

Letters
to
Amelia

A NOVEL

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... letting the
... Kies overhel
... I want to stan
... the edge of Lake
... Louise, stare at its
... impossible emerald-m
... like you did.

Lindsay
Zier-Vogel

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Amelia

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AMELIA

a novel

Lindsay Zier-Vogel

Book*hug Press
Toronto 2021

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

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The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.

[funder logos]

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To Nana and Papa

1

When Grace wakes up, she's confused that the radio isn't on in the kitchen and that the apartment doesn't smell like coffee. She stares at the ceiling and remembers the waver of Jamie's voice, his tone sad, then gentle, then gone. How dare he. How fucking dare he.

Grace throws his toothbrush out while she brushes her teeth, then his soap from the shower, then his razor from the medicine cabinet. She feels pricking at the backs of her eyes, but she can't start crying, not now. *I am packing my lunch. I am pulling a shirt out of the laundry basket. I am getting dressed. I am locking the door. I am ignoring my landlady's barking dog.*

The July heat thickens the air, the humidity clinging to Grace's skin as she locks her bike next to the library—the library that doesn't look like a library, with its concrete edges geometric and triangular. People say it's supposed to be a peacock, and from certain angles, it looks like one, its head jutting out on a long neck, its concrete tail feathers fanning out against the sky. The main library is the body and the tail, but Grace works in the breast of the building—the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, where ivy frames the windows, softening the concrete. This morning there's a streak of bird shit stretching the full height of

the reading-room glass.

She walks up the stairs, her legs like lead. Her phone buzzes in her pocket.

You've got this. Her best friend, Jenna, has texted. *I'll call you at lunch.*

"Hey, Grace!" Patrick, the resident medievalist, calls out, holding the elevator door for her. He holds out a Starbucks cup.

"For me?"

He nods, handing it to her.

She's pretty sure it wasn't meant for her, but she accepts it, the bridge of her nose burning at his kindness. She coughs so she can wipe her eyes without causing alarm.

"You feeling better?" Patrick asks.

"Yes, thanks," Grace says. She had called into work on Sunday night to say she'd come down with the flu, knowing her boss's voice mail would pick up. She thought about leaving the same message Monday night, but on Tuesday, she got up, got dressed, and left for work. She made it only as far as Harbord Street before she started dry-heaving and stumble-ran back home. She steadied her voice as much as she could and called the library, leaving a message with Patrick, who told her to make sure to stay hydrated and try some toast, or maybe some plain rice.

Grace takes a sip of her coffee and Patrick talks about the class he's planning for the fall. "I could use some help pulling the material," he says as the elevator doors open to the reference desk.

"Sure," she says. "Of course."

Grace had been hoping to sneak in without anyone realizing how late she was—she had pressed snooze when her alarm first went off, then turned it off instead of pressing snooze again the second time—but the other two techs, Jeremy and Abigail, are sitting at their desks.

"Jamie, see that double play last night?" Jeremy asks over his computer screen, pushing his red hair out of his eyes. "I still can't believe the Jays lost after all that."

“Yah,” Grace says. There’s a picture of her and Jamie from their trip in June to Saskatchewan on her desk, the bright blue sky radiating behind their smiling faces.

“I think my brother-in-law has some tickets he can’t use if you guys want them.”

You guys. Plural. “Great,” Grace says.

Jeremy beams. He always got along with Jamie. “I’ll email you the dates!”

“Janice was by looking for you earlier,” Abigail says. “She left something on your desk.”

Grace’s heart starts to thud and she sees a pink Post-it from the head librarian next to the stack of indexing Grace didn’t finish last week. *Please come to my office when you’re in*, it read. Her office? Shit. Grace uses the elastic on her wrist to pull her hair back into a ponytail.

“Janice?” Grace taps on the door frame with one knuckle.

“Grace,” Janice looks up from her computer. Her glasses sit on top of her head, holding back her blunt, grey bob like a headband. “Please close the door.”

