

Transient

By Rachel Loeper

Mary's father sent her off to London for Junior Year Abroad with a card that read May the Father protect you, the Son's Love engulf you, and the Holy Spirit carry you on his wings as you embark on this journey.

Scrawled under the message, he had written, When the answers seem hard to find, remember they're already written in your Bible. Let His words guide your days and carry you back home. In Christ's Love, Dad.

It was how he said I love you.

Mary didn't have to use the bathroom, but she told her friends to go ahead without her, implying that she did. They left the pub without another thought; she'd known them a month or less.

She came out of the bathroom and sat down at the end of the bar nearest to the cash register, thinking, maybe just one more drink.

Their waitress's name was Eve. Mary had seen it scrawled in hurried handwriting on her button advertising Heineken after surveying her piercing black eyes and long, thick hair. It was the kind of hair Mary had always wanted. Though she carried herself with confidence, Mary decided that Eve couldn't be more than a year or two older than her, and that her self assurance was due to the small mole under her right eye, which Mary took as evidence of her superiority over mortals.

Maybe I'll just ask her for her hair Mary thought, too drunk to notice Eve slide onto the stool next to her and spark a Camel Light.

"What happened to your friends?" came the light but raspy voice of someone who, despite her youth, has already had sufficient time to regret her first cigarette.

Mary pivoted on the green barstool and must have stared blankly for a moment, a detail she recalled with some degree of shame later that night. Finally, she answered, "They left," then...catching herself, "oh, I think they decided to call it a night."

"Call it a night?" Eve asked.

It took Mary another moment before she realized she'd used a somewhat regional turn of phrase. Then, "um, yeah...you know, they decided to go home."

"Oh, I see...American?"

More often than not, that question made Mary cringe, as though the British had a knack for funneling unlimited condescension and disgust into the single word. Like they'd been practicing from the cradle. She only detected slight amusement in Eve's tone, though, and was somewhat reassured.

She laughed knowingly and distracted herself with another sip of beer, "Right. American."

"My name is Eve, by the way." She reached out to shake Mary's hand, smiling.

"Oh I know...that is...I'm Mary." She shook her head, glad now that she'd at least been introduced to the art of being able to laugh at herself.

Eve said goodnight to her last table of customers and began wiping down the counter as Mary rambled about school, the annoyances of class registration, and the people she missed – Joe, her father, her little cousin Sarah. Talking about them made them seem closer.

"Listen, I've got to go do some work in the back," Eve said. "And my boss is shooting me dirty looks – I don't suppose we could continue this some other time?"

They exchanged phone numbers, and as Mary left she realized how little she'd learned about Eve – and, by consequence, how much she must've been talking. She'd taken away that Eve had graduated from secondary school about 2 years ago, making her about nineteen...and that she took yoga classes when she had time and that when she laughed her right eye – the eye with the mole under it – twitched just slightly...but that was all.

When Mary's hand was on the doorknob to leave, Eve's voice behind her called, "If you had to pick one word to describe yourself right now, what would it be?"

After a moment, she replied, "transient."

Eve nodded and disappeared through the kitchen door.

When Mary checked her mail in the Student Union Center the next day, she opened the single letter she received with excitement and butterflies.

Dear Mary,

Hi! How's it going? I'm doing fine, I guess. Even though it seems like we're never in the same place at the same time, you seem so much farther away...you know, with the Atlantic and all. It's like before I knew that if I got in my car and kept driving for some length of time, I'd be able to get to you, but now I can't. I'm glad we had this summer, though. Next summer will be even better, I promise. Crazy, but better.

I got all the classes I need to graduate in May and Justin's dad says he'll have a place for me at RadiaTech. It's just a matter of finding a place to live. Of course, I'll probably start out at an apartment. But have you seen that new development past where Brandon used to live? Do you know the one I'm talking about? Man, I was looking at the view from some of those back yards, and I couldn't believe it. I would love to live up there one day. So, what do you think?

