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My Letter: Eight lines, one hundred nineteen words, nine sentences

My parents move us the summer before ninth grade from our four-room apartment in Brooklyn, New York, to a four-bedroom Colonial house with a two-car garage on the south shore of Long Island. A town where every street is a "drive" or a "place" or a "court." Where kids play softball in the street and basketball in their driveways and roller skate in the park.

I do not play softball. I cannot shoot a basketball. I have scabs on both knees from learning how to roller skate. I do not want to move. I do not like change.

What about all my friends? I plead to my parents, desperate.

What friends? they ask.

I am six feet tall and weigh one hundred and twenty pounds, a walking hanger. My face breaks out, and I start to shave at the same time. I bear a striking resemblance to Alfred E. Newman on the cover of MAD Magazine. While I struggle to unpack my prized *World Book Encyclopedia* and complete Agatha Christie mystery collection, my older brother has already made six new friends, been invited to five parties later that night, and is the secret crush of every pubescent girl on our "drive," and a few on the "court" around the corner. No doubt he will make his way to the "place" two blocks away.

We've been in our new house for all of one hour.

At my new junior high school, I eat lunch by myself every day, alone at a long picnic-style table. It is the geek table, and little by little the other junior high geeks wander over, sniffing me out curiously. But they are the lower end of the geek chain, so immersed in their geekdom that even I don't want to eat with them. I snarl and they wander off. I don't mind eating alone. I imagine myself as part of the Witness Protection Program, and I must remain silent or put the lives of my family and myself in danger.

I look forward to Honors English because kids in honors classes like to read and proudly admit it. But there is a mistake in my schedule and I am put into the regular English class where none of the kids like to read and beat up anyone who does—and proudly admit *that.* Mrs. Unger, my English teacher, stands in front of the room and dodges paper planes and spitballs. After the second bell rings, she closes the door and claps her hands and says, *Calm down class.* The class doesn't calm down, so Mrs. Unger flicks the light switch on and off, on and off, which is very annoying and gives me a headache.

We're going to read Animal Farm *by George Orwell,* she announces, and all the kids start making cow and pig sounds. Mrs. Unger cannot control the class and comes up with the brilliant idea to sit *a well-behaved student,* as she puts it, *in between two troublemakers.* Her eyes roam the classroom, and I try

to think of something, anything, to do like throwing the wastepaper basket at her face so I will be a troublemaker, but too late, she spots me and I am designated a seat between Doug Petrie and John McCook, the two worst-behaved kids in the school. Mrs. Unger tells them *maybe you can learn something from Robert,* and I want to ask her, *Why don't you just take me outside and blindfold me in front of a firing squad? Why don't you bring me to the gallows and put my head under the blade of a guillotine?*

I am a marked man, and my life will be made miserable for the rest of the semester. I fantasize that I am Dirty Harry Callahan and that I bring an armload of ammunition to school; that I stand in front of Petrie and McCook and call them *punk* and get them to cry, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry,* and watch as they pee down the leg of their pants and promise never to kick my chair or throw spitballs. Of course I quickly put such thoughts out of my mind because no one, not even Dirty Harry Callahan, would ever be crazy enough to bring a gun to school.

Hang on! I tell myself, and I imagine that *Mrs. Unger is the vicious warden of the toughest prison in New York, no, the United States, no, the world,* and I am thrown into a cell with Petrie and McCook, two hardened criminals, and I must survive by nothing but grit and stamina. My release date is June 28th, ninth grade graduation. Months before that date, however, I will enter another classroom and meet another teacher, and life will change forever.

Public Speaking. The two words make my stomach churn. It is the second semester of ninth grade, and public speaking is my elective. I don't know why they call it an elective since, had I been consulted, I would've elected not to take public speaking.

My public speaking teacher is Eleanor Leavitt. She has great posture and smiles a lot, but not in that phony teacher way. She is a graduate of Vassar College and talks like Deborah Kerr. She doesn't slam the door after the first bell, and she doesn't clap her hands. She doesn't have to. Everyone listens to her.

Eleanor Leavitt arranges the seats in a semi-circle so no one gets stuck sitting in the back. *Welcome to public speaking, a place for you to express yourselves,* she says, and at that moment I swear she smiles directly at me.

