I HAVE LOST MY WAY

GAYLE FORMAN

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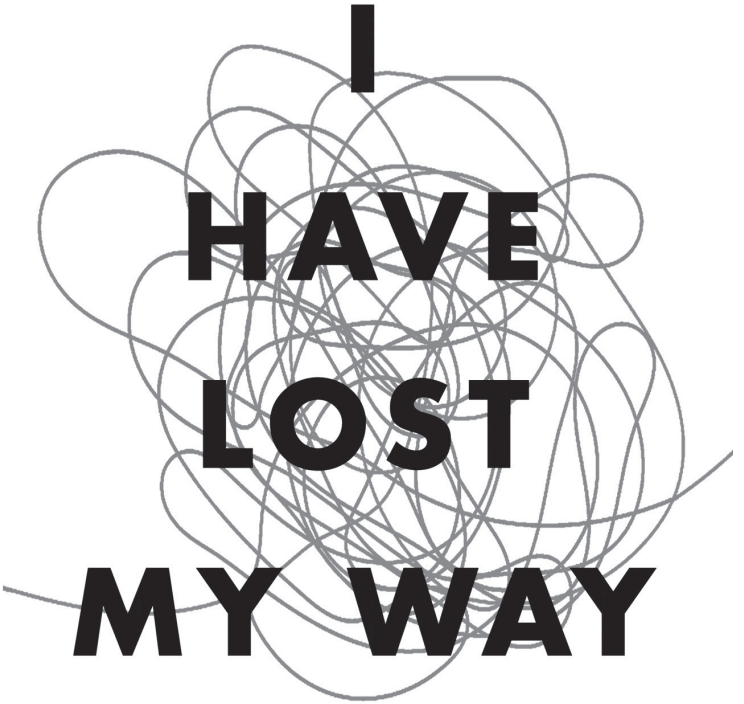
For Ken Wright, Anna Jarzab, and Michael Bourret

Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.

–Jalaluddin Rumi

Not all those who wander are lost.

–J. R. R. Tolkien


I
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I HAVE LOST MY WAY

I have lost my way.

Freya stares at the words she just typed into her phone.

I have lost my way. Where did *that* come from?

"Excuse me, miss," the car service driver repeats. "I think I have lost my way." And Freya startles back to reality. She's in the backseat of a town car on her way to her seventh—or is it eighth?—doctor's appointment in the past two weeks, and the driver has gotten turned around outside the tunnel.

She toggles over to her calendar. "Park and Seventieth," she tells the driver. "Turn right on Third, then left on Seventy-First."

She returns her attention to the screen. *I have lost my way.* Eighteen characters. But the words have the undeniable ring of truth to them, the way middle C does. The way few of her posts these days do. Earlier this morning, someone from Hayden's office put up a photo of her gripping a microphone, grinning. *#BornToSing*, the caption read. *#ThankfulThursday.*

Really it should read *#TBT*, because the image is not only weeks old, it's of a person who no longer exists.

I have lost my way.

What would happen if she posted that? What would they say if they knew?

It's only when her phone makes the whooshing noise that Freya realizes she did post it. The responses start to flow in, but before she has a chance to read them, there's a text from her mother: 720 Park Ave, and a dropped pin. Because of course her mother is monitoring the feed as vigilantly as Freya. And of course her mother has misunderstood. Anyway, Freya hasn't lost her way. She's lost her voice.

She deletes the post, hoping it was fast enough that no one screenshot it or shared it, but she knows nothing on the internet ever goes away. Unlike in real life.

Her mother is waiting for her when the car arrives, pacing, holding the test results from the last doctor, which she had to hightail it into the city to collect. "Good, good, you're here," she says, opening the door before the driver has pulled to a complete stop and yanking Freya to the sidewalk before she has a chance to give him the ten-dollar tip she's holding. "I already filled out the paperwork." She says this like she did it to save time, but she fills out the paperwork at all of Freya's doctor's appointments.

They're ushered straight past reception into the examination room. It's the kind of service a $1,500 consult, no insurance taken (thanks, Hayden) buys you.

"What seems to be the problem?" the doctor asks as he washes his hands. He does not look at Freya. He probably has no idea who she is. He looks old, like a grandfather, though reportedly he has treated the sort of one-named wonder that as of a few weeks ago everyone thought Freya was on her way to becoming.

