

Her Voice in a Bottle by Tim Pratt

Begin with the enigma: I sat at the beach on a driftwood log, beside a ring of stones surrounding coals and charred wood, watching Meredith walk away, through the archway of a natural bridge, to the little stretch of beach beyond. Her form dissolved from my sight, swallowed by the light of the setting sun, and I sat drinking a bottle of dark beer, waiting for her to return. Her bottle, half empty, stuck up from the sand beside her sandals and bag. After a while it began to get dark and cold, and I walked toward the archway, calling her name. I passed through to the beach beyond—my friends and I called the spot “Hole in the Wall” because of the archway in the rock—and saw only sand, and cliffs, and waves. There was nowhere she could have gone, unless she decided to freeclimb the cliffs, or swim out into the ocean, neither of which seemed likely. The cliffs were sheer, and the water in Santa Cruz in February was too cold to brave without a wetsuit. After going to the far end of the beach—maybe she’d clambered out onto the big rocks in the water to look at tidepools, and been cut off from land when the tide came in?—I made my way back to the little burned-out campfire. My things were still there, but her shoes and bag were gone, her bottle of beer tipped over and spilled. Had someone stolen her things? If so, why had they left mine? Had she hidden from me and crept back while I was looking for her, and run away? Why do such a thing? There were easier ways to ditch me, if she’d wanted to. Eventually I went home. I had no idea where she was staying. I didn’t have a number for her. I waited for her to call.

She never did. I still wonder, sometimes, if I’ll see her again, what I’ll say to her if I do, if maybe I have a way to call her after all. I run the scenarios to their logical or illogical conclusions, depending. I can think of several possible outcomes. None good.

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This all happened some time ago, when I was living on Maple Street in Santa Cruz California, right around the corner from my second home, Caffè Pergolesi (a coffee shop I renamed, transmogrified, and made the central setting of my first novel, *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*). I remember my time in Santa Cruz as a kind of twilight year, a strange combination of living in my favorite place on Earth and feeling very alone. I had a girlfriend who lived 3,000 miles away and visited occasionally. We had an open relationship, and there was another more local woman I dated, but she was in a committed primary relationship, so there was no sleeping over, and a core of essential loneliness remained whenever I went home from her apartment or said goodbye to her on my sidewalk. It wasn’t just romantic loneliness, either. I lived with my best friend Scott, who was wonderful company, but he was a grad student who kept hours that ran opposite my own, so he was home when I worked, and vice-versa. Every week or two my friend D. came up from Capitola and we sat out on the deck at Pergolesi, where smoking was allowed—he’s a champion smoker—and drank pints of Guinness and shot the breeze. But the hour of companionship here, or sex there, only served to illuminate my empty hours more starkly. I spent a lot of time writing alone in cafés, and walking downtown to watch street performers on Pacific Avenue, and prowling around the big bookstores, and eating cheese fries at 3 a.m. at the Saturn Café, and visiting Hole in the Wall. All nice activities, and all fond memories now, but at the time I wanted someone to *share* them with, a partner for my heart (and someone to “hear my various witty remarks,” as a famous cartoon character once said). I tried to think of myself as a noble Byronic figure, poetically standing alone in the surf at sunset, or looking down at the ocean from the sidewalk on West Cliff Drive with my scarf blowing dramatically in the sea wind, but such poses aren’t much good if there’s no one around to appreciate them. I wrote stories about chance encounters in cafés leading to tumultuous love affairs, and threw them away as feeble wish fulfillment. I felt sorry for myself and disgusted with myself over the self-pity.

That’s the state I was in when Meredith came back into my life. One day after work—I was an office drone and occasional technical writer for a little company up in the redwood-shaded hills above Santa

Cruz—I ambled around the corner to Pergolesi, as I usually did in the evenings, so I could flirt with a cute barista and listen to the Old 97s or Modest Mouse on the café’s speakers and drink a beer and read a book and maybe write a little, and hope somebody I knew would come in and hang out with me. I settled myself at one of my usual tables, back to the wall, eyes toward the door, and there I sat when, just after night fall, someone I knew did come in. But I didn’t recognize her at first; or rather, I recognized her, but I couldn’t place her, like seeing an umbrella on an operating table—she was so out-of-context that my senses took a moment to unscramble and interpret the data.

