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Opening extract from

Goodbye Stranger

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GOODBYE STRANGER

REBECCA STEAD

Andersen Press

PROLOGUE

When she was eight years old, Bridget Barsamian woke up in a hospital, where a doctor told her she shouldn't be alive. It's possible that he was complimenting her heart's determination to keep pumping when half her blood was still uptown on 114th Street, but more likely he was scolding her for roller-skating into traffic the way she had.

Despite what it looked like, she *had* been paying attention—she saw the red light ahead, and the cars. She merely failed to realize how quickly she was approaching them. Her skates had a way of making her feel powerful and relaxed, and it was easy to lose track of her speed.

When she was eight, Bridget loved two things: Charlie Chaplin and VW Bugs. She practiced her Chaplin moves whenever she could—his funny duckwalk and the casually choppy way he zoomed around on his skates, arms straight down, legs swinging.

Her interest in Volkswagen Bugs was less aesthetic. Whenever she saw one, she shouted, "Bug-buggy, ZOO-buggy!" which entitled her to punch whoever she happened to be with, twice, on the arm.

She saw the red light and the traffic that afternoon, but

she also saw a yellow VW Bug double-parked near a fire hydrant. So, still hurtling toward Broadway, she turned her head to yell "Bug-buggy, ZOO-buggy!" at her friend Tabitha, who was on a scooter right behind her. She wanted to be sure Tabitha heard her loud and clear, because she intended to hit her on the arm, twice, when they stopped at the corner, and didn't want any arguments.

"Bug-buggy, ZOO-buggy!" she shouted.

But Tabitha had fallen behind. "WHAT?" Tabitha called back.

So Bridget started again. "BUG—" And she flew straight past the corner into the street, a Chaplin move if there ever was one, accompanied by the high music of two screaming mothers—her own and Tabitha's—from somewhere far behind.

She missed third grade, but her body repaired itself. After four surgeries and a year of physical therapy, she showed no sign of injury. But Bridget was different, after: she froze sometimes when she was about to cross the street, both legs locked against her will, and she had a recurring nightmare that she'd been wrapped head to toe like a mummy, from which she always woke with a sucking breath, kicking at her covers.

The nightmares began when she was still in the hospital. In those days, which stretched into weeks, her mother sometimes brought her cello and played quietly at the foot of Bridget's bed. Sometimes her mother's music drew designs behind Bridget's closed eyelids. Sometimes it put her to sleep. One afternoon, Bridge woke to the sound of her mother's

cello and said loudly, "I want to be called Bridge after this. I don't feel like Bridget anymore." Still playing, her mother nodded, and Bridge went back to sleep.

There was one other thing. On the day Bridge was discharged from the hospital, one of the nurses said something that changed the way she thought about herself. The nurse said, "Thirteen broken bones and a punctured lung. You must have been put on this earth for a reason, little girl, to have survived."

It was a nicer, more interesting way of saying what the doctor had told her when she first woke up after the accident. Bridge couldn't answer the nurse, because by that time her jaw had been wired shut. Otherwise, she might have asked, "What *is* the reason?" Instead, the question stayed in her head, where it circled.

ONE

THE CAT EARS

Bridge started wearing the cat ears in September, on the third Monday of seventh grade.

The cat ears were black, on a black headband. Not exactly the color of her hair, but close. Checking her reflection in the back of her cereal spoon, she thought they looked surprisingly natural.

On the table in front of her was a wrinkled sheet of homework. It wasn't homework yet, actually. Aside from her name, the paper was blank. She itched to draw a small, round Martian in the upper left-hand corner.

Instead, she put down the spoon, picked up her pen, and wrote:

What is love?

This was her assignment: answer the question "What is love?"

In full sentences.

She looked at the empty blue lines on the page and tried to imagine them full of words.

Love is _____.

Her mom had once told her that love was a kind of music. One day, you could just . . . hear it.

"Was it like that when you met Dad?" Bridge had asked. "Like hearing music for the first time?"

"Oh, I heard the music before that," her mom had said. "And I danced with a few people before I met Daddy. But when I found him, I knew I had a dance partner for life."

But Bridge couldn't write that. And anyway, her mom was a cellist. Everything was about music to her.

Bridge squeezed her eyes closed until she saw glittery things floating in the dark. Then she started writing, quickly.

Love is when you like someone so much that you can't just call it "like," so you have to call it "love."

It was only one sentence, but she was out of time.

Bridge had noticed the cat ears earlier that morning, on the shelf above her desk, where they'd been sitting since the previous Halloween. They felt strange at first, and made the sides of her head throb a tiny bit when she chewed her cereal, but as she walked toward school, the ears became a comforting presence. When she was small, her father would sometimes rest his hand on her head as they went down the street. It was a little bit like that.

Bridge stopped just outside the front doors of her school, slipped her phone out of her pocket, and texted her mom:

At school.

XOXO, her mom texted back.

