

Madeleine

Lila Gyory

OS24



It's late Sunday night when my computer makes a faint beeping noise. The screen suddenly illuminates, spreading light across my nearly asleep face. My eyes flutter. Normally, I would simply shut the screen and ignore the message until morning. But it's from my sister, from you.

It's from you, who have been in Ecuador since January, whom I haven't seen in nearly five months, whom I won't see for another six. You, who have been unhappy for five months but won't let herself come home. You, who have so much fierce determination and passion it sometimes gets the best of her. You, whom I miss more than I thought I could ever miss anyone.

"Loo!" your message reads.

"Hi! What's up?" I reply.

"I had the worst day today." My heart sinks. You don't even realize how much those words hurt me.

"No baby! What happened?"

"I don't even know. Everything."

"I'm so sorry, Maddy. ☹️" And I am. I really am. I would do anything to make you happy.

"Thanks babe. I'm going to bed, but I'll talk to you soon, ok? I love you!"

"Try as hard as you can to make yourself happy, ok? I love you!"

I leave it at that, but there is so much more. There is so much I want to say to you. I want to tell you that you are the most beautiful person I have ever known, that I look up to you more than anyone. I want to tell you that I love every part of you with every part of myself. I want to tell you how scared I am that you do not love me back that same way, that you never will. Maybe it is the way of being the younger sister; maybe you are not meant to love me the way I love you. But it hurts all the same.

Outside, the moon hangs low. It's almost full. It's so close to being full, if you glanced at it quickly you would think it was whole. But if you stopped for a moment to really look at it, you would notice the lacking. You would notice the missing piece. You would see past the bright glow, the halo of confidence radiating into the darkness, and you would sense that tiniest sliver of emptiness, of longing.

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I.

We dig our hands into the bins of smooth, cool stones, sifting through for the best ones.

"Look!" You say triumphantly, holding up an oval turquoise.

"Perfect!" With my approval, you slip the stone into the small, black velvet bag.

Outside there are sounds of roller coaster wheels and screams, and the thick scent of salt and grease wafts through the air. The Florida air is hot and wet, but we are inside the gift shop, waiting for Will and Dad to get off the Dueling Dragons, soaking up the air conditioning and searching for artificial rocks in a big wooden bin.

“I want a pink one,” I say. “Find me a pink one!”

Soon enough our bag is bulging, the lumps of the stones like the mosquito bites on our swollen legs.

We feel Dad’s hands on our shoulders.

“Hey girls! How’s the shopping going?”

“Can we get these?” We ask expectantly.

“Of course!” Dad on vacation means getting whatever we want.

“You girls can each have your own bag, you know.”

We look at each other, almost confused.

“No thanks, Dad.” I say.

“Yeah, I mean, that would ruin all the fun!” You say.

We smile at each other. Dad shrugs his shoulders; he just doesn’t get it. He’s just trying to be nice, I guess, but he’s missing the whole point: the stones are *ours*; we get to share them. We get to tote our velvet bag around and later, in the hotel room, we get to sit cross-legged on the bed and spill its contents out between us, once again running our fingers through the cool stones that we picked out, together.

II.

It seemed like a great idea, the two of us sharing a kayak.

And it *was* great, at first. Dad pushed us off from the shore and we both shared the magical feeling of those first few seconds being suspended above the water. We looked out at the deep blue lake, inhaling the fresh Adirondack air, ready to conquer the day together.

But then reality kicked in. It soon become obvious that neither of us was strong enough to row, especially not fast enough to keep up with the others. We struggled to not fall too far behind, but eventually gave up. Our efforts were futile. We resorted, instead to playing Disney.

“Guess Who?”

“Are you an animal?”

“Yes.”

“The type of animal I could have as a pet?”

“No.”

“Can you talk?”

“Duh.”

She gets it; she always does. I’m Rafiki, from *The Lion King*.

On our way back, as the sun is setting over the Adirondack mountains, we sing. You’ve always had a beautiful voice, but I hate singing, especially in front of people. But for some reason, I have no problem belting out *Rent* and Beyonce with you in the middle of Blue Mountain Lake.

Forget the funny looks we get from the other boaters.

Forget the fact that I can’t hit a single note and can’t remember the words.

None of that matters because I am with you in a kayak, gliding above the water, my arms sore and aching but my heart bursting. We are happy, weary limbs and all.

III.

It’s early June, the summer before seventh grade, and we’re at our cousin’s wedding party. Will is at camp, so it’s just the two of us. The party is in the city, outdoors, and it’s drizzling lightly. Everyone else is under the tarp, but you and I decide to take a walk. The air is hot and sticky, but we walk for a while in a comfortable silence up a curving stone stairway. We’re close, but only the way an older sister and younger sister can be close. You take care of me and I admire you. But we don’t really know each other.

“You’re going to college in the fall,” I say tentatively.

You smile distantly. “I’m going to miss you, Loo.”

“That’s not the point.” You look at me quizzically.

“Oh?”

“The point,” I reply, “is that you’re leaving and I want to know things about you before you go.” You still don’t get it.

“I get to ask you any questions and you have to give me the true, for real answers.”

You narrow your eyes. You are suspicious, as you should be, but you agree.

