

Orbit

by Sarah Long

And it seemed that, just a little more—and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning.

Anton Chekhov

The Lady with the Little Dog

“What are you looking at?”

Her eyes were off across the room, focused on something stationary that was, or maybe wasn't, there.

“Why haven't you ever kissed me?” She blurted it out fast, as if it was a shocking question she had worked herself up to.

“I don't know. I'm scared.”

“Why are you scared?”

“Because I care about you, and I don't want to ruin things. I'm scared because the last woman I really cared about and kissed eventually stopped kissing me back. I'm scared because I don't want to miss you more than I already do.”

He took a sip of his wine and wiped his thumb up and down against the stem of the glass. “Do you want me to keep going?”

“No, no. I get it. You have reasons.”

“Good reasons.”

“Yes, good reasons.” She leaned over and undid the straps on her fancy, uncomfortable work shoes. “But you don't have to be scared. We could kiss, you know, just to try it. Just to see what it's like. Then, if you want, we can pretend like it never happened. I won't tell anyone, you won't tell anyone, and after a while, without anyone reminding us that it happened, we'll just forget.”

“Are you trying to talk me into kissing you?”

They laughed, and she fell back against the couch beside him.

“That's weird. Like you're trying to sell me a vacuum or something.”

“Sorry. I think the wine is making me spunky.”

“Spunkier than usual?”

“Yes, spunkier than usual. I’m sorry, I’ll stop.”

“NO. I mean, don’t feel like you shouldn’t say...whatever it is you want to say.”

“Okay. I won’t.” Her face fell serious and she looked away from him. “I’m gonna get a refill,” she said, standing from the couch.

“You want some?”

“Sure,” he said and handed her his glass as she stood from the couch. She stopped just before heading into the kitchen and said, “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Yeah, me too.”

* * *

Though it was technically a party held in his honor—a sort of going-away celebration—Alex recognized only about half of the people in the backyard of one of his coworker’s Beacon Hill brownstone. Sally showed up alone around nine, about an hour or so after the party officially began. Alex saw her walk down the brick steps into the yard, and watched her stand at the edge of the already half-drunk crowd. She pinched at the strap of her shoulder bag and chewed the inside of her cheek as she scanned the faces. Her eyes finally found Alex and she smiled affectionately. He extracted himself from the conversation going on around him and made his way over to her.

“You came!” he said, sounding more excited than he had intended.

“Of course,” she said, wrapping him in a hug, and then whispering half-jokingly in his ear, “although I can’t say that I condone the circumstances behind this party. If you ask me, your leaving us is hardly something to celebrate.”

They separated, and she looked at him in that way she always did—her face tilted to the side, her eyes wide open and full of warmth.

“You want a drink?” he asked.

“Absolutely.”

Beers in hand, Alex led Sally around the backyard, introducing her to the people he knew: coworkers from the tutoring center, and friends he had made while married to Anne who stuck by him through the split. “

How's Bryan?” Alex asked at one point when he found himself standing alone with Sally against the fence strung with ivy and twinkling Christmas lights.

Sally made a face and nearly rolled her eyes, but stopped herself. “He's all right,” she said flatly, taking a sip of her beer. Alex watched her avoid his eyes.

“You know what, Sally? You should be with someone you're actually excited about. Someone who you want to talk about all the time, and with enthusiasm, to the point that people start asking you to shut up about him. You should be with someone who makes you really happy. Because that's what you deserve.”

Sally looked up at him, her eyes wide. She opened her mouth to say something, but couldn't. Alex thought she might start to cry.

“I'm sorry,” he blurted. “I don't know why I said that.”

But that wasn't true. He knew exactly why he said it. Over the past year, as he had really gotten to know Sally, he had begun to pick up on the incompatibilities between her and Bryan. He saw how she was when he wasn't around—she was alive and vibrant, and spoke with passion about the things she really cared about. But whenever Bryan was within earshot, she acted as if she were being monitored by some disapproving authority, completely unsure of herself and unwilling to speak with conviction about anything that could be challenged. And so Alex grew to dislike Bryan, not because he was a despicable human being, but because of what Sally became—or what she wouldn't become—when he was around.

“Well, I'm glad you said it,” Sally said, smiling. “No one else wants to say it.” She wiped at her eyes.

Alex watched her, could see her grappling for the next thing to say. Her posture was vulnerable yet defiant, as it always was with her, with any girl who has no idea that she looks most beautiful in the moments when she's most delicate.

“What do you do,” she began, “when you feel like you're happy—you're comfortable, anyway—but know you could be happier? It's not an easy thing. It would be much simpler if the circumstances were dire, if there was only one possible option to choose. But...”