Grace’s heart falls to her stomach. She’s going to lose her job. This is it. She missed the last two days and Janice knows she was lying about the flu. She tries to recall how much she has in her savings account, and deducts how much she’ll have to pay her landlady on August first. She could probably make it a few months, but after that? After that she’d have to fly home to Saskatchewan and live in her mom’s old bedroom overlooking the back field and then what—

Janice gestures to the chair in front of her desk.

“I need your utmost discretion,” she starts, and pulls out a shoebox. It’s old—Grace has learned over the years to date cardboard—the edges are soft, but there are no signs of water damage or mildew. “We found this last week in the shelf read,” she said. “Well, I found it.”

“Oh,” Grace says. Did she miss something in the stretch of boxes and books she was responsible for when they closed the library down for two weeks and looked for missing books and misplaced boxes?

Last year, Patrick found a manuscript marked as the library's millionth purchase that had never been catalogued, but this year, other than a few boxes that weren't filed correctly, and the copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that had fallen behind another collection of Alice books, there hadn't been anything remarkable.

"I need to know you can keep this private."

"Of course," Grace says. Maybe this isn't about her being fired.

"I found some letters," Janice continues. "They were in a box of John Woodman's papers."

Grace nods but doesn't know who John Woodman is.

"The aviation writer. We acquired his papers in the late seventies. I don't think anyone's ever really looked at them, but I've been thinking of doing an exhibit on the Ontario Provincial Air Service. Anyhow, this box was buried under a bunch of other manuscript drafts."

"What's in it?" Grace asks, wishing Janice would get to the point already. The dull pounding of a headache is starting to collect between her eyes, and she needs a glass of water.

"Letters," Janice says, her voice conspiratorial. "From Amelia Earhart."

Grace has a vague picture of Amelia Earhart—a pilot, a feminist icon, dead, she thinks.

Janice looks at Grace with wide eyes and Grace composes her face to look more amazed than she feels. "Wow," she says, but it comes out flat, so she says it again with more enthusiasm. "Wow!"

"I have no idea how Woodman, or someone from his estate, would've gotten them. I can't find any connection, but here we are. Now, Purdue has all of Earhart's papers and they are not going to be happy about a little library in Canada having a bunch of letters, but they're ours. They were given to us," she says, her voice defensive. "I want the Fisher to get the credit here."

"Of course," Grace says.

"They seem to be between her and a beau. She was married and they aren't to her husband."

“Oh.”

“It could be scandalous once they’re out,” Janice says.

Grace nods. She reads the private letters of famous people all the time and they’re far more boring than anyone thinks. The only people who really think they’re interesting are bookish PhD students and wild-haired profs who hole up in the reading room for months at a time.

“I need you to read through all of them, and write a summary, a few sentences, for each. When you’re done, we’ll scan them, and have a special site made. We’ll do a full PR campaign. I want scholars coming to our portal. I want everyone coming to our site. The stats are going to make the University very happy.” She beams. “We are going to put the Fisher on the map.”

Grace nods.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Janice says. “Not Jeremy or Abigail, or Patrick. Not your parents or your friends. Not even your boyfriend.”

Grace feels the tingle of potential tears and blinks. “Of course.”

“And you’re going to have to do it around your other work. I was trying to come up with a fake project for you to do, but the others would sniff it out immediately. You can work on them when you’re at the reference desk, or in the reading room, so long as it’s quiet, but please keep them locked in your filing cabinet.” Janice hands Grace the shoebox. The cardboard is softer than she had expected. “Can you believe it?” she says conspiratorially.

“It’s very exciting,” Grace says. She’s going to have to look up Amelia Earhart back at her desk.

“Thank you, Grace. I knew I could count on you.”

Grace takes the box back to her desk and checks her phone. She rereads the text from Jenna. Two and a half hours till lunch. She can make it. She tries to tidy up, organizing the pile of indexing she still hasn’t finished, putting pencils back in the drawer, crumpling up Janice’s Post-it note. She glances at the clock. She’s got fifteen minutes before her shift at the reference desk starts.

Jeremy is at the reference desk and Abigail is in the reading room, so Grace opens the shoebox and pulls out an envelope. It's smaller than most envelopes are now, and the flap has been torn open. Grace unfolds the brittle paper inside. The handwriting is loose and easy in faded blue ink that slants slightly to the left—a bubbly cursive with lots of space between each word.