I decided I'm not going to be an active member of the frat this year. I mean, I'll still party with the guys and stuff, but I can't spend all my time there, doing fratty things. I'm doing other stuff, though. We have this new club, which is more like a night class except that we don't get credit for it, but I think it's worthwhile. It's teaching about stocks and investment and you wouldn't believe how much money you can make just by knowing where to put it. I'm also thinking of joining the College Republicans. It's one of the biggest groups on campus, and even though I've never been very "political", there's a lot of great people in it and with the election coming up it should be exciting.

What else do I want to tell you? Oh – my sister had her baby! It's a boy and they named him Michael Alexander. Her and Josh moved into their new house just in time, and she loved it because of course she couldn't help move boxes or anything, so she just told everyone what to do. Their place is about five minutes from my parents' house on Dutch Lane in Springtown – you know where I mean? It's a cute place to start out. I guess that's all for now. I can't wait to see you again. You're still coming home for Christmas, right? That's a silly question I know, of course you are. Write back soon!

I love you!

Love,

Joe

Mary smiled to herself. Crazy, but better. She knew Joe would have a ring waiting for her when she returned in June.

Mary sat in her night lecture a few weeks later, appreciating how, at a big university, no one expected you to say anything. She always sat in the back left hand corner of the huge lecture hall. Tonight she was completely enraptured by how perfectly her pen could wrap itself inside the course blond curls that ended abruptly at her shoulders. Her attention only dwindled long enough for her to recall Eve's eyes when she had invited her over to her flat for the first time. Tonight.

"This is rubbish," Eve screamed at her boss above the clatter of the kitchen behind the bar. "The schedule says 10 o'clock, and it's bloody dead in the dining room. This isn't the first time Tracy has called off and I have had to work for her, and it is not my responsibility to compensate for slags like her."

Her boss was a gruff middle-aged man with a beer belly who had inherited the pub with his family name against his will. He was tired. "I don't think you really know what you're doing right now. I absolutely need one of you to stay until closing time."

She pulled her jacket over her head. "Listen, I'm leaving. You know as well as I do that you can not afford to fire another waitress, but if you want to have no help at all, do what you must." She stormed out of the kitchen, nearly slipping on the wet floor, and left her boss shaking his head, fuming.

"I do hope you understand you don't need to come back," he called.

"Oh I'll be back next Friday – to get my last tick."

Mary smoothed her simple blue cotton tee and looked in the mirror with her head cocked to the right. She always felt underdressed here – everyone was either dressed explicitly to the latest fashion or looked as though they had stepped off an American art school campus, with their delicate eccentricities.

She settled on minimal makeup and a royal blue ribbon, which she tied around her neck. As she glanced in the mirror for the last time unsatisfied, she shrugged and smiled closed-mouthed, but as she got her coat on and moved toward the door to leave her flat, the toothless smile broke into a giggle of anticipation.

Eve opened the door to her third-story one-room flat and shook her head. She would never have time to clean up before Mary got there. She looked around. Her double bed that also served as a sofa was the largest feature of the room, and sat opposite her old TV which got more use as a coffee table. The bed was covered with old pay stubs, dirty clubbing clothes that she'd barely managed to get out of before passing out on her bed last night, and the uniforms from her two day jobs – a dark green smock she wore over jeans for her Monday/Wednesday/Friday job at the health food store, and a frilly Victorian get-up that she wore when she waitressed at the tea room on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday mornings. She could more than get by on those two jobs...besides, now she would have more nights free.

She opened the closet and began throwing everything in it, but not before running water in the sink of the shoe box-sized kitchen to make a dent in the stock-pile of dirty dishes. Between the kitchen and her bed, there was just enough room for a small wooden table and some miscellaneous chairs she'd picked up at thrift stores. She cleared these off, too, throwing the contents in the sink or the closet, took out a bottle of wine she'd bought for the occasion and the only two matching wineglasses she owned, and jumped in the shower.

