

An excerpt from “The Book of Why” by Nicholas Montemaranano

Winter on Martha’s Vineyard, five years after. The tree in the yard, its limbs heavy with ice, leans toward the house. Branches crack under their own weight, shatter on the walkway. Wind swings the ice-coated hammock low to the ground. The front door is frozen shut.

It’s been a few months since I’ve heard her sing, so I put on my favorite song. Her voice will never grow old, but this is the smallest consolation.

What changes is the listener, forty-two now, long-bearded, going gray, heavier than he used to be but still what most would describe as thin. Her music isn’t all that I have. I have photographs and a box of keepsakes—letters and doodles, a few sweaters, a pair of socks, her favorite books, notes in the margins, ditties that ended up in her songs.

I have the dog, too—a long-haired German shepherd. She used to be hers, then ours, now mine, but I think of the dog, still, as ours. Twelve years old a month ago, on Valentine’s Day.

Hello is the beginning and goodbye the end of every story, the refrain tells me. First and last words—hers to me and mine to her. Unless you count the many times every day that I speak to her—sometimes in my head, but more often aloud. I can do that. Now that I live in Chilmark year round, I don’t see other people very often. Every few months a ferry, then a long drive to see my mother in Queens. Otherwise, my life is solitary. There’s Ralph, of course, and she counts as company. She wakes me with her nose each morning and waits for me to say hello, which is the word I greet her with, and then I allow her up on the bed, only her front paws, and scratch her ears until she moans, and then the day—this happens every day, and there’s some comfort in this—begins. She follows me from room to room, but spends most of the day sleeping, twitching her way through dreams, unless I take her with me to town or to the beach to play fetch. When I drive or walk to the market, I wear a baseball hat; I don’t want people to recognize me, though I suppose by now they might not.

It could be you here, singing, if it weren’t for the fact that I know this recording so well by now, every note and pause and breath. I listen closely, but it never changes. I roll a tennis ball across the floor and Ralph brings it back to me. She holds it in her mouth, tail wagging. When I reach, she moves her head. A game we’ve played since she was a puppy. I point to my lap, she comes closer. I point to my lap again, she drops the ball. When I try to roll it past her again, she plays goalie and stops it with her front paws, crushes the ball between her jaws.

Enough with the ball; I want her close. She lies on my lap, and I close my eyes and pet her face, rub her belly, put my hand by her mouth to feel her panting, and you might be in the next room singing.

The song suddenly ends. I'm never prepared for this silence. Except I hear a voice, a woman saying hello, a knock at my door. I'm not sure how anyone could have gotten here. More than a few times, even in weather not as inclement as today's, I've had to abandon my car on the steep dirt road leading to the house. This happened on our honeymoon. Our shoes stuck in mud three inches deep, we walked the rest of the way up barefoot. I had to carry Ralph, who was still a puppy but getting heavy, maybe thirty-five pounds. It wasn't yet our home, just a house we rented. We talked, after our honeymoon, about how much we'd love to own the house, and by the following year we did. I might have said then that I'd intended it: I tacked photos of the house on the corkboard above my desk; I ordered address labels; on the first of each month I mailed myself a letter here.

Before I look out the window, I wonder what I'll do if no one's there, if I'm hearing things. I used to be afraid of ghosts when I was a boy, but for the past five years I've wanted to see one. Any ghost would do, would provide a kind of answer, but one in particular would be most welcome, no offense to the others out there, including my father. That is, if there are such things. I'm not sure if I believe in literal ghosts. Spirits, phantasms, apparitions. I certainly do believe in ghosts if you mean things that haunt you—memories, feelings, regrets.

I'm disappointed to see that there really is a woman at my door. She appears solid, flesh and blood. Literally, I see blood— running from her nose and staining the tissue she's holding. She's pressing her other arm against her stomach as if she's wearing a sling, though she's not. I fear a scam of some sort—a robbery, a man with her, perhaps hiding behind my ice-covered car—but I quickly change my thoughts lest they become reality. Some old habits never die. I have to shoulder the storm door three times before the ice gives, then I gesture for her to step back so that the door, which opens with my next push, doesn't further injure her.

She's tall, almost as tall as I am, and has long red hair. A face young and old— dimples and crow's feet. Constellations of freckles on her forehead and nose. Blue eyes. Late thirties, I'm guessing, but probably gets proofed when she buys wine. She looks familiar, but then again, everyone looks familiar to me. She's smiling but sniffling. I can't tell if she's laughing or crying.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she says. "My car is stuck down the road. I can't move my wrist. And my nose—maybe it's broken, I don't know."

"Come in," I say, and I can see now that she is crying but trying to laugh.

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