of wrappers, receipts, grocery bags, sticky corn, and fast-food napkins. "But I don't know how to help you."

She starts to cry.

Take her off speakerphone. "Why are you crying?" She's almost twenty years old, she should have more control over her emotions.

"It hurts."

"What hurts?"

"You never call. Or answer my texts."

"You know how busy I am."

"A text takes two seconds."

Why is she choosing to bring this up now?

"I'm not allowed to have my phone at work."

"You've never once offered to visit me at school."

"When would I find the time? Even when I come home, the work doesn't end. There are three other children still living here."

She sniffs. "I just really miss you."

"You'll be home for Christmas soon."

"Will you call me, just once, before then?"

Realize a neighbor has been watching you empty the remnants of your children's presence onto the driveway. He waves. Turn your back with a cringe. "I don't understand why it matters so much to you."

Silence swells, an invisible force pressing against you on all sides.

Ask the question that will lead you to the nearest exit: "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing," she whispers. "I don't even know why I called."

"She feels extremely intensely," her therapist once said. When she was a child, she told you watching someone get hurt was like being hurt herself. You assumed her emotional sensitivity would fade with time. Instead, it deepened.

She encourages her empathy, believing it benefits her writing. You don't doubt this. It is the writing itself that concerns you.

Her creativity comes in fits— manic bouts of energy followed by even longer periods of exhaustion. When she's home, you find her crumpled papers, scribbled at god-knows what hour in the morning, all over the place. Her failures overflow every trashcan in the house.

Christmas Eve, she sits across from you at the kitchen counter, notebook open beside a mug of untouched cocoa— scribbling and speaking at once.

You're cutting cookies for the church's annual potluck and finding it difficult to listen. Her speech is lofty and scattered, and the snippets you happen to catch are disturbing. As she is explaining the complicated way she plans to kill off her protagonist, interject: "Why do you write about so much?"

"What?"

"The things you write about are so dark."

Her pen stills. "So?"

Drop your gaze to the notebook, dizzied by the unstructured record of her thoughts.

"I wonder if it's healthy. To dwell on things like that."

"Please," she says, her voice low. "Don't do this."

"Do what?"

"Demolize the one thing that makes my life worth living."

Her words make you angry— but in a desperate, loose-fitting sort of way. "The one thing?"

She stares you down. If her resolve is crumbling, it doesn't show.

"I hope you know how much it hurts me to hear you say that."

Her gray eyes slide toward the window.

Outside, snow gathers in heaps along the edges of the six-foot fence your ex-husband installed when the kids were toddlers. After years of putting up with tickle Midwestern weather, it's begun to lean in places. It will be time to take it down soon.

"You don't understand," she says. "I have a passion."

"There is a difference between passion and obsession."

"How would you know?" She slips her notebook shut and shoves herself away from the counter. "You're not passionate about anything."

She storms off, leaving you numb. Put the cookies in the oven and set the timer. Replace the oven mitts on their hook beside the cabinet. Lean your weary body against the counter.

You've never told your daughter that you once dreamed of joining the FBI, or something like it. You've always been fascinated by forensics and criminology— poring together clues to arrive at a greater truth, investigating the inner workings of a mind gone haywire. When you were your daughter's age, it wasn't difficult to imagine losing yourself in a career like that.

You got as far as a Bachelor's in Psychology before reality hit. You were pregnant, unmarried, and needed something practical— so you found a job with benefits and married your father. When she came into your life, you realized the world needed you in a different way.

Feel your gravity return to its center. Push yourself off the counter. Breathe in the sticky smell of your kitchen and remember a time when the house was full of life and laughter.

Nothing lasts forever.

Your mother said these words as she walked you down the aisle on your wedding night. You were horrified then, offended by her apparent lack of belief in your capabilities. But her words echoed like a groansix years later, when you held the broken remains of your family up to the light and discovered they didn't fit like before.

That's just the way the world works.

Walk to the kitchen window. Reach over the sink, piled high with dishes, and part the yellowing curtains to let in the brilliant winter light.

Find her folded up beside the fireplace, left cheek pressed against the page of an open book, gazing at nothing. Her eyes are dirty marbles, bloodshot and dull.

Offer her something. A blanket. Some coffee.

She shuts her eyes.

Ask her, with faint hope for a pleasant exchange, what she's reading.

"Kafka," she murmurs.

You know the name. "For class?"