Mary spent a few minutes outside composing herself and examining the girl's door. A Safe Zone sticker had been placed carefully above the ancient doorknob, and above that another sticker advertising a British band of whom Mary had never heard. She raised her eyes to the ceiling once and breathed deeply as though inhaling the energy seeping through the keyhole and the cracks in the wall. The knocker sounded light, like sleigh bells.

At 6 a.m. the next morning, Eve rolled over. She traced the outline of Mary's hip bone, then her torso, her breast, and collarbone. She whispered, "Are you asleep?"

"Mmmmm-Hhhhhmmmm," came the satisfied reply.

Eve moved closer to her ear, brushing away Mary's curls, and softer said, "If you had to pick one word to describe yourself right now, what would it be?"

Mary's eyes opened just enough to meet Eve's for a moment. "Alive."

When she was home from college, Mary attended Blessed Trinity Bible Church with her father every Sunday. Not going would require a battle she'd never had the energy enough to fight, even after she'd discover religion to be much too small an explanation for this world. As the central component of her father's life, she still considered it with a degree of reverence or else as something that was indefinitely off-limits as a topic for any conversation after which she might still want to maintain a cordial relationship with her father.

The church had a fund raiser every year during which you could buy anything under the sun with Bible quotes on it. The selection didn't change much, and her father had been writing on the same stationary for at least five years, maybe longer. The paper was unlined, with a picture of a purple and gold sunset with some kind of bird – probably a dove – flying toward the sun. It read, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. Isaiah 55:11." She found the familiar envelope taped to the top of a package, and sat down on her dorm room bed to savor the contents.

Dear Mary,

You can't imagine how much we missed you on Christmas. We celebrated the holiday at your Aunt Catherine's after church. That house is so full of life. Jacob was so excited to get a Ping-Pong table, Sarah just started taking a new kind of dance class and performed for the family, and Anthony started school and loves it. They're all going to the Holy Union Christian Academy and Sarah's teacher just can't get over how similar the two of you look at that age. Of course, everyone understood why you couldn't make it. It was a blessing that you met your friend, I suppose, so that you could be there for her when this horrible tragedy happened. Nonetheless, my selfishness wished I could have seen your face on this blessed holiday.

Do you remember Lauren Mountz? I believe you graduated with her. Well, I was talking to Mr. Mountz after church the other day and I thought you might be interested to hear what he said. Apparently Lauren has run off to San Francisco with a boy that she met at school. I'm quite sure he didn't go to her school, but was some kind of wanderer. Her parents are just devastated that they've lost her. Even though she calls every week and tells them she's okay, they're quite sure she's doing drugs with this boy, and they're trying to figure out a way to bring her home. It's such a shame to see a child start off with such promise and end up that way. Keep her in your prayers.

In Bible Study the other day, I read something that I felt compelled to share with you. It's 1 Timothy 4:12 and it reads, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity." I've included a few of your smaller Christmas gifts and a Bible I'd like you to give to your friend Eve, with a promise that I will pray for her during this difficult time. Any friend of yours I know is a friend of God's, and mine.

In Christ's Love,

Dad

She told herself it wasn't really a lie. Eve's parents had died in a street mugging in Italy, even though it was nearly five years ago. Mary just couldn't bring herself to switch gears this deep into her life in London – couldn't imagine having to go watch those crazy Christians get out-of-hand at services every week...run into people she graduated with at the mall...and tell Joe she still loved him. Even though she did still love him, of course. She thought, This is my time. In six months, I'll be ready to go. They'll understand...all of them.

She'd lost touch with Lauren during the last few years of high school, but remembered the girl as a voice on the other end of the telephone. Lauren was the first friend she had who would stay on the phone until 2 a.m., or until her father told her to hang up. They used to talk about boys, and how far they would drive just as soon as they got cars. She got out, Mary thought. California had seemed as distant as heaven then – England, not even a thought.

