

FICTION JANUARY 30, 2017 ISSUE

QUARANTINE

By Alix Ohlin



AUDIO: *Alix Ohlin reads.*

Bridget lived in Barcelona for a year. First she stayed with her college friends Maya and Andrew, who were trying to be poets, and then she sublet from a man named Marco, whom she'd met at a grocery store. She had a fling with a woman named

Bernadette, who was from New Zealand and shared a flat with a Scot named Laurie, whom Bridget also slept with, and that was the end of things with Bernadette. Bridget smoked Fortuna cigarettes and wrote furiously in her journal about people she'd known and slept with, or wanted to sleep with, or had slept with and then been rejected by. She was twenty-three years old.

One night at Marco's apartment, she was awakened by loud knocking. Still semi-drunk from an evening with Maya and Andrew, she stumbled to the door and opened it to find three junkies standing there, asking for Marco. She knew they were junkies because Marco was a junkie—he'd told her this—and all his friends were junkies, too. They needed Marco's furniture, for reasons that were unclear, and they shoved her aside and began moving the kitchen table, the futon. For junkies, they were robust and rosy-cheeked, and she didn't put up much defense. Somehow this incident was all her fault. Marco kicked her out and she went to live in a cheap hotel, drinking anise in bed and staring at the peeling wallpaper. Later, Marco made her file a false police report saying that his laptop had been stolen. He said that it was the only way she could make up for her transgressions.

The person who rescued her from the cheap hotel was Angela, whom she'd met at the restaurant where they both waitressed. Angela was from Vancouver, and some dewy freshness that Bridget associated with the West Coast seemed to cling to her always, even when she was sleep-deprived or drunk. Angela had a German boyfriend with a face so feminine that he looked exquisite, like a porcelain doll. His name was Hans, or maybe Anders. He was always nice to Bridget, and when Angela brought her home he made up a bed for her in the corner of their tiny living room, a pile of blankets and pillows, as if she were a stray dog. Once, in the middle of the night, she woke to see him crouching in front of her, staring.

“What are you doing?”

“I wanted to make sure you were comfortable.”

“I’m comfortable,” she said, and he went back to bed with Angela.

Angela and her German boyfriend were little parents. They liked to make a fuss over people and put on elaborate dinner parties, and then they’d get drunk and spend the night bickering. It was tedious, and yet you had to indulge them, because you could see how much they enjoyed it, this performance of adulthood. Bridget stayed with them for two months, and would have felt guilty about mooching, if they hadn’t so clearly wanted to gather around themselves a collection of misfits to take care of. In addition to Bridget, they often hosted an assortment of hard-drinking Germans from Hans/Anders’s work, whatever it was, and Mei Ling, a Chinese-Canadian woman who had a cluster of gray whiskers on her otherwise smooth cheek, like a tuft of crabgrass thriving on a lawn. Mei Ling’s reasons for being in Barcelona were unclear; whenever Bridget talked to her, she scowled and left the room. Angela said that she was very depressed.

Bridget would have stayed there indefinitely, but one morning Hans/Anders brought her coffee in her dog bed and said that they had to talk. “We’re leaving,” he said.

“For work?” As usual, she was hung over.

He shook his head and patted her shoulder. “Angela and I are getting married and moving to Canada. You can come visit us anytime.”

“Does Angela know this?”

He laughed. “It was her idea,” he said tenderly. “Everything is always her idea.”

Bridget was stunned and a little irritated. She was used to a constant exchange of friends and lovers, and the idea that one of these relationships should be considered permanent struck her as inconsiderate. It went against the way they were all trying to live: stepping lightly on this earth, skirting the folly of human certainty. That night, she and Angela went out for drinks. They sat in an outdoor courtyard eating tiny meatballs

and cockles in tomato sauce. Angela's blond braid nestled against her neck. She and Bridget had once showered together, had swum naked together at a beach in Sitges. Angela's flesh was so pale that if you pressed a finger to her thigh the skin blushed dark pink, as if embarrassed by the touch. Now she was drinking cheap Rioja, her teeth turning purple. "I'm going to enroll in an education program and get certified to teach kindergarten," she was saying. "Hans will work with my father once his paperwork is settled. The business is very secure. Like my father always says, empires may rise and fall but people still need light bulbs."