The topic of my first speech is "A Chore I Dislike." I stand in front of the class, facing the semi-circle. Eleanor Leavitt smiles that wonderful smile of hers. My hands tremble, and I hold a stack of three by five index cards with notes from my speech scribbled on them. One of the girls, Karen Garrett, a good friend of Doug Petrie, my prison cellmate, deliberately picks her nose and pretends to flick her snot in my direction. For a minute, I'm fixated on her pinky finger going in and out of her nostril. Until Eleanor Leavitt clears her throat, smiles, and says, *Whenever you're ready.*

I feel the bile rising up from my stomach toward my throat, tasting that morning's Cheerios. Karen Garrett is still picking away so I turn a bit in her direction because I figure if I'm going to throw up I want to throw up on Karen Garrett.

I try to speak and a few words come out in that raspy voice you get when you need to clear your throat. I clear my throat again and again. Then I begin talking. About how *I hate to take out the garbage because when I drag the large hefty bags down the long driveway they break open and all of my mother's dinners come oozing out, and I have to scoop up day old chopped liver.* And then it happens. Someone laughs. And somebody else. Oh, God, they're laughing at me! I keep talking and describe *day old egg salad all over my hands* and how I try to scoop it up, and I see Eleanor Leavitt laughing. It's like the movie, *Carrie,* where Sissy Spacek's at the prom and she hears her mother say, *They're all gonna laugh at you,* and the room starts to go round and round, only I'm not at the prom, I'm in Room 205 of my junior high school on the south shore of Long Island and God, if there really is a hell, this is it. They're laughing at me! Even Eleanor Leavitt. Nice Eleanor Leavitt is laughing!

I try not to raise my arms because I can feel my pits exploding with perspiration and I know that if I lift my arms everyone will see big rings of water, so I only lift my hands from the elbows up which makes me look like I have some kind of neurological disorder. And the more I talk about *scooping up creamed cheese and meatballs that roll down in the street,* the more they laugh. I talk faster, and they all laugh more. And then they clap. They're clapping that it's over! I rush to my seat. Eleanor Leavitt nods and smiles at me as she passes by. The bell rings, and she calls me over to her desk.

That was a wonderful speech, she says. *I look forward to more of your work.*

I start to say something like, *Thank you very much,* but everything comes out in this strangulated, self-conscious mumble of a whisper, and I sound a lot like Flor, our school's sole exchange student who is learning English as a third language.

I give one speech each week. Everyone laughs and applauds. I throw away the index cards. Karen Garrett doesn't pick her nose anymore, and no one yawns. Now and again somebody from my public speaking class passes me in the hallway and nods or says, *Hi, see ya in class.*

Stuart Socolov, one of the kids in the class who talks a lot but makes boring speeches, invites me to some kind of Teen Night from the local synagogue, but I beg off. The last thing I want to do on a Saturday night is get together with a bunch of other kids my age and pray.

C'mon, it'll be fun, he says, but I prefer to remain alone in the comfort and safety of the Witness Protection Program.

I watch Sammy Davis, Jr. on a late night television variety show. He says when he plays a room in Las Vegas he feels like he owns the room, and I

know what he means. Because for the last five months of the semester Eleanor Leavitt's public speaking class in Room 205 feels like the main room of the Sands Hotel, and damn if I don't own it.

Two days before graduation Eleanor Leavitt signs my yearbook. She smiles that genuine smile of hers, and I clear my throat and say, *Thank you.* I want to say so much more, all these deep, meaningful, pithy statements I have been practicing, but big mouth Stuart Socolov shoves his yearbook book in her face, and before long I am standing by the door watching the other students of Room 205 clamoring for one more moment with Eleanor Leavitt.

A few days later a letter arrives in the mail addressed to my parents.

A public speaking class is only as effective as the students in it. This semester our class was a success, and your son was largely responsible. Through careful preparation of his own assignments he set a standard of excellence for others. This is really a masterpiece of understatement. To be exact, when your son was called to speak, the class would applaud, an extremely rare reaction in any case. The very excellence of his work and the pleasure it afforded the rest of the class caused everyone to strive a little harder. He was truly a delight to all of us. Your son has shown intelligence, wit, and maturity. I join you in looking forward to his future successes.

