

The Head of Every Woman Is a Man

by Madeleine Sherbondy

I have a dream the morning it happens, in those sweet and vivid early hours, of Kit before I met him. We are at a party, and he is having so much fun. He is laughing and shouting and with every word out of his mouth, shiny ribbons expel and evaporate like breath on a frigid day. I am on the other side of the room, and between us are so many people. My dream-self watches the ribbons seep from between his teeth and behind his tongue and thinks of tentacles, of ever-growing hair, of story tropes of beautiful boys with something darkly wrong inside of them. I am not surprised when the ribbons begin to meander through the air in my direction. We are in love, after all. Dream-me steps closer. This is the moment we meet, when the ribbons out of my dream-boy wrap around me and tie me to him. If I weren't dreaming, I would have sighed deeply, dreamily, the way lucky girls do in fairy tales.

The ribbons weave through the partygoers towards me. I take another step forward. Dream-music thuds inside of me and I am jostled by people, which normally would upset me but does not matter right now because my eyes are on Kit, who is laughing and laughing and ribbons are spaghettiing into the air and they are all going towards me, and I feel so, so special even as they wrap around my neck and tighten and drag me forward and tighten more and more and dig into the delicate flesh above my collarbones and I am so, so happy.

This is when I wake up and discover that, curiously, my head has disappeared clean off my shoulders, leaving behind the rest of my body like a lizard's shed tail.

It takes Kit a few moments to get over the initial shock. My mistake was in shaking him awake when I realized that the darkness I couldn't seem to adjust to was a result of my eyes disappearing along with everything else from the top of my neck up. I can't imagine that waking

up to a headless girlfriend is anything routine for him, so while he screams himself out, I sit up in bed and wait. His voice sounds as if it is coming from underwater. This is not like him. The Kit I fell so quickly in love with has never raised his voice once. The Kit I know sat across the table from me on our first date three months ago and told me that he likes the quiet of empty streets, and that he feels most himself when he's playing the cello. I suppose we haven't been dating long enough for me to see him in a stressful situation such as this, so I give him some grace. Isn't that what people who love each other do?

I reach for him. I cannot speak, but I want to reassure. It is all I can do for him right now. When I do things for him, when I rub his back as he sleeps or leave notes under his pillow or show up at his recitals with a ribbon-tied bouquet of flowers, I feel like I am myself, and not just playing the role of *girl* in a play in which I do not know the lines. If there is ever a situation in which I do not feel like myself, it is this one. So I reach for him. I find his hand amidst the vibrations of his screams, translating through my gut into sounds that my missing ears cannot interpret. His fingers, still warm with sleep, lace through mine. I hold onto him tightly until he is ready to see me.

In another life, before the one I live now, I wanted to be a poet, and string together stories one word at a time like an intricate beaded necklace. I am a storyteller at my core, but I have always been partial to tall tales, magic, unrealism. There is a story I love to tell, a classic one from a fairy tale book I would slide from the library shelves and pore over for hours well into my nascent adulthood, about a girl who meets a boy whom she loves so much she is willing to

overlook that he is a little bit arrogant, or that he too often forgets to wash certain parts in the shower, or that he is a little too intense about being a vegan. The elements of what makes this boy so desirable yet so imperfect vary depending on the storyteller. In my own version, he is Prince-Charming beautiful, talented and musical and artistic, and the sort of deep thinker who speaks as if he is preaching. He is also self-absorbed yet painfully self-conscious, wrapped up in himself and either unwilling to give the girl his time or unable to. The girl in this story feels shut out of his life, but she invites him into hers, every part of it—except for the ribbon that she always wears wrapped around her neck and tied sweetly into a bow under her chin. This is hers, and only hers.

