

\əd-'ven-chər\

Lisa Napolitan

Her suitcase was red, leather, old. Still functional. She loved it. It reminded her of herself. Hands perched on either side of its unemptied openness, Carolyn studied them, her hands, their reddish, sunburned tint. The doughy brown splotches. Chocolate milk dripped on seashells. *Must get aloe*. It had been years since she'd last acquired a sunburn. *Acquired? Managed? Succumbed to?* Foolishly damaging one's skin was not as painful in one's sixties as when one is a child, but its pinch still clamored for attention. *Late*, she reminded herself. *Late sixties*. Why, they'd nearly had cake.

In the center of the wall, a wall laden with framed awards and recognitions, diplomas and degrees; like a spider in the hub of its own web: there hung her birth certificate. Framed and *interesting* equal in size to the others. That first marker. By way of the mind she jumped straight through the certificate's protective glass, turned around (for one always turns around) and, hot hands flush against the transparent divider, peered back, looking out with its eyes, from its fixed location, from its unchanging date and seeing, seeing...what? The image went foggy. She lowered her eyes, returned her mind to her head and screwed her head back atop its plain old body. Perhaps the birth certificate was like a period on her wall. A solid, blunt etching. *No. No. Then it would mark an end*. She had had enough of ends. It was, she decided, the letter A. A starting point. If so, where was she now? She counted thirty-one frames. Thirty-one letters. Thirty frames encircling the A. With twenty-six letters in the alphabet, it seemed she had started life anew. She had reached E for the second time. It was little consolation.

It's crooked. Still crooked. Endlessly crooked. Her A hung crooked on the wall. No matter how often she tried, twisting one end of the backside's wire, loosening the other, it leaned. Carolyn was resigned to it now. Her whole life, she had been leaning left.

She took hold of the readers dangling from a chain around her neck and positioned them atop her Roman nose. "Certificate of Live Birth". Live Birth. Did still-births (*dead-births?*) still receive such an official sheet of paper? If so, what on earth did the mothers do with it? Carolyn had no children. Neither wanted nor expected any. Not really.

They would have been a distraction and life, her life, would not have happened, could not have happened, not as it did anyway. It would not have "unfolded," she had explained to Jasmine. "They're not for everyone," Jasmine had reasoned back. Had it been a mistake to go? Over and above any sunburn, friendships are not easy. In fact, they can be outright cruel.

It wasn't her fault. Jasmine sent the letter.

June 20, 20...

Dear Carolyn,

I'm inviting you out! Please come for a few days at the beach. Pack shorts, sweatshirt, easel and brush. Promise to leave you to your work. Will only bother you to eat. Barbara makes a mean BBQ so the smell alone will persuade you. Say, "yes." Dates to your choosing. Here 'till the end of August.—Jasmine. 202 Surfside Drive, Bel Canto, NY 07797

They were letters. Letters that crossed in the mail.

The pros and the cons. Pros and Cons.

I accept.

Toothpaste, toothbrush, jeans, shorts, suit, towel, underthings, hat, easel, select brushes, oils (low on Black Spinal and Van Dyke Brown), canvas. Gift. Wine. Dandelion wine! Sketch pad. Pencils.

Letter A

Dear Professor Seagal,

Thank you for an amazing course. I will use all the techniques you showed us and promise to paint every day, even if just to make a mess. For as you say, somewhere inside that mess a lesson is learned, right? Anyway, you've inspired me. Just wanted to thank you again.

Jasmine Howard

It was while walking along Christopher Street.

In snow gone grey

Feet Hair World wet Contact the

reaching back

Letter B

Jasmine, Fill your day. Find your way. Saw this postcard and thought of you. Thank you for the kind words. Pleasure to teach those who care to listen. – Carolyn

It was a Cindy Sherman. Untitled film still # 58, *or was it #28?* Once released, it moved. (reference: CindySherman.com)

In summer, time slows. Perhaps in winter too. Time slows. Never... Exhibits, lunches, sleep, work. Work, sleep, exhibits, work, sleep, walks, work ...letters A B

C Merry Christmas & Happy New Year! With love from, The Howards (Jasmine, Barbara, David, Jake, Sammy & Woolf) *Hope you are well and enjoying the snow! – Jasmine*

City apartment windowpane. Pigeon on sill. Ice on pigeon.

D Thank you for the card. Great shot of the family. Group selfie? I'll be teaching city landscapes in the spring if you care to sit in. Mentioning as you expressed interest in working again in oils. Best, - C

Robin Hood boots, flaxen hair knotted in a bun. The sights! The joy! Brooklyn Bridge, seaport, meatpackers on parade, Hudson river, Colgate clock, Lady Liberty

Ferries skate the weighted shoes

F Seems again I must thank you.

G Carry on. Carry on

H HAVE HIT AN IMPASSE. WONDERED IF YOU COULD HELP

I Dampen your surface. It will soften your lines.

