

# So Comes Love

by Martha Nichols

Her students read their work aloud in class, haltingly, sometimes proudly, and their willingness amazed Miriam. They were immigrants and retirees, carpenters, security guards, Indian nannies, Iranian escapees. She loved their odd word choices, the lack of editorial impulse. *My heart is overtaken. She had a seashell ear; it made me listen to the ocean talking.*

Theo she loved most of all. A survivor of Buchenwald—he said—a plumber, a newspaperman. He'd also claimed a childhood in Venezuela and a stint in the Royal Thai Air Force. Theo spoke English like a native New Yorker but insisted he didn't learn to read and write until he was sixty. Miriam believed this for about two seconds. He reveled in words, especially English words, collecting them on index cards decorated with goblin faces or fairies or devils, all drawn with whatever Flair felt tip he happened to be carrying.

"Emily Dickinson," he said one night after class. "Am I right? Your favorite."

Miriam buckled her bulging messenger bag. The other students had gone, those who needed to clarify final projects or just to be heard. She focused on Theo at the end of the table, his proper black suit and reddened, corrugated skin.

She smiled. "My favorite? Do I have to choose?"

"You have a favorite. You're sly."

"Okay. Dickinson. Elizabeth Bishop. Basho. E. E. Cummings."

"No, no, *no*, kiddo. Not little e.e. You're smarter than that."

It was late afternoon, the end of spring semester. Miriam had mud on her shoes. That morning, she'd learned she was pregnant. The Center classrooms were crammed with furniture and knocking radiators, but the lilacs were blooming. Their scent came through the window, which was cracked open with a pilfered stick. She considered Robinson Jeffers or Whitman for Theo, but he didn't need them to egg him on.

"His publishers lowercased his name, not Cummings." Miriam ducked her head, collecting the extra sheets she'd copied: poems about the self or "just for fun," she'd told the class earlier, because writing about your life isn't a linear process. Don't think A to B.

Theo waited, jiggling one loafer.

"Here." She held out a page. "It's by Cummings."

She watched his eyes, magnified behind his cheap glasses. *Let it go—the/smashed word broken*. Theo pursed his lips. He'd never turned in an assignment late.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"He can't finish a sentence?"

"No, really. Listen, Theo. The words seem simple, but they're not. They break apart in the strangest, most beautiful ways. It's like one of your word cards."

"You think I'm strange?"

"No! No, that's not—"

"I know." He grinned.

“Oh...all right.” She laughed. “But I’ll read the last stanza. You’ll see.”

“Sure, kiddo. I want to see.”

She had the baby, a squiggle of light, just beginning. Her heart felt untethered. Miriam’s voice wobbled, then took off.

*...let all go  
dear  
so comes love*

\* \* \*

In June, before the summer session began, a nurse reached Miriam at work, asking if she knew Theo Vasilich. He’d had a stroke, the woman reported, a left cerebral hemorrhage, the right side of his body paralyzed. Miriam had seen him only a few weeks before—in class, he’d read a juicy piece about the first nylon stockings he’d encountered, in the fifties, in Vienna—and she was so shocked she didn’t think about why the hospital was contacting *her*.

Later, the nurse explained they’d found a card in his coat pocket with her office number. They couldn’t locate next of kin.

But even before Miriam heard this, she’d known it made a kind of metaphysical sense. Miriam’s mother, Dina, a celebrity in the Bay Area light opera world, had died last year; her father Seth, an insurance-claims adjuster, had since moved to a Jewish retirement community in northern California. Dina Tober had been brassy, Wagnerian, a champion narcissist. Superficially, Theo reminded her of Dina, but that wasn’t why Miriam felt such a connection to him. Her shy father was Miriam’s biggest fan, and Theo had been that, too.

Is, she told herself.

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That evening, her husband came back to the apartment before returning to the lab. Tom stroked her bare belly, whispering talismans between her breasts. *Blastocyst. Cell diversification. Placental nourishment.* The futon took up most of their tiny bedroom.

“This week...” He walked his fingers down her sweaty skin. “The embryo is opening its mouth for the first time. Its heart is going 150 beats a minute.”

