

Adult Short Story Honorable Mention

Dear Jude

By Briana Maley, Takoma Park

Monday, Feb. 4, 2019

Dear Jude,

Your sisters are driving me batty. Flapping about like a couple of chickens. Fluffing my pillows. Insisting my nurse only give me organic popsicles. Switching my plastic straws out for paper. I told Genevieve the paper ones taste like the inside of a milk carton. She told me plastic straws are filled with phthalates. I don't know what the hell a "phthalate" is, but I do know that it's too late to worry about them now. Jesus.

Bernadette's even worse. She's been reading up on the healing power of crystals. She wants to cleanse my lower chakras. Release the negative thoughts that have damaged my cells. Right now there's a big crystalline phallus on my nightstand, as if I want to be reminded of the male member at this late hour. No offense, honey.

You've probably already figured this out, but I'm going to tell you anyway since your sisters won't let me say it to them: I don't have much time. This is the last time I'll write to you. I'll spare you the gory details, but it's cancer. The bright side, for you at least, is it's not a cancer you'll ever have to worry about. Who knew my ovaries could give me trouble so long after I'd quit using them? I'd almost forgotten those old girls were in there. Which is funny considering the mess they got me into when I got pregnant with you. Lord.

I'm not getting out of bed much these days. I sleep and sleep. Sometimes I feel like I'm looking at the world from the bottom of the ocean. I want to swim to the surface to get a clearer look around, but I can't. Then I have moments when I make it to the surface. When I'm in the mood for some Jell-O. (To keep your sisters happy, I don't eat the cherry flavor because apparently red dye will kill you. Ha!) And I have moments like right now, when I find I'm in the mood to write this letter.

I write you letters in my head all the time. Or maybe I should say I write you letters in my heart. Over the years—it's been almost five decades since you were born, but you know that—I've also written down some letters that I never mailed. In winter, I would toss those pages into the fireplace, watching them curl then burn, my words turning to smoke. In summer, I would rip the paper into tiny pieces and scatter them in a stream. I imagined that whether through the air or through the flowing water, my messages might reach you somehow. That you would feel the whisper of my presence in your life. And then of course there are the letters that I actually had the courage to send. But if you're reading this, I suppose you know about those.

If this doesn't look like the handwriting of an ailing woman, that's because I'm dictating it to Lorraine. Lorraine is a nurse your sisters have hired to help take care of me and she's lovely. She doesn't want to write that part down but I'm making her. Lorraine doesn't make me drink from a straw at all but holds the cup right up to my lips. Last night she put some Vaseline lotion in the microwave and then rubbed it into my legs and it felt like heaven. Lorraine is patient with me, but she's patient with your sisters too. Yesterday I got sharp with Bernadette because she kept asking me if I was comfortable and did I want to find a different position. I told her I'm never comfortable and would she please stop. Bernadette threw up her arms and asked Lorraine why I wouldn't let her help me.

Lorraine put her arm right around your sister's shoulders and told her that people die as they lived. That a quiet person dies quietly. That a private person prefers to die alone. That a feisty person who is used to doing things her own way—she winked at me here—will die in her own way and may not like being fussed over.

All Bernadette could say to this was "where there's life there's hope." Poor thing. I should tell you that along with crystals, she also believes in the power of mantras. Repeat a mantra enough and you can make it come true. I'm not saying I want to die. When I first got this news, I did fight. I want you to know that. But I need to face the facts, Jude. I don't want to spend whatever time I have left praying for a goddamn miracle.

I suppose I should feel flattered that your sisters don't want to see me go. I haven't exactly been June Cleaver. Sure, I loved those girls but I was hard on them too. I tried to protect them from the mistakes I made, but the trouble was I didn't want to tell them what my mistakes were. So instead, I named them after saints in the hopes that they would be saint-like. Sent them to an all-girls Catholic school and tried to put the fear of the Lord in them. They rebelled, no surprise there. If only I had come out and told them that I got pregnant at 17. And that the pain of that didn't just come from being ostracized by my family and friends, although that hurt too. The worst pain came from sending a baby out into the world, and never knowing what happened to him. From having my heart divided up into three pieces for my three children, but knowing at the most I'd only ever have two pieces with me. From loving a little boy named Jude, who I named after the patron saint of impossible causes, but whose real name I would never know.