Just then, one of Alex's old buddies sauntered up, well into his second six-pack. “Dude!” he shouted at Alex. “You gotta come over here! We're gonna form like a love circle around you and do bon voyage toasts and shit.”

Alex looked to Sally who smiled and nodded calmly. “Bon voyage toasts,” she said. “Don't want to miss those.”

* * *

“Ah, I love this song,” he said as she settled back on the couch, handing him his refilled glass.

“Me too. It reminds me of sixth grade, those awkward school dances in the cafeteria or the gymnasium, with the boys and the girls huddled against opposite walls.”

He took a sip of his wine. “I was living in San Francisco when this song came out. Once a week I would read at an open mic night at this little café called Jitters. I was completely in love with this waitress, Cindy, who worked there. She looked like Natalie Wood. She thought I was a loser, that my poems were cheesy and lame.”

“Doesn't sound that much different from the sixth grade.”

He smiled. “No, I guess not.”

She hunched her shoulders and narrowed her eyes secretively. “You know, I'm not like other 20-something girls. I'm weathered. Hardened.”

“You forgot jaded.”

“Right. That too.”

“No. You're none of those things. And I wouldn't want you to be. But you're right. You are different from all the other young girls.”

“Thank you very much.”

* * *

Alex moved to the new city on a Thursday, and on Friday he left his apartment after a day spent staring at sealed boxes and bulging

duffel bags, the obligation of unpacking an overwhelming task he wasn't quite ready to tackle. He walked around his new neighborhood and found a small bar where he settled in among a few other early evening patrons.

He exchanged pleasantries with the bartender, a man who bore a striking resemblance to Tom Waits. After each time he poured Alex a fresh whiskey, the bartender would return to his spot in the corner where he absently wiped at drinking glasses with a natty towel and glanced back and forth between the muted television and the front door.

Alex didn't mind being alone; in fact, he preferred it most of the time. But on this particular occasion, he felt intensely anxious, the same way he had felt as a teenager whenever he was required to make any sort of semi-permanent decision regarding what it was he wanted to do with his life. It was a feeling similar to loneliness: something he had grown well acquainted with but never got quite used to.

He looked up from his glass and was surprised to find the bar full of people. He couldn't remember how long he had been sitting there or how many times the bartender had refilled his glass. A blonde girl bumped into his elbow as she climbed onto the barstool beside him. She smiled at him and brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

"Hi," she said. "Is it okay if I sit here?"

"Sure," he said.

"You all by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Me too. Well, just for a little while. One of my girlfriends is meeting me."

He nodded.

"I'm Callie."

"Alex," he said, facing her to shake her hand. He noticed she had tiny, silver earrings all the way up her left earlobe, like the spiral of a notebook.

"Are you new to the neighborhood?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"It's a neighborhood bar. Pretty much everyone here's a regular, so you learn faces."

"Oh. So you live nearby too?"

"Yep. Just one street over, on Spaulding."

"Oh. I'm on Griffin. I just got in yesterday."

"You just moved here?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Where from?"

"Boston."

"Wow! What are you doing here?"

Alex hesitated; the question brought a smile to his face. "Umm. I got a job, teaching at the university."

"No way! I start my senior year in August. What are you teaching?"

"Literature."

"Seriously? Oh my god, I love to read. I'm a drama major, but I take a bunch of lit courses. I was thinking about minoring, but..." She cocked her head and smiled. Alex thought he caught a glint of a tongue ring before her teeth clamped together. "Maybe I'll be in one of your classes. I've always wanted a cute professor."

She swiveled on her stool, her knee grazing his hip. Suddenly, a raven-haired girl with earlobes like the blonde's walked up and playfully punched the blonde on the shoulder.

"Bitch!" the dark-haired girl said with a grin. Her eyes were heavily lined with silvery powder, and she smelled of clove cigarettes. "I knew you'd be here! Jonny and Steven got a booth over in the corner. Let's go."

"Oh my god, Erica, wait. This guy's a professor. Can you believe it?"

Erica looked Alex over, then nodded approvingly. "You're cute," she said. "I would totally take your class."

The blonde and the brunette continued chatting, eventually turning their backs on Alex, and then headed over to the corner booth where two boys in backwards ball caps and ironic t-shirts were waiting for them with a pitcher of beer.

Alex motioned to the bartender, having to shout a couple times over the crowd to pull him from his trance. He finally set down the glass and towel and came over with the whiskey bottle.