She wishes she'd read some of the responses before deleting that tweet. Maybe someone would've told her what to do. Maybe someone would've told her it didn't matter if she could sing. They'd still love her.

But she knows that's bullshit. Love is conditional. Everything is.

"She's lost her voice," her mother says. "Temporarily." She goes through the tediously familiar chronology—"third week in the studio" and "all going flawlessly" and *blah blah blah blah*—and all the while the phrase *I have lost my way* goes through Freya's head, like a song on repeat, the way she and Sabrina used to loop the same track over and over again until they'd dissected it, uncovered all its secrets, and made them their own. It drove their mother crazy, until she discovered the utility of it.

The doctor palpates her neck, peers into her throat, scopes her sinuses. Freya wonders how he would respond if she hocked a loogie. If he would actually look at her like a person instead of a piece of machinery that has malfunctioned. If he would *hear* her, singing voice or not.

"Can you sing a high C for me?" the doctor asks.

Freya sings a high C.

"She can hit the individual notes," her mother explains. "And her pitch is perfect. Hayden says he's never heard pitch like that before."

"Is that a fact?" the doctor says, feeling the cords in her neck. "Let's hear a song. Something simple for me, like 'Happy Birthday.'"

"Happy Birthday." Who can't sing "Happy Birthday"? A child can sing "Happy Birthday." A person who can't sing at all can sing "Happy Birthday." To show her opinion of such a request, she starts to sing, but in a heavy French accent.

"Apee birsday to you . . ." she trills. Her mother frowns, and Freya doubles down on the accent. *"Apee birsday to vous . . ."*

But her voice is smarter than she thinks. It will not be outsmarted by antics or a bad fake accent. And as soon as the song makes the baby leap in octave, from G4 to G5, she gets tripped up in it. The panic takes over. The breath turns to lead.

"Appee birsday, dear . . ." And on the *dear* it happens. The air shuts off. The song is strangled mid-breath. A stillborn melody.

"Happy birthday to me," she finishes in sarcastically atonally American deadpan, making a slicing gesture across her throat in case the message wasn't clear enough.

"Is it paralysis? We heard something like that happened with"—her mother's voice drops—*"Adele."*

Freya can hear the hope in her mother's voice. Not because she wants vocal paralysis but because she wants to

link Freya to Adele. A few years back, she read that book *The Path*, and she bought into it 200 percent. *Dream it, be it* is her motto.

"I'm going to send you for some tests," the doctor says, retreating into the already-familiar jargon. "A CAT scan, a biopsy, an LEMG, maybe an X-ray." He pulls out a card, slides it over, and gives Freya a look that does not seem all that Hippocratic. "And you might consider talking to someone."

"We did, but the lobotomy didn't take."

"Freya!" her mother scolds. To the doctor, "We're already seeing a therapist."

We. Like they're seeing him together. Like they're both taking the little pills that are supposed to quell the anxiety that is supposedly stifling Freya's voice.

"This *just* happened. Literally overnight. If this were"—and here her mother's voice drops to a whisper—"*psychological*, it wouldn't happen in the blink of an eye like that, would it?"

The doctor makes noncommittal noises. "Let's schedule a follow-up in two weeks."

Two weeks is too late. Hayden has made that clear. He called in favors to arrange a visit to the famous doctor, treater of one-named wonders like Adele and Lorde and Beyoncé. He paid the $1,500 consultation fee because this guy, Hayden swore, is a miracle worker—implying that what Freya needs is not overpriced medical care but an actual miracle.

Outside, Hayden's car and driver are waiting, even though he didn't send the driver to take Freya here. The driver opens the door and bows slightly. "Mr. Booth has requested I bring

you to the offices."

Freya has spent much of the past two years in Hayden's offices, but the request makes her feel queasy. Her mother, who still, after all this time, acts like Hayden is the emperor and she the peasant, looks freaked out. She frantically scrolls through her texts. "He probably just wants to know how it went."

Hayden Booth doesn't summon without reason, and the reason would not be to gather information. Freya's sure he received a call from the doctor the minute the door shut behind them. Or, who knows, maybe he had a secret camera filming the entire exam.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If she doesn't go to Hayden's office, he can't fire her. And if he can't fire her, her career isn't over. And if her career isn't over, people will still love her.

Right?