The boy, as sweet and artistic and thoughtful as he is, is curious about the ribbon—naturally and gently at first, but forcefully after a bit of their fairy-tale courtship. He asks about it constantly. She tells him not to ask, so he wonders privately, speculating about its purpose. To hide an unsightly scar? To accessorize smartly with her patent-leather shoes and dainty silver chain? She will not tell him. She pushes his hands away from her neck whenever he gets too close. When they intertwine their bodies at night, he nips at the ribbon with his teeth, and the girl turns over and does not speak to him until morning. He lays awake, eyes boring into the ceiling, and vows that one day he will know. He must know. She is his. Why would she keep anything from him?

I will get to the rest of this story later, but right now it is important to me that whoever is listening understands very clearly that this boy is not bad, not at all. And the girl does love him, very hotly and very blindly. When you love someone, you sometimes overlook that they tug on your ribbon when you are asleep, or that sometimes you dream about them untying it, about

giving yourself to them completely, secrets and interiority and ribbon and all. But that comes later. You all know the ending of this story, anyways. Like I said, it's a classic.

Kit cooks us breakfast in silence. He hasn't said anything since his screams dwindled into gasps, and then into nothing, and I wonder briefly if he is upset with me for putting us in this situation, for scaring him. He had guided me to the kitchen table gently, his arms around my waist while I swayed drunkenly without the assistance of my vestibular system. While the dulled vibrations of eggs frying and bacon popping float around me in my darkness, I sit at the table and investigate my situation.

It seems that everything from where the base of my skull would normally rest on my vertebrae upwards has gone, leaving behind the skin of my neck, floppy and empty like a bananaless peel. I pull aside the soft flaps of neck and press two fingers against something hard and slick, which must be a bone of some sort. A vertebra? I try to recall my college anatomy class, where the professor had made us drone a mnemonic song as a class until our sleepy voices blended together like a swarm of bees. *The toe bone's connected to the foot bone...the foot bone's connected to the...* I can't remember any more. Either the professor never moved up the skeleton to what the neck bone is connected to, or I was long gone by then, lost in my own head. I giggle at this irony, or try to—with no mouth to shape words, the sound expels from my neck in jagged, squealy syllables.

Around the bone is a thick band of meat that gives under my fingers when I press on it, and somewhere within the meat I grasp something that feels almost too soft to be real, like if I

held it with anything more than a touch it would disintegrate into mush. Air flows past my fingers into the soft thing, and a moment later, pushes out. I am still breathing, my lungs inflate and deflate with the rhythm of breath moving through what must be my windpipe. I giggle again, and the velvet-soft tube flaps against my fingers like a flag with the force of my laugh. I am breathing, I am thinking, I am controlling and moving and doing, and though the sharp edges of sound have gone with my eardrums, when Kit clanks a pan onto the stove I can feel a muffled vibration in my chest, like the dream-speakers pumping music directly into me. He cracks an egg into the pan and I feel a high hissing in my ribs. I track him around the kitchen with these vibrations like a bat, feeling his footsteps go from stove to fridge to table.

By the time I feel the thunk of a plate in front of me and the rustle of him sitting down, I have more or less figured out that my one remaining sense, of touch and feeling, is what I have to rely on in my new condition. I use it. I reach across the table, and at first I put my hand into the yolk of a fried egg, but on my second try I grasp Kit's hand.

His voice rumbles, but he is too quiet for me to hear. I gesture for him to be louder.

-Okay, he says, loudly enough that the vibrations form back into words.. That is all for a moment, and then he repeats, -Okay.

My instinct is to nod. I end up hinging my torso forward and back in a shallow bow.

-This is new. This is certainly new.

I shrug, raising my shoulders to the empty sock of neck that had once housed the top of my spinal column.

-What happened? he asks. -Does it hurt? Can you hear me? How are you... uh, well how are you alive?

I rotate my shoulders left to right to indicate no, then perform my best approximation of a nod, then shrug again.

