

the art  
of  
escaping

Erin Callahan

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(Fri, Apr 13, 5:22 p.m.)

Will:

>Hey.

Mattie:

>Hey yourself. What's up?

Will:

>I just finished it.

Mattie:

>Ugh. And now you know exactly why you shouldn't have talked me into taking a Creative Nonfic class.

Will:

>Au contraire, Mattie-0. I quite enjoyed it.

Mattie:

>But???

Will:

>I didn't say but.

Mattie:

>I know you. There's a but coming. I can feel it.

>Hello????

Will:

>Ok ok. There's maybe some stuff you left out.

Mattie:

>Like what?

Will:

>It's not your fault. It was a while ago and you weren't there for ALL of it.

>Fear not, I'm going to write some foot-  
notes for you.

Mattie:

>Footnotes? What the f  
>Shit hang on Stella's calling.

Will:

>Groovy. I'll just be here. Writing my  
footnotes.

**(Fri, Apr 13, 5:31 p.m.)**

Mattie:

>Sorry I'm back. She wanted to make sure  
we're still on for dinner.

Will:

>Why doesn't she just text?

Mattie:

>Ha! I asked her that once and she said  
something like "you never know what you'll  
hear if you call instead"

Will:

>Oh my god.

Mattie:

>I know! Can you believe that?

Will:

>That girl is a hoot.

Mattie:

>We ARE still on for dinner right? You're  
not going to spend the night writing foot-  
notes or whatever?

Will:

>I suppose I can tear myself away for

sushi. \*sigh\*

>Plus Frankie borrowed Labyrinth and promised he would give it back tonight.

Mattie:

>Yay. Meet you outside Warner at 6:30?

Will:

>I'll be there.

**(Fri, Apr 13, 5:39 p.m.)**

Will:

>Hey Mattie-0?

Mattie:

>Yes Will?

Will:

>I heart you.

Mattie:

>I heart you too you big weirdo.

*Cram school crawled by. I wanted to do well on my exams, but my mind was full of ropes and knots and chains and locks. I wondered how long it would take me to escape if someone chained me to the desk, or if I'd be doomed to listen to lectures for all of eternity. The thought made my fingers itch.*

*Yumiko passed me a note during the lecture, her eyes full of repressed giggles. "Naoki is the most beautiful boy I've ever seen. And so well-mannered, don't you think? I want him to ask me to the social on Friday. Do you think he will?" She'd drawn little hearts along the border.*

*Only one response came to mind. "I don't care."*

*— Akiko Miyake, Tokyo, April 3, 1973*

## Mattie vs. Tiny, Icky Things

I fought through a hangover on Saturday morning and forced myself into the shower. After washing bits of broken roofing shingle out of my hair, I downed two glasses of water, even though all I wanted to do was crawl back into bed and die. My important business of the day trumped nursing a hangover.

The drive to Grayton took less than twenty minutes. I parked on the street, right in front of the dilapidated villa that still managed to shine in a neighborhood full of McMansions. Fat drops of rain began to fall as I climbed out of the car, and I paused after a few steps down the stone footpath to take a deep breath.

*Come on, Mattie. This is easy. The worst thing she can say is no.*

The decrepit front door had shed black paint chips all over the porch, but it still boasted ornate woodcarvings of snakes and birds. I pressed the yellowed button and heard a deep *bing! bong!* echo through the house.

Then silence. I waited with my palms sweating and a headache throbbing above my eyebrows. More silence. I shut my eyes, massaged my temples, and rang the bell again. I turned and watched the rain fall on the tall grass in the front yard for a minute before ramming my determined index finger repeatedly against the yellowed button, sending a clamor of bells pealing beyond the door. Then I switched to rapping on the door, hoping an assertive knock would convey more urgency than my manic bell ringing.

Soft footfalls sounded inside the house and then abruptly stopped.

“Hello?” I asked.

A panel with a hummingbird carving flipped open and a pair of dark eyes peered out at me. “Hey, Girl Scout,” said a throaty voice. “I don’t want any cookies.”