Sincerely,
Eleanor Leavitt

My parents beam. I take the letter to my room, close the door and re-read it again and again and again. Eight lines, one hundred nineteen words, nine sentences. I read it slowly, savoring the meaning of each word, each sentence. Savoring the realization that for the first time in my life, I have done something well. A series of words jumps out at me. Delight. Intelligence. Wit. Maturity. Words that express my value. Words that seem to erase all the awfulness of the last year. Words that make Karen Garrett's nose picking and Doug Petrie's chair kicking and Mr. Ratner's bullying all part of some planned logic of survival of the fittest to get me to this moment. I read the letter again. I read it aloud. And I read it silently.

And then I smile.

I spend a lot of time alone that summer in our house on the south shore of Long Island. I am bored and restless, and I read, watch television, and snoop through everyone's belongings. I discover my brother's secret stash of pornographic magazines, like *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, and hidden even deeper, the really filthy ones like *Screw* and *Spread.* I read all of them cover to cover. In the back, there are ads from women who give massages; women with names like Delilah and Monique. I call the numbers in the ads and then hang up when someone answers. I call back and ask things like, *How much do you charge?* until Delilah or Monique say, *Hey, how old are you anyway,* and I lower my voice and say, *Twenty-three,* and then they say, *Yeah, right!* and hang up on me.

I hate this! I say aloud, and there is no one in the house to answer me. I hate the fact that I am in the Witness Protection Program and because of it I have zero friends. I hate the fact that I am stuck in this big house on this drive on Long Island making prank phone calls to prostitutes and, worse yet, not following through.

What do I want to do? I ask myself. *What do I want to do?* I say again, this time aloud. *What do you want to do?* I ask myself over and over, walking from bedroom to bedroom to kitchen to den. *What do I really want to do?*

I read Eleanor Leavitt's letter and slowly it all starts to sink in. I know what I must do. The one thing that scares me. The one thing that no one would ever expect me to do.

And I smile.

I want to go to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, I announce to my father one night as he sits in the den in his underwear, smoking a cigar, and watching Bonanza.

My father nods calmly. He doesn't bring up Little League, which I joined for a week, played one game, quit, and left my parents to foot the bill for the crisply pressed uniform that still hangs in my bedroom closet; or the Cub Scouts, where my membership was so brief I never got a chance to wear any uniform.

If that's want you want to do, nods my father, *I'm behind you one hundred percent. Get me some more information.*

That's when I hand him the brochure. My father reads it from cover to cover.

If that's what you want to do, he says, still very calm, *make an appointment for an audition.*

That's when I hand my father the date for my audition.

That's when he turns off Bonanza.

My father and I go shopping for clothes for me to wear to my audition at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. My father picks out a pair of yellow pants with a black snakeskin design.

I can't wear something like that, I tell him, but my father, who works in advertising in Greenwich Village, says, *Trust me, these pants are in.*

The fact that my father, who is three times my age, and listens to Harry James and Benny Goodman and Helen Morgan, knows what's in and I don't, leaves me depressed.

I wake up with hives on the morning of my audition at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I am itching all over with red scaly welts but I do not tell anyone because I do not want to cancel my audition. My mother, who catches me with my hand down the front of my pants, scratching frantically, shakes her head disapprovingly, and says, *Honey, I hope you're not going to do that when you're on the stage.*

My father drives me into the city to Madison Avenue and 28th Street. A receptionist gives me an application and a scene from a play to read. To this

day, I can't remember if it is Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams or Anton Chekhov, but I know that I will be reading it in front of a stranger. My groin is itching like crazy, and I sit on the bench in front of the receptionist, slowly moving my pelvis back and forth for relief. The receptionist looks up and I freeze in mid-thrust.

My name is called, and I walk toward the auditorium. I catch a glimpse of myself in a full length mirror: all six feet and one hundred twenty pounds of me with a wisp of a mustache barely grown above my upper lip, my chemically straightened blonde hair that looks like somebody plopped a straw hat onto my head, my yellow pants with the black snakeskin design, a fire-engine red shirt, and a black belt with a silver buckle and matching black sandals—sandals! And I think, *Oh my God, what was I thinking?* I'm auditioning at the most prestigious acting school in the United States, a place where Edward G. Robinson and Spencer Tracy walked the hallways, and I look something right out of an Andy Warhol movie.

I make a mental note to kill my father for making me wear those damn pants.

