

THE LATECOMERS

GROUND

Hello. You've reached Charlie Latecomer. I'm away now, probably spending time with my lovely wife, Maggie. Please leave your name and number so we soon can have a deep conversation about the meaning of life.

I hung up my phone and smiled. Soon after, I got down on my hands and knees and began digging. The dirt, rich and fertile, scooped out easier than expected. A few inches down, I exposed a circular metal door resembling a submarine hatch. I opened it.

Stale air rose out of the hole. A wooden ladder extended down into cobwebs thick enough to obscure what was below. I secured a nearby branch the size of a cane, and using the branch to clear the way, descended into the opening. At the bottom of the ladder, a long passageway, high enough to walk upright in, extended down at a steep angle. The walls of the passageway, solid red stone, were covered with logographs and lit by bare lights. I descended flight after flight of stairs, taking in the logographs on the wall, as beautiful in stone.

At the bottom of the stairs, two thousand steps and three hundred logographs later, a steel-reinforced door impeded my progress. I studied it for a time, running my hand over the metal, looking for a way in until, unexpectedly, the door slid open. A rush of air flowed over me with the same intoxicating ambrosial scent I'd experienced earlier in front of the cave painting. As soon as I entered, the door closed behind me.

The cavern, as big as the entire lake about it, with naturally illuminated ceilings probably two hundred feet high, housed thousands of plants. The plants directly in front of me, five feet tall and half as wide, with seeds the size of chestnuts, were vibrant and full of the same colors I'd seen in the cave animation. I went over to a plant and tasted a leaf. Above me, the entire ceiling glowed in pulses, not only generating light but heat, enough to maintain the cavern as an underground grow room.

I heard machines in the distance. As I moved through the plants toward them, a sense of well-being infused each step I took, and despite the uncertainty of what was ahead, I knew I'd found ground again.

PART I – MOAIS & ELDERS

IN A SILENT WAY

Maggie

Charlie, hands resting on his hips, silver hair making art in a gentle breeze, naked except for the guitar strapped to his back, waded off into the ocean, staring at something in the distance I couldn't make out. Maybe a longship or an island or a woman? Tattooed on his free shoulder, an oversized pair of sympathetic eyes weighed what he'd left behind. Above him, the colorless sky propped up mostly gentle clouds, one shaped like a sheltering hand, another like the priest's altar, and a third like Sabina's rope. Below him, the water, brain-like, surfaced with ever-moving sulci and gyri, welcomed Charlie as he fell into himself again, maybe for a final time.

"Maggie, it's time," he said, fully dressed, from the doorway of my studio.

"Okay. Be right there."

I glanced at the digital. Noon. The man's acute awareness of time pulled at me for a moment, but *Charlie's Moai* pulled me back. Moai, my lovely Okinawan word, defined then as a circle of people who purposefully met up and looked out for one another. Ours contained the two of us, though Charlie resisted such a small configuration. Although I had most of the basic elements of the painting roughed out, I still wasn't clear on the colors. Bright or subdued? Variants of a single color or widely varied? Sharply contrasted or melded? The colors would come later.

On my way to wash-up, I stopped in front of the other pieces in the series, all painted over the previous eighteen months, all lined up and mounted on the wall, all centered around Charlie. In the first, *Perfect Ass*, he lay mostly naked on his stomach on our bed, sporting only his I-can-talk-you-into-anything smile, fully aware of his power. Next up, on a walkabout in the Outback, an aboriginal elder at his side, wearing nothing but his favorite Wogens Longshoreman's Cap, Charlie cast about for tribal wisdom. I'd named that one *Sunscreen*. Third, in *How to Avoid a Crush*, riding shotgun down a rock slide next to Jenna and wearing only a pair of paisley-colored cowboy boots, Charlie hunted for a safe way off. Fourth, and my favorite, *The Big Swirl* had him sitting naked in a lounge chair, wearing a pair of extra-large Ray-Bans, contemplating the event horizon of a black hole. Fifth, a blank space waited patiently for the last in the series, the finished *Charlie's Moai*. Eighteen months earlier, when Charlie had posed for the first, *Perfect Ass*, I'd felt relieved I hadn't known him when he was young. He would have been too much. But that morning, in *Moai*, too little of him connected.