Meredith, without context: She wore a pale green summer dress with small flowers patterned on it, and her wavy brown hair was still long. Her narrow, beautiful face was still beautiful. Her nose was thin and strong, and she wore a pair of glasses with oval frames of some bright silvery metal. She was nearsighted—I remember, because she took her glasses off that night we lay together on my unfolded futon in college, and she looked at my face for a long time then, and I looked at her face, which was transformed and softened by the simple act of removing her glasses. She wore a bunch of cheap-looking plastic bracelets, three or four on each arm, and carried a soft brown leather knapsack on her shoulder. A willowy brunette. I had a tendency, especially in college, to get inexplicable fleeting crushes on willowy brunettes, probably as a side effect of knowing Meredith oh-so-briefly when I was a sophomore, twenty years old and utterly hopeless at love.

I recognized her, and thought, “This is like seeing a ghost,” though I don’t believe in ghosts, and had no reason to think she was dead, but she looked just the same as she had years ago—even the dress looked familiar. She went to the counter—I could see it from my table—and ordered a drink, and I thought about getting up and going to her, but what if I was mistaken? It seemed too improbable, that a woman I’d known for a few days in the mountains of North Carolina years earlier, who last I heard was going to Alaska to work in a brew pub of all places, would appear in *my* café in Santa Cruz at the very zenith (or nadir) of my lonely pity-party.

She turned, she looked at me, she looked surprised, she walked in, she put her tea cup and saucer down on the table, she said “Hey, you,” she sat down.

I looked at my wrist as if consulting a watch, though I wasn’t wearing one. “Huh,” I said. “You’re four years late for our date. And here I thought you just stood me up.”

“I never claimed to be punctual, Tim,” she said, tearing open a raw sugar packet and stirring the contents into her cup.

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When I was young, ten or twelve or so, I crippled one of our cats, maybe killed it. I was unloading firewood from a trailer made from the chopped-off back of a pickup truck, chucking logs to the ground by the wood pile where my dad could split it later. I threw a log and heard a yowl and looked down to see one of our countless yard cats twisted and twitching under the log. I remember the sinking horror—probably my first real understanding of the concept of *irreparable damage*—but I don’t remember what happened to the cat, if it died or got put down or if it even lived and limped along. Ever since then I am sometimes seized with the sense that things are fragile, and that I might destroy them, and it freezes me—I’ll hold a wine glass and suddenly become aware of the pressure of my grip on the thin crystal, and I have to put the glass down before I squeeze too hard and shatter it. I don’t *want* to break it, but I’m afraid it will happen anyway.

For a while I dated a very petite woman, light enough that I could lift her and carry her around effortlessly, and at first I was too tentative with her, my touches too hesitant, confusing smallness with fragility. I’m still maybe a little bit obsessed with breakability, and the potentially dire consequences of

thoughtless acts.

I wonder still if I offended Meredith—either time she disappeared on me—made some joke or gesture that violated a secret taboo or spoiled the sweetness between us all unknowing. I think about the old fairy stories, about brownies and house elves, how easy it is to piss them off: by leaving them new clothes, or thanking them, or forgetting to put out fresh milk. Break the secret rules and the magic flees. Toss a careless chunk of wood and hurt something innocent that never did you harm. Are you culpable if you didn't *intend* your crime, if you didn't even realize it *was* a crime?

Yeah. Of course you are.

#

The first time Meredith spoke to me was after a women's literature class. She wasn't in the class—I don't know why she sat in that day—but she came up to me in the hall after to tell me she was impressed by something I'd said about Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, something about a fish symbolizing grief, if I recall. Ah, college, when you could occasionally get a date through the judicious application of English-major bullshit.

"Are you an English major?" I asked.

"No, I'm studying mycology," she said.

"Mushrooms?"

"Sure," she said. "You should come out with me to collect specimens sometime."

At that time in my life, I'd made a decision to enjoy my youth and freedom and embrace whatever interesting experiences came my way (which led to a lot of drug use and strange love affairs), and collecting mushrooms with a strange woman sounded like just the sort of thing I should do.