Damp, soft. Damp, soft, click, click. Reposition, adjust the lens.

Damp, soft

TIME OUT Life LIFE children, wife, children, life..

"How do you find the time?"

"How do *you* find the time?"

"How?

Find time."

There is always that laugh behind the words. Kind laugh. Easy. Knowing. Right. Jasmine. I see you.

"But I take pictures."

~But I am brittle~ :and I am: I am. am

"They all feed."

She arrived by train, then they picked her up. red suitcase. Jasmine driving, little Sammy in the back, in the booster, next to Jake who will be five. Will be, almost. Time flies. David. He is a big boy. "Thick boned." Eager to ride up front. Counting up pounds and inches. Woolf hovers, massive, black chowder head between cherubic trio, panting for there is no air; white teeth like mountains, red and black gums – not city air, no conditioning air. Just salty breeze, *wind* when the car zooms. *Wind*. Woolf loves *w I n d* explains Sammy.

"I take their pictures. Pictures of our world. I see stories before they happen."

"So you start with a character. So do I."

"But I see no face. You paint landscapes."

"Does one need a face for a life?"

I am here and tonight we will watch the sky's patriotic fit. I itch, unsure what to do, commotion beneath my soles. Beneath the silvery old boards of this house. Book I brought holds no interest. Something to do with the end of the world. Shelf has promise. Wordsworth, King, Angelou. Variety! Placed EBB beside my bed, not that I ever understand. (Now for later. Written back then. Shifts in the continuum. Funny.) Room is darling. Sheer curtains, yellow daisied walls – the wild type. I C the C. See its curl. Hear its carrying-on. First thought: Jasmine looked beautiful. Crepe top, floral and flouncy. Skirt. Balanced by Barbara's composition of straight lines, cotton and denim. I wait for a still moment before I descend.

steaks, briquettes, crayons on paper in small hands, sand clumped hands, in plastic buckets green and blue, sandal gone missing, found and children's prattle. Sounds I do not understand. Foreign in my ears. Towheaded child and the tousling of hair. Mothers' hands. Black and kinky tousled too. Black and straight too. The other. Others? No. Mixed bag tied well together. Birds of many feathers.

Jasmine was right. The smell provokes. Sugared smoke makes me high. But my stepped-on toes leave me no room to breathe. (Forgot to polish. To clip and care. Shall make amends.) Red bench for three small. I stand alone, though chairs enough. Looking from among reeds. Out. For. Feet in cold sand. Between my toes. *Those toes*. Fading sun. *Forgot to polish*. Dips, down, gone. Old feet. Older anyway. Oldest. Still, they are mine. They *are* mine. Sticks poke. Wind festers, the tall grass, the chimes of glass.

Tomorrow we will walk

In a classroom a young woman watches her teacher apply paint to a canvas. She has no background in this, just interest. She is a photographer, for weddings mostly, but she wants more. "To grow," she says.

If I watch trees long enough, all I see are leaves falling.

"Oils require planning. Landscapes are fickle. The time of day changes a red sky to blue. Shadows grow and fade. Grass moving left now blows right. First, we draw. We must decide. We must capture the mo-

ment."

Letter J Your advice proved invaluable. Painting nearly every day, though some days truly all I do is pick up the brush. Other days, I am late to get the children off the bus, racing down the driveway a splattered rainbow yelling, "I am here! I am here!"

Carolyn did not lack for friends. Only had grown tired. Not tired of them, but something was missing. Gaps. Gaps. Gaps on train tracks. Gaps in teeth. Gaps in stories. GAP on streets. GAPS = Guts and Psychology Syndrome. Cures what ails ya. "Look it up," a friend said. "Common sense," Carolyn roared back. "And a bore."

Carolyn had loved once. The boy in Paris. No, twice. The writer in Brazil. Artists love. Love their art most of all.

On a street in the West Village after a storm in snow gone grey.
the reaching back

"Jasmine, why don't you take Carolyn to Wendell's Point. She can have her pick of angles from there."

"You sure? You okay with the boys?"

"Look at them!" Barbara laughs. Barbara is elegant in vintage-style swimsuit. When she goes to the beach, she sits. Watches and plays. She likes to talk to the boys. Likes the talk of boys from/in a hole dug deep and wide, water rushing up, soaking in, always gone, always returning. Browning backs in different hues. Boys from men never known. Mothers too. This is the life they've constructed. Jasmine so young. What? Thirty two? Find the time. Find time. You must find

"So, why a painting class?"

"Because I want to get closer. I want to create my characters, not just reveal them."

"Oh. So you are a writer, then." Here we get that chuckle. Kind, knowing. "But truly, no one creates characters. We just find their ghosts and put them back together again."

"But you add what wasn't there before."

"Do we? Yes. I suppose we do."