As I washed my hands, the ever-changing, timeless, warm water streamed into the sink and held me. Painting full time had been good for me, as building things had been good for Charlie, in part because we needed time alone each day for our time together to be generative. I closed the faucet, dried off, and examined both sides of my hands and

forearms. I would scrub off a few specks of blue later.

In the mirror, I caught myself. I was still okay. More wrinkles and gray, yes, but okay. On most date nights, I cleaned up pretty well, and on most days, I smiled and laughed often, happy simply to spend my time with Charlie. For twenty years, we'd been good together. Though it had been harder after our careers had ended. Had we reinvented ourselves as artists, as I liked to say, or had we been forced into early retirement, as Charlie often claimed? I did like to paint, and Charlie did like to make stuff – furniture, wooden sculptures, guitars – but for over a year, I'd often thought he missed his old life. Or something. Not that many years earlier, before the financial crash, we'd been on a different path. I thrived as a C-level executive at a big pharma company, and Charlie acted as a mid-level manager at a mid-sized company, but like death-in-twos in true-love marriages, we'd lost our jobs within a month of each other.

Did Charlie honestly miss his old life? Or as a Latecomer in more than name, did he long for a new life, one we hadn't fully created, our rightful one? All I knew was that I was okay. Maggie Latecomer – wife, lover, best friend, creator – that was who I was. If we'd finished out our lives in our Northampton house, in love, doing retirement art, I would have remained more than fulfilled.

I stopped at my studio window and surveyed the yard. Charlie had finished his chores early. The annuals, freshly planted, filled the perimeter with reds, yellows, and oranges. Four cords of wood we would need for the winter had been expertly stacked in squares next to the shed. The soil in the garden, tilled and organic, held new vegetable plants. We planned to sell the extra tomatoes, peppers, and corn at the farmer's market in the fall.

Our small Northampton cape suited us. I was thankful it was well outside the city, off the beaten path, and modest, except for the bathroom and the bookend studios we'd added on, one for Charlie's making stuff and the one for my painting. Years earlier and right before we got married, we'd built the house together on the piece of land where I'd first sketched Charlie, the one where he discovered love wasn't always stillborn.

Our Northampton house was not unlike our summer house in Nova Scotia, a house Charlie had summered in for much longer than I'd known him. Bigger, yes, but as modest. Charlie's thing for Nova Scotia was as strong as ever, because of some mystical balancing of rugged beauty and angst, he said, though I thought it was mostly angst. That, and the transplanted Nordic folks. Charlie loved everything Nordic, from the Vikings to the myths to the goddesses. I didn't mind because I too had a bit of Nordic goddess in me, or as Charlie liked to say, many Nordic goddesses. Sometimes Freya, a goddess with endless strengths, helped me when Charlie needed balancing, especially when he got lost in an ideal, the past, or a mind rift. After the previous summer's difficult balancing on Flogo Island, a summer in which he'd come dangerously close to sinking back into the ocean, the same ocean I longed to capture in *Charlie's Moai*, he'd told me how his sadness had calmed when he found me again. Though what he'd really found were the idealized parts of me, the ones reminiscent of Freya.

On the way outside, I entered our main hallway, its walls covered with framed photos of our children, awards we'd won during our careers, a photo of the first painting I'd sold,

another of Charlie's first guitar. There were numerous photos taken when I was a young activist endlessly protesting for the Equal Rights Amendment, sensible gun control, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As I always did when passing through the hallway, I brought three fingers to my lips, kissed them, and then touched one of the activist photos.

On our patio, as the twelve-thirty sun threatened to break a sweat on my forehead, Charlie towered over the table, waiting for me with his hands in his jean pockets. When I reached him, I gave him a quick, moist peck on the lips and took my seat under the canopy. He served me my favorite salad of steak tips, quinoa, and greens and filled my glass from a pitcher of fresh ice-cold lemonade he'd made to help combat the heat. As I pressed lemonade-coated ice cubes under my tongue to cool off, I glanced over at the wall clock to confirm the time.

