

# Y

That perfect letter. The wishbone, fork in the road, empty wineglass. The question we ask over and over. Why? Me with my arms outstretched, feet in first position. The chromosome half of us don't have. Second to last in the alphabet: almost there. Coupled with an L, let's make an adverb. A modest X, legs closed. Y or N? Yes, of course. Upside-down peace sign. Little bird tracks in the sand.

Y, a Greek letter, joined the Latin alphabet after the Romans conquered Greece in the first century—a double agent: consonant and vowel. No one used adverbs before then, and no one was happy.



## Part 1



# 1

**M**y life begins at the Y. I am born and left in front of the glass doors, and even though the sign is flipped “Closed,” a man is waiting in the parking lot and he sees it all: my mother, a woman in navy coveralls, emerges from behind Christ Church Cathedral with a bundle wrapped in grey, her body bent in the cold wet wind of the summer morning. Her mouth is open as if she is screaming, but there is no sound here, just the calls of birds. The wind gusts and her coveralls blow back from her body, so that the man can see the outline of her skinny legs and distended belly as she walks toward him, the tops of her brown workman’s boots. Her coveralls are stained with motor oil, her boots far too big. She is a small, fine-boned woman, with shoulders so broad that at first the man thinks he is looking at a boy. She has deep brown hair tied back in a bun and wild, moon-grey eyes.

There is a coarse, masculine look to her face, a meanness.

Marjorie Celona

Even in the chill, her brow is beaded with sweat. The man watches her stop at the entrance to the parking lot and wrench back her head to look at the sky. She is thinking. Her eyes are wide with determination and fear. She takes a step forward and looks around her. The street is full of pink and gold light from the sun, and the scream of a seaplane comes fast overhead, and the wet of last night's rain is still present on the street, on the sidewalk, on the buildings' reflective glass. My mother listens to the plane, to the birds. If anyone sees her, she will lose her nerve. She looks up again, and the morning sky is as blue as a peacock feather.

The man searches her face. He has driven here from Langford this morning, left when it was still so dark that he couldn't see the trees. Where he lives, deep in the forest, no sky is visible until he reaches the island highway. On his road, the fir trees stretch for hundreds of feet above him and touch at the tips, like a barrel vault. *This road is like a nave*, he thinks every time he drives it, proud, too proud, of his metaphor, and he looks at the arches, the clerestory, the transept, the choir, the trees. He rolls down his window, feels the rush of wind against his face, in his hair, and pulls onto the highway: finally, the sky, the speed. It opens up ahead of him, and the trees grow shorter and shorter as he gets closer to town; the wide expanse of the highway narrows into Douglas Street, and he passes the bus shelters, through the arc of streetlights, past the car dealership where he used to work, the 7-Eleven, Thompson's Foam Shop, White Spot, Red Hot Video, and then he is downtown, no trees now, but he can finally smell the ocean, and if he had more time he'd drive right to the tip of the island and

Y

watch the sun come up over Dallas Road. It is so early but already the women have their thumbs out, in tight, tight jeans, waiting for the men to arrive in their muddy pickups and dented sedans, and he drives past the Dairy Queen, Traveller's Inn, the bright red brick of City Hall, the Eaton Centre. By noon, this street he knows so well will be filled with pale-faced rich kids with dreadlocks down to their knees, drumming and shrieking for change, and a man will blow into a trumpet, an orange toque on his head. Later still, the McDonald's on the corner will fill with teenaged beggars, ripped pant legs held together with safety pins, bandanas, patches, their huge backpacks up against the building outside, skinny, brindle-coated pit bulls and pet rats darting in and out of shirtsleeves, sleeping bags, foam cups, the elderly, so many elderly navigating the mess of these streets, the blind, seagulls, Crystal Gardens, the Helm's Inn, the totem poles as the man drives past the park toward the YMCA, no other cars but his, because it is, for most people, not morning yet but still the middle of the night.

Now, in the parking lot, he is hidden behind the glare from the rising sun in the passenger-side window of his van. He sees my mother kiss my cheek—a furtive peck like a frightened bird—then walk quickly down the ramp to the entrance, put me in front of the glass doors, and dart away. She doesn't look back, not even once, and the man watches her turn the corner onto Quadra Street, her strides fast and light now that her arms are empty. She disappears into the cemetery beside the cathedral. It is August 28th, at five-fifteen a.m. My mother is dead to me, all at once.

