The House Where They Go to Di

May 19, 1993

Mom,

If you didn’t already notice, I left. I’m sure you noticed, or at least I hope you did. I left home about four-ish days ago. I don’t want to call it running away. Running away has that sort of kiddy connotation. I mean, everyone “runs away from home” at least once between the ages of six and twelve. And then comes back home streaked with tears approximately twenty minutes later. Not too many “running-away-from-homes” ensue in manhunts.

Anyways, because I doubt you’ll launch a manhunt on me, I wanted to let you know I’m at grandma’s house. Well, grandma’s beach house. The one on the coastline. The one you don’t like. The one she left me in her will last year. It’s still got all the wicker furniture, the nautical striped upholstery, the bleached wood end tables, and the seahorse lamp shades. I set up a P.O. box at the post office, which is a few miles down the road. I mentioned that in case you ever want to write me back. Not sure if you will. Not sure what you’re going to do with these letters, either.

I know you’re not really a sand and saltwater person, but it’s really quite pretty here. The shoreline is just a few strides away from the door. During low tide, I’ll take off my socks and shoes and make my way down the bank, sort of crimping its scalloped edges with my toes. It reminds me of sealing the trim of thick pie crust. It’s like the ocean is just one big syrupy, liquidy blueberry pie. With poorly folded-in edges. Especially when high tide comes. I’m a little too scared to walk along the coast when the water bulges and claws its way along the coast.

I think that’s enough writing for today. It’s probably taken me twice as long for me to get this all down on paper than for you to read it. If you did. Oh, and I forgot to mention. Something smells fucking terrible here. I don’t know how to describe it. It’s rancid. Did it smell like this last time we vacationed here? Like, as a family?

Yours,

Laura

P.S., I hope you don’t throw these letters out. I know you’re disappointed in me. But it’s not like I’m any different after coming out. I’m still the same person. I’m still your person.

June 2, 1993

Mom,

So I got your letter back in the mail the other day. Well, I don’t know if I can really call it “your letter.” All I found in my P.O. box was the exact same letter I sent out to you. With a nice, big “return to sender” written on the front in red ink. In your handwriting. Who doesn’t know their own mother’s handwriting? I could tell that you’d opened the envelope and taped it shut before sending it back to me. As long as you know I’m out here, somewhere. I’m going to send this one to you. And the next letter, and the letter after that. Even if you send them all back to me.

You know, Grandma left the house in really awful condition before she died. I was worried there would have been squatters in the house or something, but I guess nobody wants to seek shelter in a desolate beach house in bumfuck nowhere. The neighbors actually helped me patch it up a bit. Yes, I’m not totally alone! A half-mile out is another beach house with a married couple. They’re kind of old. But the husband, Jeffrey, leant me some tools. I’m thankful for the help. I remember you told me once that I was too stubborn in wanting to do things by myself. Well, I think things are starting to change.

Anyways, I’ve been birdwatching a lot lately. I don’t know too much about the local wildlife, but Jeffrey’s wife, JoAnn, told me all about them. There are wandering tattlers, whimbrels and curlews, black oystercatchers, and Western sandpipers. I think my favorite are Arctic terns, with their little black-capped heads and their little pearly birthday streamers for tails. It’s migrating season for them but it looks like they’re taking a pit stop on the shore for a while. Jeffrey says they’re a bit of an uncommon sight for this part of the year. Their migration is transitory. I wish I could tell them this, but I think we have a lot more in common with each other than we think.

Yours,

Laura

July 14, 1993

Mom,

You’ll never guess what I found while I was snooping in grandma’s closet. Yes, I was snooping. Photographs! All in black and white and sepia and glossy. There was one I stole and taped up in the kitchenette, right over the table. It’s with you and your sister, I think. I’d say you’re about eight, maybe. You’re sitting on a rocky shore that looks eerily similar to the one here. There’s handwriting on the back. I think it’s grandma’s, because I remember how she signs her name on birthday cards. It says, “Wish you were here!” on the back.

I hope you don’t mind me having you pasted up on the wall. It’s like you’re telling me, “Wish you were here!” Or better, “Wish I was there with you!” In a way, you kind of are with me like this. Your picture is transfixed. The dress you’re wearing exists in a captured landscape distorted by film. Your haunting is architectural. I wonder how many versions exist of you. How many photographs there are of you, how many snapshots in how many hearts. How many wish you were here. How many of you exist inside of me? Sometimes I worry that when I write to you, I warp and disfigure you. It’s like I xerox a new copy of you each letter I compose and each time it comes out a little more blurred. Did you treat me more kindly than I remember? Would you treat me more kindly now?

