

# Strange Prisoners Like Ourselves

LEAH BARKER

**L**et me tell you a story about myself.

Outside, the air is still. For a moment, the sound of three a.m. traffic has ceased. There are no heels tapping on pavement, no static of late night TV, no signs of life except the illuminated skyline, no sirens—only the hum of the fan on my desk.

Far enough from home, and still I can't open the letter.

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, alone for the first time in days, now would be the time to do it. Instead I stare idly out the window, listening as the city seems to hold its breath in anticipation.

The letter is right next to me. "Leah" is scribbled and underlined in blue ink on the envelope which is already torn from the thousand times I've come close to reading it.

Two nights before I left for school, my father found me at the kitchen table. "I know this might seem out of the blue," he said.

When I feel like it, I'll open it.

The letter in his hand. The letter in my hand. "But I want you to read this before you go."

"Is it . . . scary?" I asked.

"No," he lied. "It's about those things that happened, things we never talked about. Things I never got around to saying. Two years ago's things."

"Oh," I said. "Those things." And I thought, has it been two years already?

Sometimes, when I'm avoiding reading what I suspect is an apology letter from a parent, I like to look out my window and into the thousands of lit-up apartments that stretch across the horizon. I think about what kind of people live out there. I try to guess their secrets, things they write in journals or tell their shrinks or hide inside themselves—things that don't come up in normal conversation. There are things I wouldn't tell you if I had known you my whole life.

When I start thinking like that, I tend to feel a little disconnected.

Any minute now. When I feel like it.

Me on my bed, the letter in my hand. A breeze in my hair from the open window. My hand, frozen. My hand, sliding off the already-ripped envelope.

The letter, unfolded, one of thousands of secrets. Eyes sliding in and out of focus, trying to grasp a single word on the paper.

And suddenly, as soon as I read my name at the top of the page, I throw the letter aside. With reflexive quickness, it has transformed into a large spider. And there's no picking it back up again.

"It's about those things we never talked about," he had said.

I'll put the letter away, later, but for now I sit. My heart races, and the quiet of the streets below me does not lift.

This is an essay about what I don't usually talk about. This is not about sharing for the sake of sharing. This is not me opening up or dropping hints. This is about my actions, your actions.

The things that don't come up in normal conversation.

This essay, it's about looking at yourself from the outside, finding identity through stories, as if you could watch your life frame by frame, cut it into smaller, more easily digestible moments. Those memories of single, private events say more about you than the months and years you've spent in school or in a particular town or with a person. Forgetting the whole, it is possible to distance yourself from yourself, disconnect in order to tune in.

This is about illusion. We live in a society of shadows, in the wake of things concealed by lovers, parents, strangers, the government. Nothing is ever plain, nothing is ever as it seems, and we carry on in the empty spaces left by that which goes unsaid. Everywhere there is a public and private face, there are filters and fabrication, and we are, each of us, a plot hole.

This is about wanting a little clarity.

This is not a secret: a few weeks back I came across the painting *The Lovers*. It features a couple, whose heads are covered in cloth, kissing. No matter how intimate the gesture, the couple cannot be truly close while the shrouds conceal them from each other.

This is about a fascination with your own shroud.

Let me tell you a story about myself.

On the day my director is fired, I press my nose against the window of his office door to see if he is inside. On the floor is a box, brimming with books I've picked up so many times, books I've pored over in the little chair

in the corner, groaning as every new page brought another monologue I wasn't talented enough to perform.

On the day my friend is fired, his office is unlocked and empty, but I do not go in. Instead I watch the silent room through the window of his door, looking at his rolling chair and family pictures, looking at his screensaver. How many hours spent in this room? How much laughter and advice and gossiping? How much Starbucks?

Gazing blankly through the rectangular pane, I see the room in frames, in snapshots easier to digest than the whole scene—bite sizes. The day my father figure is fired marks a week since my tech designer was asked to leave his post and move out of his on-campus housing.

Sometimes, nostalgia hits you so hard things seem to slow down.

Through the window of his door, I see the window across the room that looks onto the battered theater lot. Outside, it is peaceful; birds and flowers on spring trees are juxtaposed with the warm steel of SUVs. A white minivan rolls into the scene, unhurried to my dreamy senses, and pulls into a parking space. Through the front window of the car I see his face, huge and bearded, terrible with rage. I stand, on the other side of three windows, and feel an eternity away—through these layers of glass, everything is shimmering and disconnected, a picture of a picture of a picture.

The day my director is fired, he enters the hallway where I have been lurking, and he ignores me. Fumbling with his keys and pointedly looking anywhere but my face, he doesn't realize his door is open.

I watch him balance the boxes on his hip, boxes he'll carry out later, full of ten years' worth of debris from his desk drawers. I say, "Hi."

He turns to me, unable to deny my presence any longer, and his face looks old. Bitingly, quietly, he spits out his farewell sentence, the last thing he will ever say to me before pushing his way into his office and letting the door slam shut.

There are things I wouldn't tell you if I had known you my whole life.

Conspiracy theorists work themselves into a frenzy ranting about Roswell, man's trip to the moon, Marilyn Monroe. All the political scandals that came out and all the ones still under wraps. William Shakespeare.

Then there's your boss, your son, your taxi driver. The Petticoat Affair of your local convenience store. The Watergate of the Smith family next door. And those are just views from your room.