Kit pulls gently at the loose skin of my neck. I feel his nail knock against my bone and the pads of his fingers brushing the flesh bracing it. I remain perfectly still to show him that I am not hurt and he may explore my new state as he pleases. I wish I could see him, his knitted brows writing his confusion across his forehead as he examines me. I am blind and deaf and dumb, and I wish he felt more real. For a moment, as his fingers touch the inside of my neck, he is a creature of flesh and blood, but the next, when he takes his hands from me, he is a hallucination, a figment of my imagination. How is it that I am imagining?

-Well, he says. The word hangs between us for a moment. This is where I would jump in with a plan or a solution. Let's go to the hospital! Let's search every corner of my apartment! Let's lie back down in bed together, and let the day pass us by while I use my one remaining sense to its capacity, feeling him until every nerve in what remains of my body is supersaturated with him. But I say nothing, of course. I don't know if Kit realizes that he is the one with all the words now, that I am relying on him to speak for me.

-It has to be somewhere, he continues. -Your head, I mean. Do you have... uh, I don't really know what I'm trying to say. A connection, I guess? Can you like, sense it at all? Tell where it went?

This is a good question, one I hadn't considered myself. In a fairy tale, where everything works out for the girl and her prince, the eyes would open, neurons would fire across distance, and the headless heroine would see. But obviously this is not a fairy tale, and I see nothing, not even a picture in what remains of my mind.

-Then let's look everywhere, Kit says. -Let's look everywhere you've been, where we've been. It has to be somewhere. Heads don't just disappear into thin air.

Heads also don't generally become unattached from their owners, I want to say, but this seems like a good day to throw the rules of reality out the window.

I make a list. Kit brings me a notepad and a pen and I blindly scratch out the places where I can picture my head returning to by itself, drawn so fiercely to a setting that it must go without being carried by my body. While I write, I feel Kit eating. I am hungry, but short of Kit spooning scrambled eggs into my exposed esophagus, how can I eat? Anxiety swallows my stomach whole for the first time since I woke up without my head. I cannot eat. I cannot speak. I cannot kiss Kit, cannot whisper into his ear, cannot sweep my eyelashes across the slope of his cheekbones. For our sake, my head has to be at one of these places I've written down. It must be.

When he's finished, Kit carries me to his car bridal style. My spineless neck lolls against his shoulder. I feel everything—his warm breath against my collarbones, the vibrations in his chest as he grunts with my weight, the beat of his blood beneath his skin. Though I cannot say it, I feel it enough to compensate for my absent senses, feel it strongly enough to will it into his mind. *I love you, Kit. I love you. I love you. I love you.*

The girl wearing the ribbon in the story is a romantic, like I am. This is why, during the whole underside of my life, I imagined myself being swept off my feet by someone like Kit. I imagined myself in real, uncomplicated love, laughing at marble kitchen islands and eating

prepackaged pasta and nudging my nose into a naked neck and saying things like *Hello Mr. and Mrs., your son has told me so much about you!* I imagined myself so, so happy.

In another scenario, today would be a fairy tale. Kit and I, traversing town, returning to the places important enough to us that we hope to find a missing body part there. I lie in the backseat of his car (he thought that a headless passenger might draw some unwanted attention on the drive) and feel the vibrations of his classic rock playlist through the seats, and I think about that favorite story of mine, of the girl with the ribbon and her own real, uncomplicated love. What joy she must have felt to meet the boy, even with his interest in her ribbon. What a fool she is, I think, to not untie it right then and there, to show him all of her secrets. This is what love is, or what it is to me and Kit. Here is a man who has looked directly into my skin, who has touched my bone and smelled the salt of my muscle. What more could I keep from him after that?

The first stop on my list is the bar where, just months ago, Kit and I had our first date. It was a cool fall night, the trees and air and wind all caught in the lapse of the seasons, where all evening I had tried to repress the swimming curls of desire unfurling under my back. We had bought pizza from a tiny window near the bar's outdoor seating, and Kit had folded his piece in half to eat while I watched hungrily and talked about something that I don't remember. What I do remember is the want that bloomed within me like a fine web of nettles beneath my skin. I could feel it with every breath, every movement. I had retreated to the restroom after two drinks and texted my friends, *I think I found The One.*

I insist on accompanying Kit into the bar. I haven't been back since our date, and I want to sit at the table we were at, touch the same slick wood. Kit leads me by my hand from the car. Between his fingers, laced with mine, I feel his heartbeat.

