

KATYA APEKINA

## MAUREEN AND MARJORIE

Nov. 1

Dear Marjorie,

Yesterday, we shaved our heads for the novitiate ceremony. Mother Superior cut my braid and then held it in front of her like a captured snake. I thought about biology class with you, when Mr. Flores was talking about how hair documents a person's life, like rings in a tree. It's a clean slate now.

Tomorrow, we're driving up to the monastery, and I will begin my vow of silence. Sister Katerina told me it is very difficult at first to purge yourself of words, to suck out that venom, but then, when you're finally empty, you can hear light. "Laaight Siiings," she said. She is broad shouldered and Russian and normally very chatty.

The vespers bells. I love you, Marjorie. I pray for you often.

With Love,

Maureen

1

Nov. 7

Dear Maureen,

I'm picturing the month ahead of you as a long game of charades. And for me another month without Maureen. I just counted, and it has been ten and a half months now of being Maureenless. My mother slips up and still says Margarine sometimes, but now I'm just Marjorie. Just a dry piece of toast. But let's not get into all that.

I start training for a new job tomorrow. It is so strange. I don't know what it will entail exactly, but it pays well, and I won't have to rely on tips. A psychiatrist saw me at The Barn when he was having dinner with his wife. I thought at first she was his daughter. She kept blowing her nose during all my monologues. I came to their table afterwards—the director wants us to mingle in costume now. It makes the experience more "authentic," though really it just ends up being awkward, because the long gray beard I have to wear keeps getting into people's plates every time I reach to shake anyone's hand. The doctor was telling me about this new project he is working on, an innovative new therapy using actors, while my beard was marinating in his penne alla vodka. He asked if I was in an improv class in college and how

handy I was at building sets. He complimented me on my “very neutral-looking face” and said that he could tell I would make a “good vessel.” His wife didn’t say anything, just looked into his mouth when he talked. He is a very strange-looking man, but I probably should not say this about my future boss.

I just found his card—Dr. Alexi Zifkin. Did you know him? I remember you took some psych classes sophomore year, and he said he teaches occasionally at the University.

Love,  
Marjjjjjjjorie

PS I just reread your letter, and it reminded me of Sam going around for a while telling everyone how Language is Living. I think he read that in a linguistics textbook, and then he wouldn’t stop saying it. Remember? I don’t know why I thought of that. Oh, because you were saying Language is Venom. I think I prefer the way Sam saw it. I was thinking of going to visit your parents on his birthday.

2

Nov. 9

Dear Maureen,

I know you couldn’t have even gotten the last letter I sent yet, but I will just keep inundating you. I was thinking about maintaining the status quo of words floating (growing! living!) in the universe and compensating for your silence. Are you allowed to read? I mean, things other than the Bible? I *mean*, my letters? If you were here right now we could have so much fun. For example, you could help me lift my passed-out mother off the couch and clean the pee off the cushion. I’m sitting across the room from her as I’m writing this. She has a stupid look on her face. She was fine for most of the summer, I think. I don’t really know, since I was traveling with the theater group. Anyway, I don’t think I will be staying here for much longer.

I had my first day of work today at the psychiatrist’s office. A patient sits in a room with Dr. Z. It’s pretty much like every other shrink office I’ve been in—a couch, a chair, lots of art from South America or Africa. Masks, headdresses, fertility statues, potted palms, and several boxes of tissues. The couch and the chair face the Fish Tank. That’s what Dr. Z calls it. It’s a little room with a floor-to-ceiling two-sided mirror. It’s like a dance studio, but the shape of a train car, and I have to wear a black unitard.

The patient talks about his traumatic event, and I act it out. I can't see him, but there are speakers that pipe sound into the room. The idea is that the patient keeps coming back to the event in more and more detail. And as he describes it more and more, I make my end more realistic too. I wear a costume and make-up, maybe even bring in other actors and build and arrange a set. The first time we did it, I was really supposed to just listen and maybe pantomime. It isn't supposed to be realistic at all at first, because it could be too traumatic, but gradually I help the person confront his fears. Dr. Z says that if a patient sees the trauma happening to someone else, he can process it better.