“It's a she, I think.”

“A tadpole.”

“A comma.” Miriam picked up her notepad on the nightstand. She scribbled a few words—*comma, hook*—before setting the pad aside again. “Our tender hook.”

Tom laughed. “See, Pokey. You're writing.”

She touched her belly, imagining a hook nudging her fingers. “I'm not.”

“Your teaching is a good thing, with the baby.”

She saw the tension gather along his jaw. Tom looked so fine and disheveled, his brown hair extraordinary; after two days without a shower, it smelled of sage.

A few months before her mother's death, they'd left San Francisco. Tom had jumped on the offer from MIT. At first, Miriam had blamed

him for the move to Cambridge, but then she began teaching adult-education classes at the Center. Introduction to Poetry. The Art of Personal Narrative. These days, Miriam Tober-Deming wore her chestnut hair in a French braid, pressed jeans, neat ankle boots. She was thirty-four, thin and graceful—P.E. teachers had always praised her posture—her olive skin darkening after winter. She was near the end of her first trimester. Her own poetry had stalled after a brief flurry, wings beating hard and furious.

“You're a wonderful writer.” Tom smiled, but she felt his impatience. “I'm late, Poke. You know. The proposal has to be Fed-Exed tomorrow. Have you seen...?”

“There.” His glasses were on the dresser.

“I feel like a maniac—and Lillian! God.”

“You need to talk her down,” Miriam said.

She didn't want him to go, not tonight. His post doc Lillian Ng was a gnome with a touch of Asperger's, so obtuse it seemed self-willed. Yet Tom probably did need this proposal. Only his hopes for the baby were shining and untroubled.

“I need to call Theo,” she said.

Tom hustled around their bedroom, buttoning his shirt, checking his armpits for pungency, already at the lab. “It'll work out. You can visit him tomorrow.”

Miriam spread her hands across her belly. She imagined another nudge through her skin, the sweet opening of that mouth. Her fingers tensed protectively.

Tom looked different with his glasses on. He used to call her from

his office, asking about her day—Theo did *what?* He's a character. No, a con artist, Miriam would say.

Tom paused in the bedroom doorway. "It's not like you know him well."

Her fingers went cold. Knowing and not knowing were such treacherous states. She did know Theo. She knew words intoxicated him. She hadn't known how much she wanted this baby.

"Earth to Pokey?" Tom said.

Her mouth twisted; she couldn't help it. Their bedroom wall started rumbling, the one they shared with the laundry room next door.

"You in there? Poke?"

One dryer. Not insufferable yet, but that would come later, if the faceless MBA girls or boys ignored the sign. *Hours: 8 a.m-11 p.m. Please respect your neighbors.*

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's okay." Miriam shut her eyes. The noise wasn't okay, although it didn't bother him.

"Oh." Tom checked for his keys. "It's not so bad. Just tell yourself that."

"I'm okay. I need to work, too."

She saw his jaw relax, the sweet stubble of a cornfield. Tom had a deadline. She had a book review. They had defined tasks, a mission. Meanwhile, the rest of life was topsy-turvy, washers and dryers on the fifth floor rather than hidden in the basement—a deck out there

also, only reached through the laundry room. Some architect had dreamed of terraces in hot countries, bougainvillea flowing over the white-washed walls, rosemary in ceramic jugs. Instead there was bare concrete, two plastic-lumber chairs few residents used, a single pot of marigolds.

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She bled the next morning and didn't tell him. It wasn't painful, and Tom was in a hurry to get back to his lab, to finish his proposal with Lillian Ng. Miriam hadn't even had morning sickness before this, which should have been a sign—she read that later—but at 8:21 a.m., she sucked down denial like fizzy water.

She called her OB's office next, calmly, numbly, drinking a quart for the ultrasound like the good patient she was. After a traffic snarl, she needed to pee so badly she wanted to claw open her thighs. Then it was dark and quiet in the cubicle with high-tech screens, the way Miriam imagined a medieval church to be. The gel went on goopy and cold above her pubic bone. The technician was hushed, offering no false hope, waiting for a doctor to break the news.

