

Prayer of the Bell

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I guess you probably want to know how I got to be in a mess like this. Maybe I should start out by saying I'm not smart. My dad is smart. He's a materials scientist. And my sister—that's Sonya—she's a chemical engineer, and my brother Sam designs cars. I can't even drive a car 'cause I can't pass my driving test. Which is why I ride my bike everywhere, which is how I met Genko a couple of months ago, when I moved here at the start of summer. He was getting your mail when I rode my bike past your driveway and I stopped and said hello. He asked me if he could ride my bike sometimes if he stuck to the road around the pond, and I said sure, if he'd promise he'd always bring it back to my cabin when I needed it, 'cause I have to ride my bike to work and stuff 'cause I can't drive. And he said he would and that's how Genko and me met.

I saw you before that, though, a couple of times I think, out in your garden or ringing your bell at sunset. You didn't live here last summer, I know that. I don't think anybody lived in your cabin last summer, or if they did I was never in ours when they were in theirs. I asked Genko when you moved here, and he said right before school started last year, so that's why we never met till this summer, 'cause I live with my dad and stepmom in town except in summer 'cause my dad's cabin doesn't have heat. I told Genko him and me are opposites. He has you and lost his dad, and I have my dad and lost my mom. I've got my stepmom of course, and she's okay, but I don't think it's the same as having my mom.

Anyway, if you want to know how this happened—and I feel better now, by the way—well, I guess like everything else in my life, I don't know. It's like it just did. If I was smart I maybe could have stopped it from happening. But Dad says I take after my mom, and he married my mom for her looks, not her brains, and Sonya and Sam got Mom's looks and his brains but I got stuff the other way around. That's why I live in my dad's cabin in summer, 'cause him and my stepmom get tired of me hanging around their house and I embarrass them riding my bike around like a kid like Genko, and they throw these pool parties all summer long and don't want to have to be explaining me all the time.

So that's why I'm here, and I don't mean to sound like I don't like it. I'm glad I'm here. I like to be alone and come out to the pond at night and listen to the loons and the frogs. I bring my quilt and lie down on our dock and look up at all the stars surrounding me like I'm in a cave of stars. You ever notice how you watch and watch and all of a sudden it's like the roof of stars starts to come down toward you so you feel like you can almost touch them? You ever do that, just come out at night and listen and look? I see you all the time in the daytime watering and weeding your vegetables and flowers, and at sunset, when you come out and ring your bell. But not when it's really dark. If my dad would fix it so I could, I'd live here right through the winter like you and Genko and on clear nights I'd get my quilt and walk out to the pond all iced over and lie down at the end of the dock with the frogs all frozen asleep underneath me and watch the stars.

I guess you're waiting for me to say, though, how I got to be messed up like this. It must be hard having to listen to people and not

be able to tell them to hurry up. I just want to say I really appreciate you coming over to help me tonight and I'm really sorry about your operation and your not being able to talk. Genko said you wouldn't mind him telling me and I hope you don't, and I wouldn't tell anybody else. I guess it came out one day 'cause I asked him why you always wear a scarf tied right up high around your neck, even when it's boiling hot out, and that's when he told me they had to take your voice box out 'cause it had cancer. But he said you got a settlement and that's how you could buy your cabin and he said you're okay now and that you don't mind the scarf or the sun and that you love Earth. That's the way he put it. He said you love Earth.

So like I said, I don't know why it happened but I guess it must have started 'cause I took the astronomy course at the junior college. Sonya said don't bother, Lucy, you need to know math to do astronomy, but I said it wasn't like I was saying I wanted to be an astronomer—though I'd love that, of course—just that I wanted to be able to name the stars and know why the moon gets bigger and smaller, that kind of stuff, that's all. So Sonya said she'd help me fill out the registration form, and I took the class, but Sonya was right, I flunked, even though I studied and most of the time in class I thought I knew what the teacher was teaching. So that was a big disappointment but the thing that came out of it was they were looking for volunteers to help out at their Friday night planetarium shows and I volunteered and they took me as an usher.

That's how I met Gregory last spring. He was real nice to me, thanking me every night for volunteering, and that was pretty amazing 'cause he's going for his PhD and knows everything there is to know about astronomy.

Maybe you already know what I'm gonna say happened and you don't even need me to say it, but I swear I didn't mean it to happen and I sure didn't know it was going to. It's just that one night we were cleaning up after a show, and he said he was heading out for a beer to celebrate the end of the term, and did I want to go with him. I said all right and he put my bike in his car and we went into town and he asked me about myself and I told him I work at the Walmart stocking shelves and bringing in the shopping carts and stuff 'cause I'm not good with cash and he asked me what are you good at. I said I was good at seeing things most people don't seem to see, and he asked me what I meant and I tried to tell him. Like how sometimes when I'm riding my bike out here, away from town, everything stops being what it usually is and starts to be something else, something—wider, sort of, and shinier, and this humming starts to happen like bees but it's not a sound, it's more like the air, like the light I see is humming and all of a sudden I'm not there, not as me, anyway, and not even human, really, and everything I was thinking before disappears. It only lasts for a minute or two, or maybe just a few seconds. But when it ends I know that the things people think matter don't matter at all. We don't matter either, not like we think we do, 'cause we're—well, we're not these whole, separate things we're pretending to be—and we don't even know it's pretend. I didn't tell Gregory this but sometimes it happens when I think about my mom, but anyway that's just sometimes. It happens other times, too, so I didn't mention it. Instead I told him about this place, the pond and the stars and the loons, and he said he'd take me home in his car, so we came back here, and that's I guess what I did wrong. I spread my quilt out on the dock and said let's look at the stars and then he leans over

me and kisses me and stuff and I didn't say no 'cause I didn't want him to be disappointed in me or think I didn't love him when I did, when all I ever did was wait for Friday night to see him, even just to say hello and have him say thank you before I went home.