In Bridget's stomach, the cockles swam restlessly in a river of wine. "You seem young to get married," she said.

Angela shook her head, and her braid flapped against her shoulder. "Oh, we won't get married for at least a year. We have to plan. Not to mention book the church. The flowers alone! You have no idea."

She was right about that. Bridget let her go—from the conversation, from their passing friendship, from the country of Spain. She found another place to stay and, when Angela hosted a last dinner party to say goodbye, Bridget said that she was sick and didn't go.

To her surprise, she herself was back in Canada within six months. Marco stopped by the restaurant one day to tell her that her mother had been calling, and, when she called back, her mother didn't even scold her for being hard to reach. "I have some news," she said tightly. "Your father isn't feeling well."

Bridget held the receiver in her hot palm. She was on break, a stained white apron around her hips, her armpits still dripping from the afternoon rush, and a table of three men eyed her with the impersonal but aggressive sexual hostility she'd grown used to. She burst into tears, and the men rolled their eyes and turned to a better target. As if in one movement, she hung up the phone, untied the apron, collected her passport from Maya and Andrew's apartment, and went home.

Her father lived for a year so dreary and relentlessly full of pain that she was forced to wish him dead. He had been a jokester, her father, spilling over with inappropriate remarks. Since she'd worn a bikini once at age ten, he had called her Bardot, after Brigitte, whom she did not resemble in the slightest. He gave whoopee cushions as gifts. He did impressions so terrible that no one ever guessed who he was supposed to be. In the hospital, tethered to a tubular bouquet of chemotherapy drugs, he gritted his teeth and attempted to make light of the situation, but there was no light to be made. His body shrank; he was smaller every morning, as if repeatedly robbed of substance in the night. Bridget wanted only for his suffering to end, and, when it finally did, she sobbed so hard she felt as if her lungs were liquefying. Her mother was a husk, dried out by grief. She didn't want to stay in the house alone, so she sold it, bought a condo downtown, and took up choral singing. One day, she pressed her cool palm to Bridget's forehead and said gently, "What will you do now, dear?"

Bridget hadn't thought that far; she had conceived of herself as a source of support and nothing else. Now she saw that her mother needed her to go, and she felt abandoned. In the year of tending to her father she hadn't worked and had lost touch with most of her friends. Sitting in a café downtown, she wrote a letter to Angela, the kind of letter you write only to someone you haven't seen in a long time and perhaps never knew well, the kind of letter you probably shouldn't send at all. Angela replied within a week. "My heart is with you," she wrote, and Bridget's eyes swelled with tears.

Angela and her German had not got married after all; he had met a girl named Mavis and moved to Edmonton and "You know what? Good riddance!" Angela no longer wanted to be a teacher; she was training to be a masseuse instead. She invited Bridget to visit anytime. "We'll cook and have long talks just like we used to," she wrote, a revision of their history that Bridget found sweet.

She didn't visit. She went to law school and made new friends and when she graduated she got a job in labor relations for a midsized corporation. She wore suits to work, with kitten heels, and saw her mother every other weekend, whether her mother wanted her to or not. In the evenings, she still sometimes wrote in her journal, but the entries tended to turn into grocery lists, so she stopped. She was not unhappy.

She liked being an adult, being good at her job, owning a car, painting the walls of her apartment on a Saturday afternoon. She didn't know why she'd ever resisted it.

When the invitation to Angela's wedding came, Bridget stared at the envelope for a few minutes before she remembered who Angela was. She sent her regrets and forgot about it until the phone rang at eleven o'clock one night and on the other end was Angela, weeping.

"I knew I must have offended you," she said. "I have to explain. We both know you should have been a bridesmaid, but Charles's family is enormous—I swear he has ten thousand cousins—and, you see, in their culture things are quite different. I wish—"

This went on for some time. Finally, Bridget said, "Angela, it's fine. I wasn't offended."