Along a path of warming sand from rising sun they journey. Sketch pads in hand. One larger, one smaller, the pads, the people. Carolyn has younger legs today, salt air tickling like the prick of a horse chestnut rolled vigorously in the palm of a hand. Jasmine is serene but full. Fully content within the opportunity and present success of the moment. Need I explain more?

Jasmine said, "I always say, 'Be in love with your life.' You know the song... Whenever a cloud appears in the blue. Remember somewhere the sun is shining. And so the right thing to do is make it shine for you ... You know it?"

Shrug. But an interested shrug. Genuine. Eyes included. Hazel eyes. Nearly yellow. "Sure. Buddy DeSylva. He wrote lots of famous stuff. Anyway. I think it's the only way to live life, you know? Being in love with it. Embracing it, if you're lucky enough to have that kind of a life not living on a battlefield or whatever, and experiencing it at every moment as if you're in love with it. Heightened. The world floating and un-really beautiful." Jasmine bows her head here, but the hazel, yellow-dappled eyes care, old as they are. In fact, Carolyn's internal clock has stopped. The skin beneath her eyelids, hot and puffed, her mouth open and filling with a sweetness, a saliva. Must be. Reminding her she is very, very much alive beside this ingénue. She is an artist. She knows this all, of course. This embracing of a moment. But Jasmine, floating before her is a milkweed seed tossed on a breeze, fingers of the sun tantalizing on the gloss of a beetle's wing. She is the jazz of crickets in one's ear, a seagull's rant guzzled by a wave. Had she forgotten? Perhaps she had Forgotten.

"Kerouac," she wanted to tell her, but didn't. "Jack Kerouac said that." About the being in love with your life. Every minute of it.

Hands upon the suitcase, these words come back to her. A shudder for missing words. Missed opportunity. Gaps/

The pair has found a home. Perched atop a dune really where they shouldn't be though they are careful not to step on the beach grass for it will begin its death march the moment it is stepped upon. *Don't we all*, Jasmine offers, scratching thumbnail into tip of newly sharpened No. 2.

"Have you no proper pencils? Here."

"Thank you. The 'no eraser' always throws me."

"Why did you write?" She wants to ask this, but does not.

The world in reverse.

"You're trying to make a cloud stand still."

"No. I'm trying to capture it in a moment."

"Freeze it. But doesn't it lose its beauty? Its realism all together?"

"You depress me!" Still a smile. And the faintest sense of falling in love.

Do the old fall in love? All the time. All the time.

"Have you ever seen a female red-winged black-bird? The males are so large and striking, we miss the female completely. Mistake her, if we see her at all, for an oversized sparrow. But mourning doves? I just can't tell them apart."

"Maybe because they're in mourning."

"Hmm. To me they always look like they're very much in love."

You write to me. I write back. Winter, spring, summer, fall. I walk these streets alone. These are my legs. I share them with no one.

Letter K Dear Jasmine,

I have been thinking about your desire to paint as your preferred mode of expression and want to suggest charcoals where you can use your fingers and smudge directly on the paper. No intermediary. No go between. It is not for me. I go with the paintbrush. A violinist considers her instrument an extension of her arms, I consider the brush an extension of my hand. In both cases, an extension of the soul. Dear Jasmine, what I wish to tell you is this: I am alive. You need not worry. I am alive.

Alive. But I am lonely. Ask me, and I will come.

Letter E Dear Carolyn – I apologize for my tardy response. Life has been in whirlwind mode! Yes! I plan to take your class. So very much looking forward. Barbara agrees that it's good for my soul and good for the boys to have a mother who aspires to something, be damned the success rate. BTW, included is a photo I took of the oddest couple. He so tall and wide. She so petite. Rather reminded me of Frida and Diego. But they are happy. "Happy happy," they said. And in a purple tux! Such is life! Fondly, Jasmine

The alphabet had begun to scramble.

Older hands have thinner skin. As such, they feel more pain.

Barbara: Shall we sail?

Carolyn: I won't be any help.

Barbara: No help necessary.

Carolyn: Then by all means.

Jasmine: I think I'll stay ashore. How about I watch the boys?

Only the oldest will tag along. The younger two stay with Jasmine.

They will eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and make pirate hats from newspaper. They will beg Mommy to ride into town for ice cream cones. Bubble gum and mint chocolate chip. Mommy will start up the car. It's fine. She needs to pick up the cake anyway.

Lonelier. I walk lonelier and know I am alive.

Before the sail you touched my hand, called me more than a teacher. A friend. If you read my eyes they said, "I love you, Jasmine." If you read my eyes,

Lonely. Red suitcase full of sand.

I look at the canvas but all I can see are ghosts. Three. Three ghosts. One larger, that's you. Two small. You know who.

In the echoing screech of rubber on stone small hands drip ice cream cones.

I'd like to start my life again. I'd like to start all our lives again.

red suitcase

I have been gone longer than planned, for there was much to do.

red suitcase, and the letter
Much to do and now

Forgive me.

The end.