"For fun."

Sit on the couch— near her, but not too close— and try to pry her open. "He wrote the bug story, right?"

Her zone widens as she frowns. "Nobody knows if Gregor was a bug." She hauls herself up, supporting her upper body with the stiff rods of her arms. "In the original German, he's described as an ungeziefer, which doesn't translate well."

"Oh," you say.

"The closest translation in English would either be 'monstrous vermin' or 'animal unfit for sacrifice.' Which is ironic, considering what happens to him."

"You've done your research."

"I like to understand what I read." She dog-ears the corner of the page she was on and looks up at you, losing her snobbishness when she realizes you're just here to talk. "But yeah, he's the bug dude."

"I read Metamorphosis in high school."

She takes the bait. "Did you like it?"

"Not really." You hated it, but aspects of Gregor's transformation have lodged in your memory— probably for good.

"Me neither. At least, not the first time." She closes the book, which you realize is a biography. A man with hollow cheeks, enormous ears, and wide, sad eyes stares up at you from the cover. "But I understand it now."

"Gregor dies at the end," you say.

She nods. "That's what makes the story beautiful."

Alarm bells sound in your head.

"When Gregor realizes his family is better off without him," she goes on, "he has to face a choice. He can either continue burdening them with his existence or sacrifice himself for their happiness. He does the noble thing."

"He starves himself to death," you say, remembering this detail with a sudden shock.

"It a literal sense, yeah. But the underlying message—"

"Is this what you're reading at that expensive liberal arts college? You're on your feet, and she is looking up at you in dismay. "Books that romanticize eating disorders?"

"Mom, it's nothing like that."

"Do we need to find you some help?"

"What?"

"You just called suicide beautiful."

"The way Kafka handles the complexity of suicide is beautiful."

"That's not what I heard."

"What the hell, Mom? Why are you attacking my interests?"

"Your interests are undermining your health."

She stands, taller than you now, but frail enough to prove your point. "We can't talk about anything without you dragging my health into it."

"You're neglecting yourself."

"You're living in the past!"

"No, I'm living in the real world, where you're going to have a very tough time if you don't get your head out of the clouds."

"When will you open your eyes and see me as I am?"

Your voice slips down your trachea.

The analog clock ticks on the wall. A log shifts in the fireplace, though it's cold and vacant. Snow buries the two of you inside the bright living room, great mounds of glittering white barricading the windows and doors.

She retrieves her Kafka book from the floor and books up the staircase. On the last step, she turns back to look at you. Her despair is palpable. It circles your— a cyclone of broken glass— but you don't have the energy to feel what she's asking you to feel.

"I'm sorry I don't understand you."

"You could," she says, placing a bony hand on the banister. "If you really wanted to."

The day she leaves for the spring semester, you discover a bundle of papers— which turns out to be a manuscript— placed beside your Bible on the nightstand. Recognize it as a message. Like the little bottle and biscuits in the Carroll story she was obsessed with last summer, it begs you to consume it.

Let the story live on the bedside table for a while. Wait for it to tempt you. When it doesn't, tuck it into a drawer and try, without success, to forget about it.

You are afraid of what it might contain.

The weeks plod along.

Every Friday, stand in line at the food bank. Hold your head high to create the illusion that you are not one of these tattooed, cigarette-smoking people milling about the entrance. Hide your ticket in your coat sleeve and pretend you don't belong.

Every other day, take the dog for a walk. He waddles and wheezes, squinting and snuffling and bumping into things, his tongue lolling from his grating muzzle. Regardless of his failing senses, he insists on dragging himself to every one of your neighbor's mailboxes and lifting his leg against it. If his determination weren't tantamount to self-destruction, you would find it inspiring.

She calls, wanting to know if you've read her manuscript.

Feign ignorance until you're forced to confess you haven't.

Wade through another tense exchange that mirrors most of your conversations these days. She ends the call by requesting your thoughts and a call back— when you get around to it.

Take money out of savings to rescue your only son when he loses his tire on the highway. He is shame-faced and stooped when you meet him on the side of the road with a new tire, a jack, and a lug wrench. Impress him with your mechanical skills and lend him off when he swears he'll pay you back.

Your ex-husband calls to tell you he is taking you to court over child support again. Stand in the middle of the kitchen, soapy dishwasher dribbling down your elbow and onto the floor, as you listen to him say that he— a single man living alone with an income twice that of your own— can't afford five hundred dollars a month.

