TWO OR THREE THINGS I FORGOT TO TELL YOU

Joyce Carol Oates
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Two or Three Things I Forgot to Tell You
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First Edition
“Merissa! Congratulations!”

Hannah’s excitement was genuine. Hannah’s happiness for Merissa was genuine. Merissa could see.

Merissa had been afraid—just a little, putting herself in Hannah’s place—(for Hannah Heller’s grades at Quaker Heights Day School were invariably just slightly lower than Merissa Carmichael’s, not to mention the fact that Merissa was associate yearbook editor, Drama Club president, and cocaptain of the girls’ intramural field hockey team as well; and Hannah had applied to virtually the same colleges as Merissa)—that Hannah would be hurt, and envious, and even resentful, for it is not nearly so easy to be happy for your closest friend’s good news as it is to (secretly) rejoice in your closest friend’s bad news.

But Hannah was genuinely happy for Merissa. If there was a tiny sliver of hurt, of fear, of self-doubt, even of self-hate in Hannah’s heart, she took care not to reveal it.

“Early admission at Brown! Omigod.”

Hannah had not—yet—had such good news.
“Merissa, that is fantastic. Your first choice!”
The girls hugged each other, laughing.

Hannah felt the sharp-notched vertebrae of Merissa’s spine through her sweater, and Merissa felt the fleshiness of Hannah’s back beneath the tight ridge of her bra. Quickly the girls stepped away from each other as if each had been made to know too much of the other in just that instant.

“M’rissa! Congratulations!”

There came Chloe Zimmer, flying at Merissa with a quick, breathy hug. There came Anita Chang, squeezing Merissa’s arm just hard enough to hurt. There came Shelby Freedman and there came Martine Hesse and there came teary-eyed Nadia Stillinger with a clumsy hug for her friend and a funny little whimper-sob—“Oohhh, M’rissa!”—meant to communicate the fact that Nadia, who hadn’t a chance of getting into Brown, or any Ivy League university, felt not jealousy or envy for her dazzling friend but the simple childlike sadness of losing her.

It was their senior year at Quaker Heights Day School: already, December.

*Their last year together. This year, without Tink.*

“Congratulations, Merissa!”

“Wonderful news, Merissa!”

“We’re all so proud of you, Merissa!”

“How do you feel, Merissa? Like you’ve just won the lottery?”

There was Mr. Trocchi, shaking Merissa’s hand as if she were an adult. There was Mrs. Conway, a quick, teacherly hug. There
was Mr. Doerr, his “minimalist” smile of approval. There was Ms. Svala, the girls’ gym instructor, another brisk handshake, and a damp, toothy grin. There was Dana Crowley, “Good work, Merissa!” There was the upper-school guidance counselor, Mrs. Jameson, and there was Headmaster Nichols, beaming-proud. And there was Merissa’s science teacher, Mr. Kessler, who’d been the one, in his quiet way, to really, really encourage her.

“It must be a relief, Merissa—to know where you’re going next year. To have the suspense over.”

Except—Tink knows!—the suspense of our lives is never really over.
GOOD NEWS, CONT’D.

This fantastic week!

First, Merissa learned that she’d been chosen by Mr. Trocchi, the school drama coach, to play the coveted role of Elizabeth Bennet in a stage adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*—“You really capture Austen’s unique blend of acrid humor and moral seriousness, Merissa. Congratulations!”

(Trying not to notice, for days following, the hurt, puckered expression on Brooke Kramer’s face whenever she and Brooke couldn’t avoid each other—for Brooke, who’d performed in a half-dozen school productions since ninth grade, had auditioned for the role also, and was bitterly disappointed to have lost out to Merissa Carmichael, who, she believed, couldn’t act nearly as well.)

Next day, math class! Where, handing back tests from the previous week, Mr. Doerr observed in his grim/wry way that Merissa Carmichael had “redeemed” her gender in the matter of math, for Merissa had earned 96 percent on the test, higher than anyone else except Virgil Nagy, who’d earned his usual 100 percent.

(Trying not to notice, when Shaun Ryan received his test
from Mr. Doerr, the look of disappointment and shame that came into Shaun’s face, like a quick blush; and trying not to notice how, at the end of class, when they might have naturally walked out together, Shaun avoided Merissa to hang back and exchange sardonic wisecracks with another boy who, it seemed, hadn’t done so well on the test, either.

Next day, *Quaker Heights Year ’12* staff meeting! For some reason this turned out to be the most productive yearbook meeting of the fall term: Alex Wren, editor in chief, wasn’t in one of his sour/sarcastic/kick-me-I-love-it moods but was funny, flirtatious, and sweet with Merissa, despite the fact that she’d “beat him by ten points” on Doerr’s math test; Dana Crowley, faculty adviser, English/journalism teacher, was present for only a while, and didn’t intrude in her usual kindly/bossy manner that made everyone roll their eyes, in secret, behind her back; and the beautiful cover design on which Merissa and Chloe had worked together for many hours—colors, layout, fonts—was met with unanimous enthusiasm.

(“What will they say,” Merissa said to Chloe, “when we list Tink, Inc. in the acknowledgments for the cover design?” The girls laughed nervously. For, almost six months after Tink’s d***h, the subject of Tink Traumer was still volatile at Quaker Heights Day School. The design their fellow staffers had so admired incorporated one of Tink’s Night Sky series, a brilliantly blazing photograph of the constellation Orion, into which, as in a weaving, elongated letters—

**QUAKER HEIGHTS YEAR ’12**

—were ingeniously threaded. The effect was dreamlike and compelling. Chloe said, lowering her voice, “Do you think Tink
is there?”—meaning the night sky in the photograph; and Merissa said quickly, averting her eyes, “No. Tink is here.”)

