

Letter To a Phantom

by Jean Ryan

I see your bedroom. First, the slanted ceiling angled over the twin beds, Sam's on one side, yours on the other. Sassy, your beagle, dozing on a blanket on the floor. One small window, a view of the snowy yard below: the burn barrel with a few blackened aerosol cans around it; a listing swing set; Elizabeth trundling about in her blue snowsuit; Rick leaning against the fence, smoking.

“Get out,” you'd say to Sam; being the younger, he would leave without protest. (This impressed me, the straightforward way brothers interacted. In my family of all girls, every request was negotiated.) We'd kiss for a few minutes—you loved to kiss—then take off our clothes and fall into your unmade bed, where we would leave the world behind and thrill each another with endless, steamy foreplay. You were the best sex I never had. At last we'd notice the time and pull on our clothes before your mother, if we were lucky, pulled into the driveway. Afterwards, you would escort me home along the half mile of abandoned railroad tracks that separated our houses. You did this unflinchingly, whatever the weather. On the days it snowed, I would pause at the edge of my yard and watch you fade into the white distance, waving at me just before you disappeared. Although I could not see your face, I knew you were smiling.

Every two weeks the church left a box of provisions on your front porch, donations you begged your mother not to accept—as if she had a choice. She cleaned houses during the day and waited tables at night and still could not feed and clothe four teenage boys and one toddler. What striking red hair she had, what pretty, albeit tired, eyes. Whenever she saw me, she smiled, absently, her mind on other things. I used to marvel that her small frame gave birth to you and your strapping brothers.

You were a beautiful boy: blue eyes, blond hair, broad shoulders. You were fit in the effortless way boys used to be, with muscles that came from school sports and simple chores.

Having reached the age of humility, I am shamed by the recollection of our break-up. You had been in the park the night before, you said, drinking beer with your buddies, and you got drunk and wound up kissing a girl who had even let you “feel her up.” You were sick about it, even teared up when you told me, but I was unmoved by your remorse—what did I know then of mercy? The girl you had kissed had impressive breasts and a sketchy reputation, and all I felt in that moment was righteousness. I was a woman wronged, a brand-new role that made me dizzy with power, and I told you I never wanted to see you again. I must have thought there would be plenty of boys like you and plenty of time to meet them.

Those hours we spent in your bedroom— did they stay with you? Remember your navy-blue blanket with the roping cowboys on it? The cracked “Little Ben” clock ticking away our time? Maybe those details, those afternoons, didn’t linger in your mind. I can accept that possibility, reluctantly.

In any case, you are gone, leaving me with sole ownership of the year we were together. It feels like a responsibility, holding onto this copy of you. We fell in love at fifteen, built ourselves into each other. Your wife is grieving the man she was married to for forty-seven years; I am mourning a phantom.

Given all the years and distance between us, we were lucky to reconnect. I can’t recall who found who, only that we began writing letters, real letters, typed and tucked into envelopes. You were married and working at IBM; I was cooking in restaurants, living in Berkeley, in love with the woman I would one day marry (as soon as the law allowed it). Your letters were earnest, your focus familial. You wrote about your three children, the ways they made you proud, the fear you had when your youngest daughter left for Europe. Your wife, Margie, was in daily pain and needed a hip replacement. You wished

she wanted to spend more time with you; she lived, you said, for the kids. You enjoyed hunting and skiing, didn't much like your job. Your mother had died of lung cancer. You had still not seen your father, nor forgiven him for deserting his family.

When we finally arranged to meet for lunch during one of my trips to Vermont, I was nervous, exhilarated. You were standing at the bar, grinning at me in that boyish way, your eyes squeezed into crescents. There was a settled look about you, a solid heft to your frame. You were still handsome, still Tim, but in a grown-up version that excluded me. I was struck by the rights I had lost, the knowledge turned useless.

We ordered lunch, though I don't recall eating, and shared our middle-aged almanacs. We worked over some common ground—news of our siblings, a few old friends—before offering up the people who had become our loved ones. I had only a faint recollection of your wife, and hearing you speak of her sent a gust of something that felt like jealousy through me, as if my teenage ghost had risen up and shaken her fist. You did not seem surprised that I was with a woman, and I silently credited you with that. I mentioned that I had dated several men in college but probably shouldn't have bothered. "None of them held my interest. You must have ruined me for other guys." We both laughed at this and, studying your smile, I wondered if it wasn't true.

I asked if you were happy, and you said, "Pretty much," and shrugged. "Nothing's perfect, right?" You said you were planning to surprise your wife with a vacation in the Bahamas, hoping that a trip to paradise would help. There was a co-worker, you added, who liked you, a lot. "It was a few months ago. I liked her too, but I couldn't do that to Margie, you know?" I winced inwardly, thinking of my own indiscretion. Here was your goodness, plain as day, and what it said about me. Honestly, I was annoyed with Margie—couldn't she see that you were a god?

We talked on. Every so often, I looked at your hands or lips, marveling that they once traveled over my skin. Did you think about this too? At one point while you were talking about your children, I saw us lying behind a glossy privet hedge not far from my house;

it was our hide-out. When sofas and bedrooms were not possible, nature turned to clemency, a place to disappear, and you and I were as much a part of it as the plants we hid among, all of us getting the same sun and rain. I remember the spent white flowers that drifted down around us, the bits of fall leaves that clung to our coats. Sometimes in winter you would shove open the unlocked window of a lakeshore cabin, and we would brush the mothballs off the beds before slipping between the frigid sheets. How odd it was now to see you now, to regard you without need or urgency.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, we had exhausted every topic. I looked straight into your blue eyes, wanting more—but what? What could you give me? What did I need from you? A lunch could not bear the weight of my yearning; I'd expected far too much from it. There was nothing to do but get up from the table and hug, awkwardly, and promise to write more often. We did and then we didn't.

They say you died in your sleep, a heart attack, which sounds peaceful, lucky, though not for your wife, who tried to wake you. I keep starting to send her a card, but I'm not sure there's any point in a sympathy card from a stranger. I do feel sorry for her, and the kids, and their kids, and everyone else who knew you far better than I did.

But I knew you then, when you lived in a rundown house with a broken swing set and had a dog named Sassy and a weary, overworked mother who was always pleasant to me. There you are in the yellow kitchen, making a bologna sandwich for your little sister, dropping a slice into Sassy's mouth, grinning at me. Ask me anything about that year and I'll pour my heart out.



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