The bar is closed. I feel Kit bang on the door for a minute or two before it squeaks open.

-We're closed, the rumble of a male voice informs him. -Come back at four.

-I'm sorry to bother, Kit says. -My girlfriend—he raises my hand—thinks she might have left something here. Mind if we have a look around?

There is a metal crash, soft scuffling of shoes. A slap of flesh on wood and shouted curses. -What the devil happened to her? I'm calling 911. What kind of—of crazies are you people, walking around like this? She dying? She gonna die?

-No sir, no no no, you don't need to call—she's fine, she's fine. Trust me. Dearest, give the man a wave.

I wave in what I hope is the correct direction.

-She's okay, Kit says, -just missing something important. Mind if we take a look in here?

I feel whispers that I can't make out. The words *Holy Mary*, but not spoken in prayer. The door creaks again, but stops abruptly.

-You know, sir, I feel Kit speak. -We had our first date here. Just a couple months ago. That's why we're back and looking here. It's special to both of us. Please, can we just have a look around?

If I had a mouth, I would smile like a peach split open. Of course, our love is the reason we are here. This is a place I would return to again and again if I could, and listening to Kit tell our love story to this stranger makes me glow from the inside out.

The bar man mutters; I cannot hear it. But then the door squeaks again and Kit is leading me inside, around high-topped tables and silent jukeboxes and a wide, stony bar that I snub my elbow against. I squeeze Kit's hand and gesture to my stump of neck. *Is it here? Do you see it?*

-I'm going to have a look around. Sit here. Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back.

He helps me sit in one of the long-legged chairs, kisses the hollow of my left shoulder, and is gone. I splay my fingers over the table in front of me, run them over the crevices of wood slats and rounded edges. Is this the table where I sat with my two vodka sodas and watched Kit talk? That night brushes against me with every movement I make. My voice, filled with twinkly stars, asking Kit how he became a musician. His mouth a smoky tunnel I was falling into with every word as he explained how feeling like *him* was something that only happened on a stage. Something inside of me opening and opening, so wide I felt like everything inside could fall out. I wonder if I was as nakedly in love that first night as I am now.

If my head would return anywhere, wouldn't this be it, the night I met my match?

But Kit comes back in a moment, says he's searched the inside of the bar and the cubicle where we bought our pizza and the tall wooden booths and even the ladies' room, and my head was nowhere. Where's the next place on our list? Where shall we look next?

I jump down from the chair and wobble. Kit's arms circle my waist, pull me closer to him. I take his hand again and let him lead me away.

In just about every version of this classic story I love to tell, with the romantic beribboned girl and her almost-perfect-but-not-quite love, she is protective of her ribbon, reluctant to let him touch it. While I like this story for its romance and perversity, this detail has always stumped me. Why in the world, if she loves this boy so much, would the girl not want to share herself with him, even the strange and messy and unreal? I would untie myself in a heartbeat, I always thought. *Do what you want*, I would say. *I am yours*.

Out of all the fairy tales I've read and heard and spent time in, this one to me seems the most pure. The love in this story is based on trust, on sacrifice, on not knowing what comes next and choosing it anyways. Never mind that the boy touches the ribbon until the girl is exasperated of him. Never mind that his satisfaction means her unraveling. The part that I return to at night, in the dark, is the bloom of emotion that must have taken place in the girl's gut as she decided that it was time to unveil her secret, that she would give everything she had to him just to satisfy his curiosities. How much she must have loved him, and him her, and how he must have removed her ribbon like lingerie, with the cadence of undressing.