"How was your morning?" he said.

"Slow. Still working on the moai canvas. Yours?"

"Good. I finished the oak table."

"We can use the money."

"I know."

I glanced at the clock again. Charlie didn't know the exact moment when he was born, so each of our twenty years together I'd wished him Happy Birthday at a different time of day. Both hands on the table, I tapped in unison as I counted down from ten.

"Happy birthday, my love," I said. "Sixty years old!"

Charlie smiled.

"Shall we have the cake with lunch or tonight?"

"Tonight. Midday and ice cream don't go well together."

I smiled in his favorite way. "How about, instead, we cool off after lunch?"

"I'd love to," he said.

We ate in spurts, talking in between bites, often pausing to let each other's thoughts sink in or to drift off in search of a new train. *In a Silent Way* played in the background, the first of Miles' electric albums, a perfect melding of sonata form and fusion.

Train one carried our finances. Neither of us was making enough money through our art to cover basic expenses, and as a result, we were running through our modest savings at an alarming rate. To help, Charlie agreed to build more lucrative high-end guitars, and I agreed, after I finished *Charlie's Moai*, to paint easier-to-reel-off-and-sell Berkshire Mountains landscapes.

Train two carried our children. Of concern to me and delight to Charlie, my twin sons, both living close to their father, both recent university graduates, had entered their wandering phase, a phase filled with too much alcohol, pot, and casual sex. Charlie's daughter lived near her mom, ran a burgeoning alternative medical practice, and played house with a guy I liked and whom Charlie referred to as "the Ken doll." We missed our children, spoke of them often, and sometimes wished careers, school, and divorce hadn't carried them far away from us. We would have welcomed them into our moai if it were solely up to us.

Train three carried our health. Overall, by accepted standards, we were in fairly good

shape for our ages, but we spoke of exercising more, dropping pounds, and going off our meds, as we often had the previous year. We even flirted with going the holistic medicine route and trusting our wellness to plants, herbs, and ancient practices – something I'd never even fathomed given my corporate background.

Though long-standing topics, the fresh words, ideas, and laughter flowed like good jazz, like the album playing, like my other loves: Mingus, Coltrane, and Davis. I was thankful our talks had often been effortless, silver-tongued, indelible, improvised. Talking and sex; sex and talking; they'd edged our relationship from the start. Once, Charlie compared us to camels who had stored up millions of gallons of love in preparation for our time together in the desert of age. Desert and all, I'd resonated with that thought because, for the most part, it had turned out to be true. For me, our Northampton life, in our moai of two, exemplified life at its best, a life filled with love, with self-expression, with presence. Wasn't that everyone's dream of gracefully growing old? Still, sometimes in the middle of the night, I woke and watched Charlie sleep. Invariably, the restlessness on his face suggested our last act would be built from more than wood and paint, more than Northampton, more than us.

After we cleared the table and went inside, I gently took Charlie's hand. Like young lovers, we ping-ponged our way off the hallway walls toward the bathroom, him pushing me up against one wall, kissing me shallow-deep, the way I liked it, me pushing him up against the opposite wall, slipping my hand down over his stomach, over his already-erect penis, kissing him shallow-deep, the way he liked it. He tasted like lemons. At the end of the hallway, I smiled at the tilted photo frames.

In the bathroom, Charlie turned on the shower. I glanced over at the vanity and took in our row of amber bottles full of chemicals for high blood pressure, for high cholesterol, for high blood sugar, for depression – all prescribed within the last few years. I shook my head. How could we make love like we were in our prime and, at the same time, need so many drugs? The drugs had crept up on us.

As we slipped out of our clothes, the mirror fogged over our extra pounds, mine from menopause, his from love of food. I took Charlie's hand, and we entered the shower together. The shower, one of those oversized double-rainspout ones sometimes seen in movies, walled with artistic, eight-inch square tiles a friend of mine had made for us as a housewarming gift, centered the bathroom. Each tile was adorned with abstract carvings Native American elders might have scratched on a cave wall long before the fall, and when combined into a mural, gave one a sense of a lost way of life. Years earlier, the first time Charlie and I made love in our shower, we held each other under the same spout as rain sheltered our bodies. Afterward, the water still running, Charlie began to sob, as if he needed the water to cover him so I could see and not see. I was thirty-five at the time. Back then, Charlie liked to tell people he was the same age.