It feels like being inside of a TV, which is pretty much what I've always wanted. The man who came today sounded old, maybe sixty. He survived a plane crash somewhere in Alaska. His lover and copilot had his neck broken. The man didn't say so exactly, but I think he was implying that he ate him. Maybe I misunderstood. It was difficult to understand him because he was crying a lot. Dr. Z kept telling him to rate his anxiety level, and the patient said eight, and then when I started acting stuff out he said ten so I stopped. If you and I are in a plane crash and I die, you certainly have my permission to eat me. Why not. Take communion. Anyway, why am I saying these morbid things? Am I coming unglued a little bit with no way to talk to you? Is there no one else in this whole town/world who I can say anything to? Perhaps.

I think you would like Dr. Z. He has a very soothing voice. When I'm in the other room, it's easy to forget about his receding damp tufts of hair (red hair, no less) and his soft-looking belly, probably covered in freckles and stretch marks and translucent skin. And his eyes. They're different colors. I feel more at ease when I look into his green eye; there is something about his black one that makes my skin crawl a little bit. Anyway, I think there's a term for how I feel about him in French.

Is it morning in Italy? Maybe outside your window you hear people stomping grapes or making pizza. *Mamma mia!* I kid, I kid. And then I think of the enormous black ocean between us, all of that water. Oh, it makes me dizzy.

Love,  
Marjorie

Nov. 19

Dear Maureen,

I'm wondering now if your vow extends to letters, since you haven't responded to the last two I've sent. I've never liked silences, especially yours. You only got quiet when you were angry with me, and your silence would get bigger and bigger, and I would try to fill the tiny space that was left with as many words as possible. I did that at work too. When a patient wouldn't talk, I couldn't take it. The slight crackle of the speakers and not being able to see faces—it's too much. Once I just started pantomiming things at random. The patient started coughing, and then Dr. Z was yelling at me through the speaker to sit still. Not actually yelling, but talking sharply. I kept my face in the neutral position he had so praised me for, even though I wanted to cry.

I'm crying right now though. I've spent my afternoon building a papier-mâché airplane and listening to a woman describe getting gang-raped in the back of a moving van by her next-door neighbor and his cousins. (He wore pantyhose over his head, but it had a run in it, and anyway, his ponytail was sticking out in the back.) Dr. Z didn't really prepare me for how all of this would feel. And then I came home, and the kitchen sink was stopped up with vomit, and my mother was ripping photos out of albums. Too much. It's all too much. I was at what Dr. Z would call an eleven.

I went to Sam's tree house. I'm writing this right now by the light of a camping lantern I found up here. The tips of my fingers are getting numb. Remember how we would drink forties up here? Sam and his friends would pee off the edge of the platform, and we'd get jealous because for us it had to be a team effort. I almost dropped you that one time, when I was leaning back and holding your hands as you squatted over the edge.

Do you remember that? Do your nun friends know these kinds of things about you? Do they know anything about you? Or is it me who doesn't know anything? No, clearly your spirituality was your own hoarded secret. It was a joke, I thought, when I got your letter from the Italian convent. I was sitting there reading it while your side of the room was just as it was before you left to study abroad. A poster of James Dean on a motorcycle, for god's sake. And Sam is gone, and you are suddenly *of the cloth*, and all I have is that stupid poster and a degree in theater. There must have been signs. How did I not see any? Did you pray for me then, stealthily, while I was sleeping across the room from you? Did you hide rosary beads in the shower? What the fuck, Maureen. It's getting too cold to write anymore. Goodnight, m.

Nov. 22

Dear Maureen,

I'm sorry. Why did I even send those horrible letter(s)? Hopefully you will read this one first and know to disregard the other ones. Things are better now. I moved out of the house. Being there made me crazy, and I think it just made her worse. Alexi is letting me sleep in the Fish Tank. He lent me an inflatable mattress, and the ceiling has stars glued to it. I don't know if they were there already or if he put them up, but they are nice, and the room feels airy because of the mirror. I fell asleep last night on my back feeling like I was floating down the Mississippi River on a raft. I pictured you and Sam curled up on both sides of me, nuzzling my armpits.

Alexi says I have a natural knack for this work. And I do think that somehow I am helping people. We drink tea in his office after each session, and today he was so happy with me that he ate almost an entire jar of jam. We'd had a bit of a breakthrough when I pantomimed crashing the papier-mâché airplane over and over. The man screamed the first several times I did it, but then by the time he left he was at a six. Tomorrow we're setting the plane on fire.