The morning after I met Kit, when I returned home from his apartment swollen with desire, I took a hair ribbon from my dresser and tied it around my neck, looping it into a bow under my chin. I took one end of the bow, pulled until its ears shrank into nubs and the ribbon was holding tightly to itself to keep its knot. I imagined Kit untying me, how deep our love must be at that unseen point in the future for him to want to know all of me, even the parts of me that are mine. I imagined parts of myself hitting the ground—lopped arm here, a toe there, my head rolling across the ground. I hoped that one day he would love me enough to put me back together.

We go down the list. Next we visit Kit's apartment, then to the record store where we spent an afternoon early in our courtship picking out new records for each other to listen to, then to a highway lookout that had been the site of a tender, sugary kiss, then to the top of a parking garage where we had told each other in sweet whispers how we felt towards each other. We even drive forty-five minutes out of town to a bridge in the next city over where we had shared a

takeout lunch, meeting in the middle between my hometown and his over the holidays. I feel our relationship unfold and take shape all over again with this retracing of our steps, like an origami creation being undone and creased back together. I let Kit take my hand and help me out of the car, put an arm across my chest as we cross a street, guide me around mailboxes and kiosks and pedestrians like the world's most intensive trust exercise. I feel horns honk around us, people gasp as we go by. It is jarring at first, to be looked at by so many people without the ability to look back, but it fades into the background quickly. All I concentrate on is Kit's hand in mine, the landmarks of our love, the vibration of his voice in my palm.

My head is not in any of these places.

I feel Kit growing frustrated as the day wears on. During the first hours of our adventure, after our stop at the bar, he had described the world around us for me so I could see through his voice. -The sky is a gray, kind of gloomy color, with a little blue far away at the horizon, he told me at the street corner across from the record store. -There's people, but not too many people—excuse me sir, please stop staring, she's just lost something important—and most of them are wearing flannels. Are flannels in style right now? This is why we need to find your head, so you can see these things and tell me what's in style right now and if I look like a bum.

After a few more hours of fruitless search, his narration dwindles. -Watch your step, he says now and then as he guides me, hands on my back, up a staircase to the performance hall where I went to watch him give a recital just last week. I grip the banister, place one foot on the next step, hoist myself forward with him supporting me. I would never tire of this, in different circumstances. Him guiding me. Going everywhere with him. Letting him lead me.

The hall is empty. I cannot see the empty rows of seats and cavernous stage, but I feel the echos of my footsteps in the wide mouth of the space as Kit leads me by the hand from the wings

onto the stage. I feel the silence pressing down on me, broken only by our steps and Kit's breathing.

-Stay right here and don't move, he repeats as he had at each other stop. -I'm going to go look around. Wait for me to come back.

I listen to his footsteps fade off into the empty space. I am detached again. Each time he has let me go today, parked me somewhere I wouldn't accidentally hurt myself while he goes off in search of my head, I've felt almost weightless, as if gravity is not holding me down anymore. Then he returns eventually, announced by the vibrations of his footsteps and his hand grasping mine again, and I feel tethered, safe. I am not going to float off the planet as long as he is touching me.

I lose track of his sounds around the recital hall quickly. I stand in what I imagine to be the center of the stage. I pull at the skin around my nails, probably torn up and ragged from my blind picking. I listen. The silence of the hall carves new spaces into me. I wish I could yell. I have never wished for anything more than for a tongue and lips to shape the odd gasps and screeches my vocal cords push through my severed windpipe, to break the heavy silence but also to call for Kit. To know that he is still here somewhere outside of my periphery, that he hasn't abandoned me.

I take a step forward into the darkness. The clack of my heel against the wooden stage floor is like a gunshot in the emptiness. Another step. *Maybe I will find him. Maybe I will run headlong into him and he will sweep me into his arms and promise that he will never leave me again.* Two more steps, then a scuff, then my shoulder slams into something hard and smooth and cold and the remnant of my neck slides and bunches and burns. I've toppled over blindly, not even knowing to put my arms out to catch myself. I feel the echo of vertigo deep under my

navel, buried within my guts. I do not know which way is up or which way is forward or in what direction my chin would be pointing if my head was where it belongs. I reach an arm forward and feel heavy velvet hanging nearby; I am near the edge of the stage, by the curtain.