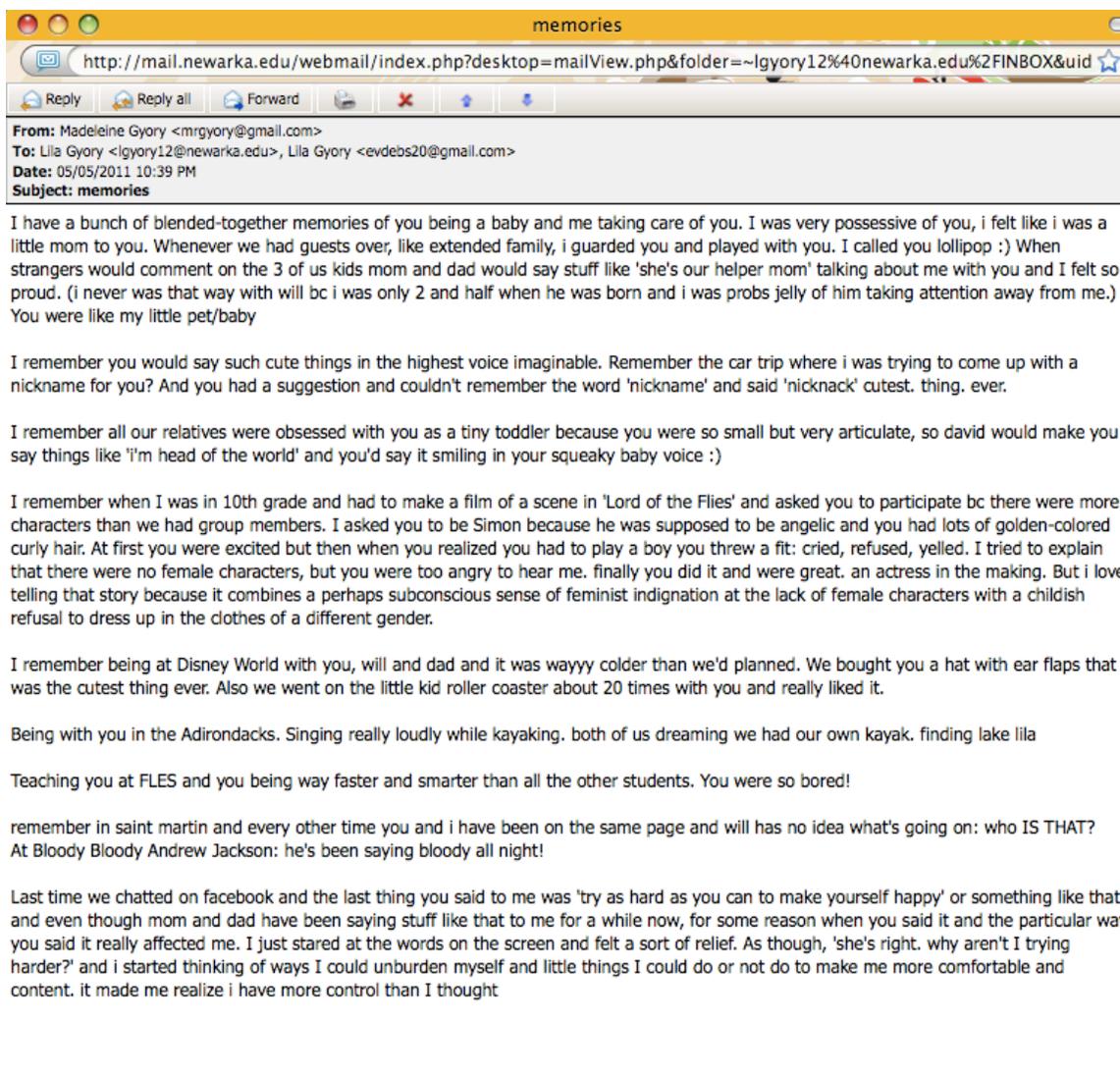
“You have to swear to tell the truth.”

“The whole truth and nothing but the truth? Deal,” you say, laughing a little. It’s not a mocking laugh, though. It’s tender; it’s understanding. It’s the reason I love you.

So I ask you. I ask you about drugs: (Have you ever smoked pot?), and drinking (Have you ever been drunk?), and boys (Are you in love with him?), and sex (Have you ever? Did it hurt?). I ask you if you are afraid; you don’t reply “of what?” you just say yes. I ask you everything. And you answer me honestly, trustingly. But it’s not even the answers that matter, they’re not the point. The point is that, in this moment, in the grey, damp heat of the afternoon, sitting on the slick stone steps in our summer dresses, we have become friends.

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When I started writing this paper, I e-mailed you. I asked you to briefly describe any memories you had of the two of us.



This is what you said.

I cry as I read this. I'm not sure why. I guess just thinking about you thinking about me, about us, makes me sad. But in a good way.

Last time we chatted on Facebook and the last thing you said to me was 'try as hard as you can to make yourself happy' or something like that. And even though mom and dad have been saying stuff like that me for a while now, for some reason when you said it and the particular way you said it really affected me. I just stared at the words on the screen and felt a sort of relief. As though, 'She's right. Why aren't I trying harder?' and I started thinking of ways I could unburden myself and little things I could do or not do to make me more comfortable and content. It made me realize I have more control than I thought.

I pause, staring at those words. I let them sink in. I turn the syllables over on my tongue, repeating them over and over, trying to make sense of it all.

And then I get it. My fear dissipates. I *am* important to you. You *do* care about me, the things I say, things I do. I *have* affected you—maybe not the way you have affected me, yet, but I'm getting there. Most important, you *do* love me the way I love you. I finally realize it. I don't need to be scared anymore; I can finally just let go, open myself up to you. I feel a wave of relief rush through me. But it's more than just relief, it's more than just a realization.

Madeleine, you have done so much for me in my life. You have taken care of me. You have protected me, taught me, guided me. You have made me laugh—you can *always* make me laugh. You have made me angry, you have made me cry, you have made me open my eyes and understand. You have shaped me, changed me.

But nothing you have ever done is as meaningful, as essential, as beautiful, as this. You have restored my faith in love. And for that, I owe you everything. And maybe, if I'm lucky, I can do the same for you one day.