

All the Things We Cannot Keep

A eulogy for loss.

Words NINA ST. PIERRE

I have this set of love letters.

Their envelopes are worn soft. The papery rectangles are hand-painted by an artist, a man whose small-town swagger captured me at 15, and again at 20 in a dark, smelly bar I snuck into while home from college on Christmas break. Some are representative, some abstract. One is a tangerine sunset over a tropical bay, shaggy palms framing the sea; another a winter grove of birch trees, their crisp white bark stark against a powder blue background. There's an angry monkey in gold chains gripping an overflowing pint glass of beer. And my favorite: a free-floating wave crashes into two cupped hands and spills down onto a girl who holds an umbrella but uses her hand to block the falling water instead. *Why doesn't she use the umbrella?* Her shadow is long and stretches onto rolling hills, which in the far corner of the envelope become a craggy mountain peak.

These letters are dated from January 2002 to March 2004. For two years, we dated long distance, falling in love through missives sent from the top of California to the bottom. We were high school sweethearts in arrears; early aughts twentysomethings with a 18th-century kind of love. Love letters over red flags. Our passion flooded showers.

When we split up seven years later, my friends told me to throw the letters out. *Cut the emotional cords*, they said. *Start fresh. Things carry memory*. I knew that I should. It was the healthy thing to do. But the letters were art and artifact. I pictured my grandchild finding them, tied together with twine, in the back of a dusty closet somewhere after I was long dead.

Eleven months after we stopped writing letters, my mother died suddenly. The death certificate said it was a pulmonary embolism. But I knew it was something closer to a broken heart.

Sometimes the truth we make matters more than facts.

Psychologists at Columbia's Center for Complicated Grief explain grief like a physical wound, in which an infection can be a complication to healing. The more *complications* there are, the longer it can take the psyche to process it. A history of multiple traumas or loss can complicate it further. Say you lose a parent, then a partner, then a job, your grief might be protracted, prolonged. Your wound might become infected. *Complicated*.

As defined by the CCG, complicated grief is "a persistent form of intense grief in which maladaptive thoughts and dysfunctional behaviors are present along with continued yearning, longing and sadness and/or preoccupation with thoughts and memories of the person who died." Before doc-

tors understood grief was a shapeshifter, patients stuck in sorrow longer than the typical six-month to yearlong bereavement period were often misdiagnosed with depression. But in the mid-'90s, they found a way to corral the ghosts and measure them.

They called the test the Inventory of Complicated Grief. It was an assessment tool used to distinguish pathological grief via 19 statements of loss with answers ranging from "never" to "always." Anger, disbelief, and hallucinations were just a few of the factors it measured in order to determine whether one's grief was less passing state, and more disorder.

1. I think about this person so much that it's hard for me to do the things I normally do.

- 0 never
- 1 rarely
- ☒ 2 sometimes
- 3 often
- 4 always

7. I feel disbelief over what happened.

- 0 never
- 1 rarely
- 2 sometimes
- ☒ 3 often
- 4 always

15. I see the person who died stand before me.

- ☒ 0 never
- 1 rarely
- 2 sometimes
- 3 often
- ☒ 4 always

If you took inventory of your grief, what would you find? How many are there? Of what sorts? How would you categorize and arrange them? Where are they stored? And, what I most want to know is, would you recognize them if they showed up in a different part of the store?

When my mother died, my brother and I had to clean out a dilapidated garage behind her house. We didn't sort through and arrange things. There was too much. The debris of her life threatened to swallow us, so we threw it out. It took us five trips in a U-Haul to the dump.

"You're not taking any of these dresses or anything?" my friend Carra asked as we purged my mother's closets. I shrugged, pulling sweaters and turtlenecks from their plastic hangers and cramming them into garbage bags as fast as I could. My mother isn't in these clothes, I thought. I just wanted to move on.

Holding onto items too long is a characteristic of complicated grief. Relationship-guru types say you must purge the old to bring in the new! To move on you must trash your past. But what if we aren't moving forward at all? In Natasha Lyonne's *Russian Doll*, rotting fruit marks the passage of time. It tells her that even though she keeps dying and repeating the same day over, linear time marches on; and in linear time, bodega watermelons decompose. In one world, you can be looping through time, dying and being reborn every day, but in another, fruits rot on a predictable schedule. The fruit shows that loss is not linear and nonlinear, but both at once, simultaneously.

I took the letters with me when I moved in 2014 from Oregon to Philadelphia for graduate school. Graduate school was my stepping stone—a sort of holding tank—between a smaller life in the West and what I envisioned as a big new future in New York City. School was a logical reason to leave my life behind. To start over alone, at 33 years old, with nothing. For two years, the letters stayed buried at the back of my closet.

After I graduated, I found a perfect apartment in New York. It was a roomy studio with a bay window and wrap-around island in the kitchen, just south of Brooklyn's leafy Prospect Park, in the part of town where the city melts into suburban Victorians and hushed quiet. It was affordable by city standards. Even the landlords were straight from central casting. She worked for the *New Yorker* podcast; he was a professional jazz musician. They lived upstairs with their blue-eyed, twin sons.

The landlords were waiting. All I had to do was transfer the deposit and e-sign. But something strange was happening to me. I'd ridden the train up from Philadelphia for the weekend to apartment hunt and sprung for a room at one of those micro-hotels in the Lower East Side with a room just big enough for a bed and a view. My computer was splayed open on the bed next to me, the lease maximized onscreen. Through the floor-to-ceiling window, I watched the blue of the summer day fade to a creamsicle sunset as I fell into a strange paralysis. My limbs were leaden; my chest caved in. My breath reduced to shallow sips.

The sky got darker and the city lights brighter and I couldn't move. I'd been dreaming of this move for years. I should have been ecstatic. Out celebrating. Roaming the neighborhood. Instead, I was pasted to the bed by an invisible force, willing my arm to reach the computer. *Just sign the fucking papers. What's your problem?* Then, an hour later: *Call a friend. Go for a walk. Get a drink. Move. Do something. Please. Anything.* But my body had gone rogue.

Another hour. *A shower. Take a shower.* Somehow I managed to strip off my clothes, then fell immediately back to the pillows, exhausted.

All night, I laid there frozen and naked and confused until finally I drifted into a thick, dreamless sleep. When I texted the landlords the next morning to apologize and tell them I couldn't take the room, they didn't reply.

I took the train back to Philadelphia and fell into a low pressure system. What I remember most about the next six months was lying face down on the splintered wood floor of my living room. The floors must have been a hundred years old. They were warped with inch-wide gaps that had collected dirt and hair and bugs over the years and compressed them into tiny blocks of debris. Little scum Legos. I remember the cold floor against my cheek as I peered into those gaps, trying to pry loose the debris with my fingernails. I was a soggy, tear-soaked mess. My limbs were lumpy, beat-up pillows. My thoughts morose; melancholic.

Every day I walk over the debris of all lives lived before me. Eventually everything gathers its own scum.

Finally, I started the motions of moving. Packing up my apartment, I began to sort everything I owned into piles. *Take or leave. Keep or trash.* One morning, from the back of the closet, I pulled out the letters. I opened one. Inside, I found