This is not to say that everybody has deep, tormenting secrets, but that, as outsiders, we never know someone else's full story. Plato says we live in a

world of illusion—a shadowed cave—and cannot perceive reality as it actually is. We are never able to see the true state of things, and I wonder if we really want to. We thrive in a haze, unwilling to expose ourselves and unwilling to know each other.

This is fear of seeing things as they really are.

This is my father's unopened letter.

Distancing yourself from yourself, forgetting the whole—this is about snapshots.

A pretty, thirty-something soccer mom walks around a strip mall, wobbling in her boots as she presses forward against the wind.

Twenty yards away, I sit in my minivan with the broken heater, transfixed.

Twenty yards away, I hate her with every stupid flick of the head she gives to keep her hair out of her face, hate every manicured fingernail and designer sweater. Her name is Jen, my father had an affair with her, and the last time I saw her I was digging in her closet, looking for a dress to wear to a graduation ceremony.

Sometimes nostalgia hits you so hard you slip back in time.

Such gorgeously expensive fabrics slid under my fingertips, such pretty dresses that could make anyone feel attractive. They were color-coded from lightest to darkest, illuminated by closet lights so that I felt as if I were in some designer boutique instead of sifting through an older woman's clothing. "This one," she said to me, "this one would be adorable on you." I tried it on and didn't feel like me in the pale, blue and white colors, but I wanted to see what it felt like to be her perfect, preppy daughter. We sat on her bed and talked all day about boys and school and other girly things, me still in her dress and her in her cute jeans. Maybe she didn't know, but I was thinking about how much I loved her hair and house and style, and how my mother had yelled at me the other day, like every day, and how my father wouldn't stand up to her and how sitting there talking with Jen made me not care.

Frame by frame: I sit, shivering in my car and watch her wander through her shopping, thinking about how sick it is that I've worn her clothes. She's just running errands—it's so simple it's laughable, so normal and calm after all that's happened. Everything just keeps moving and moving, and I feel like I'm the only one who remembers.

It's the touch of her fabric on my skin. I'm lying on her bed, tracing the quilting in her blanket as she sits cross-legged, hugging a pillow. It's all I can feel. The memory is still and quiet; I smile vaguely. As the wind rages outside

my car, I am too deep in thought to see her slip into the crowd and out of sight.

Let me tell you a story about myself. One day I woke up and felt the cold stone of the earth below me. There were broken chains at my feet, and the towering walls of the cave were all around, and it was filthy and dank. Everything was shadows and flickering, indistinct, but I sensed that behind me lay freedom. And though I could leave, could walk out of the cave and into the sun, I stayed rooted to the spot, still stay rooted to the spot, for fear of what I'd find. This is about seeing things all too clearly. I sit at the kitchen table, days before I go to college and my father hovers uncertainly over me clutching a letter and mumbling about two years ago's things, and I'm thinking, has it been two years already?

Far enough from home, and still I can't open it.

Let me tell you a story about myself. My director turns to me only because he is unable to deny my presence any longer. His face is old, etched with not only his blame, but also the blame of my tech designer, my teachers, my friends. Bitingly, quietly, he spits out his farewell sentence, the last thing he will ever say to me before pushing his way into his office and letting the door slam shut: "You can go now. I'm no longer an employee of this school."

I stand blinking at his door again, feeling the finality of the moment. I wonder if I should linger, wonder if I should hammer at the door and scream until he talks to me. I wonder what else there is to do.

You can go now.

During the next few weeks, the final stretch of my senior year, I may sit in his office, just to be there, just to be around the coffee stains and old show programs he left behind. Over the summer I might even write him a letter, one he won't respond to, but for now I can be nothing but the passive, silent girl I so essentially am. On the day the only adult I had ever trusted is fired, he hates me, and I can barely stand to feel anything.

I start down the hallway, teetering a little in my heels, while in his office, my old director packs.

Can you sense a light shining somewhere out of your field of vision? Can you feel the warmth of an unseen sun? Broken chains around my feet, and still I stay motionless.

If the shadows were lifted, could I bear to look? Secrets keep some pieces missing, so no matter how hard we try to put the puzzle together, there are

always those empty spaces that cannot be filled, and the picture remains incomplete. This is how we like it. Reality is sometimes ugly, inconvenient, and secrets allow us to blur the lines between who we are and who we'd like to be. If we can keep each other guessing, if we can avoid being figured out, we can avoid judgment, or boredom, or both. This is not a secret: the lovers hold each other, but they do not know each other. Their faces covered, they are senseless and numb. In hiding their thoughts, desires, and pasts from each other, they refuse to recognize things about each other and themselves. They cling to each other, long for human contact, but will always remain disconnected through self-protection. We, like the lovers, are not trapped—the truth is not missing or lost. But we hide ourselves and deny truths about others; we do not want to be free.

Let me tell you a story about myself. There was Jen, who was my friend, and my father, and my director, and these three were my life. And now I know better and wish I didn't, so I keep my knowledge far and distant, a picture of a picture of a picture. This has been an essay about what I don't usually talk about. There are memories in my head, and in your head, there are people out my window and a whole skyline of private matters, and there is the letter, now stuffed in my purse unread, and no one knows it's there. There are secrets, there are always secrets, and I wonder, what do we do when the fog thins out and the lights come up? This has been an essay about what is true. And I feel, I really feel, as though I'm getting somewhere.

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## WORKS CITED

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