"What do you do with all that money anyway?" His voice seems to come to you through a tunnel. "You can't honestly expect me to believe it's going to the kids. That Church gives you food for free, so it can't be groceries. And the school you send them to doesn't charge tuition."

There is no way to make him understand that the pantries are limited, and the food you get from them is sometimes past its prime, mostly processed snacks, and hardly enough to live on. Putting the children through school is costly. Even without tuition, there are sports fees, book fees, electronics fees, and field trips fees— not to mention the cost of a gas, utilities, and supplies.

"So where does it all go? You hoarding it up for a cruise?" He scoffs at your silence. "Try clamping up in court. See what god it does to you then."

Stand with the phone at your ear after he hangs up, a yarning void where panic might be. Wander to the living room and wonder if your ex-husband is to blame for your daughter's emotional arrestment. Fall into a chair. Remember the day you realized you were alone in the battle for your daughter's life.

You sat in a folding chair, one of many arranged in a tight circle. You drew her out-patient therapy three times a week, right after school, where she would meet other troubled teens in a nondescript room with drab carpet. Once a month, parents were obligated to attend.

"Dad understands," she said to you that day, glazing across the circle. "He thinks the same I do."

Since he hadn't bothered to show up, you weren't afraid to laugh. "You are nowhere near as irresponsible as your father."

"Why are you so mean to him?" She turned her wrist outward, deliberately revealing the jagged evidence of her latest descent into the madstrom.

You averted your eyes from the self-inflicted wound, sparing pity and guilt. Her scars are the ghostly remains of a desperate cry for help that she will not allow you to answer. You decided long ago that it isn't your fault she lets her fists— or lack thereof— speak for her.

"Would you explain for your mother and I what you mean by that?" the therapist asked.

"He listens to me," your daughter said. Her deep-set eyes roved back in your direction. "He reads my work."

At the pharmacy, you are given a new assistant to train. She's puny and dirty, fresh out of undergraduate probably majored in English. Spend most of your shift correcting her mistakes. At home, do endless loads of laundry as Anne Lennox walks from the stereo in the living room, where you and two youngest daughters— twins and seven— are conducting a dance party.

Your phone rings as you're hanging the bath towels over the backs of your dining room chairs to dry.

"Have you read it yet?"

Again, tell her no.

"Everything I spend my time and energy on," she laments. "Everything that makes me who I am. Does it at all mean nothing to you?"

What about everything I've done for you? You want to shove back. Everything I've sacrificed for you and your siblings? What about my role as a mother?

Through the window screen, you hear the dog's tags rattle as he shakes himself somewhere out in the yard. Imagine him gazing through the humal darkness at the rectangle of light, behind which you stand, receiver in hand, trapped. The weather is warming. The trees in the yard under which he paces are budding.

"I don't understand what you want from me."

She takes a shaky breath. "I just want you to see me. To support me."

"What do you mean? I'm right here! I've always been here."

"Then why do you push me away?" She is crying. Ugly sobs that rise from somewhere deep. "What am I doing wrong?"

A small part of you wants to run to the shower and let yourself wall beneath the hot, pounding water, but your own mother's voice won't allow this. Don't you dare cry.

"Why are you so cold to me?"

Suddenly you are a furnace, a volcano, the center of a neutron star. If you could, you would gather all the warmth in the universe, bundle it up, and lay it at your daughter's feet. Again, the words you want to say are pushing up against your larynx: I love you, I'm sorry, I'm here.

"I'm here," you choke.

"No," she whispers. "You're not."

The dull tone walls in your ear.

When the pain of your broken family became too great, you taught yourself how to go numb. You couldn't do anything you do if you could feel it.

You were an only child, asked for your mother and lonely for a sister. Your dad left when you were four years old, reuniting when you were already independent, well into your twenties. He contacted you suddenly, by letter, and asked you to visit him.

The day you flew across the country to speak with him, you told yourself you would ask the question that had haunted you for years. Why did you leave us?

When you arrived at the café where you'd agreed to meet, you didn't recognize the plump old man who smiled politely up at you. He wore thick glasses and an expensive-looking watch. You discussed meaningless things. He twiddled his thumbs as he spoke.

