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The letter was a mistake. She was sure of it.

April often wondered if living alone gave her too much time to ponder. She had a tendency to overthink, telling herself stories for company, to fill up her otherwise unoccupied rooms. Her apartment, for example, was the source of many stories: It was a cozy one-bedroom on the third floor of a forthright-looking redbrick 1920s building, and sometimes April imagined a small family sharing it during the Depression, maybe with a sheet curtaining off a corner of the living room to give the parents some privacy. Or a woman living there alone in the 1940s, working an assembly line in a Seattle factory and waiting for her husband or fiancé to return from war. Or a *Mad Men*-ish single woman in the 1960s, a secretary in a bright dress who gazed at all the men who held the jobs she really wanted and wondered when her life would change. Each of them might have left their mark, in the faint scratches on the wood floors or the tiny chips in the bathroom tile or the ancient, yellowing shelf paper in the linen closet. Maybe some of them were still alive, living somewhere else, fondly remembering the years in that apartment on that quiet Seattle block with a springtime view of paper-pink cherry blossoms on the street below. Sometimes April imagined a reunion in the apartment, with people from different eras

somehow magically sharing the same time and space. They'd probably all be horrified by how much she was paying in rent, and by the fact that she hadn't gotten around to changing the shelf paper. (Did anyone really change shelf paper?)

But right now, April was fixated on something entirely new, something far from those familiar, pleasantly faded walls. She had written the letter and taken it to its destination, and almost instantly regretted it.

Nobody ever seemed to write actual letters anymore, but April loved the idea of a handwritten, on-paper, non-email correspondence—handwriting, with its loops and swirls and angles, seemed to be a tiny map to someone's essence, or a portal to another time, like a Victorian novel written with a scratchy fountain pen. But she knew all too well that some letters should never be sent. Letters confessing a painful secret, perhaps; the sort better to be carried to one's grave or at least one's dotage, whatever that was. Letters that contain the written equivalent of a toddler's temper tantrum, a fury quickly dissipated but living on through angry scribbles on a piece of paper. Letters repeating gossip that may or may not be true—maybe especially if it's true. Or letters written late at night, beginning with “You don't know me, but . . .” and going on to express something that could only be described as a crush on a person one doesn't exactly know.

Unfortunately, the letter she had written was exactly that last type.

And while she hadn't actually *sent* it, it had nonetheless reached its destination: slipped within the pages of a book—Anthony Horowitz's *Magpie Murders*, to be precise—and dropped off in a pile at the used-books desk at Read the Room, the neighborhood bookstore just two blocks down from April's building, on a bright May afternoon that seemed to pulse with promise. At the store, a thirtysomething man whose name April didn't know, with a carelessly becoming beard and the kind of gentle smile that might inspire bad poetry, had the job of tending to the new arrivals of used books, sorting and checking through them.

He would, April was certain, find the letter and read it. He seemed careful in his work, like he might be the sort of person who would appreciate the mystery of an anonymous correspondent. Though very, very good-looking—surely he wasn't an actor, but he looked like he could be one—he seemed quiet and bookish and maybe even a little shy. She'd seen him politely interacting with customers, and once watched him patiently looking up a book online for an elderly man who seemed highly skeptical of computers. He seemed, in short, nice.

April was ready for nice. She was, officially, lonely. Working from home had seemed so convenient at first, but now it appeared to have become something permanent without her ever agreeing to it—and, as a person who tended toward introversion, she'd adapted to it maybe too easily. The other day, she'd been out for a walk—she made herself leave the apartment once a day no matter what, even in the frequent Seattle spring rain—and found herself getting far too enthusiastic over a sweater-clad dog whose owner hustled her pet away quickly. It worried April that she seemed to be getting out of practice in talking to people, but how could she practice? She just wasn't meeting anyone. Even her neighbors in the building all seemed just like her: quiet and solitary, rarely venturing out. April heard their music and footsteps and mysterious thumps, but rarely saw them—imagining their stories rather than knowing them.

She could, of course, have just walked right up to the bookstore man and said hello, like a regular person, but she'd hatched the idea of the letter late one night after watching a rom-com double feature, not long after she'd reread *84, Charing Cross Road*. Things worked out so nicely in the movies, and the letters in the book (between a bookshop employee, April noted, and a woman who loved to read) were so charming, and somehow in the middle of the night it all seemed like a good idea. Sometimes, April had reasoned, sitting at her desk in the darkness, you just have to throw something out into the world and see what happens. That morning, she'd quickly dropped off the letter in the

book without giving herself time to rethink it. And now, as the late afternoon settled into a quiet, soft-sweater grayness, it wasn't easy to keep her mind on her work.