She tried Tom on all three numbers afterward. No answer. She peppered him with email, but Tom was notorious for going offline when he felt pressured. He asked his students and post docs to keep up with all official messages, forcing everyone to come to him.

She thought of twilight. She thought of perfect moments glimpsed from on high, pink lapsing into blue, the Belt of Venus. The day they'd moved to the apartment, a year ago, it had seemed like the best-kept secret. Five-hundred square feet, a galley kitchen, but windows filling the rooms with light. A refuge. A real home where Miriam had never expected to find one.

They still went to the deck sometimes, sharing an Almond Joy. The

sky swelled overhead, infinitude. At sunset, they pointed out chimney swifts, a heron flying toward the river. Pigeons landed like angels when the sky darkened.

\* \* \*

Two hours after the ultrasound, she was on the T heading for another medical complex, this one in Malden north of the city. She'd left her car in a garage near downtown, unwilling to battle more traffic, and took the Orange Line from Park Street in Boston. She sat on the rattling subway car, welcoming the moan of the train around tight corners. When Miriam arrived at the hospital, she envisioned rings of friends and relations, all the black-kerchiefed babushkas and sons and daughters and torrid Carmen Mirandas that Theo had written about. There was no one.

In his room, his face was grotesque putty, smeared and set. His eyes were dull.

Then he recognized her. "God damn?"

"You can talk! Theo, they said...oh, who cares what they said." She held a bouquet of daisies and freesia, glancing around the room for a water glass. "These are for you."

"God damn." He was almost laughing.

"They said you couldn't talk."

"God damn!"

"He can't. That's all he ever says." An orderly with a nose stud rolled in a food cart. She was tall and cadaverous; her nametag said Kiki.

"God *damn*." Theo shook his head at the Jello.



Kiki shrugged. "He understands, though. Don't you? They got you on kiddie stuff, dude."

A nurse hustled in then, bulky in her mint-green uniform, with a clipped gray Afro. "God damn is right. You can say a lot with those words. You his daughter?"

Miriam started. "No, I...just a friend. A good friend."

Theo nodded fiercely. Kiki shot her a curious glance.

"I like this man." The nurse, named Rose, checked his IV. "He's already charmed the pants off us. You know about those cards of his?"

"His word cards? Yes," Miriam said. "Theo's my best student."

"God damn!"

"Theo, no kidding?" The nurse smiled at him. "You're in school? Good for you, honey."

Miriam saw his cards on the table then. She grabbed one—*sagacious*—with a picture of a devil wearing a mortar board. She held it up for his inspection. Theo worked his lips, staring.

"Sagacious." Miriam extended it.

His eyes were watering. "God *damn*."

"You know this word," she said.

"You be going home soon, Theo," Rose said. "I really hope you do. We'll tell your teacher friend when you're ready. Let me get those

pretty flowers in water.”

The nurse gently removed the bouquet from Miriam's hands. She murmured to Kiki, who found a plastic cup. For a second, Miriam imagined telling Theo about the baby. *Oh, you poor darling. Rest your head on Theo's shoulder, cry for as long as you need to, let your tears precipitate.* She heard his off-key eloquence, as if the stroke hadn't happened and the nurses weren't there and they were drinking tea in an English Garden—make that Bali, tropical, drunk with jasmine. Am I still a good person, Theo? *Kiddo, kiddo, you're grand!*

When Miriam looked at Rose, she could tell Theo wouldn't be going home soon. His word cards would sit beside him, unread. *Animation. Velocity. Voluminous.* Her flowers would sag in their improvised vase. *Vanished.*

\* \* \*

At eleven that night, the machines were rumbling through her bedroom wall. Things kept going wrong, a landslide in a landfill. Broken dolls covered with fissured cellophane. She'd dropped her change purse on the subway platform. She'd locked her keys in the car. She'd set a potholder on fire on the kitchen stove. She'd only slept for a few moments.