She took me out that afternoon. I drove in my silver Nissan Sentra with the dent in the driver's side door. (Every car I've ever owned has had a damaged driver side door, which would symbolize something if my life were fiction, probably.) Outside Boone, where I went to college, there are lots of rolling hills and pastures, lots of cattle and horses and Christmas tree farms, and we went to a field full of cows. She pulled on latex gloves—which I found sort of sexy—and gave me a pair. "We're going prospecting in cow shit," she said cheerfully. She was wearing jeans and scuffed-up boots and flannel, and I was dressed like I mostly always was, in hiking boots and jeans and a t-shirt.

"Oh, so we're looking for *that* kind of mushroom?" I said. I knew hallucinogenic mushrooms grew in cow shit, and had heard stories of people harvesting them locally, though I understood you had to check a lot of cow patties and get pretty lucky to find any.

"Yep. It's been rainy, so we might find *Psilocybe semilanceata* in the grass, or *Psilocybe cubensis* in the shit—that's liberty caps and magic mushrooms, to you." (I had to look up the names of the mushrooms on Wikipedia—I don't claim to have *that* kind of memory for dialogue, so all the talking here will be approximations, except for a few conversations I recorded in my journal at the time, and even those are probably unreliable.) She set off, and I followed, admiring her self-assurance and certainty. She cautioned me not to eat anything without consulting her first, and I replied, rather drolly I thought, that she didn't have to worry about me picking something out of a lump of cow shit and popping it in my mouth. She gave me a grin. I figured I could learn to like that grin, even depend on it. She sent me to a likely-looking patch of grass—who knows why it looked likely? I took her word for it. She told me what to look for, reddish or brown mushrooms that turn bluish when you squish the flesh. I didn't have the

heart to tell her I'm color blind. I'd seen plenty of 'shrooms in dried form, and figured I could fake it. I didn't see much. I mooed at the cows, which ignored me. It turns out fresh mushrooms look totally different from dried, as I discovered when she called me over.

"Bingo," she said, and began plucking 'shrooms from a pile of cow crap and dropping them into a couple of paper coffee cups I held out.

"So we have to dry these before we can eat them?"

"Philistine," she said, wiping her hands together, then pulling her dirty latex gloves off and dropping them, inside-out, into another cup. "You only dry them if you need to preserve them. They're much better fresh. Let's go to your place and wash them off, what do you say?"

"Sounds like a Friday night," I said. "Is there enough for three people?" I lived in a little apartment off campus with my friend D.—the same D. who later lived one town over from me in California—and etiquette dictated that I bring enough drugs to share.

"There's enough here for three people to spend a weekend visiting God," she said.

"Sounds like a weekend, then."

D. wasn't home. I forgot it was his game night. He didn't meet Meredith that evening. Actually, now that I think about it, he never met her at all.

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"So you went to Alaska?" I said, spinning my empty pint glass between my hands.

Meredith raised one eyebrow—it's a trick I can't do, and have always admired—and shook her head. "Nooo. Why would I go to Alaska?"

"I thought... somebody told me you went to Alaska to work in a brew pub." Hadn't they?

"That was Sue," Meredith said. "You remember, that blonde girl you had a crush on, the field hockey player? You wrote that poem for her and even had dinner with her at her house but it didn't go anywhere. You should've cooked for her. Like you made me that omelet, you would have won her over I bet. Anyway, she moved to Alaska, not me."

I frowned. "Really? All these years I've had that mixed up?" I didn't want to believe it, but I could. I've had many opportunities over the years to discover the flaws in my memory. My little sister got all the memory in my family. I'd like to say I got all the imagination, but actually that was pretty evenly divided.

She snorted. "You probably asked somebody what happened to that girl you had a crush on, and they assumed you meant Sue, not me."

I stopped spinning my glass, wondering that she could still wound me, though I'd only spent a week with her long before. "It wasn't a crush. A crush is, like, a one-way thing. You liked me, too. At least you said so. You acted like it."

She leaned forward. "What was it you said to me, when you read me that poem you wrote about obsession? That love is just an obsession that runs both ways?"

"A reciprocal obsession," I said.

"How'd that poem go?"