I might walk over to the cemetery tonight. Last time I was there, some of the gravestones had little stone piles on them, like anthills. I am going to bring along a pocketful of decorative gravel that I've skimmed off the bonsai trees in the waiting room. I might make him a pile.

xoxo,

Marjorie

PS I am dying to hear 1) what the light sounds like, 2) if all that silence made you crazy, 3) when you are coming home, and 4) what was done with your braid?

Dec. 2

Dear Marjorie,

Marjorie! What unhappy letters. I got the stack of them yesterday when we came back to the convent. I want to answer all of them at once, but words are coming out strangely. I feel a little like a colt taking its first steps. Language is strange. Not that I had been able to rid myself of it entirely, but there were moments when my prayers and thoughts transcended. Sam was

in the silence. I don't know how to describe it other than I was getting at the essence of things, and it was very slippery, and now it's mostly gone.

I feel a little like I am telling you this from your Fish Tank, since I can't see your face. Are your eyes rolling around in your head? And let them. I will still pray for you.

Oh, Marjorie! I'm sorry for "hoarding spirituality," for not being entirely open with you. I did not try very hard to tell you things, and I didn't have the language for it. I heard my calling so suddenly it caught us both by surprise.

Remember the Sacré-Coeur? When I'd said I felt God's presence we'd both laughed about it, because I didn't know how to explain it better. You were understanding it as a metaphor or some low-blood-sugar hallucination. But sitting in the pew with the stained glass pulsing around me like a heartbeat, that was the beginning.

And then in Italy, I was alone a lot, and I had never been alone before like that, for long stretches of time. I would sit in the living room of the boarding house, and the wind would blow the curtain out the window, and it was like the room gasped. I don't know. I am not telling this in a way that communicates anything important.

6

But I wish, Marjorie, that you could feel God in you. That you would let yourself. I want you to know what it feels like, but I am not sure how. Maybe we could pray together when I come? (I bought the ticket for January 3rd.)

I am worried about your mother, and I am worried about this job. It is a weird form of martyrdom. And this doctor. When did he go from Dr. Zifkin to Alexi? It worries me, him putting you in these terrible situations.

Love,  
Maureen

PS There is a dog here in the convent with no eyes. The way he goes around, nose on the floor, he reminds me of a little dustbuster. We keep bowls of water for him in all the corners because his nose dries out from all the sniffing. I just saw him now and thought about how happy he looked.

Dec. 5

Dear Maureen,

I was just about to cut my hair and I thought of you. It will fit easier under all the different wigs I have to wear. I am waiting for Alexi to come and shave my neck. You are wrong about him. He does not just throw me at anyone who comes along. Yesterday, for example, a man came in and said he went into a state one day watching all the bees in his courtyard, so he cut up his girlfriend with a paring knife. As soon as the man started talking, Alexi went over and switched the lights off in the Fish Tank, because he didn't like the way the man was looking at me. He was obviously getting off on telling the story, and he probably never had a girlfriend to cut up in the first place.

I was trying to remember Sacré-Coeur? Which one it was. There were so many cathedrals in Paris. It reminded me of how in awe we were of the chapel in the tree, but now I think we weren't in awe in the same way. For me it could have been a post office or a nail salon up there. Please don't slip away from me. I am glad you told me about that blind dog. I picture you reading this letter with that dog sniffing at your feet.

OK, this page is getting covered in hair. Some of it is sticking to the ink.

Love,

Marjorie

7

PS A nun telling me not to martyr myself? Really?

Dec. 8

Dear Marjorie,

The envelope you sent me was full of hair. If I had a locket, I would put some in there. Tomorrow is Sam's birthday. I don't know if you will end up going to see my parents or not. My mother sounds like a pixilated version of herself in all her letters. It would be good for her, I think, to have you there. She thinks of you still as an approximation of me.

No, I don't like that you are his specimen, that he keeps you in a glass cage and cuts your hair.

I've been praying to St. Monica, the patron saint of drunks.

Love,

Maureen

Dec. 15

Dear Marjorie,

I just got back from walking the dog with Sister Katerina. “Vich side vich?” she kept saying as she tried to put on his collar. I wish you could have been here in October for St. Francis’s feast day. Everyone from the village brought their animals to be blessed. The steps outside the cathedral transformed into a strange petting zoo: three cats on a leash, several shy alpacas, a hyperactive pony, some dogs, and a monkey. The monkey had the face of an old woman, and it took me a while to realize that was because she’d had all her teeth removed. Have I told you about that already?