I found the source of that weird smell. I was digging through the kitchen cabinets to find sheet pans. There was a bird. Two birds. Two dead arctic terns under the kitchen sink, each resting on their shriveled backs. I vomited. It took two pairs of latex gloves, half a roll of paper towels, a trash bag, and a quarter of a can of air freshener to remove them. And a few nearly-expired scented candles to completely exorcise the kitchen. There was no blood. There was no real rot. They just smelled awful.

The terns that aren’t dead haven’t left for the season yet. Jeffrey’s worried that something’s wrong with their migration. When the tide is low, they float atop the sea’s surface like bobbers attached to a fishing line. Like little buoyant seashells. Oh, and I forgot to mention something. I found a new name. I don’t like how Laura sounds anymore. I’ll just go by El. I hope you’re not mad. Please don’t be mad. I know that names are precious. I haven’t told anybody yet. And I haven’t told Jeffrey and JoAnn about, you know, the whole gay thing. I don’t want them to turn me away. Just thought I would let you know now before I sign off.

Yours,

El

August 9, 1993

Mom,

I found two more of the letters I sent you back in my mailbox yesterday morning. Envelope torn, then taped shut, with “return to sender” written on the front with red ink. In your handwriting, obviously. So I guess that’s how you’re going to act. Opening up my letters just to skim them, package it all back up and send it back to me so they don’t have to sit and rot in your house. So the thought of my existence doesn’t weigh you down.I hope I haunt you. I hope I haunt you just like you haunt me.

Maybe you’re mad at me for changing my name. And I wanted to make you more mad. So I decided to cut my hair. I grabbed the pair of kitchen shears and since I wanted to make you mad, since I wanted to make you really, really mad, I did it right in front of the pictures on the wall. I wanted you to see me do it. It only took five minutes to hack it all off and it looked awful. Just awful. I hated it. I hated it so much.

So I cried. I cried and I dropped the scissors and ran out the door and into the tide. And it was stupid of me, too, because it was mid-afternoon, when the tide is at its strongest, and deep waves of muscled ocean were sucking at its gritty banks. I ran, crimping the doughy seaside edge with the soles of my feet and tripped. And my forehead met with the flooded shoreline as the sea took its punishment on the sand and pretty soon I couldn’t tell the salty difference between the seafoam and the stream of blood spouting from my busted lip.

So I lied there, face-down in the sand. Like a child throwing a tantrum. When the waves pulled out long enough for me to lift my head, I would give out a wretched scream or sob or moan, then let it fall back into an oncoming blast of saltwater. Eventually, I finally got tired of listening to myself dry heave and felt embarrassed that maybe, somehow, you were watching. Or maybe the terns overhead. From a birds-eye-view. Speaking of the terns, I found four more dead under the bathroom sink. In the cabinet. Planted on their backs with their withered feet curled inwards. It’s like they come to the house to die, just to torture me. Sometimes I wonder if I deserve it all. Like it’s divine punishment for liking girls. I bet that’s what you would tell me if you were here.

I ended up walking to Jeffrey and JoAnn’s house. The whole four miles on foot. And I’m proud of myself for that. I’m proud of myself for reaching out to them, even if reaching out means trekking shoeless for over an hour to ask someone to use their shower. I’d never felt so embarrassed in my life, crusty and briney and standing on their porch like a lost, wet dog. I don’t know if JoAnn’s ever had kids, but I think she would make a great mom. She kept me for dinner and Jeffrey bandaged up my face. You’ve told me I don’t know how to reach out to others. I disagree. I think you’re projecting.

Oh, and they had a guest over. They called her their niece, even though she’s technically not related to them. Her name is Mia. She’s two years older than I am and a whole foot taller. And fortunately for me, she graduated from cosmetology school last year and works as a hair stylist. She cleaned up my shitty haircut. I actually like how it looks now. We hung out a lot after dinner. She actually drove me back to grandma’s house in her car– a pickup truck, very cool– and we spent another hour talking and talking.

This part I don’t think you’ll like, but she kissed me before she left. Nothing big, just on the forehead. She took my shoulders and pressed her lips to my scalp and it was wet and warm and soft and hard all at the same time. We hadn’t even talked about, well, you know, liking girls and all. I didn’t even mention you. But I think she just knew. I’m going to see her again next week.

Yours,

El

August 16, 1993

Mom,

The smell came back again. Worse, this time. I’d never smelled rot so rancid, so bitter. I’d never wanted anything gone so bad in my life. Not even you. I had to get rid of them. So I started opening up every drawer and cupboard I could find. I pulled the furniture back from the walls. I peeled away the rugs. I tore the curtains off their rods.