A pause, a snuffle. "So you'll come, then?" Angela said. Her voice was tinny, a child's, with a child's manipulation edging around the distress.

Bridget felt trapped. "Of course," she said.

She and Sam, her fiancé—he was also a lawyer—decided to treat it as a vacation. They hiked and swam and went zip-lining at Whistler before ending their trip in Vancouver. "How do you know her again?" Sam asked in the hotel, where she was steaming her dress, feeling nervous for reasons she couldn't define.

Bridget smoothed the dress with her hand, as if stroking her own lap. "I barely do," she said. "It'll probably be dull. Forgive me for what we're about to experience."

"Oh, I'll make you pay," Sam said, smiling, and kissed her.

The wedding, though, was not dull. Angela's husband turned out to be a Nigerian cardiac surgeon, and his large family was raucous and witty. Everybody had to meet everybody. Nobody was allowed to skip the dancing. At one point Bridget found herself

sitting with an elderly uncle, telling him a long story about her father, as he nodded and listened gravely, his wife meanwhile instructing Sam in a dance. Angela came up behind Bridget and put her hands on her shoulders, her cheek against Bridget's cheek. She was still blond and fresh-faced, but skinnier now, her dress a severe column of white, no frills or lace. Her hair was pulled back in a chignon. Grown up, she was all geometry.

"Thanks for being here, Bardot," she whispered in Bridget's ear. "It wouldn't have been the same without you." Bridget squeezed her hand, touched that she'd remembered this old nickname. And then Angela was swept away by a crowd that lifted her to the dance floor and demanded she perform. She danced gamely, but her hair was coming loose; she kept raising a hand to poke at the strands, and her smile tightened each time she felt the disarray.

Bridget and Sam moved to Ottawa and had two children, Robert and Melinda—Bobby and Mellie. Their kids were joiners; they hated to be alone, and every weekend they wanted to see their friends at soccer, birthday parties, figure skating, hockey, dance recitals, sleepovers. This took up much of life. Bridget began to dream of travel: spas in Costa Rica, yoga retreats in Scandinavia.

"I think I'm burning out," she said to Sam, and he thought she meant on work, but she meant on everything. Sam was stable and good for her, absorbing whatever she threw at him, the tofu of husbands, but it didn't help. She considered an affair, but it seemed like too much work. Anyway, her days were full of meetings and car pools; there was no time for malfeasance. Instead, she spent more hours than she should have online, seeing whose life had turned out to be more dramatic than her own. That was how she found Angela, who maintained active accounts on Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram. Angela was still in Vancouver and, judging by her pictures, she had one child, an astonishingly beautiful boy who was a perfect combination of her and Charles—her eyes, his nose—as if they'd divided up the genes by legal agreement. Angela photographed him playing soccer and baking muffins; she pinned recipes for organic pancakes with hidden spinach and discussed the importance of fish-oil supplements. She redid her living room and posted the swatches; everything was off-white. She said that her favorite

color was bone. Bridget clicked “Like.” Within a day, a message from Angela popped up in her in-box, frothing with six years’ worth of news. Much of it was already known to Bridget, from the Internet, but she pretended it wasn’t. As it happened, Angela was coming to Ottawa for a conference, and they made plans to get together. Bridget asked what kind of conference it was. “Medical,” Angela wrote.

On the day they were to meet, Bridget went straight from the office, in her pencil skirt and heels, to the bar at Angela’s hotel downtown. It was a modest hotel that catered to visiting bureaucrats. Angela was sitting in a booth, wearing jeans and a light cardigan. A bone-colored cardigan. Her hair was cut in a pleasant bob, and she was still blond. When she saw Bridget, she stood up and flung her arms around her, pressing herself against Bridget’s chest. It was the way Bridget’s children had hugged her when they were little, holding nothing back, and Angela’s body felt like a child’s, thin and pliant and eager.

Bridget asked what kind of work she was doing at the conference, and Angela waved her hand shyly. “I’m not working these days,” she said. “The conference is for people who have my illness.” The illness was one that Bridget had never heard of. Angela described a set of diffuse symptoms—fatigue, muscle aches, cognitive impairment—that defied diagnosis. Doctors were perplexed. Much research still had to be done.