"I'm tired," she tells her mother, with a weary wave. "You go."

"He asked for us both." She looks to the driver. "Did he ask for us both?"

The driver has no clue. Why would he?

"I'm exhausted from all the stupid doctors' appointments," Freya says, going into what her mother calls diva mode. Diva mode befuddles her mother because on the one hand, *dream it, be it*, but on the other hand, it's fucking annoying.

When her mother gets upset, she purses her lips in a way that makes her look exactly like Sabrina, or Sabrina exactly

like her. "It's like the genes chose sides," their old babysitter used to joke. Meaning Freya took after their father—the reddish skin, the high forehead, the telltale Ethiopian eyes—whereas Sabrina looked more like their mother, the hair curly, not kinky, the skin light enough to pass, if not for white, then Puerto Rican.

But then her mother reconsiders, and the prune mouth is gone. "You know what? Maybe that's smarter. I'll talk to him. Remind him that you're only nineteen. That you've come so far. That we have so much momentum. Making them wait will only make them hungrier. We just need a bit more time." She's back on her phone. "I'm ordering you an Uber."

"Mom. I'm quite capable of getting myself back home."

Her mother continues tapping on the phone. Freya's not meant to take the subway alone anymore. Her mother has a tracker installed on Freya's phone. She exercises caution even though, like Freya's diva attitude, this too is premature. Freya is not famous. She is somewhere between buzz and celebrity on Hayden's scale. If she goes dancing at clubs, or hits the kind of bar or café frequented by up-and-coming Actor/Model/Singers, she's recognized; if she does an event at a shopping mall (which she no longer does; not on brand, the publicists say), she's mobbed. But on the subway, amid regular people, she is exactly nobody. But for her mother, every one of her actions is aspirational.

"I'm just gonna walk a bit," Freya tells her mother. "Maybe go through the park, clear my head, see what's on sale at Barneys."

She knows her mother will not refuse the healing power of Barneys. Though Freya still feels mildly uncomfortable in places like that. She's often followed, and she is never sure if it's because she's half-famous or half-black.

"Go find something pretty," her mother says. "Take your mind off things."

"What else is on the schedule?" Freya asks, out of habit, because there's always something and her mother has it memorized. Her mother's awkward pause is painful. Because the answer is *nothing.* Nothing is scheduled because this time was allotted to being in the studio. Right now, she's meant to be finishing up recording. Next week, Hayden is going to some private island for a week, and then he's back in the studio with Lulia, the gap-toothed singer he discovered busking in the Berlin metro whom Hayden made so famous that her visage smirks from a billboard in Times Square.

"That could be you," Hayden once told her.

Not anymore.

"Nothing," her mother says.

"So I'll see you back at the apartment."

"Well, it's Thursday."

Thursday nights her mother and Sabrina have a standing dinner date. It usually goes unmentioned. Freya is never invited.

Obviously.

"I can put it off if you need me," her mother says.

The bitterness is awful. She can taste it. She wonders if

it'll melt the enamel off her (recently whitened) teeth.

It's also embarrassing. What should she have to be bitter about where her sister is concerned? Sabrina, who, as her mother says, has *sacrificed so much*. She whispers the last part the same way she whispers *breather* when discussing what's going on with Freya. "You're just taking a *breather*."

(*Breather* is code for *self-immolation*.)

"You'd better go," Freya tells her mother before the bitterness melts away her insides, leaving only a bag of empty skin. "Hayden's waiting."

Her mother glances at the SUV, the driver. "I'll call you as soon as I get news." She climbs into the car. "Clear your head. Take a day for yourself. Don't think about any of this. You never know—it might be just what the doctor ordered. I bet if you can go the rest of the day without thinking about this, you'll feel better. Go shopping. Go home and binge *Scandal*."

Yes, that's exactly what Freya needs. And perhaps a glass of warm milk. And a second lobotomy.

She waits for her mother to drive off before she starts walking, not south toward Barneys but west toward the park. She pulls out her phone and looks at her Instagram feed. There's another shot of her, standing outside the studio on Second Ave., under a just-blooming cherry tree. The caption reads, *#Music #Flowers #Life #BeautifulThings*, and the comments are full of nice things that should make her feel better. *Nothing more Btiful than U.* And *NEED NEW VID!* And *FollowbackPLZ!!!!*