I wait. I try to call for Kit. All that comes out is a breathy squeak. I wait.

It does not take him long. I feel him stamping up the stairs to the stage and his hurried steps to get to me, and then his hands are under my armpits, hoisting me to my feet.

-God, he mutters, almost too quietly for me to hear him as he brushes dust from my shoulders and knees. -I said stay put so that didn't happen. I really need you to just stay and not try to go anywhere, this whole thing is hard enough already.

What remains of my body dissolves into a white noise of guilt. This whole day, while I've been reveling in my fairy tale and immersing myself in the past, Kit has been searching for the most important part of my body without a speck of help from me. Well, not that I could help much to begin with. I imagine his face as he led me around town like a horse by its bit—I had thought that he would be happy to be with me even without my head, that he would still be wearing that gentle, peaceful smile. I could not see if there had been hard edges to that smile, or if it had been there at all.

I squeak again, and hope he construes it as the apology it's supposed to be.

-I'm sorry, he says. He helps me sit down on the stage, then I feel his knee brush against mine as he joins me. -Today has been stressful. Having someone rely on me this way is different for me. It's hard for me to be everything to someone.

I pat his knee. It is all that I can do to thank him.

-And I'm happy to help you, don't get me wrong, he goes on, -but I guess it's been a lot. It'll be good when you have your head back so you won't have to rely on me to lead you around and protect you.

I shrug and squeeze his hand. *I like being protected by you*, I think. *I like it when you lead me and when I get to follow you.*

-It'll be a relief for you I'm sure. You're a strong, independent woman. You don't need me. You're going to be just fine, no matter what happens with us.

A new earthquake of anxiety rattles me. I squeeze harder, and I feel my fingernails carve crescents into his skin.

-What?

I can't answer except for a choked squeak. What does he mean, *no matter what happens with us?*

-I'm sorry, I know this isn't the best time to say this.

I feel Kit shift, almost imperceptibly, away from me.

-But come on, we've only known each other like two, three months. We don't know what'll happen. Yeah we're having fun now but...I want to go back to school. Eventually. Not like right now, but soon. And I don't want to stay here. I think there's more for me.

My stomach is oily with panic. I wonder if it is possible to vomit with no mouth, if my contents will erupt from my neck like a volcano. I can't even swallow the compact ball of dread bobbing beneath my breastbone.

-That's not to say that this won't work.

His fingers curl around the soft part of my arm. I almost jump, still unused to the sudden, sightless touches.

-Just... today has been kind of a wake up for me. I can't be everything to someone.

Especially so early on. You have to know what I mean.

The shame of all he had said and all I am unable to contradict blooms hotly inside me, like a bed of thistles. I mime writing in the air, gesture wildly for the notepad with our list. When I feel the paper and pen slotted into my open hands, I write in capital letters:

I LOVE YOU, KIT.

The silence on the other end of this statement is long and slow and uncomfortable. The realization blooms in me that this is the first time I had said this to him instead of breathing it into my pillow in the dark, whispering it to his retreating back, thinking it so fiercely that I wished the thought would transplant into his brain.

-I love you, too, he finally says, and the anxious fist in my gut unclenches. -I do. I love being with you, and walking all over town with you, even looking for your head with you. But still. That doesn't change that I think we just need to be realistic. It's early on. You feel me?

Under the silence of the recital hall, I feel a skittering, scratching sound. Kit's nails against the wood? My ankles turning, scuffing my shoes against the curtain? I am so, so tired of not being able to see what is in front of me, even as it announces itself.

-Besides, I think the relationship means more to you than it does to me.

If I were to stop feeling, would there stop being things to feel?

-Anyways, it's not here. We should move on.

There is no version of the story about the girl with the ribbon and her lover in which they do not end up together, at least for a short while. This is not a story I am prepared to tell. I am sorry.