Dear Gene,

Sorry I've been in such a mood lately. I've been trying to do the Honolulu-Cali flight for months and we're still months from figuring out the logistics and it's putting me in a foul mood. GP scheduled my lectures and I'm wall to wall for the rest of the year. (I should really get someone else on that. I've had to start drinking cream so I don't waste away.) All this to say, I don't think I'll be able to get up to Boston next weekend. Rain check?

Love,

A.E.

Grace refolds the letter, slips it back into its envelope. She doesn't know much about Amelia Earhart except that she flew planes and Hilary Swank played her in a movie they filmed in Toronto a few years ago. She puts the letter back with the others—there are at least sixty of them, maybe more. She pulls out another.

Dear Gene,

People ask me all the time what my favorite flight was. I'm supposed to say the Atlantic flight (I loved my plane, but that flight was nothing short of harrowing), but my absolute favorite flight was in my little Avro Avian. Have you ever flown one? Do if you ever get the chance. They're

just so light and responsive. After I finally submitted my Fun of It draft, right after the Friendship flight, GP wanted me to jump on the lecture circuit immediately, but I insisted I needed a break and took off in my little gray moth. I just followed roads and rivers and ended up in St. Louis, and Muskogee, and Fort Worth, and one day I had to land on the main street of a teeny little town in New Mexico—Hobbs, I think it was called. It was the most free I've ever felt, maps safety-pinned to my pants, my cheeks so wind-burnt, not even cold cream could heal them. I looked like a racoon, but the happiest racoon you've ever seen. It was right before we met, just weeks before.

I have no idea when, or how we'd make it happen, but we should find a little two-seater and go somewhere for a few days, a week. If anyone asks, we can say it's airline business, and I'm sure we could stay at Carl's ranch in Colorado without it being a big to do. Wouldn't that be fun? Flying, just the two of us together. Let's do an open air cockpit so we can really feel the wind. Closed cockpits are such a thing now, and don't get me wrong, I'm grateful—my cold cream consumption has gone significantly down and it's a relief not to have permanent circles around my eyes, but I love the screaming wind.

I've been doing lecture after lecture, two a day, and then hopping on a train for the next stop for two weeks straight now. On Saturday, I did three talks back to back to back and could barely whisper by the end. I shouldn't complain, but it is tiring and not always very fulfilling. Mostly, it's keeping me from flying. You know what I miss most? That moment when you're flying up through the middle of a cloud (who ever said they have silver linings has never flown through one) and then when you reach the top and hit the sunshine. Is there a more glorious moment? I can't even count how many times I've tried to write about the clouds

from above, terrible, terrible poetry that NO, you cannot read!

Even if we can't fly together any time soon, that you understand it is enough.

I love you,

A.E.

Grace does a quick Wikipedia search, but the entry is long and she's scheduled to be at the reference desk.

Once she takes over from Jeremy and can Google things properly, she learns that Gene is Gene Vidal, a former pilot, an athlete, the dad of writer Gore Vidal, and GP is Amelia's publicist-turned-husband, George Putnam. Apparently, her marriage to George was a "marriage of convenience,"—he was rich, and flying wasn't cheap—and it says he proposed six times before Amelia relented.

According to Wikipedia, Amelia's middle name was Mary, she was born in 1897, she grew up in the Midwest, and had one sister named Muriel, but the family called her Pidge. Amelia set flying records. She wrote books. She crossed the Atlantic twice, once with two male pilots when she wasn't allowed to touch the controls because she was a woman and women weren't supposed to fly, and then a few years later, solo. She was an early supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, and a feminist before the word *feminist* really existed. She lived in Kansas, in Boston, in California, in New York, and was building a cabin in Colorado.

She disappeared in 1937, the entry says, during an attempt to circumnavigate the globe. She was declared dead in absentia two years later after failed attempts to find her body. Grace looks at a map of Amelia's final flight on which all of her stops are plotted—Oakland, Miami, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Brazil, Senegal, tracing the equator until Papua New Guinea, where there's a dotted line over the Pacific Ocean and a handful of tiny islands, like specks of dust on her computer screen.

