

THE THIRD-FLOOR BEDROOM



KATE DICAMILLO

MARCH 28, 1944

Dear Martin,

I am a prisoner. Did you know that this would happen when you put me on the train to her? She has very fat ankles, Martin. You insist that she is our aunt, but I don't believe that it's possible for me to be related to someone with such fat ankles. And I'm not lying: I am a prisoner! She locks me in this room. She has a key that she keeps in her apron and she uses it to lock the door behind her; and after the door is locked, she rattles the doorknob, checking herself. I can feel the rattling of that doorknob in my teeth. I have extremely sensitive teeth. I don't know if you remember this about me. Sometimes I worry that you won't remember me at all.

In any case, you might like to know that the room (my prison!) is on the third floor. I can see mountains. There is some consolation in that (the seeing of mountains), but not enough that you should think I feel cheerful. I don't. I feel abandoned. In fact, my feelings of abandonment are at this very moment so profoundly overwhelming that I am forced to bring this letter to a close. Mrs. Bullwhyte taught us that all good letters should end with a summation, followed by an offering of good wishes. Here is my summation: I am

a prisoner. The "relative" who is keeping me prisoner has fat ankles. Also, I didn't mention it earlier, but I am sick. Here are my good wishes for you: I hope you don't get shot.

Cordially, your sister,

Pearlie George Lamott

P.S. What do they feed you in the army? Who feeds you? I am a good cook. I could have taken care of myself while you were away.

P.P.S. I didn't bat an eye when Ma left, did I? I expected it, Martin. But I did not ever expect that you would leave me.

MARCH 29, 1944

Dear Martin,

Here is a sketch of the wallpaper in my prison. As you can see, there is a bird and then another bird and then another bird and then another bird. There is a vine and then another vine and then another vine and then another vine (although it could all be the same vine; it's impossible to tell for certain and I've given up trying). There is a word for this wallpaper and that word (one of Mrs. Bullwhyte's vocabulary words, which she would be happy to see me make proper use of) is relentless. The wallpaper is so relentless that when I close my eyes against it, I still see it. Even if I weren't locked in this room, I would feel as if I were imprisoned here due to the relentlessness of the wallpaper. It's as if the whole room is under the spell of some witch (a witch with fat ankles). Do you know that once Mrs. Bullwhyte said about me (in front of the whole class) that she has never known a child with such a propensity for verbiage? It pleased me inordinately when she said that. But I must tell you that since I have arrived here, I have not spoken

THE THIRD-FLOOR BEDROOM

one word. Not one, Martin. Bringing this letter to a close, I will say, in summation, that I am caught in the lair of a witch. My good wishes to you (the recipient of this letter) are that I continue to hope you don't get shot.

Your sister,

Pearlie George Lamott

P.S. You should know that I am very sick. This happened when I set out to try to find you. I was outside for one full night and it was very rainy and I slept in the crook of a tree and I caught a cold. (Mrs. Bullwbyte said that it is a superstition, an old wives' tale, that you can catch cold from merely being cold. I am sorry to disappoint her, but that is what happened to me.) I didn't believe when I set out to find you that I would actually find you. But I felt duty-bound to look. I want to be clear. (Mrs. Bullwbyte said that we should always strive for clarity of language, as it is a gift to our reader.) So here I am, being clear, Martin: I wasn't running away. I was running toward.

P.P.S. I wonder if those wallpaper birds feel as trapped as I do. It's hard for me to breathe in here.

MARCH 30, 1944

Dear Martin,

Today the doctor came. Don't ask me his name. I can't remember it; but I think it begins with an F. All I can tell you for certain is that he is a nose whistler. Various and assorted tunes came out of his nose as he examined me. At one point, he got through most of "Begin the Beguine," although I'm not sure he intended any tune at all. He does not, by nature, seem like the kind of man who likes a song. Dour is the Bullwbyte vocabulary

word that could be properly used to describe him. He listened for a long time to my lungs, but I don't know how he could have heard anything at all over the whistling of his own nose. In any case, I believe that he is looking in the wrong place, as whatever is wrong with me has nothing at all to do with my lungs. The only good that came of his visit is that he said I must have fresh air, and so the window in my room has been opened. Mrs. Bullwbyte once read us a story that started with the words "It all began when someone left the window open." I can't remember a thing that happened in that story. But I've been singing those words to myself now like a song, "It all began, it all began, it all began when someone left the window open." I have never smelled air so sweet, Martin. If I could, I would fly away. Not toward. Away.