Now Miriam tried to remember her dream. Hayley Mills had been in it, sorting lights and darks in the laundry room, folding railroad handkerchiefs. They were the kind Miriam's father blew his nose into, then looked up from, embarrassed. It had been Hayley from *The Trouble with Angels*—blonde, boyish, mischievous, a '60s girl caught smoking in a convent school, saved by Mother Superior—oh, how Miriam had longed for this as a child in the '80s—but in the dream, Haley morphed into something else. Suddenly she was little Pollyanna, primly telling her neighbors to follow the rules. She was

drab and mean.

As a teenager, Miriam had hated the suburbs of San Francisco, the endless used car lots, strings of pennants flapping in the fog, taquerias and cheap Chinese restaurants. Poetry first captured her through the disguises it offered. She could rage or cry safely. She could make inanimate landscapes and strangers carry the weight, compressed into gorgeous word bubbles.

Miriam popped the foam plugs from her ears. The noise grew louder, buttons or buckles on the side of a dryer. A washer was running. She'd become an expert at calculating each 26-minute wash cycle, 54-minutes in each dryer, how long it takes with four washers, four dryers. She felt the ghost touch of her father's hands, cupping her ears when she couldn't sleep, when Dina and her bohemian friends got too raucous.

She reached for her plaid robe, punched open the bedroom door, scooped up a Post-it pad by the phone. She scribbled, "Please DO NOT run the machines after 11 pm (see sign). We are trying to sleep—Your Neighbors."

It would make no difference. Lately there had been something carnivorous about this place, where MBA students crept out to steal the *Wall Street Journal* just after it was delivered. When they moved away, the rich ones tossed their plants into the dumpster out back, their perfectly functional tables and shelves. The rent was a steal, worth the hassles—she and Tom had a mantra—and she still loved the apartment, Miriam told herself. She loved the deck off the laundry room.

Once an older woman had started a washer at 6 a.m., and Miriam strode in like a resistance fighter with a chest belt of bullets, the woman scurrying like a rodent, apologies, apologies, the absurdity of the situation plain to both. But tonight, Miriam felt a perilous

slide, grabbing for the pad, writing another note, this one pure Cummings. *Let it go—the*. She should tweet it instead, announce to the world how fraught she was. It would make no difference.

She shot out of the apartment, past the elevators, into the laundry room. All the lights were blazing; three of the dryers were running; two washers hadn't hit their spin cycles. There was a pile of unsorted laundry on the folding table. She opened dryer doors to turn them off, slapping her useless notes on hot enamel surfaces. Slap, slap.

*Truthful liars...false fair friends...they were born to go.*

\* \* \*

There had been another baby, another half-life. A not-yet-life. In college, she'd had an abortion, and at the time it was the rational thing to do. The father had been a boy with red hair and green eyes, a two-month acquaintance—gay, she thought—bisexual, he said. Sex with him had been like weak peppermint tea. Their child would have been pretty but insubstantial as a spirit. Or maybe she just wanted to believe that. Single mothers got stuck with changelings, not a god or goddess in human form—did that make it easier to forget?

She hated rhetorical questions. That was what she told her students. Questions with obvious answers or no answers were a device, an easy fix. *Are you nuts, kiddo? You think you count one, two, three, and the world cavorts at your request? You think you're in charge, with your declarations of independence? Aren't you smarter than that?*

\* \* \*

Outside the laundry room, she leaned into the deck railing, her belly pressed against metal struts. Five floors below, the dumpster was

full of cardboard and abandoned spider plants. Miriam watched two men haul out a box so big it could hold a dishwasher. The men looked homeless, scavenging for treasure cast off by the MBAs or preppie sons of foreign diplomats. Under the streetlight, one of them resembled Theo.

She'd never gone outside in just a robe. It was breezy, the sky enormous.

She'd been calling Tom all day. She'd tried his office, his cell, the lab. *This is Tom Deming. Leave me a message. Or not.* Lillian's recording had begun to grate like a chainsaw. *You have reached the Genomics Laboratory. We are currently unavailable for your convenience.*

Miriam had left voicemail messages, but nothing scary. *Hey, Tom. Can you call me at home?* He hadn't yet. He worked like a dog, ran from meeting to grant proposal to conference, and she loved his heedless equilibrium. He was flourishing—can you *believe* it?—a kid from Maine. He quantified the minutest chains of life. He was a geneticist, the son of secular humanists. He'd been showered with blessings his entire, golden, woodsy childhood.

