



SIGNS AND WONDER

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MY FRIEND RILEY LOOKS FOR signs from Beyond. It all began when a white peacock landed on the house where her grandmomma lay dying, later strutting into the road and halting Riley’s car on her way to the funeral. She took those visitations as signs her grandmomma’s life had continued in a different form—and that she, too, could endure.

More recently, the demise of her marriage blindsided her. After a few months of couples therapy, her husband shrugged away their forty-one years together. She had convinced herself they could rescue the marriage. Hadn’t they reclaimed several homes together, renovations that blended Riley’s design talent and Damian’s building expertise? Their collaboration culminated in an ambitious, modular three-story, including an outdoor kitchen and pool, a massive woodshop, and Riley’s aerie. Sequestered in that office during the pandemic, she kept her business on life support. Meanwhile, Damian brooded and played billiards weekly with a pod that included the woman he turned to more and more. And, finally, for good.

I’ve known Riley for four decades,

since we worked side-by-side at a New Orleans university. After I moved to Atlanta and she started a marketing company, she employed me remotely as a writer/strategist. Lulled by weekly Instagram posts of weddings, christenings, birthday parties, and holiday celebrations with her extended family, I was stunned three years ago by her phone call. “He says he’s tired of coming last—after our kids and grandchildren, my business, and my family.” Her words quavered across the miles between us. Like many men, Damian had stoked his resentment silently until he decided to abandon what irritated him. He moved into a carriage house on the grounds of a property he was remodeling and, not long after, began dating his billiards teammate.

Outwardly, Riley carried on—buying a home of her own, watching her business ebb away. Inwardly, she hollowed out a barren place where her soul waited for her husband’s return. Barren places can hold us for a long time. Even after I told her, “You’ve outgrown him already,” she clung to the hope he would get the new woman out of his system and come back to her. Long after Riley stopped missing him, she still yearned for the life they had made together.

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The pandemic receded. They finalized the divorce. Separately, now, they celebrated holidays and visited their daughter's family in California. Riley turned her days—taking care of her elderly parents and her nearby grands—into joy she could not create for herself. Trick or treating in the neighborhood with her son's three toddlers, Riley's Halloween costumes tracked her personal progress, from a black-draped Wicked Witch six months post-divorce to, the next year, a fey, long-legged Tinkerbell. "I like it," I teased her after she posted that photo. "Peter Pan men have always been my fatal attraction."

Every time she felt she was getting her bearings, though, an undertow of grief and rage engulfed her. To exorcise it, she sent bitter texts to Damian's girlfriend. Trying to heal, she demanded he take the dog they had adopted during Covid lockdown. One desperate December day, she finally invoked her grandmomma and a friend, both now gone on to the spirit world.

"Ladies," she begged, "send me a sign. Show me how to go on."

At that moment she spied the beautiful stranger approaching. For months they had greeted one another, and sighting by sighting, she noted more about him: slim, amber complexion, a courtly bearing that intrigued her as much as his feline grace. Each time they drew close, he would incline his cross-cropped head and say, "Good morning," his mellow baritone held by the clammy air like musical notes, echoing. Always Riley replied the same—no more, no less—until that morning when she stopped him, asserting, "You can just keep saying good morning, if you like, but my name is Riley Gautreau."

"Richard Exton," he replied.

Exchanging names led to walks along the bayou and levee. Conversations revealed their shared love of art and design, but also Richard's passion for museums that housed favorite paintings. Fantasies of traveling with him to the Louvre, the Prado, the Borghese gave rise to tea on her porch, their heads



bent over volumes of fine art as they murmured personal revelations. Riley confessed her husband's betrayal, Richard admitted his antiques business had floundered but was inching back toward solvency. One evening she invited him inside. Excepting her son and father, he was the only man who had crossed her threshold. Turning pages turned into foreplay until Riley—who had only ever slept with Damian—traded the armor of grief for Richard's arms.