Apparently, no one knows what happened to Amelia and her navigator, Fred. They disappeared and that was that. Grace keeps reading, but there's a lot of technical information about radio navigation—kilohertz and beat frequency oscillators and different types of antennae. She skims it until she gets to the search mission—unsuccessful despite the U.S. government's millions of dollars. Underneath, there's a list of theories about her death—the crash-and-sink theory that they ended up in the Pacific, another that they found a tiny island and lived there for a few days, or weeks, no one really knows. And another that she was captured by the Japanese Navy—it was the cusp of the Second World War, after all.

Grace's research is interrupted when she has to show an elderly prof how to look eighteenth-century allusions to vomit on the reference computer.

When she's back at the desk, Grace pulls up photos of Amelia. She's got curly hair cut short, and tousled—more bedhead than famous person. She squints and half-smiles into the camera, more impatient than coy, it seems. She stands in front of propellers, with goggles perched on her forehead. She is tall and slim, boyish. Not a person Grace would think of as having an affair.

She looks up Gene and on his Wikipedia page it says he and Amelia met in 1929 while they were both working at the Transatlantic Air Transport company, trying to make air travel safe and palatable to the American public. He was married, and Amelia married George in the thirties, but there were rumours they were lovers from when they met until her disappearance. Based on these letters, it looks like the rumours were true. He smiles from the screen—a wide open smile, his hair dark with the same severe part that all the characters have on *Mad Men*.

Abigail steps out of the elevator with a full trolley of boxes and Grace quickly clicks the browser closed. Abigail is not one to keep things to herself.

“How are you feeling?” Abigail whispers. She doesn't have to whisper, there's no one here, but it's a force of habit.

The missing rushes back in, like a high-speed train through her chest, and it takes Grace a moment to realize Abigail means the flu she lied about, not Jamie leaving. “A bit better,” she manages.

Abigail nods sympathetically, then says, “Farouk has a reading tonight if you’re feeling up for it,” she says. Farouk is her boyfriend, or at least that’s what she calls him. Grace isn’t sure that’s what he’d call himself.

“Thanks,” Grace says as brightly as she can. “I’ll see how I’m doing at the end of the day.”

Abigail pushes the truck into the reading room and Grace can feel her throat closing. She pushes open the door marked STAFF ONLY and runs to the bathroom. “Fuck.” Her eyes are puffy. She splashes water on her face and puts her hands on the sink, trying to get some air in. “Fuck,” she says to her reflection.

There was no lead-up, no indication Jamie was going to leave. But last Saturday morning, while Grace was standing at the kitchen sink, trying to pick dried Cheerios off a bowl with her fingernail, he said, “I don’t know if I love you anymore.”

The kitchen went still and Grace’s sternum cracked like a plate.

She stood at the sink, water pouring out of the tap and asked him to repeat himself.

He wouldn’t.

“Say it!” she insisted, her hands dripped onto the floor, two puddles on either side of her feet.

“I’m sorry, Grace. I’m so sorry.”

He was joking. He had to be joking.

His eyes weren’t joking. They were so, so sad. In fact, leaning against the kitchen counter, his arms folded across his chest, his Adidas T-shirt, the one that had tiny little holes in it from the broken washing machine at their first apartment, she realized she’d never seen him sad before, not like this.

“So, what, this is it?” she asked.

His silence said yes.

He emptied three shelves in the living room, three drawers in the bedroom dresser, and a bunch of hangers from the front hall closet. The apartment went from theirs to hers in less than an hour.

Lucy, the CanLit specialist, walks in. “You okay?” she asks. “You look pale.”

Grace waves her hand, trying to find the words.

“Right. You had the flu. My wife had it last week. It’s a doozy. And in the summer. What a rip-off, eh?”

Grace nods.

“Why don’t you head home,” she suggests. “I’ll cover for you.”

“Are you sure?” Grace asks. “I’m supposed to be in the reading room for the afternoon.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you,” Grace says, feeling the tears fill her eyes. She blinks them back.

“No problem at all,” Lucy says, turning to the bathroom stall. “Just go home and get some rest.”