She hated him. Maybe they'd been together too long. Six years? Eight, if you counted when they'd first met—at a party, after two a.m., in a San Francisco garden with moss and slugs.

His voicemail beep was the worst, as cheerful as a cricket. She wanted to hurt him but didn't know how. *Hey, Tom. Remember that dream I had about chimps stealing my bicycle? They rode around my old house, wearing Lycra like Tour de France racers, then the doorbell rings, and there's Lillian, holding a pound cake. She probably churned the butter, you said.*

Miriam rubbed the two creases on the side of her hand. Another message she'd never leave, like *Tom, our baby is floating dead inside*

*me, or Tom, I'm sinking.* For a moment, she was beset by rogue thoughts of him having an affair with Lillian, the two grappling on the floor amid shattered Petri dishes. Ridiculous. She smoothed the creases with her thumb, her right hand, the lines palmists say show how many children you'll have. She'd already lost both.

*Hey, Tom. I had a dream where I disposed of my own corpse. In a garbage bag.*

She hated herself, the melodrama, her mother's voice taking over, nothing left to fight it off. She shivered, her plaid robe too thin even in the June air, Tom's hand-me-down, washed too many times and oversized. During the ultrasound, she'd turned her head toward the screen and felt momentarily reassured. That iconic fetal curl. The baby! Her tender hook.

A lid clanged behind her.

In an another world, she cradled her child. Miriam rocked the baby to sleep in a hand-woven sling, murmuring dazzling new poems. She was Mother-Poet, recipient of major grants and book contracts, a residency at Yaddo. She thought of hot-air balloons in old lithographs.

She stared at the dishwasher box below, its flaps gaping. Theo's look-alike was gone. The maintenance guys would toss the box into the dumpster tomorrow. In three days, she was scheduled for a D&E—*dilation, evacuation*—unless her baby washed away on its own.

\* \* \*

It was after midnight. All three dryers were whirling now, the two washers chugged. A boom-box had been switched on, too, thrashing and drumming, and the chaos of noise hit her like a barrage. Jay-Z?

An ash-blond boy in his twenties bounced along.

“Did you turn these off?” he called out to her.

She walked back into the laundry room. “It's after midnight. Didn't you see the sign?”

“The sign? Nobody cares about the sign.”

She flung open the dryer doors, one after another, shutting them off.

“Whoa!”

Miriam spotted her Post-its, crumpled into twists under the table.

“I won't leave,” she said.

“Great. I get the Wacko.”

He had to be an MBA, clean-cut and milk-fed. He knew how to crew a yacht. He'd grown up with Swiss maids to press his underpants, to practice ravishing.

“You're into poetry, right?” he said.

“I'm a teacher.”

“Very sensitive. I read that kind of shit in high school.”

She shut her eyes.

“Your husband is Tom? The science guy? He's cool.”

“Stop, okay?”

“Wish I could. I bet you're getting your Ph.D. in something.”

He smiled then, obviously unconcerned about her answer. The blond boy held his head sideways, taking in the ugly robe, the way it sagged over her breasts.

“I'll just turn the machines back on,” he said.

“Please don't.”

“Sorry. I have an interview tomorrow. Ever hear of McKinsey?”

“I'm having a terrible night.”

“My hands are tied.” He wiggled his fingers. “I forgot to go to the dry cleaner.”

“Please. I'm about to have a miscarriage.”

He mimed dismay. Then his face regained its blankness. “Wow.”

Where were his clothes? She'd hurl them into the dumpster. She'd chuck them off an overpass. Where was the goddamn gun when you needed it? She could hear his snap judgment. *No worries. You'd make a lousy mother, anyway.*

He shrugged. “Come on, lady. I can wait you out.”

When Miriam spun around, he started clapping.

\* \* \*

Back in the apartment, she picked up the phone, sitting, clenching, punching numbers. She heard that cricket beep.



"Tom." Her vision blurred. "I just told this asshole in the laundry room my baby is dead. Did you hear that? Dead."