I blinked at the dark eyes. “Um, hello?”

“Beat it, Girl Scout.”

The hummingbird panel snapped shut.

“Wait,” I shouted as I resumed my frantic knocking. “Wait, Ms. Miyake. I’m a big fan of your mother. I just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

The panel flipped back open. “If that’s the case, I’m definitely not buying what you’re selling. Get the fuck off my porch, Girl Scout.”

The panel snapped shut again, and I stared at the hummingbird carving. Rain was pouring on the lawn now, and I couldn’t bring myself to walk back down that stone path to Stella’s car. I sank down onto a pile of paint chips and gazed through the tall grass.

I don’t know how long I sat there. It could have

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been hours, but it didn't feel like sitting on the roof drunk on bourbon. My mind didn't wander into unpleasant territory. It stayed focused on the rain and the buzz of the grasshoppers, the feel of paint chips as I rolled and cracked them between my fingers, and the soreness of my ass against the wooden slats of the porch. And then I thought about Akiko.

I pictured a seventeen-year-old girl, dressed in a quintessential school uniform with a sailor-style collar, pushing open the door of a magic shop in Tokyo and bullying the middle-aged magician behind the counter into making her his new assistant.

Then I pictured a twenty-year-old woman stepping onto American soil with sensible shoes and a visitor's visa, even though she planned to never go back home. I imagined her disembarking from a trans-Pacific ship, because it seemed more romantic than arriving by plane and landing in some dingy airport in California. But I suppose there was something poetic about that as well. An airplane brought her to the land where her career would truly begin, and another airplane would end it.

I didn't even notice when the hummingbird panel flipped open again. "I thought I told you to get off my porch."

"I believe your exact words were, 'Get the fuck off my porch, Girl Scout.'" I could have sworn I heard just a flicker of laughter behind the door.

"How long are you going to sit there?"

I shrugged. "I'm pretty comfortable."

"I don't really like cops," she huffed. "Don't make me call them."



“It’s not like I’m bothering you. I’m just sitting here.”

“You sitting there *is* bothering me.”

“Then come out here and talk to me.”

“I don’t spend much time outside. And especially not on the porch.”

“I can see why. You should really sweep up all these paint chips.”

The hummingbird panel remained open, but I heard footsteps leaving and then returning. The door creaked open just long enough for her to toss a broom and dustpan onto the porch.

“If you clean up the porch, I’ll invite you to tea.”  
With that, the panel snapped shut.

I picked up the broom and dutifully swept the dirt, dust, and paint chips into the dustpan before returning to my seat. The rain stopped and started again, then the door slowly creaked open. I rose from my seat, but there was no sign of her. I pulled the door all the way open and peered into the house.

“Hello?” My voice echoed through the cavernous foyer. I glanced up at the cathedral ceiling and exposed wood beams as I stepped over the threshold. I heard rattling coming from the hallway to my right and headed in that direction.

“You’re late,” she said when I entered the dining room. Two teacups and a teapot sat on the table.

“What happened to my formal invitation?” I asked.

“It was implicit, not formal. Sit.”

I took a seat in a stiff chair across from a thirty-something Asian woman. Her thin lips formed a perfect horizontal line, but her expression was far from blank. She

glared at me like I was spoiled, soft. A marshmallow ready for roasting. I picked up my steaming teacup and burned my fingers.

“Ow,” I mouthed.

One corner of her lips curled upward. “I don’t use milk or sugar.”

“It’s fine. Thanks for the tea, Ms. Miyake.”

She bristled. “Don’t call me that.”

“Then you should probably tell me your first name.”

“Miyu,” she said before taking a sip of scorching tea.

“And you’re Akiko Miyake’s daughter.” I felt my face slip into a goofy expression of reverence before I burned my tongue on a tentative sip of tea. “I have so many questions, I don’t even know where to start. I mean, what was she like?”