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Anyway. The letter was done. And then what would happen, if the bookstore man did read it? Probably nothing, April thought, back at her desk and back to overthinking. Maybe grown-up women—April was thirty-three, an age that felt to her neither old nor young—working grown-up tech jobs from home shouldn't be imagining themselves as the not-blond heroine of a Nora Ephron movie. (April's hair was a very non-rom-com medium brown, though she liked to think she had a better haircut than Meg Ryan had in *You've Got Mail*.) Maybe boredom and solitude had led her

to take a step too far. Maybe she really wasn't much of a writer. It wasn't even truly a letter, just a paragraph really, and maybe it had needed another draft—it was too short, not funny enough. April believed in rewriting, in trying to make things better. In the empty stretch of her evening, she feared the letter left in the book would be met with silence. It had perhaps been a crazy idea.

But April's life seemed in need of a crazy idea, to shake things up. Mostly she spent long hours in her apartment, working remotely for an online real estate company (a job that mainly consisted of writing cheery emails to potential home sellers) in the daytime and reading at night. She loved to read; it had always been her way of tuning out the world, of postponing troubles and escaping someplace else. As a child, her favorite days were trips to the library, when she'd stumble back into the car balancing a small mountain of books, reading on her bed until the afternoon light faded and her mother called her for dinner. She had loved Francie Nolan reading on the fire escape in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*; Jo March weeping over fiction while perched in a tree in *Little Women*; the All-of-a-Kind Family sisters, in their matching dresses and pinafores, making their own ritual trips to the library. April didn't have sisters in real life—she had Ben, but he was another story entirely—but books had given them to her.

These days, she was mostly reading mysteries, in which lone-wolf female detectives—all of whom, like herself, seemed to live alone in quirky apartments and have a strange assortment of mismatched food in their refrigerators—somehow always seemed to be stumbling into mysterious murders that they were able to figure out through nothing more than clever deduction. April imagined that she might be good at this, maybe just from reading all those novels—in the same way that, after watching all of *Call the Midwife* on Netflix, she was fairly certain she could deliver a baby in a pinch, as long as it wasn't breech—but the opportunity hadn't yet arisen. Maybe the letter was an attempt to create a little mystery of her own.

Like her mystery heroines, April didn't mind living alone,

despite the odd bump in the night that made her wish for another person in the room, at least for a moment. Sometimes the old building just seemed to need to stretch out its bones and make mysterious sounds, like little whispers from inhabitants past. Even in daytime, her apartment had pleasantly squeaky floors that seemed to remember other footsteps. When she was younger, April had dreamed of living in an apartment like this, somewhere all hers, filled with pretty leaded-glass windows and books. But now sometimes she wondered if this was really how adult life was supposed to be: this quiet stretch of days not too different from any other, this low-key contentment that never quite became all-out happiness. Long ago, she had thought that thirty-three was a ripe old age, and that by that time, she'd be happily settled in a rich, full life. There wasn't anything wrong with April's life, really, but she just always seemed to feel like she was waiting for something—for love, for a job that wasn't just OK, for busy gatherings with friends, for something unexpected.

As a regular at Read the Room (April had chosen the apartment several years ago not just for its vintage charm but also for its proximity to the bookstore; she'd long nurtured a fantasy of working in a bookstore someday), she had often surreptitiously watched the man at the desk, from a table in the café or from the corner of her eye as she browsed the shelves. He was handsome, but in a way that indicated that he didn't really know it—he was always absently rubbing his hand through his hair, leaving it whimsically askew. He seemed, from what she could observe, like he might have a sense of humor. She liked the way he laughed at his colleagues' jokes: not a big guffaw, but a soft, throaty peal, often chiming in just a bit later than everyone else. He wore no wedding ring, and he didn't seem to have any particular attachment to anyone at the store, at least from what she could see. Of course, she had no idea if any of these impressions were accurate (for all she knew, he was gay, or deeply involved with someone very impressive, or a total jerk, or maybe all of the above), or if he would in any way welcome her approach. But the only way

to find out was to reach out, and April believed that the whimsy of sending a letter rather than directly approaching him might appeal. Well, she believed it yesterday, and it was too late to undo it now.

April closed her laptop for the day, pondered leftovers for dinner, and tried to focus on other things. Like why it was that whenever she saved up to buy some longed-for piece of furniture or décor, it never quite looked at home in her apartment, as if it was an early party guest waiting for the rest of the A-list to arrive. (She had a new armchair that wasn't getting along with the rest of her mostly secondhand furniture; it seemed to be keeping its distance, no matter how many throw pillows she put on it.) Or why she was receiving strange unknown texts from someone looking for their wayward son-in-law: "U need to come back. Gloria needs u. The kids miss u." Or whether it would be rude to ask her next-door neighbor in 303, who was taking tango lessons, to turn down the bandoneon music and maybe practice in socks after 10 p.m.

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The evening passed quietly, as evenings so often did, like links on an endless chain. A pretty chain, but one that maybe needed a pendant. Or something. Late at night, reading her latest mystery in bed, she kept thinking of the letter, sitting just a few blocks away on a counter in the store, a tiny corner peeking out from the pages of the thick red-and-black hardcover like a hand reaching out into the unknown. The nice thing about mysteries in novels was that they always got solved, though maybe not the way you thought they would.