Inside the box were four packages wrapped in blue Christmas paper depicting the nativity scene: one marked "To: Eve" in black magic marker and the others, simply, "Mary". Mary slowly opened the packages with her name on them and found an ornate silver cross and chain, a journal with daily prayer suggestions, and a hand-held tape recorder. The first two she might have predicted; even though she received a cross and journal every year, she took it as progress that her father had finally remembered that she preferred silver to gold. The tape recorder she'd mentioned to him in October – thought she might find it useful to record lectures.

I do love you, Dad. She slipped the cross over her neck trying to bite back the guilt.

Mary had spent Christmas at Eve's English grandmother's old house which sat, withering, on the outskirts of the city.

"What are you so worried about?" Mary asked as Eve smoothed her hair in the mirror for the seventh time in fifteen minutes. She turned to Mary, her eyes glowing with excitement, or anxiety.

"I haven't seen James since last Christmas – I always get jittery like this, too. We used to be so close. He moved to America as soon as he graduated, but didn't come around again until Mummy and Dad died...now at least he comes every Christmas, but it still gets me worked up."

Mary nodded, knowingly, thinking of what it had been like when her mother died of cancer eight years before, what death meant for the ones left. But I'm not all he has, she thought, he has Aunt Catherine...and the church.

Eve let herself into the house, which was not nearly so run-down on the inside as it was on the outside. Or, as Mary thought when she looked closer, maybe it's just hidden better.

The cracked walls and floorboards were covered with tapestries, photo collages, and oriental rugs, but any careful observer could see that the place was falling apart.

James had the same features as Eve – the black eyes and hair and honey-colored skin that embodied the union of their English mother and Indian father. When the girls walked into the house, he had a little girl of four or five in his arms.

"Evie!" he exclaimed, letting go of the child to greet his sister. He wasn't a big man – maybe 5'10" – but picked her up easily and she squealed with laughter.

In the introductions that followed, Mary learned that the child was his girlfriend Candice's daughter from another relationship; all three of them had flown in from Seattle for the holiday. Candice had straight black hair to her shoulders and big blue eyes and taught third grade at a public school in the city; her daughter Janie looked just like her.

Eve's grandmother appeared through the doorway that lead to the dining room and kitchen, drink in hand. The greens and holly that outlined the doorway matched the woman's festive dress.

"Oh, my girl!" She came over and offered hugs to Eve and Mary alike. She was a warm, over-excited woman with red-painted lips and gray hair and eyes.

Immediately, she turned to James, "There's rum and some other things in the cupboard, why don't you go make these girls some drinks?" Smiling, James headed toward the kitchen.

Then she turned toward Mary, "Has Eve told you how we operate around here?" Mary shook her head. "Well now, I have most everything made, except for the salad. " She bustled in the direction indicated, stopping at an antique buffet table in the dining room to pull out two aprons. "Put these on, loves, and come along."

Cinnamon, nutmeg, and almond flavor filled the air later as they sat down to a table set with what looked like very fine, very mismatched dishes and utensils. The table was primed with honey-roasted ham, roasted duck and potatoes, spiced apricots, green beans, and cream pea soup. The old lady entered with the specialty salad composed of greens, orange peel, onion, cashews, and oil and vinegar dressing that Mary had concocted with some help.

Eve's grandmother began, "If everyone will please join hands, I will say a blessing."

It was at this point Mary started to feel the effects of the alcohol, struck by some kind of dichotomy.

"Thank you Lord for bringing this family together. Thank you for James, Candice, and Janie, who flew all this way to be here with us today and for Evie and Mary, may we substitute as her family and make her feel loved. Thank you also for teaching each of us that even when we're not under the same roof, or in the same country, we are still a family."

It was the only time God was mentioned throughout the evening, and it came to Mary as a transmission from her father. He said things like that at the mealtime prayer. She also remembered the uproar it had caused when her cousin Phillip moved to Boulder. It seemed any family member moving farther than an hour drive from his or her roots was a candidate for being burned at the stake. It was just another way prayer proved insufficient.