I stand on a round stage in the auditorium. Someone sits in the back. It is dark, and I can't tell who it is. I hold my play by Miller or Williams or Chekhov, and I have tried to memorize some of it, but right now my hands are shaking, and I pray I don't drop the book. I'm trying hard not to concentrate on the increasing itch several inches beneath my ugly belt buckle. The voice in the back of the theater asks me to *go ahead and read,* so I begin. It's actually going pretty well, me standing there grinding my thighs together, when I do something really dumb. I look up. I look up because Eleanor Leavitt always told us to make eye contact with the audience, which in this case means one stranger sitting in the last row of the theater. When I look back down at the words in my hand, I've lost my place.

I start reading the first line my eyes focus on, which is a line I read three lines ago, so I start making up words, any words, to stall for enough time to find the line I'm supposed to be reading. I'm actually standing on stage at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts verbally bastardizing Williams or Miller or Chekhov or whoever the hell it is, just uttering a bunch of nonsense. Then I pick a line, any line, and I race through the piece faster and faster and cannot wait to finish. All I want to do is get off this stage and into the nearest bathroom and undo my yellow pants with the black snakeskin design and pull down my Fruit of the Loom underwear and scratch myself to heaven. Finally, out of breath, I stop.

Thank you, says the voice from the back.

I run out of the theater, past the receptionist, past my father, and into the nearest restroom. When I emerge, my father is standing there with open arms and a big grin.

You're in! he says.

Just like that.

I know, I can't understand it either, and the only one who makes sense of this whole thing is my older brother, who calls home from college.

Just write 'em a check and they'll take anybody, he yawns.

Riding through the Midtown Tunnel on the way home, my father leans over and pats my leg.

They liked the pants, he says, satisfied, as if a snakeskin design had anything to do with my acceptance into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Maybe he's right. At this point I don't argue.

I wake up at six o'clock in the morning on the second Saturday in October for my first acting class. A cab takes me to the Long Island Railroad station that takes me into New York's Pennsylvania Station where I grab the thirty-fourth street cross-town bus. I am no longer a fifteen-year-old refugee from the geek table at a Long Island high school. I am Eugene Gant in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel,* and I am leaving my rural hometown in North Carolina to start a new life in the big city.

There are twelve students in the Saturday teenage program at the Academy, and they come from a host of distant and exotic locales: Larchmont, Scarsdale, Mamaroneck and Scotch Plains, New Jersey, which, being from Long Island by way of Brooklyn are the kinds of places I've only read about on road maps. One of them, a girl of seventeen with a mass of curly hair and an enormous bosom that she displays proudly, approaches me and extends her hand.

Hi, I'm Linda.

Hi, Linda, I say.

Linda thrusts her chest toward me.

That's Lynda with a y, she says, defiantly, as if expecting, even daring me, to disagree.

For the rest of the semester others will snicker and whisper and lewdly refer to the size of her upper frontal anatomy with all the usual immature phrases that kids use, but for me, from that moment on, she remains then, and always, *Lynda-with-a-y.*

Another student, Joan Silver, arrives in a limousine and in full theater makeup. She is fifteen but reminds me of one of my mother's friends. She doesn't talk to any of us, and during our music class belts out a tune from a Broadway show that ends with, *I am going to be a star, dammit!* and you know she means it, too, dammit.

There are only two other boys in the class: Don Noodleman, from Howard Beach, Queens, who arrives wearing as much make-up as Joan Silver; and Leonard Frankel, a white kid with an enormous Afro from the Bronx who has a speech impediment and tries to sing "Try to Remember" from *The*

Fantastiks, but he pronounces try as *twy,* and twy, twy, twy as he might, he can't get it right.

I'm starting to feel like I'm Steve McQueen compared to these guys when the door opens and in walks Ric Reilly. Ric Reilly is taller than me. He is better looking than me. He is a better actor than I am. He is my competition. Ric Reilly will go on to be nominated for an Academy Award several years later, and I will watch the awards show on television and seethe with envy as he parades down the red carpet with his date, reporters scrambling for his attention. But a short time later Ric Reilly's career will peak and then wane and fade to a whisper, and by then I could care less.

Of course, I do not know this at the time. All I know is that anytime any of the girls need a partner for a kissing scene, they all pick Ric Reilly.

Clara O'Dell, an arthritic former Busby Berkeley hoofer, now well past eighty, teaches our first class, something called Movement and Dance. She expects all of us to wear black tights.

