

A Letter from Abroad

In Issue 72 by Reyna Marder Gentin

Short Story



Photo by LiliGraphie on Adobe Stock

The letter arrived on a Tuesday afternoon, although it almost didn't. It had snowed over the weekend, and Mel hadn't shoveled the pathway or put out salt. When the doorbell rang, he was surprised to see the mailman.

"You gotta clear your path, Mr. Hanson. I almost killed myself. It isn't right. Next time I'll leave the mail at the bottom of the driveway and I don't care if you report me."

"I'm sorry, Patrick. It was just so damn cold and icy. I kept putting it off, and then I forgot."

Patrick handed Mel the mail and turned to go. "Well, here you are. You just have this one letter anyway. The rest is junk." When he'd walked a few steps, he slipped a little and grabbed

onto a bush by the side of the path. Then he straightened himself and kept walking. Mel couldn't make out what Patrick said under his breath, but he had a pretty good idea it wasn't dinner party language.

"I'm sorry, Patrick. Tomorrow, I promise." Mel reached for the door handle, but the door had closed and locked behind him. "Damn it."

By the time Loretta answered the door, Mel's toes were nearly frozen and the letter was stuck to his fingers.

He pushed past her into the hallway and stomped his feet on the ground. "My God, woman, where have you been? It's ten degrees out here."

Loretta stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "Who told you to go out in your slippers? I was using the hair dryer. I didn't hear the doorbell." She wound her fingers through her limp, graying hair, but the curls she admired in the fashion magazines wouldn't hold.

Mel ignored her and put the letter down on the front table. It was addressed to him, the handwriting thin and strangely childish. There were a bunch of foreign stamps and a postmark from Amsterdam but no return address.

Loretta peered over Mel's shoulder. "What's that?"

Mel stole another glance at the envelope and then walked down the hallway to the kitchen. "Just leave it alone. It's addressed to me."

"Do you know who it's from? Aren't you going to open it?" Loretta's voice was high-pitched and insistent; how had he ever married a woman who sounded like that?

He pulled out a bowl from the cupboard and poured himself some Grape-Nuts. "Please. Leave it be." He wondered how long he'd have to wait for Loretta to change the topic. To his great relief, her cell rang. Mel watched her leave the room to take the call. When she came back, she was smiling.

"The alterations are done on my dress. I have to head into town. Will you be okay here for a few hours by yourself?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm not a child, Loretta." But he understood her concern. Just the week before, he'd left a pot of oatmeal on the stove and wandered off to watch the end of the ballgame. The oatmeal had burned and the smoke set off the fire alarm. When Loretta returned home, the house was crawling with firemen, checking out the overall safety of the house. Checking out Mel.

"I'm having cold cereal," Mel said. He wasn't trying to be funny, but Loretta laughed.

“Okay. I won’t be long.”

When the door closed behind his wife, Mel returned to the front hall to make sure the letter was where he’d left it. He knew it was crazy—it wasn’t like the letter could run away. Not like Daphne had, anyway. The letter was there, and maybe he’d have some answers.

Ah, Daphne.

It’d been so long since Mel had seen or heard from Daphne, yet he knew immediately that the letter was from her. How had she found him? What could she want with him now, these twenty-five years later? Was she writing to beg his forgiveness? To explain why she’d left? Maybe she wanted to start anew—but what about his wife? Mel knew what he’d want to do.

Follow Daphne to the ends of the earth.

Mel liked to think that he remembered everything from the day Daphne left, but he knew that time had washed away some of the painful details and amplified others. Still, much of the scene remained intact, a movie that played repeatedly in his mind. He sat down on the red brocade couch in the living room and started the mental projector.

Even as a younger man, Mel had been a plodder, prudent and staid. He wasn’t the sort of person to blow a week’s salary on tickets to a concert to impress a girl he met at a diner. Until he met Daphne. She had that effect on him, made him impulsive. Around her, he wanted to bust out of his everyday life and wrap his arms around her thin waist, twirl her around and sing sappy love songs by Captain and Tennille. She turned him into a fool.

That day had started out warm, but by noon, when they’d agreed to meet up, it was downright sweltering. The benches in Central Park were so hot that they couldn’t sit for more than a few minutes, and the grass on Sheep’s Meadow was brown and parched.

“Let me get you an ice cream, or some ices,” Mel offered.

“I want to get into the air conditioning. I’ll go back to work. It’s cooler there than in my parents’ apartment.” Daphne pulled up the hem of her shirt to fan her face, exposing the smooth skin of her stomach and her belly button, and Mel felt a rush of desire that was never far from the surface when he was around her. Even thinking about Daphne brought it on. He was like a fourteen year-old boy, all hormones and heat. Mel put his arm around Daphne’s shoulders.

“What are you, crazy? Don’t touch me. It’s hot as hell out here.”

“I know, I know. I don’t control the weather.” He should have let her leave, but it wasn’t only the temperature that was hot. The modest engagement ring he’d bought the day before was burning a hole in his pocket. They’d been dating for six months, and he thought the time

was right, although he hadn't had the nerve to talk much with Daphne about the future. He'd planned a romantic walk over to the old Marionette Theater, pictured himself down on one knee. He could taste his happiness. It tasted like Daphne, or so he imagined.

When he tried to turn her in the direction of the theater, she stopped abruptly. She took a bottle of water out of her bag and opened it, poured it over her head, her auburn curls now wet and flattened against her cheeks. Mel laughed. She was so delightful! He put his arms around her, ignoring her shrieks to get off. Before he knew it, he was holding the ring out to her in the palm of his hand.

"Marry me, Daphne!"

She stared at him, her eyes a cauldron of shock and revulsion. She backed away, slowly at first, and then turned and ran, glancing over her shoulder just once. Or perhaps she never looked back. Mel was no longer sure.

And now here was Daphne's letter on his front table. Mel looked again at the postmark and wondered whether she lived overseas or was just on vacation, whether she'd remained single or had a husband and family. Mel had moved on, of course, marrying Loretta several years after Daphne fled. Their daughter, Michelle, was getting married in two weeks. In a few hours, Loretta would return with her "mother of the bride" dress, carefully altered to minimize her thickened waist and sagging arms. In Mel's imagination, Daphne was still young and lithe and fresh, walking down the aisle toward him in a white silk dress, a bouquet of roses in her hands.

Mel picked up the letter and walked into the kitchen. He raised it to his nose, searching for a trace of the Nina Ricci perfume Daphne used to wear, but he smelled only the soap on his fingers. His hands shaking, he took a letter opener from the drawer and slit open the top of the envelope.

His eyes drifted to the bulletin board on the wall. In Loretta's neat hand, a five by eight index card held the names and contact information of their children, the eye doctor and Mel's neurologist, the plumber, the pharmacy, the neighbors. A stack of bills awaited Mel's attention—electric, cable, phone. An invitation to a second-cousin's grandchild's christening. The sanitation department's recycling schedule. An old photograph of their son Charlie at his high school graduation.

A whole life.

Mel walked over to the stove and turned on the gas. He held the envelope by one corner and watched Daphne's letter as it burned. Then he went back to the living room couch and turned on the ballgame.

When Loretta returned, she found the firemen and the policemen crawling all over the house.