Bridge's mother was on an Amtrak train, coming home from a performance in Boston with her string quartet. Bridge's father, who owned a coffee place a few blocks from their apartment, had to be at the store by seven a.m. And her

brother, Jamie, left early for high school. His subway ride was almost an hour long.

So there had been no one at home that morning to make her think twice about the cat ears. Not that anyone in her family was the type to try to stop her from wearing them in the first place. And not that she was the type to *be* stopped.

Tabitha was next to Bridge's locker, waiting. "Hurry up, the bell's about to ring."

"Okay." Bridge faced her locker and puckered up. "One, two . . ." She leaned in and kissed the skinny metal door.

"Nice one. You can stop doing that anytime, you know."

Bridge spun her lock and jerked the door open. "Not until the end of the month." Seventh grade was the year they finally got to have lockers, and Bridge swore she was going to kiss hers every day until the end of September.

"You have ears," Tab said. "Extra ones, I mean."

"Yeah." Bridge put both hands up and touched the rounded tips of her cat ears. "Soft."

"They're sweet. You gonna wear them all day?"

"Maybe." Madame Lawrence might make her take them off, she knew. But Bridge didn't have French on Mondays.

If she had French on Mondays, life would really be unfair.

The next day she wore them again.

"Un chat!" Madame Lawrence said, pointing as Bridge took her seat at the very back of the room. And Bridge's head tingled in the way that happens when someone points. But that was all.

By Wednesday, the ears felt like a regular part of her.

VALENTINE'S DAY

You paint your toenails. You don't steal nail polish, though.

Vinny calls you chicken: all of her polish comes from the six-dollar manicure place. Every month, she puts another bottle in her pocket while the lady is getting the warm towel for her hands. You told her you want to be a lawyer and can't be stealing stuff. Vinny rolled her eyes. Then Zoe rolled *her* eyes. Vinny's eye-rolls are perfect dives, but Zoe always tries too hard. Her lids tremble and her eyeballs look like they might disappear into her head.

Your mother is shouting that it's time to leave for school. You suck in air and shout back: "Just a minute!" You are not going to school. She doesn't realize that, of course.

It turns out that, in high school, not painting your toenails is considered disgusting. You blow on your wet toes, little puffs. "So much for the freshman-year perfect-attendance certificate," you tell yourself.

"What?" Your mother is standing in the doorway looking impatient.

"Nothing," you say.

She squeaks about your flip-flops, how it's February, but

you tell her it's fine, it's not so cold, there's no gym today, and nobody cares.

Really you are just going to hang out in the park until she leaves for work. Then you will come back home.

Your feet are ice. The flip-flops were a stupid idea—what were you thinking? The playground swings are freezing and your hands ache, but you hold on, walk yourself back a few steps, and let your body fly.

It feels wonderful.

The playground is deserted. It's too early for little kids to be out, especially in February, and everyone else is where you're supposed to be: at school. On your way to the park, you had to dodge Bridge Barsamian, struggling with a big cardboard box, those tatty-looking cat ears she's been wearing since September peeking over the top. You sidestepped into a bodega just in time.

You lean forward and swing back, lean back and swing forward.

Straight ahead of you is the big rock where you played when you were little. There's a divot in it, a crater where everyone dumped acorns, leaves, grass, those poison red berries if there were any. You poured them from your shirt-hammocks into the crater and poked the mess with sticks. "Dinner!" You'd all sit in a circle, and Vinny would dare everyone to lick their berry-stained fingers. She was always in charge—even then, before you understood it, her beauty was hard to look away from: glossy dark hair and full red lips. Snow White with a tan and a strut.

• • •

It's windy on the little platform at the top of the wooden climbing tower. The short walls are covered with messages scrawled in thick marker, big sloppy hearts and dirty words. When you were small, you would swing yourself up legs-first, but now you have to stick your head through the opening in the floor and then hoist the rest. You certainly have grown, you tell yourself.

You sit on the rough plank floor and wedge your back into the nearest corner, the one that was always yours. You can almost see them, in their places: Vinny to the left, Zoe to the right. They're not your friends anymore. They're both other people now. The girls you can see looking back at you are gone. No one talks about these disappearances. Everyone pretends it's all right.

Remember the time you found a beer bottle up here? It was empty, but the three of you took turns holding it, staggering around and pretending to drink—though never touching it to your lips; that would have been disgusting. You felt almost drunk for real.

Vinny's father had been there that afternoon, seen you, and demanded that you all come down. He took the empty bottle with one hand and jerked Vinny's arm with the other, dragging her toward a garbage can. She tried to cover, acting like she was just walking along next to him, double-time.

You check your phone. Your mom was getting into the shower when you left. You wonder if she has left for work.

You can see the sun touching the tops of the buildings

across the street, making its way through the neighborhood like someone whose attention you are careful not to attract. It's still shady in the playground. But aside from the loneliness, and the cold, it's all exactly the same. If you keep your own body out of sight, you could be nine years old again.

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