I'm not wearing no tights, says Ric Reilly, and all the girls swoon.

I'll twy, says Leonard Frankel.

Don Noodleman, already wearing a pair, says nothing.

All eyes turn to me. I lower my voice three octaves, lower than Ric O'Reilly's.

No way am I wearing those things, I growl.

Miss O'Dell starts to cry and collapses on a folding chair.

Ric Reilly rushes to comfort her, and all the girls sigh, *Oh Ric,* and they all give me a dirty look. For the rest of the semester, I am known as *the creep who made poor Miss O'Dell cry.* Plus, I have to wear the damn tights.

Our speech teacher is John Forbes, and he reminds me of George Sanders, the type of proper Englishman you'd expect to find hosting Masterpiece Theater in front of a fireplace, wearing an ascot and puffing from a long cigarette holder.

We are each asked to read a selection from our favorite book, and when I am called on I read a passage from *The Catcher in the Rye.* I have practiced this selection for weeks and as I read, I feel the emotion rise up in my voice. Suddenly I am Holden Caulfield and every other angst-ridden male, from Marlon Brando in *The Wild One,* to James Dean in every one of his three movies. I continue reading and I know, I just know, that when I am finished I will look up and John Forbes will rise from his chair and pronounce, *Good God, Boy! you are magnificent!* and take me by the arm and lead me down the hall where I will read for another teacher, a teacher with great power and great connections. And before I am even finished this other teacher will proclaim to Mr. Forbes, *Good God, you're right!* and then I will be given a role in a new movie, and my reading as Holden Caulfied in *The Catcher in the Rye*

will be likened to Marlon Brando's I-coulda-been-a-contenda soliloquy in the back of the car with Rod Steiger in *On the Waterfront* and I, too, will become a contender.

I finish my passage from *Catcher* and look up to find Forbes with his head down on the desk. Silence.

After about a minute, Forbes looks up and leans back and takes a deep breath.

You're from Brooklyn, aren't you? he says, and I nod my head yes.

Is there anyone else here from Brooklyn? he asks, and everyone is quiet and they look down at the floor like it's a scene from one of those old black and white war movies where the big, bad Nazi general gathers all the villagers into the town square and demands that all the Jews step forward. Finally, Leonard Frankel meekly raises his hand.

I'm from the Bwonx, he says, and John Forbes puts his head back down on the desk.

By my senior year, the Witness Protection Program is a thing of the past. I no longer eat alone. I have friends. I smoke pot, make out with my girlfriend, and have the one thing that has eluded me since ninth grade: my own table in the cafeteria. A table that says I belong, I am popular. I sit with my friends, eating and laughing and throwing french fries and Jello.

One day I notice another table not too far away, just beyond the jock table and the stoner table—the geek table. Most of the geeks are new; a few are holdovers from junior high. They sit spaced apart, their faces down in their sandwiches. But one geek looks familiar. I recognize him from ninth grade as one that I shooed away. One that was too geekish, even for me. He sits there alone, three years later, wearing a Will Robinson velour shirt from *Lost in Space,* just like the ones my mother used to buy in bulk. And I know what I should do. What I need to do.

I will walk over to that table and tap him on the shoulder and he will jump, scared for a moment that someone from the jock table is going to throw food down his shirt, or worse. I will extend my hand and say, *How ya' doin,* but he will shrink back, scared that it is all a trick. I will guide him over to my popular table and introduce him to everybody and invite him to join us, and some of my friends will disgustedly moan, *Ga-ross!,* but I will stand my ground. *This is my friend,* I will say, putting my arm around his shoulder. *If you want to be my friend, you have to be his friend.*

But I don't do any of that. I can't. The distance that separates our two tables is only five feet, but for me it is a long walk back to another life. So I just sit there. A bit of a chill runs through me because I know that it could just as well be me still cowering over there in my self-imposed Witness

Protection Program. But I cannot bring myself to throw this geek a life raft, to risk my hard-earned high school popular status. And just as I'm about to turn my head, the geek notices my glance and I swear he smirks with a knowing look of recognition that says, *You can run, but you can't hide.*

And that is when I turn away and never look back.

I carry my letter from Eleanor Leavitt with me, and it has survived several moves to college and the numerous apartments that came afterward. I'm not afraid to stand up in front of groups of people anymore; I don't feel waves of nausea and my voice doesn't rasp and I don't stammer or stutter. And when I feel a certain kind of mood come over me, a mood of uncertainty, or sadness, or self-doubt, for whatever reason, I pull out Eleanor Leavitt's letter and reread it.