Her glare intensified. “I bet you think I’m so lucky. That I had such a wonderful childhood, raised by nannies who never lasted more than six months because they couldn’t possibly live up to my mother’s impossible standards. I bet you think I enjoyed spending countless hours backstage with my only friend. His name was Game Boy, by the way.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She’d guessed that my childhood had been more standard than hers and she wasn’t wrong. Apparently, I didn’t look like the type who’d grown up on the road with my primary caregiver in the spotlight.

“Whatever, Girl Scout.”

“It’s Mattie, actually.”

She waved my name away. “I was going to call you Girl Scout until you got fed up with it and left.”

“I don’t care what you call me as long as you’re willing

to talk about escapology.”

She took another sip of tea and didn't seem the least bit fazed by the blazing heat. “You're younger than most of them.”

“Most of who?”

She cleared her throat with a forceful cough. “You mean whom, not who. And I'm referring to the fans who show up here. There haven't been many in the past few years, but they're usually middle-aged. And male.”

“Huh. Well, isn't it refreshing I don't fit the usual profile?”

“I don't think refreshing is the right word.”

“Did she teach you?” I asked.

Miyu laughed. “Teach me what? How to call for room service? How to hail a cab at the age of four? How to buy painkillers on the black market?”

I saw right through her game, but I wasn't even close to my breaking point.

“Your mom's entire life was wrapped up in escapology. You must have picked up something along the way.” I thought about my dad and the many hours of *Star Trek* I'd watched with him. “You wanted to bond with her, didn't you?”

She studied me as she drained the rest of her tea. “What exactly are you looking for? A mentor?”

I nodded. “I know it's a long shot, but I also know I won't reach the level I want on my own. There's only so much you can learn from guidebooks and YouTube videos.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

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“Why do you want to learn the art of escapology?”

*Why, indeed?*



“Mattie? Are you all right?”

*I don't know. Am I?*

I certainly hadn't expected to end up in the guidance counselor's office during the last few hours of my junior year at Vincent Cianci Jr. Regional High School, having *a moment*. It wasn't quite a panic attack because I didn't feel like I was going to die, but my palms were clammy and a stubborn little knot had tightened in my chest and one of my ears was ringing like someone had very rudely struck a tuning fork right next to my head.

If I were a nineteenth-century housewife, some well-meaning doctor would say, *Oh, fiddlesticks. You've caught the hysteria. Time to pluck out your wandering womb.*

This particular *moment* had been brought on by a confluence of tiny, icky things. First, the god awful Successories posters hanging behind Ms. Simmons's desk telling me to *make it happen* and *walk the talk*. Then there was the little smudge of lipstick by the corner of Ms. Simmons's mouth, the single flaw in her otherwise put-together persona. Finally, there was the almighty trigger word—well-rounded. I hated that word.

“Anyway, as I was saying. A college is going to want to know right off the bat that you're well-rounded. So in addition to bringing your GPA up just a few tenths, I'd really like you to think about participating more next year. Throw yourself into some extracurriculars. That

sounds doable, right?”

Her glistening blue eyes made my face twitch.

“No, actually. Not doable.”

She blinked at me. “What?”

“Higher grades I can handle, but there’s no way I’m spending a second more of my day here at school. Especially when no one who joins extracurriculars really cares about extracurriculars. They join them so they can look good on paper.”

“I sincerely don’t believe that’s the only reason.”

“Regardless, *I* don’t care about extracurriculars. Joining one now so I can impress a college admissions board is completely disingenuous.”

She took a deep breath and started bending a paperclip. “It’s not disingenuous if it’s something you enjoy. There must be something, Mattie. What about French Club? You took three years of French, didn’t you?”

“I took two years, and I hated it. Besides, who cares about French these days? Everyone knows Spanish is the second language you should be learning.”

“Okay,” she said softly, “then Spanish Club.”

“I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Math Team?”

“I barely passed Geometry last year.”

“Debate Team?”

“I hate confrontation.”

The paperclip she’d been torturing finally gave way and snapped in two. “Chess Team?”

“I hate competition.”

“Mock Trial Team?”