I dredged up a few lines from memory: “Fill me with yourself. Make the world in your image, the moon a silver coin that bears your face, the clouds your crowding limbs, and I will live in the cradle of your heart.”

“Yeah. The bit about the moon is pretty okay, but otherwise...”

I shrugged. “I never published it.” I’d published some of the other poems I wrote about her, after she never showed up for our first real date, after she never called or wrote. Probably better not to mention those.

“I hear there’s a roller coaster in this town,” she said.

It was like gravity. It was like going hiking and slipping on a wet hill and sliding down, landing on your ass and skidding. There’s no chance of stopping the fall. All you can do is try to slow it down. Or, if you’re reasonably sure you won’t land on jagged rocks or in a patch of poison ivy at the bottom, you can just lay back and enjoy the ride. I guess if you know certain death is at the bottom of the hill you might as well enjoy it, too. Why not? “It’s local’s night at the boardwalk,” I said. “Rides are fifty cents. So are hot dogs and sodas.”

“I’m not a local,” she said, and grinned that grin I remembered.

“I’ll vouch for you,” I said.

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I won’t go into the weird romantically-charged trip to the boardwalk, riding the rickety wooden roller coaster and so on. I mined that vein pretty thoroughly in my first novel, and covering it here again would feel like plagiarizing myself, and I’d get mixed up about what I felt and what the characters in the novel—who start falling in love at the beach boardwalk—felt. You can imagine. A woman you had a fling with years before reappears at a low point in your life. You go to a place where you have to sit very close together and focus on immediate and physical sensations, roller coasters, bumper cars, sea breeze. You can smell her again and you remember how she used to smell, muted but natural, like pine woods in winter, and she still smells that way. You talk about the rides and the cheap hot dogs and the ocean and every word you say bears the weight of all the words you aren’t saying, and eventually even the pauses sound significant, at least to you.

Then she beats you at air hockey and asks if she can see where you live, and you say yes.

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I took Meredith home and showed her my place, a nice little house I shared with my best friend and one of his fellow grad students. My room was nothing special—a futon for a bed, too many books, one nice little stained-glass window over the desk. I picked up the blue glass bottle she’d given me during our brief time together years before. It was like something from an old apothecary shop, about the size of a spice jar, with a snug glass stopper to hold it closed. The bottle lived on my windowsill with a few other mementos of old times. Meredith took the bottle and held it up to the light, a blue shadow falling across her face. “You opened it,” she said, sounding fond and disappointed all at once.

I shrugged, embarrassed. “Yeah, ages ago.” In truth I’d only opened it the month before, on my drunken New Year’s eve, feeling nostalgia in my bones like lead poisoning. I’d opened the bottle and put it to my ear and listened, and thought I heard something, some last lost words. But I didn’t want to tell her that and sound like a fool.

“Oh,” she said, and turned her back to me, unstoppered the jar (I heard the pop) and whispered something. Then she returned the bottle to me, sealed again. “Be more patient this time,” she said. “Only open it when you really need to hear my voice.”

My room felt too small suddenly, and I was too aware of Meredith as a *woman*—Meredith, who’d declined to make love to me all those years ago because, she said, she wanted to look forward to it a little longer, which was either a gentle brushoff or a kind lie or a strange miscalculation. “I’ll show you the garden behind the house,” I said, and set the blue bottle down—gently, gently. More carefully than Meredith had ever treated me.

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Here are a few of the things that struck me as strange about my week in college with Meredith:

The night we spent together in my room at the apartment in college—D. and I called it the Cold Room because the heat never worked properly—my alarm clock went on the blink, flashing symbols that weren’t numbers, and finally just dying forever. I pointed it out to Meredith, and she said, “Time doesn’t apply to us here. This night will last as long as we need it to.” But though we touched, and kissed, and talked (and nothing more), dawn came before I wanted it to, and she left as the last dregs of darkness drained from the sky.

That first day, when we tripped on mushrooms and walked through the park and sculptures on the west side of campus and along the creek, I kept losing sight of her—she’d vanish and appear across the streambed, behind an ugly postmodern sculpture, even once up in the low branches of a tree. “You’re teleporting,” I said. “Bampf!” It struck me as hilarious.