Tuesday

Jude, I don't know what you've been told about me or the circumstances of your birth. If you were told anything, it was probably some standard fare about how your birth mother committed a selfless act of love so that you could have a better life. I don't want to turn your world on its head, but that's not exactly right. I gave you up because I saw no choice in the matter. How would I have kept you? I was 17. I was lucky my parents hadn't disowned me. How could I ask them to help me raise a child born out of wedlock? It was a different time.

Nowadays women go out and have babies on their own on purpose. More power to them, I say. But that's not what happened with you.

I imagine you wonder about your father, Jimmy Marshall. I know I still wonder about him from time to time. To be honest though, he probably doesn't wonder about you, or me. It's not that I think he's forgotten the pain he caused me—I think he never knew. Sure, he knew he got me pregnant. But then my parents sent me away to live with my Aunt Tilly to give birth and finish high school. Jimmy didn't have to watch me grow thick in the middle. He didn't see how I tried to use heavy sweaters to hide my condition until it couldn't be hidden anymore. He didn't see me sitting alone every day in a school where I had no friends. He kept all his friends. I know because Mary Hobart, my one good friend who didn't turn her back on me, wrote me letters all year and told me. Told me how he took Kathleen Conway to Homecoming that fall and asked her to go steady, which is more than he ever asked me to do. How he kept playing basketball and was named MVP at the end of the season. And you know the funny thing? I didn't even hate him for it. Hell, I still thought I loved him. Still imagined that when I moved back home, he'd drop Kathleen and come running back to me. That's not what happened, of course. What happened was that I got a job checking groceries and he got a scholarship to Princeton.

It wasn't until I met my husband Albie that I realized what a fool I'd been. Albie may not have been a sports star or a scholar, but he loved me. He treated me with respect. And yes, he knew about you and he loved me anyway. If he were still alive, he'd be the one writing down these words. In my experience a person is either going to love you, or they're not. I hope you've experienced your share of love, Jude.

Thursday

Your sisters don't know about you. I didn't tell them about you when they were young because I couldn't admit to my mistakes. And if I told them now, I'm afraid they would try to find you. And I don't think that's fair. I figured if you ever wanted to find your biological family, you would.

I hope the fact that you've never called or written means that you're happy. That you've never had to look beyond the life you had to feel complete. I imagine the handful of letters I mustered the guts to mail over the years are sitting in some cold metal file drawer at the agency. Or maybe you read them and decided I was crazy. You'd probably be right about that.

You know who Lorraine reminds me of? She reminds me of one of the nurses at the hospital when you were born. They whisked you away from me—told me it was easier that way—but I did get a glimpse of you. Your skin was a rosy pink and you were covered with the swirling white goo that all babies come out with. I thought you looked like a beautiful little seal pup made of marble. I can still see your trembling limbs. Your shock of black hair. The dark red birthmark on your arm. Do you still have it, or did it fade?

A short time later someone wheeled over a clattering cart and started sewing me up. I lay in the bright hospital light and cried. I don't suppose you can imagine the indignity of it all, giving birth in front of a room full of strangers. I didn't even know what to expect because no one ever talked to me about these things. My own mother wasn't even there with me. A nurse came and put one hand on my knee to hold it still, but she also took my hand and squeezed it. Told me I was doing a fine job. That night when I was lying in a darkened room—by some small mercy the other bed in the room was empty—that same nurse slipped into the room to check my vitals. She gave me a little envelope that had a clipping of your hair. She pulled the blanket up over my hands as I held it to my chest and said there was no need for anyone else to know I had it. She told me that you were healthy and beautiful and that I was a brave girl. She told me someday when the time was right, I'd have another baby. She was right about that. But she didn't tell me that my other babies would not replace you in my heart. That the weight of your absence would be so much heavier than a yellowing envelope holding a little tuft of hair.

I'm getting tired now and I want to finish this up before your sisters get here. Even though they're busy with their jobs and families, they still find a way to make sure I'm never alone for long. I'll send this letter off with Lorraine, ask her to make sure it gets to the agency. It won't be the first time I've relied on a stranger. I guess you know that. I'm including the envelope with your baby hair. It will feel strange to be without it, but I can't take it with me where I'm going.

If you ever read this, I want you to know that it's true what Lorraine says. People die as they lived. And I will die as I have lived, loving you.

Yours sincerely,

Martha Jennings Holmes
Your birth mother