The man wishes so badly I weren't there that he could scream it. All his life, he's the one who notices the handkerchief drop from an old woman's purse and has to chase her halfway down the block, waving it like a flag. Every twitch of his eye shows him something he doesn't want to see: a forgotten lunch bag; the daily soup spelled "dialy"; a patent leather shoe about to step in shit. *Wait! Watch out, buster!* All this sloppiness, unfinished business. Me. I'm so small he thinks "minute" when he squats and cocks his head. My young mother has wrapped me in a grey sweatshirt with thumbholes because it's cold this time of day and I'm naked, just a few hours old and jaundiced: a small, yellow thing.

The man unfolds the sweatshirt a bit, searching for a note or signs of damage. There is nothing but a Swiss Army knife folded up beneath my feet. My head is the size of a Yukon Gold potato. The man pauses. He's trying to form the sentences he'll have to say when he pounds on the door and calls for help. "Hey! There's a baby here! A baby left by her mother—I think—I was waiting for the doors to open, she put the baby here and walked away, young girl, not good with ages, late teens, I guess? There's a baby here, right *here*. Oh, I didn't look—" He looks. "It's a girl."

There's a small search. The police mill around and take a description from the man, who tells them his name is



Vaughn and that he likes to be the first in the door at the Y in the morning, that it's like a little game with him.

"Gotta be first at something, guy," he says to the cop. They look at each other and laugh, a little too hard, for a little too long.

Vaughn is wearing his usual garb: navy track pants with a white racing stripe; a T-shirt with a sailboat on the front; new white running shoes. He is still young, in his early thirties, six feet tall with the build of someone who runs marathons. His red hair is thick and wild on top of his head, and he's growing a goatee. It itches his chin. He fiddles with it as he talks to the officer. *What did you see?*

By now Vaughn is used to the way his life works: he is the seer. When the cars collide, he knows it two minutes before it happens. He predicted his parents' divorce by the way his mother's lip curled up once, at a party, when his father told a dirty joke. He was nine. He thought, That's it. That's the sign. It isn't hard, this predicting, if that's what it's called; it's a matter of observation. From the right vantage point—say, overhead—it isn't a matter of psychic ability to see that two people, walking toward each other, heads down, hands in pockets, will eventually collide.

*Sir, what did you see?*

Vaughn pauses before answering. He feels time slow, and he feels himself float up. From up here, he sees what he needs to: the sequence of events that will befall me if I am raised by my mother. It's all too clear. He wasn't meant to see her. He wasn't meant to intervene. He has seen the look in my mother's eyes; he has seen women like her before. Whatever my fate, he knows I am better off without her.

Marjorie Celona

*What exactly did you see?*

And so the officer takes down a description of my mother, but he doesn't get it right: Vaughn tells him that her hair was short and blonde, when the truth is that it was swirled into a dark brown bun. (When she takes it out, it falls to her collarbone.) He says she wore red sweatpants and a white tennis sweater—he finds himself describing his own outfit from the day before—and that she didn't look homeless, just scared and young. Maybe a university student, he says. An athletic build, he says.

By now, twenty people have gathered in the parking lot of the Y. Some lady pushes through the crowd of officers and people in track pants. She swirls her arms and her mouth opens like a cave.

“My baby!” she shrieks and sets a bag of empty beer cans in a lump at her feet. Her head jerks. The cops roll their eyes and so does Vaughn. She's the quarter lady—the one who descends when you plug the meter: “Hey, man, got a quarta'?” Her hair is like those wigs at Safeway when you forget to buy a costume for Halloween. If she had wings, she'd look ethereal.

My first baby picture appears in the newspaper. “Abandoned Infant: Police Promise No Charges.” Vaughn cuts out the article and sticks it on his fridge. He's embarrassed by one of his quotes—“I believe it's an act of desperation”—and his eyes fill with tears when he reads the passage from Saint Vincent de Paul, which is recited to the press by one of the nurses at the children's hospital: *These children belong*