“I’m just trying to be everywhere at once. It’s a weakness of mine.”

I remember we looked at stones and broken colored glass in the stream by the steam plant, and she told me about being a little girl and wishing she could shrink down to explore river rock islands and the insides of rabbit warrens and the interior of hollow trees. Peeking on mushrooms, the world a vivid continuous flow of color and shape and sensation, that sounded perfectly reasonable to me. “Why didn’t you do it?”

She said, “Maybe I did,” and then she disappeared again. Just another hallucination, a bit of lost time, my distractible eyes deceiving me, but when I found her again minutes later her hair was wet and her pockets were full of damp stones.

We went to a party three days after we met, at a friend of a friend’s, out in the country past Meat Camp. I wanted her to meet everyone, but I couldn’t find any people I knew—it was a big messy party on a big sprawling property, kegs and fires and knots of people playing music and laughing and passing joints around. We lingered on the outskirts of the drum circle and warmed ourselves by the bonfire and finally went off by ourselves and found a rope swing dangling from a huge old oak branch—just a long rope with a fat knot at the end to put your feet on. We swung and laughed and saw fireflies in the sky, but it was too late for fireflies, so they must have been embers from the big bonfire. We took turns on the rope and swung and laughed, moving out over dark space and penduluming back. But on one of her turns she swung out, and I looked away for a moment—someone had set off a firework back at the party—and the rope returned empty. She was gone. When I saw her the next day she said she’d just lost track of me at the party. She didn’t elaborate and I didn’t push. She could get testy when asked to account for her actions or movements or motives or past. She was easy to be with but hard to know.

My time with Meredith was mostly brief illuminations punctuated by swift and prolonged periods of absence.

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Out back in the little garden behind the house I showed Meredith the plants, though I didn't know their names. (Later that year I met my wife-to-be, who also had a garden, and taught me the names of all the flowers. But before that I could barely tell a flower from a weed.) "So what kind of mushrooms grow in California?" I asked, grasping for something known to focus on.

Meredith was kneeling, examining some leafy plant illuminated by the porch light. Winter in Santa Cruz is the wet, rainy time, the green season. "How would I know?" she said.

"You're not a mycologist anymore?"

"I was never a mycologist," she said.

I looked up at the night sky. Too much light pollution here to see much in the way of stars. *Okay*, I thought. "In college, the day we met, you told me you were a mycologist, and then we went out looking for mushrooms, remember?"

She stood up. She was nearly as tall as me. "I said I was a *music*ologist," she said. "You must have misunderstood me. I was studying music history, actually, back then. The religious significance of music."

The world had shifted under my feet again. My memory had more fault lines than northern California. "Oh. But, we did pick mushrooms..."

"Sure. I liked doing drugs. I knew about certain kinds of mushrooms. But fungi aren't my passion." She punched me lightly in the shoulder. "You told me you were a poet, and I haven't spent the last few years thinking you were a *potter*, you know."

"Sorry," I said, feeling stupid and low. I didn't know this woman at all. Why had I ever thought I did? No, never mind—I did know her, some part of her, some essential part unattached to details of profession or obsession. I know I did. "I'm not much of a poet anymore anyway."

"Too bad. I left you a little poem. I whispered it in the bottle." She looked at the sky, as I had a moment before. "I should go. Can I see you tomorrow? Maybe go to the beach and watch the sunset?"

"Yes, of course. I know a lovely spot," I said. "Meet at the café?"

She leaned in and kissed my cheek, giving me a whiff of the scent of her. "See you tomorrow."

I waited up that night for my best friend Scott to get home and told him about seeing her, trying not to let on how excited I was, how hopeful I was. "Wow," he said. "The famous Meredith. That's crazy."

"I'll bring her over after we leave the beach," I said. "Maybe we can have dinner? You never did meet her."

"Sure," he said.

Part of me didn't really expect her to show up at Pergolesi. The last time we'd made a date—after that night in college, that intense night, when I said I wanted to take her on a real date, to make the thing between us more solid and real—she'd disappeared utterly from my life. But she was at the café when I got there. Something in my heart let go. I thought everything would be okay.

