

VANESSA FARNSWORTH
EVOLUTION

SHELLEY FLIPS OPEN THE MAILBOX at the end of her driveway and extracts four nearly weightless rectangles.

Bill, bill, bill, letter.

Letter?

She tucks the bills into her waistband then holds the letter up to the sun. A single sheet, twice folded. Shelley tears the end off the envelope and reads the letter as she walks back to the house. It's still dangling from her fingers as she corners the garage and marches into the backyard where her husband is coiling a garden hose around its stand.

"This has my name on it, but it's really for you. It's all about you, anyway. And very informative, I might add. It's just what I needed on a bright Sunday morning, that or a hammer to the forehead."

Shelley drops the letter at Ted's feet and makes her way down to the pool where she yanks the bills from her waistband and ditches them in the recycling bin by the cabana. It's not like she has the money to pay them. Besides, she's concerned that her comment to Ted may not have had the singsong quality she'd been going for and that's more of a concern to her than whether or not the electricity gets shut off.

Shelley hears footsteps behind her.

Then she hears a voice.

"Maybe we should talk about this."

"Or not. You know, I never check the mail on Sundays as a general rule and, for the life of me, I don't know why I did it today. I guess I was just looking for God's input into how my day was going to unfold. Fuck, I'm naive sometimes."

Kicking her flip-flops into the grass on the far side of the deck, Shelley rolls up her pant cuffs and sits on the pool's edge, plunging her feet into the unseasonably cold water without so much as a whimper. Ted drops down next to her and tries to follow suit, but flinches when his soles skim the water's surface. It takes forever for him to lower them the rest of the way.

“Don’t you want to hear what I have to say about all of this?”

“By ‘all of this,’ I assume you mean the letter and no, not particularly. My feet are far more interesting or at least the left one is. It’s flat like a duck’s. It’s strange that I’ve never noticed it before.”

“Can you notice it later?”

“It doesn’t work like that. You notice things when you notice them and once you’ve noticed them, you can’t un-notice them just because the timing’s a tad inconvenient.”

“I’m sure there’s logic in there somewhere.”

So is Shelley, but she’s too preoccupied to tease it out. After thirty-two years on the end of her legs, she’s only now realizing that her feet are amongst the oddest things she’s ever seen. Particularly that left one; there’s something truly flipper-like about it. It’s as if God ran it through a wringer before fastening it to her ankle. Shelley flexes her toes then curls them, hoping against hope that Ted will switch to a less volatile topic before she puts any real thought into beating him to death with the pool skimmer.

Somehow her hopes for Ted never pan out.

“And nothing about this letter bothers you?”

“Only that it exists. Drop it in the pool and then it won’t. We can time how long it takes for the ink to bleed into indecipherable smudges. Come on, it’ll be fun in a sandcastle-melting-in-the-surf kind of a way.”

“Shelley—”

“Shelley nothing. You don’t seem to be getting the gist of what I’m saying. You need to drop the letter in the water in order for its words to be rendered indecipherable and the longer it takes you to do that, the angrier I get. Is that blunt enough for you?”

“Shelley, can I just—”

“Lower it slowly? You bet. I didn’t mean to suggest that you have to dunk it like I dunked my feet. An edge-first slide will do. Oh.”

Shelley snaps her feet out of the water as if it’s only just occurred to her that they too could melt like a water-breached sandcastle. She reaches forward and gives her left foot a wiggle, painfully aware that Ted is continuing to grip the folded letter in his left hand. Although Shelley is tempted to telepathically coerce him into dropping it into the pool, she’s fairly certain that water this cold will block her psychic energy.

Ted’s voice is low.

“I can explain all of this.”

“Please don’t. My feet are my priority right now and unless I miss my guess, some molecules are in need of rejigging in order for them to achieve the normalcy I crave. It’s probably not a good idea for you to be distracting me while I’m doing it. Mentally modifying one’s atomic structure is a tricky business. If my mind wanders midway through the process, a black hole could swallow the sun or worse.”

“What worse?”

“Best not to speculate.”

Ted taps the letter against his thigh, his eyes fixed on a horizon only he can see. He starts to speak, stops, then plunges in.

“I found the gin in your desk drawer and the whiskey in the laundry hamper. What did I miss?”

“Vodka, ceiling tile over the chest freezer.”

“Should’ve known.”

“Let’s not get into the topic of things you should’ve known right now. I’m more interested in the things I don’t want to know and that letter tops my list. Eat it, burn it, bury it behind the shed with the cat. I don’t care what you do with it, just make sure it never again takes up space in my reality.”

“No.”

“Wrong answer.”

Shelley raises and lowers her legs several times like a drawbridge on a busy day then stops, redirecting her eyes to her toes. She squints their knobby joints into focus with the intention of studying them in greater depth but, sadly, Ted is like a dog chasing a bone, severely impairing her ability to concentrate on anything but the present crisis.

“That’s all you have to say on the subject?”

“That and watch your back. Whoever sent me that letter is really gunning for you and if its sordid details don’t get your balls fried, its author will no doubt come back with something far nastier or at least more detailed. And I don’t want any more details, thank you very much. The broad strokes tell me everything I need to know except what I’m going to do and it’s far too early for me to answer that right now, so excuse me if I prefer to concentrate on my toes.”

Ted places the letter flat on his left thigh and clamps it in place with his hand, effectively thwarting Shelley’s ability to swat it into the water the first chance she gets. In some ways her husband knows her so very well, just not in the ways that would make him seem intelligent.