For three afternoons she was transformed: supple as Chagall's *Circus Rider on a Red Horse*, yielding as Klimt's muse in *The Kiss*, unselfconscious as Ma-

tisse's harem odalisques. Only Christmas paused their couplings; Riley flew west to her daughter and Richard east to his.

Three months later she called me. Recounting her pleasure-soaked idyll, she concluded, "This is the disappointing part." After Riley returned home on New Year's Eve, her texts to her lover were read but left unanswered—an indubitable sign of ghosting.

Desire, infatuation, vulnerability, I knew well, could mislead.

"I'm glad you don't think this is a tragedy," I told her. "Let's face it, you got out of this relationship what you needed." Clearly, there was nothing

disappointing about their encounters, just about his disappearance.

“I saw him walking far from our usual route and texted we could just go back to hello.”

“Do you think he could?”

Her breath caught. “I probably couldn’t either.”

Why, I wondered, did my ambitious, successful friend turn to me at this time? Since my husband died I had felt like a feral creature, running on instinct—away from painful reminders, toward a hazy horizon. Zealous about defying grief, I was startled when people called me brave. Yet I knew well that when one life ends and before the next one begins, you can flatline. Six years on, despite making mistakes, I’ve found my way by willingness to be lost. Through four moves, life has taken on new forms, unforeseen yet somehow ordained, and I became adept at finding my new place within them. Did my experience inspire Riley to believe that she, too, could adapt?

Listening to my friend, I realized we both got to know our new selves in homes of our own, in bodies that after all these years still had something to teach us. When the body awakens, it stirs the soul. Richard might be long gone, but now Riley was pouring her passion into painting with oils.

“My technique is terrible, but I love it, and my teacher is wonderful,” she gushed about her first painting class since college. “I’m turning my garage into a studio.”

I envisioned her there: paint-splattered drop cloths at her feet, easel commanding the space, getting her colors just right. Her exuberance reminded me how, in my life, losses and rejections have mostly led to greater freedoms. When I aged out of my career, it opened up time for my own writing to flourish and for me to support my husband full-time through his illness and death. Two years later, the sale of our cabin relieved me of a place once cherished for its remoteness but where even the friendships had grown to feel remote. While I was at it, I relinquished our marital home, seeking a fuller life in a smaller city.

What seemed like a good plan soured. Within a year, the new, conservative town grew claustrophobic. Uprooting from stifling loneliness wasn’t hard, and it accelerated my move cross-country to build a life with longtime friends on the west coast. Now Riley was here, visiting me for the first time in six years, giddy that her need for Damian had receded. Releasing her regrets, failures, faults had softened my friend, her “after-loss” alchemized into afterglow. Despite Damian’s belated remorse about the divorce, she observed with a kind of wonder, “I don’t want him back.”

Concluding her epic tale of heart-break, beguilement, and inspiration, she mused, “Just think how the divorce had brought me so low until those two women sent me a sign.”

“Oh, Riley,” I said, “Richard was not

the sign.” How easily she could mistake him as the manifestation of another beginning. Reconnecting her soul and her body, her lover simply catalyzed the energy ready to emerge, helping Riley across the threshold from doubt and sorrow to belief in herself and the zest to wield a paintbrush. “Turning your garage into a studio is the sign.”

Before she flew south to her daughter, we took a final walk along the bay. Fog rolled in, bathing the cypress trees and Lighthouse Field in luminosity, quieting us. Far below, surfers paddled the water, which glowed as if lit from within. Her romance with Richard, I thought to myself, was a subplot in the far more interesting odyssey she had chosen, or that had chosen her. The cliff walk took us around a bend, and there—on a railing a foot from the buzz of e-bikes, clatter of skateboards, whoosh of roller skates—perched a great egret. Otherworldly, the regal bird’s strange beauty arrested us. Power closely held in dazzling white plumage, it towered like a beacon, radiant and unwavering. Embodying grace and stillness, appearing on this last day of my friend’s visit, the egret also seemed to herald her next incarnation. Its presence struck me as a benediction—the prayer at the end of a service that guides us forward, into the mystery just coming into view. ✨



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