We drove to the beach, and she appreciated the beauty and seclusion of the spot. We sat on the sand and talked, but not about where she'd been or what she'd done. I only knew where she hadn't

been—Alaska—and what she hadn't done—study fungus or work in a brew pub. I told myself we had time for all that. I didn't ask her how long she was in town for. I liked to think it was indefinitely.

Then she kissed my cheek again and said she'd be right back, that she wanted to walk a little ways down the beach. I haven't seen her since. I never even took a picture of her, and have nothing but the image of her in my mind. Nowadays everybody has a cell phone with a camera, they can document everything, but even a few years ago those phones weren't ubiquitous, and anyway I hate talking on the phone, and don't even own a cell now.

I went home and told Scott that Meredith had ditched me. I might have thought she drowned, except for her bag and shoes disappearing too. He was sympathetic. He said of course she was unreliable, I knew that, I shouldn't let it get to me, but maybe she'd show up in my life again. He said I should think of her like an unexpected pleasant surprise. He's a romantic, too, in his own way. When I saw my buddy D. later that week he just said I was better off without her, because she'd always fucked with my head. "I never even met her," he said, "but I could see how bad she messed with you. Besides, don't you have enough women in your life? You really need another complication?"

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Nobody ever met her. I mean, we saw people, when we were together, but we never saw anyone I knew, and I never met anyone who knew her. At a university of 12,000 students, it wasn't that surprising. Then again, I never knew for sure if she was a student or a townie or junior faculty or what. I never thought to ask. When I was with her, I was just with her. I only wondered about her life outside of me when she was gone.

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I recently saw a movie where one of the characters turned out to be a figment of the protagonist's imagination. Coincidentally, I'm currently reading a novel—a totally different story—where the same thing happens. In the movie, the imaginary person is a villain, and in the book, he's an ally. Different uses for the idea, but the core is the same: a deluded narrator externalizes some aspect of himself and perceives that aspect as a living, separate human being. It's a trick I've seen over and over again, in lots of books and movies, and it irritates the shit out of me. Not because I think it's a dumb idea—it can be used to great effect—and not just because my selection bias makes me think it's overused. It bugs me for some deeper reason I can't articulate, and it always disgusts me a little, the same way a story that turns out to be a dream in the end disgusts me. I feel duped, I think, for investing myself in something that turns out to be imaginary.

Which is profoundly stupid, because all fiction is imaginary. Even this story, which is filled with true stories of my life, is to some extent imaginary, whether I want it to be or not. My mother called me on the phone tonight, and I asked her if she remembered me throwing a log and hurting one of the cats—"What," I asked, "ever happened to that cat?" Mom didn't remember anything like that happening. My little sister, who has a memory so voluminous and precise that she can name the date of almost anything that's ever happened to or around her, also had no memory of me hurting a cat. My mom did remember the time my brother fell off a chair and crushed a cat to death, which I don't remember at all. Maybe I unconsciously appropriated his story and made it my own. But I still feel *guilty* about hurting that cat, ashamed over something that may never have happened. It's imaginary, but it's still real.

Listen to me. Talk about English major bullshit.

I didn't ask Mom if she remembered Meredith. Mom never met her. The most she'd be able to say is maybe she remembered me mentioning her. Which is the most anybody I've ever asked about Meredith

can say.

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When I opened the blue bottle that drunken New Year's eve, long after midnight, with "A Long December" by the Counting Crows playing on my stereo and too much champagne inside me, I held the bottle to my ear and heard Meredith's voice. I heard her say "I'm on my way."

At least, that's how I've remembered it all these years. But writing this, questioning my recollections, made me go back to my old journal and look up the account of that night. I found my messy hangover scrawl, written the morning after. According to my journal I held the bottle to my ear and heard the words "I'll never stay." ("I'm on my way / I'll never stay." That makes a little poem, a simple couplet, doesn't it?) But I wrote that after sleeping all night, with a dry mouth and a pounding head, so who's to say my memory wasn't already influenced by oblivion and dreams? The only memory I truly trust is the memory of how Meredith made me feel: like there was a great deep chasm opening up underneath my feet, but that was okay, because when I was with her, I could fly.

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Then again, if it hadn't been for the chasm, I wouldn't have needed to fly.