You are upset with me. And you are right to be. Who am I to judge a doctor whom I have never met, who has been kind to you? Is this why you have not written me? Have things been better with your mother?

Please don’t be upset with me.

Love,

Maureen

8

Dec. 19

Dear Maureen,

I’m not upset with you! I was just out of town for the last week and a half. Can I still write to you about this very ugly man whom I am very possibly in love with? He took me to a conference in Minnesota on new psychiatric methods. We did a presentation of our findings. Like everything new, it has been very controversial. I am enclosing a copy of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Look at whose face is on the cover! I don’t look too bad, I think. Alexi was unhappy about it, because he said it is designed to visually reference the movie poster of some obscure Swedish film and is a passive-aggressive attack on his methods. Anyway, I spent most of the time at the conference giving interviews. People really liked that he found me at a dinner theater production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. That was an anecdote he had me practice telling several times in the car.

We did see your mother—not on Sam’s birthday, because we were in Minnesota, but when we came back. She looked awful, Maureen. Your father wasn’t home. Does he still even live there? She didn’t say he didn’t, but I think he might be staying at a motel. It’s good that you are coming home soon. I don’t know what she will do for Christmas. The house was a mess. There was a dead mouse floating in the soup tureen. I think Alexi could do



a lot for her. I got her to promise that she would come visit him in his office in the next few days.

I came by my own mother's house to get some things, and she'd somehow managed to put up a Christmas tree. "Marjorie," she said, "Marjorie, do you remember when you were little how you used to love me?"

Love,  
M

Dec. 23

Dear Marjorie,

Thank you for the magazine. I see your cannibal can now once again fly in airplanes. Progress. The woman who was raped is not mentioned in the article. Is she able to use moving vans again? Have you helped her forgive her neighbor? Is that what the reenactment will ultimately lead to? Or is it just for acceptance and desensitization? Forgiveness is so elusive, Marjorie. I hope that eventually you will forgive your mother. And that eventually my mother will forgive me. For being here and not there. For offering her nothing but prayers. For Sam's death. I forgive you too for the way you talk about her, so clinically, and for bringing your doctor over to see her.

9

But I'm glad you have been honest about what I have to expect when I come home. I am prepared now, as much as I can be. It's almost Christmas Eve, and it's hard not to feel hopeful. You will get this after Christmas. Merry Christmas! I hope you do not spend it alone, eating scraps from the table of the doctor's wife. That came out more cruelly than I meant. Forgive me for that too. I will see you soon.

Love,  
Maureen

PS The date of my first vows has been set for March 13th. Maybe you could come here for it? In some ways it will be the last real time we will have to spend together. After I take my vows it all becomes much more complicated, but we'll talk about it when I come.

Dec. 25

Dear Marjorie,

Merry Christmas! Is it snowing? The closest thing to snow here is the ash raining down from the fireworks that the Filipino boys have been setting off.

There was a boys' choir that sang here last night, and it was so painfully, painfully beautiful, it felt like being stabbed in the heart with an icicle over and over. It overwhelmed me. I was at once quivery flesh and calcified skeleton. It overwhelmed me, missing Sam so much.

Oh,  
m

Dec. 25

Dear Maureen,

It'll please you to know that I am jotting down this note to you at my old desk. Our mothers are downstairs huddled together, washing and drying dishes and whispering things, about me, I assume. My mother says that she has been sober for a week. This is what she says, and she does have one of those AA coins hanging from the refrigerator. I haven't heard from you in a while, but I am assuming it is just the slowness of mail.

The office is closed for the week, and Alexi's wife has taken him to Aruba. She has been stopping by the office more and more, since she saw the magazines with me in them. She does not like that I am living in the Fish Tank. I heard her fighting with him about it being against the fire code and zoning laws. Of course Alexi stood up for me. While he is gone, though, I am staying here. The heat shuts off automatically when he leaves and it gets too cold.

OK, mothers are calling. Yours looks better, by the way. My mother gave her a sweater.

I can't wait to see you.

Happy birth of Jesus your lord and savior day!

Marjjooooorrrriiee

Dec. 31

Dear Maureen,

What is the point of me even sending this? The post office will be closed for the next few days, and I know that you will not get this before you leave. Think of it as a little time capsule. Or like the murderer's confession to the detective in a movie.

If you are reading this letter, then my attempts to trap you have failed. You have come back to your life in Italy of praying and darning stockings and taking care of crippled animals and avoiding reality. I want you to stop punishing yourself.