I guess maybe I knew the whole time he was just pretending, 'cause as soon as he went home I cried the rest of the night. I cried so hard I felt sick the next day and like I didn't want to show up to work. Everybody goes to the Walmart and I kept feeling like, what if somebody knew. What if he came in, or if he told somebody. When I got home from work, for the first time, I locked the door as soon as I got in the house, and even though the sun was only just starting to set, and I could hear you and Genko ringing your bell, I pulled down all the shades. I was like that all week, and then on Friday night when I went to the planetarium I was so scared to see him again, scared he might say something funny to me, or not say anything at all, and then when I got there, he's not there. It's my astronomy teacher working that night and he sees me and says, "Oh, hello!" real casual, and then he says, "You took one of my classes, didn't you?" And I say yeah, I flunked it, but I still wanted to help out, and he said that was really nice of me, most students do it for brownie points. And then he says, "I'm glad I can rely on you, Lucy," in this real friendly way so I knew he didn't know anything about me, so I ask him if Mr. Phelps—that's Gregory—if he's off tonight, and he says to me, "Mr. Phelps is off for good, lucky man. He won a fellowship at an observatory in Chile, and he's probably arriving there right about now."

I just nodded and said, oh, that's great, that's so nice for him. And then I put out the programs and said hello to the people who were

lining up, and when it was all dark and the show started, I remember I just sat there not understanding a single thing my teacher was saying to the audience, just looking at that bowl of stars and realizing I was going to live my whole life without ever making sense of anything. And then when I was riding my bike home that night, I thought, I might as well stop trying to think since it never does me any good. I should just look at the world, and hear it and touch it and smell it and taste it until some day I go to sleep.

And that felt good, to just be okay with not trying to figure stuff out any more. And the next morning, I was able to go to work at the store and not feel like everybody knew stuff about me. And I could come back to the cabin at night and not feel like I had to pull down the shades as soon as I stepped in the door. And that's how it went for a few more weeks, until all of a sudden I realized I'd missed my period. So I bought one of those kits at Walmart and when I got home I used it and it said I was pregnant.

And when I read that, well, the sun was just starting to set and I looked out the window and saw you and Genko in your garden, bowing in front of your bell like I've seen you do lots of times, and I thought I'd listen 'cause I like the words you say when you ring the bell—not you, I mean, 'cause you can't talk, what Genko says while you pull the bell: "May this bell sound throughout the world. May all beings hear it. May their longings cease as it echoes in their hearts."

Well, Genko saw me watching and looked straight at me and said it again. And I thought, maybe he knows, maybe he saw us out there and somehow he knows and he's making this wish for me. But I decided I didn't care if he was. I'd just listen to the bell. And

I did, until it faded away and you went back inside. And then I got hungry and made myself some peanut butter toast and a glass of milk and sat watching the sky get dark and eating my dinner. And then I went to bed. And that night and every night last week I fell asleep remembering you and Genko and the bell.

I guess what I mean is, part of me knew if I wanted to do something I had to do it soon, but the rest of me never held onto thinking about it long enough to decide. Then Saturday my dad calls and says he and my stepmom and Sonya and her husband, Pete, are coming Sunday 'cause it's Pete's birthday and he wants to go fishing, and would I have the place all nice and clean? So I said I would and when I got home from work I scrubbed the kitchen and vacuumed and pulled all the weeds in the front yard and made a potato salad. So when I got up in the morning and my back hurt so much, I thought it was all the cleaning I did, and then after they got here and headed out onto the dock and fished, I lay down for a while, but I didn't feel good. Then they came in and they hadn't caught anything but that was okay 'cause my dad brought steaks and I'd made potato salad and Sonya made a lettuce salad, but when we all sat down to eat, I could barely touch a thing. Then it was time for cake, and everybody sang Happy Birthday and Pete cut cake for everybody and gave me a big piece and I tried to eat it but all of a sudden I had to excuse myself and went to the bathroom and threw up. I didn't tell anybody and they all went home pretty soon after the cake, but I couldn't lie down again 'cause the pain had gotten so bad. And then the bleeding started and I knew. So I sat on the toilet for a while and it came out. Then I wrapped up in my quilt and came out here, but even though I passed it, the cramps were

still so bad I guess I was crying. I'm sorry if I woke you up but I really appreciate your coming out here and helping me clean up. I never had so much blood before. And for bringing me tea and talking with me. I mean, for listening.

I'm okay now. And I'm glad you know. I don't know why, but it feels good somebody else knows.

And I'm sorry I took so long telling you. You must want to get back to bed. But before you go... could I ask something?

Well, I thought I'd call in sick to work tomorrow and rest and...

Well, I kept it. There's not much, just kind of a lump, but I don't know, it didn't feel right flushing it down the toilet, so I put it in a cup and I was wondering, tomorrow, if you're not busy, could you and Genko come down to the pond with me? There's a place I like, where we could move this big stone away, and I thought we could bury it there, under the stone, and you could ring your bell, and I could mark the stone with a star. □