“Yawn.”

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“Newspaper?”

“Double yawn.”

“Yearbook?”

I stared at her. “That’s a joke, right?”

“Maybe you could propose a new extracurricular to the Student Activities Committee.”

I tried to picture my own handpicked extracurricular. Jazz Appreciation Team? Historical Non-Fiction Book Club? Kitschy Knickknack Collectors Alliance? Then, of course, there was that *other thing*. That thing I hid from everyone. Whenever I thought of someone like me saying that sacred e-word aloud, I imagined Akiko Miyake rolling over in her grave at Swan Point Cemetery. *Thou art not worthy, suburban millennial.*

“Wow. I’m truly honored, Ms. Simmons. But that sounds rather overwhelming. I think I’ll pass.”

“Mattie, I don’t like to say things like this to students, but I don’t think I have a choice with you. Sometimes . . . you have to play the game unless you want to go to some godforsaken party school for nonstarters.”

I crossed my arms. “No thanks. I’ll see how far I can get with my integrity intact. Besides, a party school could be fun. Who doesn’t like parties?”

That was the moment her blue eyes finally stopped glistening, and she shooed me out of her office with a hall pass and pamphlet for Bristol College. Once I got my bearings, I realized I’d instinctively headed toward Liam’s classroom. But I didn’t want to walk in there looking like I was on the verge of a panic attack, so I hooked a left into the ladies’ room and shut myself in a stall.

*Sweet, sweet solitude.* The moment you close the door of a public bathroom stall almost never fails to blow my mind. There's something almost sacred about it. It's like a breath of fresh, serene air except it usually smells a little bit like toilet.

I washed my hands without glancing in the mirror. I hadn't bothered to tame my mousy brown hair with a blow-dryer that morning or put concealer on the dark under-eye circles I'd inherited from my mom. I probably looked like a frizzy zombie, but there was zilch I could do about it.

At least my outfit wouldn't make me a target. I had on jeans, clean white socks, a red t-shirt with no graphics or slogans, and a generic black hoodie. It's not that I wanted to dress like a nondescript extra from a teenage-problem-of-the-week movie, I just couldn't quite bring myself to wear anything from my collection of vintage dresses to school. The crown jewel of my collection was a blue and white party dress from the '50s with cap sleeves and a Peter Pan collar. I generally preferred the fashions of the Jazz Age to midcentury-modern, but I didn't have the cash to buy a dress from that era and refused to settle for a contemporary knockoff. I pictured myself wearing the party dress while trying to dig a fat chemistry textbook out of my locker and almost laughed out loud.

I took one last serene breath and forced myself back into the hall. I found Liam hunched over his desk, scowling and scribbling on a notepad. He had his closed fist pressed against his forehead, as if he planned to punch himself in the face once his frustration reached its peak.

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“Your chicken scratch looks fascinating. But can I suggest a laptop?”

“Huh?” He looked up at me but kept his fist against his forehead. “Judas Priest, Mattie, I didn’t even hear you come in,” he said with just a hint of his New Zealand accent. “Well . . . One more grueling year almost over.”

“Thank fucking god.” I tried to come up with something more insightful, but the word *well-rounded* was ringing in my ears again.

He squinted at me. “What happened?”

“Ms. Simmons sat me down for a chat.”

Liam leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on his desk. “That woman is exhausting. She smells lovely and is strikingly pretty, but she’s utterly exhausting.”

I realize most students don’t swear casually in front of their history teachers and most teachers don’t disclose co-worker crushes to their students. But Liam and I have had this dynamic since the day I accosted him about a note he wrote on one of my exams. He claimed my sentimental hero worship of Sacajawea was clouding my critical thinking, and I informed him that he was a joyless misogynist. He laughed and upped my B to an A for “having the ovaries to call a forty-five-year-old man a misogynist to his face.”

“What did she want?” he asked.

“I don’t know. She rambled on for, like, ten minutes about liberal arts colleges, extracurriculars, and well-roundedness.”