Alexi says I need to start confronting my own fears and feelings surrounding Sam's death. He says he can tell it is interfering with my work and our relationship. I have been building the set, obsessively. I have already constructed the tree with the tire swing. I have collected cigarette butts and plastic bags and beer cans from the actual shore. The Fish Tank will contain water. River water, and I have already arranged for its transportation. I want to do this for you. Your mother let me take the clothes that you and Sam wore that day, and I have found my yellow bathing suit.

I want you to know all of these things in case in the moment I am struck dumb. In case I am overwhelmed and say all the wrong things, which I have and I might. I want you to understand that I am doing this for all of us, and that it will only be an ambush if it has to be. If you are stubborn.

Alexi will sit with you and your mother. She needs closure too. He will guide us through this. He knows how to help people in our situation.

I hope you aren't reading this letter. I hope it falls into the hands of some confused old Italian nun who now occupies your room. It is New Year's Eve, and the windows are covered in icy swirly designs. My mother is downstairs counting down with the television set. Alexi comes back tomorrow. I can picture him so sunburned and vulnerable looking.

I can't wait to see you. Finally.

Love,  
Marjorie

PS Happy New Year!

\*

Feb. 4

Poor Marjorie,  
I just read the letter you sent me before I arrived. The letter you hoped I would never have to read. It's touching what you tried to do. Also, stunningly naive. But maybe it helped you, having me in the audience, in which case I'm glad to have sat there. But closure? Oh, Marjorie. There won't ever be closure.

At the airport, my mother clung to my feet and wouldn't let go. I knelt beside her and began to pray, and she started scratching at my face. It was

horrible. I would be lying if I said I wasn't relieved to be back at the convent. I know that is a horrible thing to say.

I hope you didn't mean what you said about coming here for my vows, that it was something you said in a moment of anger. But I understand if you can't come. If I had any money of my own, I would offer to buy your ticket.

Love,  
Maureen

Feb. 11

Dear Maureen,

Alexi said my expectations were too high. That this is a process. Maybe I rushed things because I knew you would be here for only a short period of time.

I'm at my mother's house. She isn't home, and the door was left wide open. Alexi thinks it would be best if I stayed here for a few days. Just long enough for things to settle down. His wife walked in on us while we were having our tea, celebrating the pilot's last session. We were just about to kiss when she came in, and we froze. For several minutes, I think, we just sat there, leaned into each other, our lips inches apart. In the moment I remember thinking that we must have looked like one of those optical illusions that is simultaneously two silhouettes and a vase. That maybe if we didn't move she might see the vase and not us.

I will think about the trip. Alexi might be able to give me an advance on my paychecks. But now isn't a good time to ask.

Love,  
Marjorie

Feb. 15

Dear Maureen,

I'm at St. Vincent's with my mother. Things have not been going well. I'm too exhausted to go into all of the details, and anyway they are what you would expect. I'm writing this because I kept seeing all these nurses with dirt on their faces, and I only now realized it is Ash Wednesday. I had completely lost track of what day it was since I have stopped going to work. Also probably what you would expect.

I want to come to your vows, but I don't see how I can. You so casually mentioned to me over dinner that it might be the last time I will see you.

Our last supper. Jesus christ. A ring, a veil, and a new name. And me as your maid of honor. What did you expect me to say? I still hope you'll change your mind.

Tell me something about Sam. Something nice that you remember. Tell me while you can still write me.

Love,  
Marjorie

Feb. 15

Dear Marjorie,

Today is Ash Wednesday, the day of mourning and repentance. I helped burn the palm fronds that the others then mixed with oils.

All day I've been thinking of Sam (and also you). I got so jealous when the two of you became friends. You probably already knew this, but I broke my leg not because I was "trying to get a cat out of a tree," but because I was spying on you two having your secret wedding. It might have been a fifth-grade approximation of a wedding, so that you could scandalously kiss behind bushes, but still. And now I am also having an approximation of a wedding. They give us rings with two hearts and a sword through them. I think I told you already. Two hearts pierced by a sword. Sam and I were both so in love with you, Marjorie. When we went camping, the moon was huge and red, and all of us thought that maybe it was Mars barreling towards us. When is a moon ever that close? We'd all three held hands and jumped. Where was the moon in your reenactment?

Please come. If you can.  
m.