"Now, where shall we start?"

Conversation flowed lightly, as everyone except Janie had had quite a bit to drink by that point in the early evening. Mary felt more comfortable around them than she had expected to, drawn into conversation on topics of travel, and the future.

"So how long will you be in London?" Candice asked softly.

"Until June," Mary answered, "That's when the semester ends." Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Eve's face fall.

"Of course I'll have been here a year, and it will be hard to go." She looked at Eve, smiling and pretending she didn't notice the girl's hardened features. "And I have many reasons to come back often." She winked, and Eve gave in, smiling subtly.

Later that night the girls sat lazily on one of the two squeaky, wooden single beds in the upstairs guest room and Eve asked, "So, what did you think of them? Isn't James fabulous?"

Mary drew in closer, staring intently into Eve's eyes, "They're all absolutely fabulous. Of course, I expected nothing less, knowing what a quality woman had come out of the family."

They almost always went into their kisses smiling, as though they could be nothing but perfectly delighted at the now.

Dear Mary,

This will be the last letter I write as a college student. Commencement is Thursday and I'm virtually done all my classes, but we're waiting until you come home to have my graduation party. I was really upset, as you well know, when you couldn't make it home for Christmas, but I got over it and this added time apart has taught me how much I still want to be with you.

I can't believe how far we've come, you and me. Do you remember my high school graduation? That was when you were still thinking about following me to school. Then when you graduated a year later, I was so upset that you were dating Brad and moving half way across the country that I didn't know what to do with myself, but it just goes to show you that everything that should work out does, just not maybe in the way we thought. The party wouldn't really be complete without you, anyway.

Even father back than that, though – eighth grade graduation. I talk about it at school and no one can understand why we made such a big deal out of graduating from eighth grade, but it seemed like a big deal at the time. I barely knew you then, except as a girl I'd had homeroom with as long as I could remember, but I think even then I knew.

Do you remember last summer, how we drove to a different park every night and explored the woods. Remember when we found that pyramid at the end of the path by Sestina Lake? Someone must have built it and we spent half the summer asking every stoner we met who took all the time to do that, but no one knew. It stayed a mystery. Or that old woman we met in Spring Grove who talked for hours about how she had been in Hawaii during Pearl Harbor and how her son never called but he was still a "very good boy." Even the people who have bad things to say about this town can't say it's not beautiful. I think there's more to see though...more that we can see together.

I ran into Jake last night. I hadn't seen him since the Get Together Dance you and I went to over winter break when I was a sophomore and you were a freshman. He's still pretty broken up about Lauren moving away – they always had such a weird thing, though. I don't agree with what she did, but I think he'll be alright with time. It's only been a few months. Her parents wouldn't let up about her coming home, so now she only calls once a month and won't give them her address. She always seemed a little bit of a free spirit, and I know you were friends with her, but she never made sense to me.

In September it felt like forever until Christmas, and then at Christmas six months seemed like all the time in the world, but it's almost here. You're almost here. I can't wait!!!

I love you!

Love,

Joe

"I want you to try something with me, love," Eve proposed after they got high one rainy Saturday afternoon in April. Of course, what afternoon here isn't rainy? Mary thought. It limits options for Americans accustomed to Midwestern weather, four seasons at least.

Mary groaned. "Can't we just sit here...and talk?"

"Now don't be lazy...come sit on the floor."

Mary unwrapped herself from Eve's down comforter with considerable effort, "What are we doing?"

"I was talking to one of the girls from yoga the other day and she told me about this technique...it's really a way to gather energy, and I promise you won't feel nearly so heavy afterward. Well, I don't promise since I've never tried it before, but..."

"What do I do?"

The two girls sat opposite one another on the floor, cross-legged, with their knees touching.