“What kind of cognitive impairment?” Bridget said.

“Oh,” Angela said, smiling. “I’m in a fog most of the time.”

She didn’t seem in a fog to Bridget. They sat drinking wine and discussing the annoying habits of their husbands and children, the dirty socks left on couches, dishes unscraped in the sink. Angela’s son had bought a frog at a pet store and tried to sleep with it in his bed. Her husband was always at the hospital. He’d suggested that her symptoms were psychosomatic.

“Men always say that women are crazy,” Angela said vehemently, “but men have been in charge for most of history, and look how that’s turned out!”

Bridget laughed.

“*Bitches be crazy*,” Angela went on, shaking her head and making air quotes. Bridget didn’t know what, or whom, she was quoting.

Angela sighed. “I shouldn’t complain, though,” she said. “He keeps us in frogs and fresh sheets.”

Bridget laughed again. She was enjoying herself more than she’d expected to. They ordered another bottle of wine, which Angela chose because it was organic and sulfite-free. “I can’t taste the difference,” Bridget said.

“You’ll thank me tomorrow,” Angela said.

Around them, the hotel swelled with people sitting alone, stroking their phones with one hand while eating or drinking with the other. Even when the place was full, it was quiet. By ten o’clock, the bar was empty again and the street outside was dark. It was a government city, sedate in its schedules.

“I’m not sure I can drive,” Bridget said to Angela.

“Why don’t you come upstairs for a while first?”

She nodded.

The room was decorated in surprisingly offensive shades of mauve and green. Angela’s things were flung everywhere, her suitcase open on the closet floor, handouts from the day’s seminars scattered on the desk, wet towels dampening the carpet. Bridget lay

down on the bed, and Angela sat next to her. It seemed lovely to be there, with her head on Angela's lap.

"Personally, I prefer the old White House pressroom."

"I'm sorry you're sick," she said, and Angela nodded, stroking her hair. Bridget turned then, and wrapped her arms around Angela's waist. The two of them fell asleep that way, body to body, flushed cheek against warm leg, an embrace that was not about sex but not not about it, either, a hunger for touch that was somehow satisfied by this middle distance, this mutual understanding. Later, when Bridget thought about the night in the hotel, she would remember how Angela, down at the bar, had said, with sudden sobriety, "Nobody takes care of me," and then laughed, dismissing her self-pity with a toss of her pale hair.

They swore to keep in better touch, but didn't. Once Angela was back in Vancouver, her social-media accounts took a turn from organic cooking and home decorating to alternative health and New Age spirituality. She was doing chelation and oxygen therapy. She smudged her home with sage. Her thinking seemed dire. She was preoccupied with the tensions in the Middle East and believed that global conflict was imminent. She adopted two cats because she wanted her son to experience as much joy as possible before the world came to an end. But she and her son both turned out to be allergic, and "#catproblems" accompanied most of her posts.

Then came a year when Sam—always the steady one, the imperturbable base—almost died of heart trouble. For months, Bridget took care of him and their family, and, when he was better, their marriage was better, too; it had solidified under the stress, like a building settling on its foundation. During this time, Bridget rarely went online. She found it hurtful to see other people's smiling, healthy families or, even worse, to hear about lives that seemed as fragile as her own; she didn't need to be reminded that everyone's happiness was in jeopardy.

When she checked back in, Angela was gone. All her accounts had disappeared. An e-mail sent to her in-box went unanswered. Bridget didn't have her phone number and couldn't find one listed. One evening, while the kids were in the basement watching a

movie with their friends, she sat down and wrote a letter by hand, mailing it to the last address for Angela that she could find. “We’re all fine now. Just wondering what’s new. How are those pesky cats?”