Your sister,

Pearlie

P.S. Instead of a summation, I'm offering this interesting piece of information. I guess it is best that you hear it from me (as opposed to hearing it from "Aunt" Hazel). I bit the doctor. It surprised everyone. It surprised even me. He provoked me. He accused me of being feral. "Has she been raised by wolves?" he said when I refused to answer his questions. She (the fat-ankled "Aunt" Hazel) tried to defend me. She said that I was, for all intents and purposes, an orphan. The doctor said that that was absolutely no excuse, and that at twelve years of age I was almost grown and should act like an adult and speak when spoken to.

In any case, that is neither here nor there (as Mrs. Bullwbyte said to me often enough when I rambled on attempting to explain something that turned out not to be explainable at all). What matters is that I thought I would live up to the doctor's expectations of me and act as if I were raised by wolves, and so I bit him. It was only a small bite, not really wolflike at all. I didn't even break the skin. Or, I do not think I did.

P.P.S. Here are my good wishes for you: You can, if you want, describe what it is like to be in the army. I will listen to you. I have always listened to you.

THE END OF MARCH, 1944

Dear Martin,

Today a big crow came and sat on the windowsill and looked right directly at me. He stared at me so long that I believe he was working to memorize my face. I would like to think that he then flew out of here, over the mountains and over the sea and right directly to you, holding the whole time this picture of me in his dark head and that when he landed beside you, you looked into his eyes and saw me; and that you could see how angry I am and how sick I am and how positively full and brimming-to-burst with words I am. This is what Mrs. Bullwhyte would call one of my "extended flights of fancy." She said that I am terribly prone to them and often told me that I should rein myself in or the world was bound to disappoint me. And guess what, Martin? She was right. The world has disappointed me. You let yourself get drafted; you have gone off to war. I am alone in the world. In summation: The mountains outside my window look purple sometimes, and sometimes they look blue. The mountains are always offered up in poetry and the Bible as something solid and true, but my thought on that is this: how could anyone trust in something so changeable, blue one minute and purple the next? My wishes for you: Last night, the moon was very low in the sky. It gave off a strange light that made the wallpaper birds seem to flap their wings. Take that and turn it into a wish for yourself, Martin.

Your sister,

Pearlie

P.S. When you walked away from me at the train station, I watched you for as long as I was able, as long as was humanly possible, and you did not look back, not once. That is when my heart broke. What's wrong with me has nothing to do with my lungs. That nose-whistling, F-named doctor doesn't know what he's doing. It's my heart, my heart. My heart.

I'M NOT SURE WHEN IT IS

Martin,

I have pneumonia and a high fever and it is hard for me to write these words. Everything shimmers; nothing holds still. I hope you appreciate my effort to communicate, Martin. It is our duty and our joy to communicate our hearts to each other. Words assist us in this task. That is what was written at the top of every one of Mrs. Bullwhyte's vocabulary lists. Aunt Hazel sits with me and cries a lot and communicates with me that way. I have taken pity on her and allowed her to move her chair close to my bed. She is right beside me. In between crying, she talks and tells me astonishing things. For one: our mother was always flighty, even when she was a child (I guess this isn't that astonishing). And that if she (Aunt Hazel) had known that we had been left all alone (she never even knew that Pa had died), she would not have allowed it. She would have come for us. I can't imagine someone coming for us. I'd like to think about it more, but I can't. I can't think about anything right now. I'm so hot. The air coming in the window smells like mountains and the black wings of crows. If I could say something to Aunt Hazel, if I could manage to make myself speak, I would say that I'm not mad anymore, only afraid, and I don't want to leave the world.