"This one's on me," he said as he filled Alex's glass. Then he poured himself one and raised it in a toast. "To the college girls," he said. "They're not much for conversation, but fun to watch."

Alex clinked glasses with the bartender.

* * *

"Why do you like me?" he asked her.

"You mean, why have I graced you with the gift of my friendship?"

"No. Umm. Why do you like me?" He set his wine glass on the coffee table and brushed at a piece of lint on his knee. "I never understand why anyone likes me, but you, you're young and...hopeful. You're not supposed to like someone like me."

"Someone like you?"

"Yeah."

"Huh." She took a swig from her glass then set it down next to his. "You know, I still remember the first day of the first class we ever took together. What was it, like two years ago?"

"That sounds about right. I loved that class. Even though I was by far the oldest person there... Even older than the professor, I think. "

"I know, and you were also the smartest, but listen. That's not why I remember, well, not the main reason. I remember walking in and seeing you sitting there, pulling your books and papers out of your bag. You were sort of...charmingly ruffled. I had been there for nearly three and a half years and had never seen you before, so I figured you must have been new. There was something about you I liked immediately. And I watched you out of the corner of my eye through the entire class.

"It's something that probably only happens two or three times in a person's life—you see someone one day, a total stranger up to that point, and think, 'I have to know this person. He has to be in my life.' That's how I felt about you. And even though we became friends right away, I sort of avoided you for a while."

“What?”

“Yeah. I mean, when there weren't other friends around. I couldn't be alone with you. Not because I thought I might do something stupid, but because I was afraid of finding out what it would feel like, just you and me, standing in front of each other.

“You were with Anne, I was with Bryan, before any signs of trouble on the horizon. And it's one thing to lay eyes on a stranger and be immediately attracted, but the more I got to know you, the more I liked you. But I wasn't expecting anything, and I didn't want to give the impression that I was. I just wanted to know you, to have you in my life, however you might fit.” She leaned forward and retrieved her wine glass. “Does that answer your question?”

He watched her take a sip. “Wow. No. But I wish I had asked whatever question you were answering.”

“And that's another thing,” she continued. “You ask a question like, ‘Why do you like me?’ and you have no idea how wonderful and warm and smart and funny you are. Or maybe you do know, but you're just not sure. And I like being given the opportunity to tell you.”

* * *

After Anne kicked him out for the last time, Alex spent a month letting his friends take him out to bars and nightclubs—loud, flashy places they had never visited when he was married—places that lived up to their names: Trance, Blackout, Alcatraz, Inferno.

He found it strange how no one assumed that the split had been his fault. It hadn't been—Anne had grown impatient with his desire to find fulfilling work instead of just settling for some steady desk job like all the other husbands, and although they had both talked about wanting a family in the past, her desire to have a baby grew more persistent as his remained a distant aspiration—it was something they didn't talk about, but the weight of it managed to permeate every aspect of their relationship, hanging in the air like an overdue bill. While Alex was the same person he had been when they got married, Anne had become someone else—influenced by friends' baby showers and expensive family vacations and padded

bank accounts, she changed her mind about the kind of man she wanted to be married to.

She had been the one to end things, standing unrecognizable in the doorway with her arms crossed as he packed the few shared items she would allow him to take, but still, he was surprised, and maybe even a little disappointed, when no one accused him of any wrongdoing, but instead pitied him—looked at him with furrowed eyebrows and pouted lower lips, patting him on the back as they ordered more rounds of drinks.

He was lost. He wasn't heartbroken because of Anne; he had loved her, still did, but had to agree with her that their time together had reached its end. He was devastated in the same way that anyone is when they've settled on a path, even a loosely mapped one, and find themselves abruptly cast off course, unprepared and ill-equipped for change.

He agreed to take the job at the university in the Midwest the day after he signed the divorce papers Anne had messengered over. Teaching had always appealed to him—he liked the idea of spending his life learning and sharing what he learned with others. Plus, he had never wanted to give up on the idea of summer vacations. He didn't tell anyone for a couple weeks, and stopped answering the phone when his buddies called to invite him out to the bars and nightclubs.

After he moved, most of his Boston friends seemed to lose track of him virtually overnight. There were only a couple people he kept in regular contact with—only a couple people he wanted to talk to.

Sally wrote Alex emails several times a week—thoughtful, detailed emails in which she would respond to the last email he had sent her: “I'm glad you have a neighborhood bar. Everyone needs a bar within walking distance where they can go get buzzed in the company of inebriated strangers.” Or, “You're rereading *Lolita*? God, I feel like I lost my literary virginity to Nabokov. How is it the second time around?”