"Just look in my eyes...now visualize...stay focused and visualize the energy around our bodies, everywhere in the room...and work on condensing it to the space between us..." Eve reached out for Mary's hands and they grasped, hands to elbows, as their bodies began to sway back and forth in unison, slowly. They maintained eye contact even as the Radiohead on the stereo grew louder.

I am the key to the lock in your house
That keeps your toys in the basement
And if you get too far inside
You'll only see my reflection

It's always best when the light is off
I am the pick in the ice
Do not cry out or hit the alarm
You know we're friends till we die

"Now, I'm going to think about all the reasons I love about you and when we move in your direction, send those reasons like little balls of energy toward you...then when we move in my direction, you do the same..."

As she spoke Mary's eyes opened wider and their rhythm picked up. Now as they swayed, their heads moved as though being blown or pushed by a vertical cycle of wind.

And either way you turn
I'll be there
Open up your skull
I'll be there
Climbing up the walls

The room glowed and roared with energy and life and the two girls –

Broken. Mary had taken her last wave of energy and used it to push herself up and out of the cycle. "Stop it!" She screamed louder than she meant to, throwing herself back down on the bed, cowering in its still warm corner, wishing she'd never gotten up.

"Mare, what's got you upset? What's the matter?" Eve asked, moving toward her. She reached out to stroke Mary's exposed arm, but the pursued shrunk back.

"It's just too much, ok? I don't need that –" She motioned to the space between them, "this ...you know I'm going home soon and I don't want to think about it until I have to, okay?"

Eve's voice knew the fragility, "No...not really. It's not all right." She leaned back and avoided Mary's gaze. "Not when you're ignoring what we talked about the other night. We could do it, you know."

"The Tourist," the last song on Ok Computer, drew to a close slowly.

Sometimes I get overcharged
That's when you see sparks
You ask me where the hell I'm going
At a thousand feet per second

"No...I was drinking and crazy and I care about you and I love spending time with you and I got carried away. I'm sorry. This London thing, you know...was just supposed to be a thing in my life, something I did. And then I go back home and get a diamond and finish school and get to spend my life with this perfect guy who knows me so well and loves me so much."

"I love you. And what do you mean he knows you? If he knows you so well, who the hell does he think I am?" Mary looked down at her hands, which were either shaking or else her vision was blurred, she couldn't tell which.

"Blast, Mare – how much fun could we have? You said you've always wanted to see the Netherlands...and I speak Italian, but I've yet to see Italy. This doesn't have to be some kind of bloody game. I've saved a lot of money the past two years and it would be enough to start, and if we ran out we could just stop where we were and get jobs for a while. We could do it."

Hey man slow down, slow down
Idiot slow down, slow down

Mary stifled a breath laugh, thoughtful. "That's not it and you know it. I'd be easier if everything you said wasn't so incredibly appealing...and it is. That's not the point."

"It's the only point in the whole bloody world. Look at me. I haven't asked a single thing of you in this whole thing. I just want to be near you. Please tell me that for the next week or so, you'll consider it. Picture what it could be like. I think you want it as much as I do and you're just scared and being scared is no excuse to run home and buy a minivan and turn into your mother."

Idiot slow down, slow down

Eve knew what she'd said as soon as the words left her lips. Mary looked at her coldly, "I can't do this right now."

"Oh, I'm so bloody sorry, Mare..."

"Just – don't." They both sat back in silence as an instrumental closed the song and the CD spun to a stop.

If you had to pick one word to describe yourself right now, what would it be?

Mary stood alone in the airport terminal and thought about a conversation she'd once had with Eve about how, when life moves too fast, you lose a certain level of consciousness...so that weeks or months or years later, you wake up and all the time in between now and the last time you'd been this conscious seems less...real. They called the awakenings "moments of infinite potential" because none of the choices between the two occasions have been made.

Suddenly she forgot which airport she was in, and if she was waiting for Joe to arrive and begin loading her luggage into his Acura or for Eve to bound around the corner with two cups of fresh coffee, smiling and announcing their latest destination. In this instant she could be anywhere.