Miriam cut herself off then. She couldn't leave this message. She cycled through voicemail options, frantic, trying to erase it and failed. *Our baby*. Everything had failed. Her fingers shook so hard it took her several tries to call his lab.

"Genomics."

"Lillian! Thank God."

"Tom's getting pizza. Mushrooms and Canadian Bacon. Miriam? I'm really nervous."

"I need to talk to Tom."

"I slammed my thumb in a drawer. The one we use for pipettes. I broke two."

Miriam's throat closed. "Lillian. It's important."

"What's wrong? You can tell me. I'm good at the big picture."

"No." She forced her voice down. "I just need to reach Tom."

"Oh, sure. Right. You're a very private person. Tom says that."

"Does he have his cell phone?"

"The battery died."

"As soon as he walks in. Please, Lillian. Tell him."

"Are you angry? I don't think you—"

Miriam hung up, collapsing on the couch. She hated Lillian. She'd been reduced to talking about Canadian Bacon. I'll give YOU the big picture. Her breasts were still tender. Who the hell was in charge? God and his rabble? Lillian and her fixation on Canadian Bacon? Tom didn't like Canadian Bacon. Would Lillian know the answer if it puked on her?

\* \* \*

She hugged her knees to her chest, thinking about her father. They hadn't talked for weeks, she realized; if she didn't pick up the phone, they never would. He'd become ensconced in his studio apartment outside Santa Rosa, with a dining hall that served "fresh 'n' healthy California cuisine." The communal garden was hot and dry. He'd always wanted to live in Israel. Instead, he'd moved to the Jewish men's version of a cloister.

It was the loneliness that felled Miriam. It was as if she'd never known loneliness before. Tom had his own unknowable piece of Tom. Her father seemed happier alone than he'd ever been before. Men protected themselves, and she'd thought she was more like a man that way, less capable of intense feeling than her mother.

She thought of cars swishing by on the highway, long after midnight when she was a child. She would wait for her father to check on her, although sometimes he didn't. Miriam would hold herself tightly in the dark. She'd imagine everything she felt as a secret color painted across the sky.

\* \* \*

Miriam stumbled past the elevators and into the white-bright room—and three dryers were still going, 15, 22, 43 minutes—and that was it, the end. Russia, Baghdad, Kabul. She was the girl with

the beret and rifle, hurling it all into the void.

"Miriam!" Tom yelled.

He'd arrived at last, clutching his Fed-Ex package. But he seemed less real than the Tom she'd been hating all day. His shirt remained neatly buttoned; his beard had grown beyond stubble. He needed a shower.

She slammed open a dryer, snatching clothes, racing to the deck and throwing them over.

"Don't!" He tried to grab her. "Don't give the assholes what they want."

She squirmed past him, at the dryers again.

"Miriam, you're better than that."

She tugged out more laundry. "Better than what?"

"Miriam—stop! Please. I heard the message."

"Good."

He hurled his package at the floor. "I'm firing Lillian! We decided to go for the 24-hour dropbox at the airport, trying to make that stupid *stupid* deadline. She didn't tell me you called until I was leaving. She didn't...."

The damp clothes still felt warm. "Tom."

"Oh my God. *God.*"

His voice broke. Tears poured down his face.

"Tom, don't fire Lillian."

"Is it true?" He stumbled into her, the wet laundry trapped between them.

"Yes," she said. "It's true."

He hugged her so hard then that Miriam cried out. When he kissed her, she tasted his sour breath. She wanted to devour every scrap of bitterness, even as she clung to the soggy clothes that belonged to someone else, kissing her husband, longing for him, the old him, the gone him.

Then she broke free, running back to the deck with her bundle. Charcoal clouds shifted above, black horses turning into crows, but he followed her. Tom did follow, holding her from behind—golden, fallen Tom—his hands shaky and burning all over her skin.

*Life, kiddo. You will write your poems of lamentation. You will attend the birth of a true and lasting sorrow. You will do it all again.*

She let go of what she held. Shirts swooped over the railing into the night. Wet towels slapped the asphalt. Some pieces floated, others plummeted straight into the dumpster, and so many items spun apart, like ghostly lungs, contracting and expanding.