Pearlie

APRIL 8, 1944

Dear Martin,

Aunt Hazel and I were together in the third-floor bedroom for an eternity. This, of course, is hyperbole. But hyperbole is sometimes necessary to get at the truth (It seems odd, doesn't it, that we have to lie to tell the truth better?). But that is neither here nor there. What I mean to say is that I was feverish for a long time and that Aunt Hazel stayed with me for the whole of it. That is a fact. It is also a fact that Aunt Hazel begged me to speak. Begged me, Martin. I have never before in my life had anyone beg for me to speak. It was deeply satisfying, particularly because for most of my life, I have been encouraged (vehemently) to keep quiet.

In any case, what happened was that I was in the grips of the fever, and I had a movie running in my head and what I kept seeing were not old, sad images, the kind you would expect your brain to pull up when you are sick and maybe dying; images such as Pa's funeral, how black everything (the coffin and the trees and his hair, all slicked back) was and the way you sat on a chair in the dining room afterward and put your head in your hands like an old man; or an image of the house the way it looked (curtains blowing and the light forlorn) the morning I woke up and knew that Ma was well and truly gone; or the sight of you, walking away at the train station, never once turning back. I saw none of that. What I saw instead the whole time the fever raged was a moving list of Mrs. Bullwhyte's vocabulary words. Every word looked as if it were etched in fire, necessary and demanding. I couldn't help but think that Mrs. Bullwhyte would be pleased about this. At some point, I started to say the words out loud. Aunt Hazel listened to me with her mouth hanging open, as if I were speaking words she had been waiting all her life to hear. I have never been listened to that way. It's an absolute shame that what I said didn't make any sense. I just said the words, read them from the list, and

when I finally stopped, I felt freer, lighter, as if I might float away. Aunt Hazel, seeing this, took hold of my hand.

And then, as I was looking straight ahead, staring at nothing but the wall, an amazing thing happened. One of the birds broke free. It unpeeled itself from the wallpaper and flew around the room, bright as light, and then it went out the open window. Another bird lifted its wing off the wall and Aunt Hazel squeezed my hand so hard that it hurt, and after a minute, the bird sighed and sank back into the wall and stayed.

You will say that this was fever and Mrs. Bullwhyte would say that it was an extended flight of fancy, but I can only tell you that it is true: what was nothing but paper transformed itself into something living right before my eyes. I fell asleep then, and when I woke up it was dark in the room and Aunt Hazel was still there by my bed, sleeping, holding on to my hand. Can you imagine that? I've come to believe that her thick ankles are a clue to her character. Stalwart. That is the Bullwhyte vocabulary word for Aunt Hazel. The door to my room was unlocked. I took my hand out of Aunt Hazel's and got out of bed and went to the door and opened it all the way and stepped down the hallway and down the stairs and into the kitchen and made myself a sandwich of cheese and bread. The bread was stale, but I have never in my life tasted such a good piece of cheese. I thought about Aunt Hazel, upstairs, asleep in her chair. She has very large hands, Martin, and she had held on to me so tight. And then I remembered the wallpaper bird, breaking free and flying out the window. My legs got shaky and I had to sit down. I sat there in the kitchen and held my sandwich; and I believed suddenly, fiercely, that I was going to live and so were you. I could feel the promise of this, of our surviving, deep in the enamel of my highly sensitive teeth. I finished the sandwich and went back upstairs and Aunt Hazel was still there, sleeping by my bed, and I said her name again and again until she finally woke up.

Your sister,

Pearlie

THE THIRD-FLOOR BEDROOM

P.S. In summation: I am almost entirely well. Aunt Hazel is stalwart. It is April now, at last.

P.P.S. My wishes for you: that when you come home, you will go upstairs with me, to the third-floor bedroom, and let me show you the break in the pattern of the wallpaper, the place where a bird was and should be and is not. This is proof of something, I am sure, although I cannot say exactly what. When you turn away from the wallpaper, I will direct your gaze to the mountains, which are waiting, still, outside my window. As I write these words to you, they are changing again. They are turning themselves green.