She would even respond to the things he hadn't written, but must have been apparent to her between the lines of his emails: “I know

you're probably out there, hitting up the cafes and acoustic shows, keeping yourself busy, but it'll all just make the loneliness worse unless you really talk to people, and really listen when they talk to you. Besides, it would be a real shame if the people inhabiting that new city of yours didn't get a chance to find out how lucky they are to have you living in their midst."

And always, she would throw in a few sentences about what she was up to, favoring the peculiar details over the mundane: "I went to a ridiculous house party on Mission Hill last night. On my way out, I tripped down the steps and broke the heel off of my boot. I walked all the way back down that goddamn hill, left foot on tippy-toe, and when I woke up this morning it took me about twenty minutes of serious consideration before I could figure out why my left leg was so sore." Or, "I decided to paint one wall in my new apartment a really intense shade of red. Maybe it's just an act of defiance—I don't even particularly like the color. In fact, every time I come down the hall and see it, it sort of frightens me. But Bryan never let me paint the walls in our house, so now that I can, I chose one of the most startling colors possible."

He saved all her emails in a folder on his computer called "Sally," and even when he wanted to, he prevented himself from responding to her messages right away. He would carry her words around in his head all day, thinking up the most adequate response—something witty and intelligent, like a miniature novel, without giving too much away; he feared sending pieces of himself out across a space where he couldn't retrieve them, couldn't call them back at will. He grew dependent on the regularity of her emails, and was practically crestfallen on the days she didn't write, even if her last message had arrived only the day before. He checked his inbox with growing frequency; the days he found her there were good days, and the days he didn't were ambiguous, if not dismal. Increasingly fixated, the gaps between the good days and the rest widened in his mind, and he grew impatient, overly expectant, irritated. He blamed her for all of it.

Then she called him one evening just before sunset. Their phone conversations were far less frequent than their emails. The false starts and pauses he allowed himself when he wrote her emails couldn't disguise him over the phone. She would hear everything in his voice, and this made him nervous, so nervous that no matter how badly he wanted to hear her voice some nights, he never called her. When they did speak on the phone, it was always she who called him.

"Hey you," she said.

"Hi."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. Good. Just getting ready to go out." He felt the need to be going somewhere, to seem busy yet carefree, as if constantly moving around came naturally to him.

"Oh, okay. Well, do you need to go?"

"What?"

"I mean, do you need to get off the phone? Are you in a hurry?"

"Oh, no. It's fine. What's up?" He tried to sound relaxed, but the harder he tried to control the tone and level of his voice, the more on edge he sounded.

"Umm. Nothing, really. I just wanted to see how you were doing. You haven't written in like, over a week, so I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine. I've just been really busy."

"Oh. You're not upset with me, are you?"

"No, why would I be upset with you?" He snorted a little.

"I don't know. I just thought I'd ask." Her voice sounded flimsy and faraway.

"Well, I'm not. I just have a lot of stuff going on, and I don't always get a chance to sit down and write some long email. So, it's nothing personal."

"Okay. All right." She was quiet for a moment, and Alex could hear the sound of cars in the background. He wondered where she was. "Well, I'll let you go. I just wanted to say hello."

"Cool. I'll talk to you soon, okay?"

“Okay. Bye.”

Alex hung up the phone and stood in the middle of his apartment, the fading daylight outside his window giving the whole room a bluish glow, eliciting in him the feeling he always got in those anonymous hours when the time of day is not immediately evident.

He stood motionless for a while, then forced himself into the bathroom and climbed into the shower under the hot pelting water, not wanting to do anything or go anywhere at all.

* * *

She could see how tired he was after flying all day, so after they finished off the bottle of wine, she fetched some pillows and blankets and together they unfolded the futon for him to sleep on. She let him have the bathroom first, and when he was finished washing up, she emerged from her bedroom and went in to remove her contact lenses and brush her teeth in front of the sink. When she came out of the bathroom, he was already under the covers on the futon. She went into the kitchen and switched off the light.

From the hallway between her bedroom and the living room, she said, “Good night, Alex.”

“Good night, Sally,” he responded.

She turned to head off to bed then stopped, turning back toward the living room.

“I'm gonna say something, and I need you to not interrupt me as I'm saying it, or else I'll lose my train of thought and end up dumbing it down and stopping short of what I mean to tell you.” She leaned against the door frame in her blue cotton nightgown.

He stayed quiet and still, and he wondered if she could see him looking at her.

“I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm completely, utterly, ridiculously in love with you. Since you moved away, I miss you so much my lungs ache. Whenever you send me an email, it's like I'm reading my favorite book for the first time, and when I get to the end, I reread it and I have that feeling all over again.