As she had so many years earlier, Angela wrote back quickly. She no longer had the cats, she wrote, with a lack of explanation that was slightly ominous. She and Charles had got divorced, “on good terms more or less,” and she now lived in a little cottage outside the city. “A little cottage” sounded to Bridget like a euphemism for something, though she wasn’t sure what. Angela had decided that her symptoms were caused by an allergy to electricity, so she lived without it. She had a woodstove and candles. She didn’t use computers and was reading a lot. “I feel a bit better every day,” she wrote, a statement that seemed to herald its own contradiction. Of her son she said little.

Bridget wrote back, wishing her well, and the correspondence seemed to die a natural death; there was no habitual rhythm in Bridget’s life for such letters. When, a year later, her cell phone lit up with a Vancouver area code, she assumed that it was Angela, but the voice that greeted her was low and commanding and male.

“This is Dr. Charles Adebayo. We met at my wedding,” he said.

“Yes, I remember,” Bridget said, confused. She was sitting in her car, listening to music, while Mellie fought her way through a soccer game in terrible blustery weather.

“My former wife is ill,” Charles said. There was a solemnity to his voice that was hard to reconcile with the laughing man of years ago. It was the voice of a man who’d had practice speaking about difficult topics and knew to provide them careful containment. “She would like for you to visit, and I would like so as well.”

“Is this the electricity thing?” Bridget asked. She looked out over the dismal soccer field, more mud than grass, where teen-age girls were flinging themselves around with abandon. Mellie was her aggressive child, a lover of tackles and hits; Bobby always

played defense. They were both more wholesome, her children, than she'd had any right to expect.

On the phone, Charles sighed, a long, soft note. "We are not sure," he said. "Angela continues to believe that she suffers from electromagnetic hypersensitivity. I believe she may have other significant health problems, but she refuses to see a doctor or be tested. We hope that you can persuade her to do so."

"Me? Why?" Bridget said. She felt capable only of single syllables, beyond which tens, hundreds of lengthier questions loomed.

"Because you are her best friend."

On the field, Mellie went down hard, and Bridget involuntarily straightened in her seat, but a few seconds later her daughter bounced up again, laughing. She shook her ankle and high-stepped in a circle, as if she were doing the hokey pokey. And then everyone was running again. Bridget caught her breath, sometimes, when she saw how athletic her daughter was, how reckless her grace, how fully she possessed her youth.

The thing happening in the car—the phone call, the man's voice, his bewildering request—did not seem real compared with Mellie's loping stride as she deftly stole the ball and toyed with it, her skittering feet driving it toward the net and then past the goalie. Mellie clasped her hands above her head and glanced over at the car. Bridget honked the horn. *I saw.*

"Are you there?" Charles said. "The situation may be critical. We request that you come as soon as you are able."

Bridget didn't say, "I haven't talked to Angela in years." She didn't say, "I would have thought she had closer friends." She simply agreed to answer the summons.

he landed in a drizzle of rain that continued all the way from the airport to the hospital where Charles worked, obscuring the city behind a swish of windshield wipers. **S** Traffic moved slowly, and she saw nothing but other cars and a horizonless sky.

Angela's son was waiting at the hospital, too. He was all gangly legs in skinny jeans, his eyes half-hidden beneath bangs. Charles wore a purple shirt and yellow tie, strangely buoyant colors that contrasted sharply with the gravity of his expression. Over the shirt he wore a white coat. He gripped his son's thin shoulder with a strength that was clearly both dominant and reassuring.

They drank coffee and talked about Angela. Charles mentioned Angela's weight loss and her "ideation." The son's eyes were partly closed, as if he were trying to fall asleep. At last Charles wrote down directions to the cottage—"you won't find it with a G.P.S."—and suggested that she arrive in the early morning, when Angela was most hospitable. He didn't explain what he meant by "hospitable." Then he asked his son whether he had any messages for his mother. The boy shook his head.

The drive to Angela's cottage took Bridget through emerald hills made brilliant by the previous day's rain. The city fell away, then the suburbs, and then she passed through small towns with no posted names. The road Charles had instructed her to take dwindled from asphalt to gravel to mud, and she began to worry that her economy rental car wasn't up to the task. Her phone reception shrank to a single bar. Then the road ended. Charles had said, "You will have to park and walk." She stepped out into woods that smelled like fir and mushrooms, earthy and chilled, and hoped that the tiny clearing between two trees was the start of a trail. She crashed through it, the loudest thing around. Everything else was still, as if some kind of bad magic had blanketed the place. But, before she could get too worried, she saw Angela's cottage, a normal and well-maintained A-frame with geraniums planted in window boxes.