At the ice cream shop where Kit and I had shared a milkshake the week after we met, I hold tightly to his hand while he weaves us in and out of a clutch of students vibrating with chatter. My head is not there.

At the basement where he had introduced me to his friends at a house show, I feel the high-frequency squeal of shock that his friend who lives in the house emits before Kit turns me around in my tracks and leads me back onto the street. My head is not there.

In the music practice room where I would sit and listen as he played the cello, I begin to cry, or something like it. There are no tears, just stuttering gasps forcing themselves in and out of my throat. Kit helps me to sit down on a piano bench, rubs his thumb over my collarbones like he would brush tears away from my eyes.

-I think we need to reevaluate, he says. -Obviously the list isn't working. I'm sorry. I know you're feeling really scared about the head thing.

Silly boy, I think, *silly, silly boy*, and at the edge of this thought sits anger. I am angry with Kit, angry with him for not reading my thoughts and seeing that what scares me is not the absence of my head, but the potential absence of him. I am angry with him for daring to consider a future without me when I have shaped my life around him for weeks, twisting myself into shapes to fit his wants, blowing off my stories to spend time with him, spending hours sitting in

this very spot while he pulls long, low chords from his instrument. I have opened up and kept on opening, waiting for him to pry open his life for me. Most of all, I am angry with him for looking for my head, my most sacred piece, the vessel for the brain I have spent so much time developing, the lips I kiss him with, the hair I take such joy in braiding and unbraiding and braiding again. And he is the one to search for it, and he will be the one to eventually find it—not me. I am a live wire, as if with the disappearance of their barrier to the uncensored stimuli of the world, my nerves have no choice but to feel it all.

But I do not want to be angry with him. How could I? He is all I have right now, the only hand reaching through the darkness to guide me back to my life. And besides, he has spent so much of his time looking for my head.

-All of these places have something in common.

They are special to me.

-They are special to us. They're all places we've had a nice time together, or important moments of our relationship. But they're all about us—not you. Where would *your* head be?

I shake my shoulders left to right. These are the places I would return to, if I could. These are the places that allow me to fall back into the past, when it was just me and Kit and the world outside the window passing us by.

-M——, he says, and I gasp reflexively, sucking in air through my severed windpipe. I don't remember the last time he had said my name, or that I had said it.

-M——, if you had never met me, if I wasn't here right now, where would you want to be?

Where would I be right now if not with Kit? Well. Not as happy, of course. Bored. Waiting. For what? I didn't know before I met him, but now I can see I was waiting for him.

Without him? Waiting for nothing. For something to happen. For one of my poems to finally be accepted to one of the magazines I was voraciously sending them to. For an opportunity to move away from the town I was born in. For my life to begin. But I am happier now. My inbox collects digital dust, and so do my books. I wake up in my own bed and go to sleep in Kit's. I construct poems in my head that never make it to the page, let alone the submission box, but I am happier. He makes me so, so happy. I am happy, but something inside of me is shifting to a strange new place.

I take the list and pen from him, scratch out a word. My head's last hope of being found.

There is one more thing you must know about the story I've been telling. This is that the girl wearing the ribbon does not know the fate that is to befall her by allowing her lover to untie it. All she knows is that she loves this boy, loves his grand way of speaking and his vague arrogance and his all-absorbing interiority and the way her hand fits perfectly into his as he leads her forward. She even loves the way she scrabbles around the sealed edges of his life, hoping that if she waits, if she's pretty and supportive and interesting enough and if she shows up at his recitals with flowers and listens to his classic rock playlist and lays out the pieces of her life for him to browse and shows him what is beneath her ribbon, maybe he will stay with her. Maybe he will see that, even though there is more out there for him, what is in front of him is beautiful and in love with him.

At the end of each telling of this story, whether it is their wedding night or on her deathbed, she lets him untie the ribbon, and it is all the same from here. Her head tilts impossibly

back, back, back. He sees the secret insides of her neck, the way her skin parts like a mouth opening. She sees the wall behind her, the floor rushing to meet her, one last lopsided glimpse of her lover and his bewildered, heartsick expression. And then nothing.