Charlie lathered his hands with my favorite rose-and-cinnamon-scented soap. With slow circular movements, he washed my shoulders as I rested my hands on the tiles. From there, he glided down my body, not missing an inch of me. Lower back. Buttocks. Hamstrings. Calves. Feet. Then he turned me around and before he worked the front,

kissed each eyelid, my lips, each side of my neck. With each stroke and kiss, I took a step closer to release.

When my turn came, first I shampooed and fingertip massaged his hair using a technique he loved almost as much as sex — slow, firm, circular movements, clockwise, counterclockwise, as though I was dialing knobs up and down. The hair on Charlie's head had fully grayed over the year, along with the hair on his body. He wasn't fond of the change, but I loved gray even more than gray-black.

As we escalated under Charlie's spout, a special gentleness and a mastery guided his geometric strokes, dabs, and caresses, not unlike how I imagine Klimt painted *The Kiss*, and an intensity, too, as if he would never forget. I met him halfway, with gentleness and mastery, and for a few moments lost myself in what we had created in the shower, in our bed, in every part of our home. It was a work of art.

It didn't take either of us long.

When we left the shower, Charlie reached for an oversized white towel and slowly dried me, beginning with my hair and working his way down. I drifted back to our first year in the house, during another drying, when I'd asked Charlie what we should master in the last phase of our lives. He'd signaled with his favorite contemplative look, one he'd often used, one suggestive of searching for the perfect answer. Then he dropped the towel to the floor, pulled me close, my back against his chest, and while both of us were looking into the full-wall mirror, he slicked my wet hair front to back, and said, "This."

If we'd snapped a picture every year of the defining moment, the one capturing the mood of the time with absolute certainty, if we could somehow have gone back to our start and studied all the snapshots together, as augurs of a sort, would those photos have been enough to navigate twenty, thirty, forty years together?

Both dry, we slipped into our bathrobes and stood in front of the mirror. Charlie rested his hands on my shoulders and softly kissed the crown of my head. His reflection was calm, at peace, and, even though I knew the peace was ephemeral, it pulled me in.

"Deep in thought?" I asked.

"Yes, though I'm not ready to talk about it."

"You sure you want to wait?"

Charlie kissed my crown again as his hands tightened a little over my shoulders. The tightening, one of his tells last triggered when he'd lost his job, signaled he had something difficult to discuss, a topic we would need to work through together; I speculated an add-on to our earlier discussions about money.

"I want to leave for Nova Scotia soon," he said.

"That would be a welcome change for us. Pick a date."

"I need to go by myself this time."

"How come?"

Charlie looked away from the mirror.

"What's wrong?"

"I've made a decision."

"Tell me, love," I said.

With a resigned look on his face, one I'd never seen before, one that made me wonder if I'd been right about his tell, Charlie slid his hands off my shoulders and rested them at his sides, only to return them a short time later, hands trembling.

"Maybe it would be better if we talked more tonight," he said.

"That bad?"

Charlie didn't answer.

"You're scaring me, Charlie."

"I'm sorry."

"Remember, radical honesty in the moment is our rule," I said.

I crossed my arms over my chest and placed both of my hands on top of his. With my index fingers, I caressed the top of his wrists, hoping I might calm him. He feigned a smile, and then, as if he were still posing for *Charlie's Moai*, went almost breathless. A thought — nothing will ever be the same again — dug until firmly planted in my mind. With all my strength, I struggled to rip it out.

Charlie looked down at the floor for what seemed like a long time. When his reflection came back to me, in a whisper he said, "I'm leaving . . . here . . . I'm leaving . . . you."

"No."