During one of those readings I make myself a promise. The next time I make my three-thousand-mile journey home to our family house on the drive on Long Island, I will visit Eleanor Leavitt. And I will tell her how much that letter meant to me all these years. I will tell her it—everything.

So it is during my first night home, sitting at the dinner table with my family, that I mention my plan to visit Eleanor Leavitt the next day.

You can't, says my younger brother.

What do you mean, I can't? I ask him, expecting to hear that the family car is in the shop for repairs.

She's dead, says my little brother between bites.

What do you mean, dead? I ask, and after "dead" I add a nervous high-pitched laugh, knowing very well what he means, but hoping that if I ask again he'll give me a different answer.

She died last week, answers my brother, still eating. *We used to see her climbing the stairs real slow, he says. She had this bulge in her stomach, and then one day she didn't come back to school.*

And that is that. It's over. Just like those scenes in the movies when one person plans for years to say that special something to someone else and they plan and they dream about what the moment will be like and then when they finally make that long journey home over some treacherous mountain range, the person is dead. And they wonder, *Did that person ever know how much they meant to me?* Then of course somebody comes by with a final letter or a video that the dead person wrote or recorded that says, *Of course, I always knew how much I meant to you!* and the movie ends on a happy note. But this is not a movie. Nobody hands me a letter or a video. So I'm left to wonder.

A few days later I'm riding on the Long Island Railroad into the city when who should plop down next to me but big mouth Stuart Socolov from ninth grade public speaking, so we start to catch up about life and loves and all that stuff, and before I know it we're talking about high school.

I don't remember how the subject comes up, but someone mentions Eleanor Leavitt, and Stuart Socolov is going on and on about *what a great teacher she was* and how she liked him and how she said he *always gave the best speeches,* and I just can't stand it anymore, listening to him prattle on about his great speeches and all, so I bring up the subject of my letter.

Oh, I got one of those, says Stuart Socolov.

What do you mean, one of those? I ask, slightly irritated that my letter would be described in such a derisive, offhand manner.

And then Stuart Socolov proceeds to recite the contents of his letter, which, except for a misplaced word here and there, is an exact duplicate of my letter, and I cringe at the sound of his voice reciting words like *intelligence, wit, and maturity,* and phrases like *a masterpiece of understatement,* accolades that were supposed to be meant for me, and only me.

I guess we made quite an impression, I say, my voice raspy and coarse like I'm back in ninth grade.

But Stuart Socolov can't let it go and proceeds to rattle off everyone else in Eleanor Leavitt's public speaking class who also received a copy of my letter. It's like finding out your girlfriend, who you think offered her virginity to you, and only you, offered it to ten other guys in the same week. *Shut up,* my brain screams in my head. *Shut up, shut up, shutupshutupshutup.* And for the rest of the train ride into Pennsylvania Station I smile and I laugh and I joke with Stuart Socolov, but the truth is I don't really hear a single thing he has to say.

I travel the three thousand miles back home and the night I arrive, even before I unpack, I find Eleanor Leavitt's letter. I think of all those fantasies I had about the night Eleanor Leavitt wrote that letter, sitting in her dark paneled den in front of the fireplace with a little ink bottle on her desk, writing for hours, dipping a quill in the ink bottle, laboring tirelessly in the morning dawn to get the words right.

How did she really write that letter? In the school cafeteria between classes? On carbon paper, so she could fill in different names like it was some kind of generic form letter?

This one letter. Eight lines, one hundred nineteen words, nine sentences. This one letter that ushered me through ninth grade and through high school and into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. This one letter that always waited for me in my bedroom, my dorm room, my first apartment, when things got a little too rough, to always remind me of what I once achieved. Did she ever really know what those words meant to me? This one frayed, yellowed, ink smeared, piece of paper that I should go ahead and crumple and discard and finally be done with.

So the next day I do the one thing, the one sensible thing that is left to do to make peace with what I have discovered, and face the truth about Eleanor

Leavitt and her letter. The one thing I have never done after almost fifteen years. The one thing that will set the record straight between us.

For the very first time, I take Eleanor Leavitt's letter, and I have it framed.

And I reread it.

And then I smile.

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