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Now it's six years later, and I live in Oakland, with a wife I love and a job I like and a writing career and everything I've ever wanted, mostly, and I'm only thinking about Meredith at all because I had to clear off a shelf that held a bunch of keepsakes yesterday. The little plastic pumpkin from the performance art show my senior year. The screw Adrienne found on the floor of the bar and handed to me, with a pointed look, at that rock show when I was twenty-two. The stone Ganesha statue D. gave me. The airplane liquor bottle with a note rolled up inside it from Aubrey. The tiny wooden boat Scott brought me from Europe. The set of cool little miniature canopic jars from my wife Heather.

And the blue glass bottle from Meredith. I held it in my hand and thought about pulling the stopper out. Would I hear a voice—the poem she'd promised? If she'd actually promised it, and I wasn't just misremembering. Would opening the bottle conjure her, call her to me, like rubbing the lamp and letting the genie out, only she's a slow genie who takes a few weeks to arrive? And what would happen if she did show up, smiling and acting like no time had passed, like nothing had gone sour between us?

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"We should run away together," I said when we sat on the beach, holding hands.

"You said the same thing last time we were together," she said. "Remember?"

"I think so," I said, but I didn't remember that at all.

"It sure beats running away separately," she said, looking out at the ocean, thinking over the idea, it seemed to me. "Then again, we wound up together again this time, didn't we, on the other side of the continent? Maybe we were running away together all along. Just along separate paths that converged."

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My life is strong now. Meredith always came to me before when I was weak, feeling alone, in the aftermath of one wrecked relationship or in the midst of others collapsing. And when she came, she didn't really give me strength, only more doubt and worry. But somehow, when she was *here*, when she

was *present*, I forgot about everything else, and didn't notice the wreckage or imminent collapse. She kept me immersed in a beautiful, all-consuming now. I tried explaining that to D. once, after she disappeared the second time, and he took a drag off his cigarette, looked at me for a moment, and blew the smoke out the side of his mouth. "That girl's like heroin," he said. "Sure it feels good while you're doing it. It feels better than anything has ever felt in the history of the world. But it has a way of fucking up the rest of your life. Are you picking up what I'm putting down?"

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So I've got this blue bottle sitting on my desk now. I put it up on top of my computer, with the glow-in-the-dark grasshopper and the collection of plastic scorpions. If Heather asks me why I moved it, I'll tell her I like the way the sunlight from the tall window catches the blue glass, which is true.

Part of me wants to open the bottle, just to put an end to wondering, to see one way or the other, because the kind of anxiety that eats at me is the anxiety of uncertainty—if I know I have to deal with something, I just *do*, but when some vague unspecified fear hangs over me, it inhibits my ability to live. Another part of me wants to throw the bottle into the ocean or chuck it into a dumpster or drop it into a volcano—ha!—next time I'm in Hawaii and we go on a helicopter tour. Another part of me knows it's bullshit, that it's just a bottle, a glass vessel a woman I barely know whispered into, and just because I write fantasy doesn't mean I believe that stuff. I'm a skeptic. Sure, I knock on wood, I have little superstitious rituals, but I know they're merely magical thinking, that they don't exert any influence on the world, that at most they exert influence on my mind, which is enough, sometimes. Maybe destroying this bottle would exert a positive influence on my mind. Or maybe getting rid of it would drive me crazy, like reading a great story in some beaten-up out-of-print paperback anthology and then getting to the end only to find the last pages are ripped out.

I'm not alone anymore. Hell, I'm not twenty or even twenty-four anymore. I like to think I could shake Meredith's hand and wish her well and put her out of my mind. Or that I'd see her and feel nothing, the way some crushes seem to dry up like mudpuddles in the sun. But the same terror of breaking a wineglass in my hand, of foolishly destroying something wonderful, grips me when I think of opening my door and seeing Meredith standing there, or running into her on the street on my day off. The things I might feel for her could ruin a world. There's a sense in me that our story is unfinished, that it's a three-act play with only two acts already staged. That kind of nonsense comes from years of writing stories, I think—on some level I've come to believe my own bullshit fiction that there are resolutions, closures, or happy endings in life.

When I know the real secret to happy endings is simply choosing the right moment to look away.