These were events of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Also on Wednesday, the (fat) acceptance letter from Brown University admissions had come addressed to Merissa Carmichael at 18 West Brook Way, Quaker Heights, New Jersey, while Merissa was in school.

(Though Merissa had asked her mother to please, please, please not open any of her mail, forbidding such a “violation of my privacy,” Mrs. Carmichael couldn’t resist tearing the envelope open on the front step, as soon as she’d discovered it in the mailbox. For the Carmichaels had talked of very little else for months but Merissa’s college applications, and Merissa’s father, who’d gone to Dartmouth, wanted very badly for his daughter to be admitted to a “top” Ivy school.)

Then, Thursday: when (1) Merissa learned that an essay she’d written for Mr. Kessler’s science class—“Our Environment, Ourselves”—had placed third in a high school competition sponsored by Scientific American, which Mr. Kessler had encouraged her to enter, and would be posted on the magazine’s website; and (2) the girls’ field hockey team, on which Merissa was usually only an average-to-good player, managed to win against the higher-ranked Lawrenceville girls’ team, partly through Merissa’s deft blocking of the Lawrenceville star player—(though Merissa made a joke of limping afterward, insisting she wasn’t in pain, a result of having been slammed in the ankle by the furious Lawrenceville player’s hockey stick).

Also on Thursday: In the wake of Merissa’s good news about Brown, which had quickly spread through the senior class, she
was congratulated by the several other seniors who’d scored early admissions at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Brown—not close friends of Merissa’s but people she liked and admired, mostly.

(Except Merissa was uneasy hearing the others boast of being like, an elite.)

(Except Merissa was anxious that Shaun Ryan was avoiding her—it was unmistakable now. And not just Shaun but other guys who’d applied for early admission at Brown, too.)

Then, Friday: Merissa’s presentation in her AP English class, a close reading and critical analysis of the Dostoyevsky novel Notes from Underground, stirred a lively debate—Is there an “underground” being who resides inside us, who determines our “conscious” (“daylight”) selves, though it is not known to us? Is there any way to discover this being?—and earned her a grade of A-plus from Mrs. Conway.

(Except it was weird: When Merissa finished her presentation in the English seminar room, where students and teacher sat at a companionable oval table, her heart was beating rapidly and lightly like a fluttering butterfly trapped in a small space, and her armpits were itching, and she’d broken out into a cold sweat! And her friends Chloe and Hannah—and Anita Chang, who was a sometime-friend, one of those friends you don’t dare turn your back on, for fear they will say something mean about you, and Gordy Squires, Virgil Nagy, and Alex Wren—were all staring at her for a long, awkward moment before someone said, “Awesome, Merissa! Wow.”).

Hey! Not bad, Meris.

Tink prodded Merissa in the ribs. Not much flesh on
Merissa’s ribs, so the jab hurt.

*Be happy, Meris. As long as they’re grading you, grades are good.*

Tink’s warm breath in Merissa’s ear. So that the fine hairs on the back of Merissa’s neck stirred.

Tink’s special *smell*—like burnt cloves, singed red hair, a briny, picklish scent beneath.

*Main thing is—be happy, dude. Don’t let me down, ’cause I need my girlfriend.*

Was Tink sincere? Or teasing?

Or was Tink in one of her spiteful mean-moods? So you couldn’t tell whether she was laughing with you, or at you.

You couldn’t trust Tink Traumer when she was alive, so how could you trust Tink Traumer now that she’d *passed over*?

“I heard from Tink today.”

Merissa spoke quietly. So that if Hannah didn’t choose to hear, she wouldn’t have to acknowledge it.

But Chloe drew in her breath sharply—“Ohhh! I g-guess that I did, too.”

In lowered voices, the girls spoke together. They were standing at Chloe’s open locker outside Mrs. Crowley’s homeroom, a little oasis of quiet/privacy amid the noise of the senior corridor. They were standing together, their backs to the corridor, in the hope that no one—not even one of their close friends—would dare to intrude.

Chloe said, “I—I—I wasn’t sure if it could be Tink . . . I was coming downstairs this morning, at home, and feeling kind of—I don’t know, sad—and my mother was in the kitchen sort of half screaming about something—scolding my brother,
I guess; he’d tracked mud inside on his sneakers so it looked like tiny little turds everywhere—and this kind of sick sensation came over me. . . .”

Merissa waited. She knew—exactly that sensation.

“And I wondered if I could, you know—get through it—the r-rest of my life, I mean—though I wasn’t serious, of course,” Chloe said quickly, laughing, “not like Tink was s-serious. . . . And just then there was this warm, furry sensation, like a cat’s fur against my face—and that way Tink’s hair smelled, or her skin—that kind of singed-burnt smell?—and Tink didn’t actually say anything to me—I think she was just kind of laughing, but not in a mean way—laughing that I would be so silly to make so much of—of—whatever. So I felt better right away. I don’t know why—nothing had changed—but still, I felt a lot better. And I think it had to be Tink.” Chloe paused, wiping at her eyes. “What did Tink say to you?”

All that Merissa could remember clearly was Be happy.

Be happy—dude?

Merissa laughed. It was like Tink to say “dude”—parodying guy-talk, the way guys talked to one another in mimicry of the Dude in The Big Lebowski.

“Oh, I don’t think that Tink actually said anything to me, either—it was just, like with you, she was close by. Then—she vanished.”

Merissa was too tactful to tell her friend that Tink had spoken to her. For now that Tink had passed over, her friends were even more prone to jealousy over her than they’d been when Tink had been alive.