"It is best if you approach her gently," Charles had said.

Bridget didn't knock on the door. She stood in front of the house, allowing herself to be seen. How she knew to do this she couldn't have said. It was a calculation made on instinct. There was a flicker of movement at a window, and Bridget turned in a full circle, taking in the dense and quiet woods, the pine branches dripping, the surprisingly rapidly drifting clouds. Sam and the kids were visiting his parents this weekend; they had planned a cookout and a horror-movie marathon with the cousins. They would hardly think of her.

Behind her, the reluctant opening of a wooden door.

Angela stood silhouetted like a girl in a fairy tale. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and her blond hair was in a long braid, the way she used to wear it. She was very thin. One hand rested on some kind of machine, from which tubing ran up her arms, under her nose, and around the top of her head. Her whole face twitched, either with tremors or with an attempt to smile; Bridget wasn't sure. "Do you know me?" she said.

Angela nodded. Her eyes were cloudy, marbled. "I shouldn't let you in," she said. "For your own good."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm in self-isolation. What I have may be contagious."

Bridget didn't ask what she had. "I don't care," she said. "I want to see you."

Angela turned and disappeared into the house. The open door was not an invitation. Bridget spent some moments staring at the darkness where her friend had been. After a while, a window above her opened and a sealed plastic package was thrown down to the ground. It was a medical kit, which, when she tore it open, turned out to contain a surgical mask, plastic gloves, and shoe covers. She put it all on obediently and waited until Angela came back to the door and nodded, satisfied.

Bridget followed Angela through a foyer and into a dim room; the far wall held large windows, but they were crowded with greenery that let in almost no light. As her eyes adjusted, she saw that the room was comfortable, with couches and armchairs and a woodstove in the corner. Angela settled into one of the chairs with the machine at her feet like a pet.

“Charles must have called you,” she said. Her voice was raspy, asthmatic, and it made her tone hard to interpret.

“He did,” Bridget said. She didn’t want to talk about Charles, didn’t want the freight of marital disagreement in the room. She leaned forward, putting her hands on her knees, and saw her friend recoil. “Tell me how you are,” she said.

Angela stared past her. “There’s a light,” she said. “When I close my eyes at night, I see it and think it’s waiting for me. Sometimes I think it’s my father. You know he died.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I remember when your father died,” Angela said. Her eyes grew sharper. “You changed so much. I didn’t understand at the time, but I do now.”

Even years later, the mention of her father shifted a weight in Bridget’s stomach, tilted her center of gravity. The sadness of his death was still a sinkhole that she could fall into and be swallowed by.

“My mother got married again,” she told Angela. “To a dentist named Dennis. Dennis the dentist. She has these beautiful movie-star teeth now. Veneers, I guess they are? She seems happy. They have a time-share in Florida. So.”

Angela bared her own teeth, which were not beautiful, small and brown, little emblems of decay. “Would you like some tea?” she said.

“Yes,” Bridget said. “Let’s have tea. You rest. I’ll make it.”

She had anticipated putting together a tray of biscuits or bread and jam, brewing a pot and serving it with sugar and milk. But there was no food in Angela’s cottage. The cupboards held only bottles: capsules of bee pollen, vitamins, apple-cider vinegar. Next to a teapot on the counter was a bowl holding what looked like loose tea leaves; they smelled like mushrooms, like the forest outside. She boiled water on the woodstove, brought a tray into the living room with two cups. Angela’s legs were now tucked beneath her. Her head lolled to the side at a violent angle, as if her neck could no longer support its weight. She was asleep.