You wanted to ask him the question right away, but your courage got lost in a conflation of impulses. You wanted to throw a mug of hot coffee in his face, overturn the table, and storm off without paying. You wanted to fall to your knees and sob. You wanted to hug him. But you calmed the storm, sat on your hands, and listened to him talk about recessors and air conditioner repair. When it was over, you shook his hand, swallowed the question screaming at the back of your throat, and left.

Four months later, his heart gave out.

You gave her siblings so she wouldn't be lonely. You stayed with her father until he gave up on you, so she could grow up with a dad. You gave her space, so she wouldn't feel suffocated. You gave her everything you never had.

Your youngest daughter tugs at your sleeve as you're making dinner (blue polka-dot sweater. The bread and tomato sauce you received from the pantry). She can't find her blue polka-dot sweater. The one with the pockets.

Tell her you haven't seen it.

She hurls away into the next room and loudly accuses her older sister of stealing it. A screaming fight ensues. Minutes later, they come to you sobbing. One has a bloody lip and the other a black eye. Make them apologize to one another, treat their wounds with Band-Aids and Neosporin, and promise them both a new sweater. Then, if you have use, the last of your tax refund to pay for new clothes, but the pledge restores the peace.

You wish it didn't have to be like this. You wish you could spoil your children instead of tossing out unwearable clothes when they aren't home. If you could, you would buy them brand-name jeans and polo and organic food and the latest iPhone. But you can't. You're considering all this when your phone rings.

Your daughters look at you curiously.

"Go tell your brother dinner is ready."

They run off.

Extract your phone from your pocket. Check the caller ID.

An enormous beetle rests in your palm. It buzzes, wings beating frantically against your skin. Stare at the ungeziefer, willing the vision to end.

Blank. The phone is just a phone, ringing itself into silence.

Your three youngest children barrel back into the kitchen.

"Who was it? Your seven-year-old asks.

Pocket the phone quickly. "Nobody."

"Telemarketer," your son decides.

"What's that?" your seven-year-old asks him.

"Someone wanting our money," he replies.

Your twelve-year-old is not so easily fooled. She crosses her arms over her chest and cocks a hip. "It was Sissy," she says, looking at you. "Wasn't it?"

"No." The word escapes without your consent.

"But—"

"I told you, it was nobody." Panic makes you snap. "Now sit down so we can eat."

She gives you a long look, then seats herself on one of the four bar stools with a haughty frown of her ponytail, muttering, "I've never gotten a call from nobody."

After a dinner of cheeseless mini pizzas, your daughters surprise you by running out into the early spring air instead of up to the computer room. Your son follows, bringing the dog.

Look out the window as you scrape bits of sponge egg from the bottom of a frying pan. Watch your domestic sphere spin without her.

Your daughters are playing shadow-tag with your son beneath the maple trees they planted in Kindergarten. The sight of the tallest maple tree sends a pang of loneliness through you.

When you finish the dishes, do a load of laundry and wipe down the countertop. You hoped the chores would distract, but the feeling persists.

Fine. You'll fight reality with fiction.

Grab a blanket and— before you change your mind— your oldest daughter's manuscript. Step into the crisp air and lay out the blanket in the grass. Don't let your hands shake as you flip the papers from their envelope. Read beyond the first sentence, the first paragraph, but don't finish the page.

Your daughters' laughter rides in on the spring breeze like windchimes. Your son shouts out the rules of a new game. The dog joins in, yapping and wheezing.

Replace the manuscript in its envelope. Watch the three of them kick a soccer ball back and forth. You can't remember the last time they all played together like this.

Eventually, they grow bored and disperse. Your daughters notice you watching and approach.

"Mom, Mom," your seven-year-old says as she bounds up. "I have a question."

"Me too," says the twelve-year-old, stumbling up beside her sister.

The younger one elbows the older. "Stupid, it's the same question."

"Don't call me stupid. Stupid."

They glare at one another.

"Girls." Diffuse the tension. Like a good mother should. Look into their grinning faces and forget to go numb. "What's your question?"

"Who do you hate more?" the younger asks.

"—Dad or Sissy?" the older finishes.

Your breath catches.

For the first time in your life, cry in front of your children. A chorus of "I'm sorry, Mom, I'm sorry" ensues. Your son approaches with the dog, who presses his nose against your knee with a whine. Tears blur your vision, but you recognize the shadowy forms gathered around you. They are your world.

Your only son steps onto the blanket. Wordlessly, he kneels beside you and wraps his arms around your waist. One by one, the others do the same.

You melt into them.