“She wants you to pad your resume?”



“I think that was the general idea.”

“Hmmm. Can’t you say you’re the sole research assistant for a soon-to-be-famous historian?”

I snorted. “That’s a well-rounded lie.”

“If it makes you feel better, I think most colleges are just as impressed with independent interests. You’ve got history . . . what else?”

I shrugged.

“Mattie, what do you do when you’re not at school?”

“Hang out with Stella?”

“Okay, we can work with that . . . call yourself a devoted sidekick to a vapid overachiever.”

“Wow. So helpful. And Stella’s not vapid.”

“Kidding, kidding. What else?”

“I also collect quirky antiques and vintage clothing, watch *Star Trek*, listen to old jazz records . . .”

Liam looked at me with his lips all scrunched into the corner of his mouth.

“What?”

“This is off topic, but has it ever occurred to you that all of your interests involve consumption, rather than creation?”

“Et tu, Liam?” I whined. “You mean I don’t make anything, right? You sound just like my mom.”

Whenever I told her I was going to spend an evening dusting my jazz records or watching *Star Trek* with my dad, my mom would say, “When I was in high school, I started a band and we lugged all our equipment fifteen miles through the snow so we could play at some shitty rec center and then lugged it back home again. Uphill both ways.”

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“I really do need to meet your mum one of these days,” Liam said with a dreamy look in his eyes. “She sounds like a positively fascinating woman.”

“God, Liam. Ew. And I didn’t come in here to talk about my mom.”

“Sorry, sorry. Well . . .” He steepled his fingers under his scruffy chin and then shrugged. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

I blinked at him. “You’ll figure it out? That’s all the teacherly advice you have for me?”

“Mattie, it’s the last day of school. I dispensed the last of my teacherly advice back in December. You need to time your crises better.”

My phone vibrated in my back pocket, letting me know that I needed to be back in homeroom in two minutes. “That’s my cue. So help me god, Liam, you better come up with something better than ‘have a nice summer.’”

He narrowed his eyes and tapped a pen against his desk. “Enjoy the solstice?”

“Ugh.”

I stalked off to my last homeroom session of the year and found Stella sitting in her unofficially reserved seat. Her already sunny face, framed by two blonde pigtails, brightened a few more lumens when she spotted me. The effect was blinding.

I met Stella in sixth grade, the year she convinced her on-the-verge-of-divorce parents to stop home-schooling and send her to public school. Dressed in a sweater vest and knee socks, she was practically a swan among the slouchy, publicly educated riffraff. But she

was also desperate for someone to guide her through the promised land of semi-normal kid-dom. I somehow talked her into hanging out with me that afternoon, and because she didn't own a TV, subjected her to a pedantic PowerPoint presentation on all the various *Star Trek* series. Whereas most eleven-year-old girls would have run home screaming, Stella had just smiled while she sat cross-legged on my bed and said, "Neat. This is fun." My head had pretty much exploded.

"We're almost there," she said. "I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, Ginger."

"Ugh," I moaned. "I can't handle nicknames right now. Especially nicknames derived from embarrassing hair-dye-related incidents."

Her million-dollar smile dropped to a cartoonish frown, like the blue sad face they use to teach preschoolers about emotions. "What happened?"

"Am I that much of an open book?" I whined. "I sicken myself. Anyway, Ms. Simmons pulled me out of seventh period."

"Oh my god. Ginge—I mean Mattie—please tell me you're still on track for graduation next year."

"Christ, Stella, I'm not even close to risking not graduating. As always, I'm solidly in the middle, where I belong."

"So what did she want?"

"I don't even know. It was all extracurriculars . . . blah blah blah . . . well-roundedness . . . blah blah blah."

Stella opened her mouth to say something but held back.

"What?"

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She shook her head. “Nothing.”

Meadow Winters breezed in and took her unofficially reserved seat in front of me. Today, she was sporting what Stella referred to as her “off-duty model hair,” with her glossy locks piled on top of her head, like a delicate nest for a few cartoon songbirds.