Bridget left the tea. She took off the surgical mask, hiked to the car, and drove to the nearest store, where she bought some root vegetables and rice and fruit. Back at the cottage, Angela was still asleep in the chair, and Bridget arranged a blanket over her lap, tucking it in at the sides. Then she cooked the vegetables and strained them into a broth. She cooked the rice to a bland pudding. She mashed sweet potatoes into a purée. When Angela woke up, Bridget spooned the broth into her mouth, wiping away dribbles with a tea towel. Angela did not object; she parted her lips like a baby. Later, Bridget moved her to the couch. Bridget herself slept in Angela’s bed upstairs, which was thin and narrow and hard. The next day, more broth, a little rice. She read aloud to Angela from the only material on hand, old copies of *Chatelaine* and the *Reader’s Digest* which must have been left behind by some previous occupant; she couldn’t imagine Angela buying them. She read recipes, “Laughter Is the Best Medicine” columns, stories about brave pets and remarkable women. It was hard to tell whether Angela was listening; she mostly lay back with her eyes closed, her fingers playing idly with the tubing of her machine.

Once evening fell, Bridget lit a fire in the stove and fed Angela again. When she was about to go upstairs, Angela grabbed her hand and said, “Please, no.” So she took some pillows and cushions from the armchairs and made a bed for herself on the floor.

In the morning, Angela’s eyes looked brighter. She disconnected herself from the machine long enough to take a short walk around the house. Afterward, they sat

outside and drank Angela's terrible tea, which tasted like moss and feet. Angela had allowed Bridget to dispense with the mask, saying only, "I suppose you've been exposed. I just hope your immune system is stronger than mine."

"Does your son come here to visit you?" Bridget asked her. She didn't mention that she had seen him in the city. Angela's eyes brimmed with tears, and she shook her head.

"I lost him," she said.

"But why?" Bridget said. After two nights at the cottage, her eyes and skin ached. She couldn't stop thinking about hamburgers and red wine. She wondered what Sam and the kids were eating, watching, what jokes they'd be making later that she wouldn't understand.

"Bridge," Angela said. It was a sunny, windy day and her fine hair was lifted in the breeze, floating up and away as if it wanted to escape her. "You must understand," she said. Her voice was patronizing, kind and sad, as if she were a parent explaining death to a child. "With what I have," she said, "I'm past the point of no return."

"Come home with me," Bridget said impulsively. "Stay at my house. We'll watch movies on the couch and eat junk food." She could sense Angela stiffen but kept going, unable to stop. "We'll drink wine and stay up too late. You can meet my kids. You'll like them, Angela. They'll make you laugh."

They were holding hands now. Some geese flew overhead in a V-formation, and the trees swayed back and forth, as if they, too, were seeking touch. In one of Angela's magazines, Bridget had read an article about a scientist who had proved that trees could form a kind of friendship, twining their roots together. Sometimes one tree would curve its branches away from the other's, so that its friend got enough sun to survive. Angela said nothing, and the trees fell silent, too, as if to make sure that Bridget heard her refusal.

She didn't see Angela again. She flew home to her family, leaving the cottage stocked with soups and stews, and fell gladly back into the mad routine of extracurricular activities and conference calls and neighborhood dinner parties. For a while she tried to stay in touch with Charles, but he never sounded pleased to hear from her; she understood that she had failed him. He finally removed Angela from the cottage by force, and she spent time in and out of hospitals. She didn't respond to Bridget's letters, and Charles said she refused to use a phone.

"How long do you think she can go on like this?" Bridget asked him the last time they spoke.

"I cannot hazard a guess," he said, and hung up.

Bridget stood in her kitchen, watching the wind twist maple leaves off a tree in the yard. The kids were upstairs in their rooms. Bobby was going away to college next year; Mellie the year after that. Sam was travelling more for work these days. Bridget would soon be stripped back to herself. Sometimes she thought of this aloneness as a luxury. Sometimes she was afraid of it. Sometimes she saw her life as a tender thing that was separate from herself, a tiny animal she had happened upon by chance one day and decided to raise. It was terrifying to think how small it was, how wild, how easily she could fit it in the palm of her hand. ♦

Alix Ohlin is the author of four books, including the short-story collection "Signs and Wonders" and the novel "Inside."

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