I said no a few more times, I think, until my breath caught, the air trapped inside my chest waiting for Charlie's mirrored image to recant. When it didn't, I pulled away and turned toward him to see if the mirror had lied, only to backtrack until I was leaning against the mirror, hands hard pressed. I homed in on the black-and-white floor tiles, some hairline-cracked.

"Why?" I asked.

"There's something I've lost."

"What?"

"I don't know. I'm so sorry."

"But we always work through things together . . . Can't we do it this time?"

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

"I don't see them in you anymore."

"I never thought — "

How had he lost sight of the goddesses? Had I done something wrong? Had we run our course? When we'd committed to each other years earlier, neither one of us believed in forever. Instead, we'd focused on every day, convinced of the power of stringing them together. But what happened after your husband no longer saw the goddesses in you, after the love of your life stopped stringing?

I took a deep breath. Another. I tried to focus on the out-breath for relaxation as I'd been taught. Telling me was better than not, right? That had been our agreement after the Wave of Incidents. Radical honesty, no matter what the fallout. Besides, leaving was not new information; the canvases had warned me. At least, one way or another, we would get to the bottom of his restlessness, and after a short time, life would return to normal. Yes, normal.

I raised my head. Charlie met me with the kindest face, the same one that in the past had signaled green, had signaled that we were workable, had signaled we wouldn't be out of sync for long, except his cheeks were stained red. I had this strong urge to marshal him back into the shower, to scrub his face white with sea-salt soap, but instead, I asked, "Have we run our course?"

Charlie took a step toward me and softly clasped my hands, circling his thumbs on my palms as he often did in gentler moments. Even after his news, I went thoughtless at his touch for an instant. Then I uncuffed my hands and slid them into my bathrobe pockets.

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know?"

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Maggie, but I have to work through this alone."

"Will you be alone?"

Charlie discovered the bathroom floor again. I traced a crack, long and jagged, zig-zagging across two tiles. Was it possible he had met someone else? How would that happen without me knowing? Was she younger? Nordic? Weren't we too old for any romantic drama? When Charlie found me again, the deepest sadness draped his face.

"I don't know if I'll be alone."

"Oh. Do you know who might join you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I cycled through the women he knew in town. Judy. Michelle. Sienna. None of them were strong enough to be more than good friends. In Nova Scotia, none of our island acquaintances were strong enough, either. Linnéa. Ebba. Sanna. No, I believed him. I wanted to. I had to. Charlie would work through things as fast as he could, and then he would come home.

"When are you coming back?"

"I don't know."

"Why would you make love to me and then tell me this?"

"Because I do love you."

I studied his face.

"I do," he said. "I didn't plan to tell you until tonight, but I couldn't keep it in any longer."

"You *planned* to tell me on your birthday over cake?"

"Why don't we go to the living room and talk more? I'll make more lemonade."

"Fuck lemonade."

A dry-ice cold shiver stabbed me from the inside out. Fuck Nova Scotia, fuck Charlie and his fucking restlessness, fuck all young, unnamed, of-Nordic-descent women. Was this how Charlie planned to master our relationship? And what about the time we'd brought in young American Jenna? Hadn't she been enough? But none of the fucks beyond lemonade surfaced, and instead, we dressed in silence. I had lived long enough to know what was underneath all the fucking was a broken place, and although I couldn't name it, that day its size, its weight was overwhelming and unlike anything I'd experienced, as

though the collective loss of all humanity had been stored in my chest.

On the way back to my studio, Charlie stopped and tried to place his arms around me, but I swatted them down. No, I didn't want more lemonade-talk. No, I didn't want touch. Yes, I needed to be alone, silent, with paint. Reluctantly, Charlie nodded like he had heard my no-no-yes, then haltingly backpedaled away down the hallway, a moment later disappearing behind his studio door.

In my studio, I turned on *In a Silent Way*, from the beginning. Miles's trumpet sounded fuller, with each melodic phrase sweet and sad, old and new, full of love and loss. As he played, I worked at a feverish pace, adding bright colors to the canvas. The altar took on orange. The rope sprouted Picasso-blue hearts. Charlie donned a red bathing suit. So, what was off in the distance was not an island or a longboat.