“Did you ever think that maybe it’s you they’re gunning for? The letter

is addressed to you, after all. Maybe the bullet was meant to pierce your heart and it's me who is nothing more than collateral damage."

"Nice dodge, but I haven't done anything to earn that kind of spite. I'm guessing you may have. Look, there are certain things in life that I just know and one of them is that whoever my new pen pal is, she must've been spurned something awful to be so stealth in her revenge. Most women would've just confronted me with the evidence of your infidelity in the driveway at dawn. This one wrote a letter. How incredibly Victorian."

Shelley flexes her toes and spreads them wide. She hears impatience in her voice and makes a mental note to curb it. She has the upper hand here, at least for now, and the best way to lose it would be to allow herself to get emotional. She knows it, Ted knows it, even the goddamned pool knows it.

Deep breath.

Ted fills the ensuing silence with the sound of his own voice, something he would be better off not doing and maybe deep down he knows this. That would certainly explain the constipated look on his face.

"How do you know the letter writer is a she? There's no signature and the handwriting could certainly go either way. The way this thing is worded, it could even have been written by a third party. Did you notice any of that?"

"You'd be surprised at the things I noticed. For instance, I noticed that you haven't once denied any of the allegations that letter contains, which is something you normally do straight off. That's an interesting thing to notice, don't you think?"

Ted has joined Shelley in staring at her toes and she can see why: It's hard to imagine any human would admit to owning them if they weren't so undeniably fastened to one particular human's feet. There's just something so simian about them. An ape's toes and a duck's feet. She really does have a branch of evolution all to herself.

"Come to think of it, something about that letter does bother me."

"Like what?"

"Why would someone write something so wincingly pathetic? I mean, it makes a hell of a lot of assumptions based on nothing more than whatever two-dimensional version of me you presented when you were trying to get laid. This bitch doesn't know a thing about me. She wouldn't have a clue what it would take to make me cry."

"Not this again."

"Yes, this again. Is it too much to ask that I be tormented by someone who is capable of doing a little research? There's no effort involved in this

letter other than what it takes to put ink on paper. She could've stalked me or eavesdropped on my conversations or even hacked into my email if she really wanted to get at the heart of me. From what I'm seeing here, all she did was crib something from a soap opera. Whoop-de-do."

Shelley flicks water at the letter, missing it entirely. It occurs to her that she should try catching Ted off-guard with a heel to the chin. The only problem with doing that is she suspects it's just what he wants her to do and she hates feeling as though she's living her life according to a script.

Ted huffs.

"Can we maybe just stick to the accusations contained in this letter? I think that's where our focus should be."

"Why, did you dictate it?"

No answer.

Ted's neck is turning red, never a good sign, so Shelley lets her toes sink beneath the water's surface, breaking the spell they've been casting on her and her husband. Ted looks at the folded letter before returning his gaze to the invisible horizon.

"So where do we go from here?"

"Into the pool, fully clothed. Let's pretend we're abandoning a sinking ship."

Ted looks confused, but then Ted has a tendency to find life confusing. At some point in his formative years, he carved his reality into tiny compartments, each one carefully segregated from the others. Whenever these compartments collide, he's forced to grapple with what he considers to be an inconceivable set of consequences and instead of rising to the occasion, he falters, making his errant behaviour tragically easy to smoke out.

Unfolding the letter, Ted scans it.

Then he scans it again.

"Did you write this, Shelley? Now would be a good time to fess up if you did and save us both a heck of a lot of pointless frustration."

Did she? Admittedly, Shelly has written anonymous letters in the past, but mostly to Ted's dotting mother and mostly on the topic of his personal habits. Shelley doesn't think she's done anything like that this time although—and let's be honest here—anything is possible once the vodka kicks in.

"I don't think so. Why would you ask me such a thing?"

"The Qs."

Ted has his finger on one now. He angles the letter so that Shelley can see what he's referring to.

“The way the tail flips up. No matter how you vary your writing style, the tail always flips up in the exact same way. That’s how I knew the love letter Albert Einstein supposedly sent to your grandmother wasn’t authentic. The letter from Ghandi thanking the U.S. patent office for protecting India’s sovereign rights over basmati rice also had that same flip. You’ve really got to work on that.”

Shelley’s eyes have landed on her knees, which are almost as odd as her toes. The way her kneecaps bulge makes them seem like tennis balls cut in half and covered with skin. Hiding them beneath her hands, she joins Ted in inspecting the Qs and has to admit that he’s got a point. However, she isn’t quite prepared to blame the vodka just yet.

“That’s hardly conclusive. Let’s keep in mind that we wouldn’t even be having this conversation unless you were guilty of the crimes the letter accuses you of, so I’m not sure it matters who wrote it.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?”

“Because you’re a genius, we both know it. We both know a lot of things.”

Ted loosens his grip on the letter and lowers his eyes to a water-wing floating abandoned in the pool, leaving the letter undefended. Shelley swoops in and snatches the unexpectedly snatchable missive and chucks it into the sparkling water before it can be examined any further. Then she points her knees at Ted.

“What do you think? An evolutionary mistake or the start of a new species?”

Ted shifts his eyes from the water-wing to the drowning letter then rises without answering Shelley’s question. She’s too transfixed by the texture of the skin covering her knees to notice where he’s going and, in truth, she’s not sure she cares.

Not this time.