There were more birds. Terns. Dead terns. With their withered feet pressed against their pale breasts and their fragile wings folded in like papery envelopes, tucked into their sides. All with their bellies up. Three to four to a shelf, a rack, a ledge. Like those drawers of taxidermied birds you find in museums. Study skins packed like sardines with rigid legs, their eyes brimming with cotton. But these birds actually had little beady eyes. They were in the kitchen cupboards. They were in the bathroom cabinet, behind the hand towels. They were in the dresser of the guest room, previously presumably vacant. They were behind the couch and the bookshelves and the kitchenette hutch and the living room sideboard.

I left every drawer and cabinet door open. I couldn’t touch them. Like they were resting in graves I couldn’t disturb. The kitchen and the bedrooms and the bathrooms and the living room were all one giant catacomb, a crypt littered with feathered carcasses. Part of me thinks that they were sent here. Like you sent them to find me because you were too much of a coward to do it yourself. I packed an overnight bag and waited on the porch for Mia to pick me up. I didn’t want to sit by the sea.

She didn’t kiss me when she arrived and halfway through the drive, asked me if something was wrong. And what was I going to do? Tell her that I had just excavated dozens and dozens of little taxidermied monochrome birds that I found in my grandma’s house? No, I told her. Just carsick. She bought it. And once we made it to her little apartment, a sliver of a sea-worn condo complex, we started slugging down drinks. I don’t know how many I had before we started talking, really talking. You know, the deep shit.

She asked about you. Well, she really asked about what I was doing in the middle of nowhere in a decomposing seaside shack. So I told her. I told her everything. It all spilled out so fast I felt like I was salivating. Like I was absolutely starving to regurgitate it all. My mom kicked me out. I ran away. I admit it, I ran away. Because I’m a faggot. That’s what she said, a perverted faggot. She said her daughter wouldn’t hurt her like this. After all she’s sacrificed, all she’s slaved away for as a single mother. Girls who have sex with other girls are what destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, you know. All they do is eat pussy and defile the sanctity of proper marriage.

After I told her all that, there was this weird, stuffy silence. Cotton-y, like the shrunken eyelids of taxidermied birds. Then she laughed. She laughed! Not in a mean way. She apologized for laughing, grabbed my hand and kissed me. On the lips. As soon as she pulled back, she told me her parents did the exact same. Her parents told her that corrupt murderous man-hater lesbians like her needed to be institutionalized.

We laughed. And for the time being, I forgot about the birds in the house. We slept in her bedroom that night, together. I wonder how much grief a bedroom can witness. It seems too much to bear.

Yours,

El

August 18, 1993

Mom,

I haven’t sent that last letter yet because I’m only writing this one a day and a half later. On the ride back to grandma’s house, I told Mia all about the letters. How much I’ve been writing to you. How you haven’t written back. Obviously. “Man, it’s like she’s haunting you” is what she said when I was finished. And she asked me how I expect to begin anything new with you inside me? I didn’t know. I thought about it for the rest of the ride.

When she kissed me goodbye at the door, she wrinkled her nose and asked, Jesus, what was that smell? And immediately, my throat became cotton again. I told her not to worry, that my grandma’s house was a mess on the inside and I wouldn’t want her to see it. But she insisted. And like a police hound, she sniffed her way up the porch and into the fetid living room. I didn’t follow. I didn’t want to see the birds again. Their tomb. I waited. It took forever. I waited forever.

When she finally reemerged, she looked green. Birds, she told me. White birds. A bunch of dead ones, all on their backs. Like they all came there to die. I’ll call Jeffrey, she told me, and we can get rid of them for you, him and I. Okay? I didn’t have the heart to tell her I’d already seen it. She cupped my cheek with one hand, as if to ground me– a taut fishing line buoyant on the sea. I’ll help get rid of them for you, she told me. As soon as I’m done with my shift.

Then she handed me a small envelope. An open envelope, never sealed. A little crumpled. I found this in there, on the kitchen table, she told me. This looks like it’s for you, she told me. She kissed my forehead– wet and warm and soft and hard all at once, reminded me to avoid peeking inside until it was all cleaned, and that if I wanted, she could drive me to JoAnn and Jeffrey’s house to stay for the time being. I declined, and she left. Without another word. I checked the envelope. Nothing was in it. But it had been signed. “Wish you were here!” in your handwriting. Red letters. The way you sign your name on birthday cards. I’d know it anywhere. I guess you finally wrote me back. Well, don’t do it again.