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Heaven is Empty

by Mari Syrad

This is not a letter but my arms about you for a brief moment. As you read it, I feel my edges pulling away from me, the transition of time blurring the white of my nightdress, the cotton made ether. As you read on, I inch closer to you. Drifting through light and nothing, drifting home. You won't think it possible. You won't think it's happening, but just wait...

I met a man in heaven. That's how it started. Or it started with my death, if you like. This man, with a charismatic smile and an outstretched hand, told me a secret about the universe. He said we're all born knowing it, but as the world doesn't believe in magic anymore, by the time we get to the end, we've forgotten all that we knew. Secrets told in utero disappear in the breeze, he said.

He leaned in close, his head alongside mine, his hot breath tickling my ear, and gave me the piece of wisdom that will bring me to you. The details don't matter now, but the hope he carried to me in that whisper, it was a dream I never dared dream.

As I thanked him and turned to leave, believing I knew all I could know, he caught my wrist with a firm tenderness, and issued a warning. Once I stepped out of heaven, there would be no offer of re-entry. I'll admit, his words barely registered, it was the only way back to you, and that is worth a thousand purgatories.

And so I write this letter. Though not a letter but a conduit, a beacon, a helix upon which I glide home.

You must be nearing the end. When I look down my hands are chalkboard smudges and my eyes oil spills on an ivory canvas, I am opaque. Can you see me materialising before you, Maggie? Maggie, am I nearly there? Am I rising up from the page, my limbs made of paper? Are my limbs made of paper, Maggie? Does the pencil lead dance unchoreographed across the page until it resembles my features? Am I home?

'Maggie Letford?' the nurse enquired. Maggie turned as she uncurled her scarf in a half pirouette, her cheeks flushed from the wind. 'Your mother's just through here, I'm afraid she's much the same as before.'

Maggie followed the nurse and sat poised on the edge of the chair in front of an old woman in a white nightgown, the edges of her pale hair blurred in the glare of the lamp beside her. The woman was muttering on an endless loop under her breath and didn't acknowledge Maggie's arrival.

They sat together for a while, Maggie warmed her pink-tipped fingers with a mug of tea and talked to her mother as though she still understood. When visiting time was over, Maggie leant in to kiss her mother's soft cheek. To her surprise, the wizened fingers grabbed her wrist with a firm tenderness, and her mother, alert for the first time, looked her in the eye.

'Did it work?', she whispered. 'Did the letter bring me home?'