“Hey, Mattie,” she said as she pulled out her phone.

“Hey, Meadow.”

“What are you guys up to this summer?”

“I’m working at Café Italiano and—”

She took a two-second break from scrolling, scrolling, scrolling to say, “Oh my god, they have ah-mazing gelato.”

“Yeah, it’s okay.” The tiny state of Rhode Island didn’t have much to offer the world besides hot wieners and rich people with yachts, but at least we had decent gelato. “Stella’s abandoning me for St. Joe’s,” I added.

Yes, my best friend, the traitorous overachiever, had been accepted to the prestigious summer session at St. Joseph’s Academy, a private high school that opened its hallowed halls each summer to motivated public high school seniors so they could experience a small taste of college-prep life. Only two other students from our class had been accepted—a guy from Stella’s AP classes who I’d dubbed Marlon *Blando* because he shouted *Stelllll-abbbb* literally every goddamn time he saw her, and this fourteen-year-old genius named Frankie who’d skipped two grades and had zero friends.

“Oh, wow. Congrats, Stella,” Meadow said as she finally looked up from her phone and turned to face us, and by us I mean Stella. “I could never waste a summer

going to school, but good for you.”

Though I agreed St. Joe’s sounded about as much fun as a root canal, Meadow’s backhanded compliment made me cringe. Stella must have seen me grimace because she flashed me a smile that said *play nice*.

“I was just telling Mattie that it’s not like regular school,” Stella cheerfully explained to Meadow. “We get to read books the teachers wouldn’t dare cover in public school, and we work on independent projects . . .”

Stella trailed off as Meadow nodded and waved to Will Kane when he trotted into the classroom with his tousled brown hair and sinewy basketball player limbs. He took the seat next to Meadow and tossed his messenger bag on the desk.

“What’s shakin’, kids?”

Even though Will had said “kids,” as in plural, Stella and I both knew he was really talking to Meadow. Will had been dating Meadow’s best friend, Betsy Appleton, since middle school, which, for most people my age, was before the dawn of time. As Will typed out something on his phone with lightning speed, he and Meadow struck up a conversation about an end of the year party at some rich kid’s beach house and ignored Stella and me.

Okay, here’s where TV always gets it wrong. Meadow didn’t need to flip her hair and sneer at me or sprinkle me with epithets or shove me into a locker to let me know that me and my BFF didn’t matter to her, and that we didn’t matter to anyone who matters. The dismissive little nod she gave Stella the second Will plopped down at his desk said it all, loud and clear.

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You might even say this was worse, because this was nothing. Insults and epithets would at least be something. But this was all Meadow thought Stella and I deserved from her.

I'd become generally impervious to that kind of shit. Sometimes, though, I could see it wearing on Stella, grinding her down ever so slightly. I didn't think it would ever break her, but six years of it had dulled her shine. And that made me want to stick a big, wet wad of gum in Meadow's off-duty model hair. Maybe I expected more from Meadow because we shared pre-high school history. Will had grown up in Grayton, the town over from Tivergreene, and I doubted he even knew my name.

I took a deep breath and shoved my notebook into my backpack. Deep down I knew semi-invisibles like Stella and me had a better chance of escaping Cianci Regional unscathed and becoming reasonably well-adjusted adults. High school traumatized some people and spoiled others, like Meadow and Will. They took for granted an endless supply of sycophants and self-esteem boosters, and never learned the subtle art of not giving a shit.

Stella heaved a dreary little sigh, bringing another grimace to my face. I'd expected the last hours of my junior year to be a breeze at best and a tolerable bore at worst. But Ms. Simmons's command to sand down all my sharp edges plus Liam's completely unhelpful burnout multiplied by Meadow and Will had ruined it and left my palms sweaty, my chest full of sharp little icicles, and my ears all ringy.

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And the worst was still to come. The Stella-less summer heading my way would drive me from the comforts of my jazz records and knickknacks and vintage dresses and into the dining room of a resentful stranger who insisted on calling me “Girl Scout.”