“On the nights when we talk on the phone, I go to bed and have the most vivid dreams—not about you, necessarily—but dreams in

which I can hear and taste everything, and I wake up and realize that that's what I'm trying to do when I write to you, or talk to you on the phone— and although I could never write or say as well or as much as I feel for you, I'm trying through typing and through clutching the phone against my ear to grab for exactly what it's like to have you right in front of me—because that's what I want more than anything else in the world. That's all I want.”

He said nothing, and he watched the outline of her body slump a little against the door frame then grow smaller as she moved back down the hall where she disappeared into her bedroom.

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It had been weeks since their last phone conversation, and Sally's emails had tapered off to once a week, at the most. Alex figured that after their last conversation, she had assumed that he was asking her to back off: allow him time to separate from the life he had lived in Boston, and space to create a new one out in the Midwest. As was often the case when he harnessed every scrap of energy in his being toward disguising how he truly felt, he had managed to cast her out, away from him, instead of drawing her closer.

The start of the school year did nothing to subdue his loneliness. If anything, the sense of isolation he felt—as if he had misplaced something precious through some clumsy error—only heightened when he was in the classroom, assigning readings by his beloved authors, all the young students blinking up at him without a shred of familiarity.

As Labor Day approached, he tried to think up reasons that would take him to Boston for the long weekend: rational, justifiable reasons besides his true motivation for wanting to go. But even though nothing else came to mind, he bought a plane ticket anyway, and he called Sally the night before his flight.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Were you sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sorry. I can call you later—“

"No. It's okay. It's nice to hear your voice."

"It's nice to hear your voice, too."

They were both quiet for a moment, and Alex could hear her bed sheets ruffling against the mouthpiece of her phone.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Sleepy," she said.

Alex chuckled. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. Okay, I guess."

"How are classes?"

"They're good. No one knows what the hell I'm talking about half the time, but I'm working on it."

"Shaping young minds?"

"Trying to. Half of them think Virginia Woolf is just a character Nicole Kidman played in a movie. "

Sally laughed sleepily. "Well, are you making any friends? Got any pretty young coeds coming to visit you during office hours?"

"No. I mean, there are tons of pretty coeds. All these pretty, young girls like you. But I don't want to talk to any of them. I don't even want to be in the same room with any of them for longer than the university's paying me to be."

"Well that's the spirit," she said.

"I keep having this feeling, this really uneasy feeling that I shouldn't have come here. Anne kicked me out, and I felt like I had to do something big, I had to make some sort of drastic life change and get my shit together and be productive and settle on some kind of career that didn't seem completely horrible. I didn't think I had any choice. But ever since I got here, it's like I can see all the other things I could have done, that I should have done, and it's like some sort of cruel joke."

He looked out his window, across the rooftop of the neighboring apartment building, over the small town streets, toward the dim, twinkling lights of the homes in the distance.

"I miss you," he said.

There was only the soft rustling of sheets for a second, and then she said, "I miss you too." She sounded relieved.

"That's good," he said, and she laughed. "I mean, it's not good that you miss me, but, well, it's kind of the reason I'm calling." He could feel his entire body smile. "I have a surprise for you."

"Tell me. I can't stand surprises."

"Okay. When you come home from work tomorrow, you're going to find me waiting for you, sitting on your doorstep."

* * *

Alex lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling fan as it slowly pushed the air around the room. He held out his arm and spread his fingers as wide as they would go, then brought his hand down like a mask against his face. It was something he used to do when he was a child when his body was heavy with exhaustion, but his mind remained alert, not allowing rest. Like a security blanket, his hand blocked out sight and sound, eventually lulling him to sleep.

And even though he knew his little trick wouldn't work tonight, he lay there like that for a bit longer, willing his breath and heartbeat to slow. Then he sat up and pressed his feet to the floor, turning his back on all the insecurities and doubts and reasons-why-not that had been a constant presence in him for so long. He left them all there, under the blankets and pillows, and walked down the hall toward Sally's bedroom door.

He walked in without knocking and saw her lying on the far side of the bed, her back facing him. He said nothing as he climbed in beside her, wrapping his arms and legs around her from behind, finding the warm curve of her neck with his nose and lips. Without a sound, she threaded her bare legs through his, held one of his hands against her stomach and the other near her cheek where he could feel her breath, all of it having a tender familiarity as if it were merely one night among thousands of other nights they had lied together just like this, their side-by-side bodies holding up against the forceful undertow of the world just beyond their bed.