Even if him untying the ribbon meant the end, she would let him have it. She would let him have her. She would gather up the shiny pieces of her life in her arms, give them freely to him with nothing in return. She would give up her head for him.

We are at the library, which rises from the center of town like a bone protruding from broken skin. I do not see its reclaimed church steeple or its auburn bricks, though I know they are there. I grasp tightly to Kit's hand and fumble my way up the steps and past the circulation desk, and I concentrate on feeling. Beneath my feet, I feel the rush of cars streaking past the library. I do not feel anything beneath the phantom eyelids I keep expecting to open on my command. I do not feel that sure sense of *hereness* that the girls in fairy tales do when they find the golden goose, the crown jewels, the missing piece.

But it is here. I do not *know* the way I had expected to, but Kit's grip on my hand tightens and he pulls me along behind him with urgency. I recognize the muted, waterlike babble of the children's library, the bright, warm air that lays upon my skin like a sheet of fresh paper. Kit mutters call numbers to himself as he pulls me behind him. I wish I could tell him that he's got it all wrong, he's mixed up the mythology and the fairy tales. We're looking for 398.2, a number that's been on the inside of my eyelids for all of my short life, since I was old enough to traverse the Dewey Decimal System by myself. Folklore. Legend. Magical realism. It is like greeting an

old friend, one whom I have not seen in quite some time. When did I stop seeking out fairy tales? Was it when my own life began to resemble one, dark underbelly and all?

I feel Kit cry out, then his hand abruptly departs mine. I am alone in the darkness and silence for one long, ugly stretch of a minute. I reach out, grasp bookshelves on either side, brace myself. I wait.

When Kit returns, he shoves a round, fleshy object into my arms. It is soft in some places and pointy in others, its topography unpredictable, unique, beautiful. It is my head.

I hold it in one arm and explore it with the other. I press the fat under its cheekbones, run my fingertips over its eyebrows, dip my pinky finger into its soft, warm mouth. Its long flow of hair brushes my knees, and the delicate skin under its chin pulses with blood. At the base of its skull, I feel a knobby stick of bone, a flappy sheath of flesh, the threads and threads of nerves.

-Put it on! Kit is saying. -We found it! Put it on, you can be yourself again! You can speak and see and smell and hear, and you won't have to rely on me. Isn't this great?

I hold my head with outstretched arms, like it is a foreign object. Like it is not my flesh and blood. Is this how Kit feels about me, like I am his but he cannot quite recognize how I fit onto the body of his life? Is this why he feels so fine with leaving me?

-It was where you wrote it might be, by the fairy tales. Sitting right on top of this big book, actually, have you read it? I can't imagine why else it might end up here. The book was called—well, what was it called, again?

It is called... well, I guess I don't remember either.

-Put it on! he says again. -Or I'll put it on for you. We spent all day looking, and now here it is. It's like in those stories you like, with the princesses and the frogs and they're all in love. It all works out, no matter what happens. Everything is going to be OK, I'm sure of it. Just

put it back on. Don't you want to see what comes next? Don't you want to see the rest of the story?

I do not want to be a storyteller. I do not want to be a poet, or a collector of heart-shaped glass plates from my local Goodwill, or a mother to the neighborhood stray cats haunting my apartment building, or a hopeless romantic who would tie ribbons around my neck and stare at myself in the mirror, waiting to be untied. What good are all these things, the trinkets of identity that have pooled in my arms over the years, if Kit is not there to love them? I do not want to even be me. All I want is to be his.

I tuck my head under my arm like a football and extend my arm through the darkness until I find Kit's hand. I wait for him to start walking, to lead me through the shelves and into the light that I cannot see.

In a minute. I will put it on in a minute. I'm not quite ready yet. Wait for me. Soon, I will let go of his hand. Soon. Soon.