

Lindsey Gates-Markel

MONOLOGUE

Dennis has to read Anna's email twice to understand, his brain skipping ahead with pleasure: she's in a production of *King Lear*, her first college show, opening that night and running only through the weekend. She apologizes for the short notice. She's been so busy.

"Would love to see you there!" she signs off.

Dennis sits back in his chair. He reads the email again. He prints it out and reads it on paper.

When his shift ends, Dennis speeds through yellow lights with the radio off. He calls Anna's number when exit signs for her school start appearing along the interstate almost two hours later, but she doesn't pick up. The outgoing message recites the phone number back to him in a monotone. He leaves a voicemail: he hopes he still has the right number for a girl named Anna, because he wants to let her *know* that he's on his way to see her *show*. He laughs at his rhyme. He says how excited he is to be invited. He reminds her that an opening night performance is a special kind of energy and that it will be exhilarating just to be a witness. He apologizes for taking up so much voicemail space. He tells her to break both legs. He says he can't wait to see her. Then he says sorry if that's weird.

On the opening night of *Little Women* five years or so ago, Anna had been overcome with real tears during the scene where she, as Amy March, came home to her older sisters after having been punished and hit at school. She sobbed onstage, a genuine wreck, and for a moment, the room hung in silence except for the sound of her curled on the rug, weeping into her dress. She was barely fourteen years old.

Dennis had watched from the elevated light booth that overlooked the stage, one hand poised for the cue to fade to dark, the other held at his throat. The other girls onstage were high-schoolers. They had poorly dyed hair. Meg was wearing a sports bra. But when they saw

Anna crying, their faces bloomed. They moved toward their sister with their arms open and their skirts rustling. They cradled Anna and smoothed her hair, promised sanctuary. The people in the audience of the small theater, mostly parents, dotted here and there amidst the few rows of torn upholstered seats, didn't shuffle their feet or shift or squint at the program.

Dennis has told the story of Anna's moment as Amy, weeping as though she were alone in the room, so often that the details have come untethered to Anna, the girl he knew, the actor he trained. It's transformed into a myth that he tells and retells. He's recounted it to wary parents standing in the doorway with their hands still on their children's shoulders, to strangers while blotting at The Bluebird down the street, to former actors of his long after they'd moved on to other theaters, to new co-workers during otherwise shallow conversation at the information desk. He tells the story again to himself as he drives, still trying to capture the moment, the change, when that girl let go of herself and became someone else.

By the time Dennis runs to the sliding doors of the auditorium, the ushers are leaning against the staircase in the lobby, chatting and drinking from soda cups. He asks where he might find an open seat, and they shrug at him and say *maybe* in the balcony. One hands him a program and points toward a winding carpeted staircase. Dennis passes through a set of double doors with gold crown molding and squeezes past a row of people until he reaches a plush seat high in the balcony, a stray left vacant between two couples, and stuffs his coat underneath just as the house lights dim.

The set is a kingdom, an echoing castle. Lear knocks around a jeweled sabre from his throne. Dennis isn't prepared to see Anna, he realizes, when she appears stage left, draped in tiers of velvet and topped with gold—Cordelia. Her presence overtakes him, makes him laugh out loud without meaning to. *I am sure my love's more richer than my tongue.* He squints to see her clearly; she is grown, her hair long. She could be Claire Bloom from this distance. She's an actor mingling with students.

Anna was the person Dennis had been hoping to find when he'd

bought the old building in '99 and hauled his bed and clothes and a borrowed pickup truck's worth of scripts into the back room. After two years, the bathroom sink had been slashed with corn-syrup blood and dappled with stage makeup. The spare room and adjoining closet were lined with metal racks packed full of costumes—old fur coats to imply the wealthy, flowered Goodwill dresses to imply the 60s, togas to imply the Greeks. By the first slow Sunday afternoon that Anna wandered in the front door, clutching the audition ad cut out from the newspaper, Dennis had stopped apologizing for the mess. Any saved trinket could be used as a prop. Onstage, in warm enough light, junk mail on a card table was enough to indicate a home.

He liked to believe that he could see, even that first day, how easy it was for Anna onstage. That she would be a much better actor than himself. He had cast her in *Little Women* that afternoon. She listened with uncommon acuteness when he directed her. She danced a made-up softshoe when she was excited. And she had stayed, without complaint or second glances, despite the clutter and the smell and the humble stage.

By the third act of *King Lear*, Dennis has to sip from a waxy fountain cup of ice water. He feels full up, homesick, out of his own body when Anna speaks. He glances from the corners of his eyes to watch the rows of eyes watching her, the strange faces smiling despite themselves. And then Lear, a junior Phi Psi speech major with a tacked-on beard, stumbles onstage with Anna limp in his arms. Dennis gasps from his seat. *Stay a little*. His face is wet. Lear bends over Cordelia, presses a mirror to her open mouth, begging to see evidence of a breath. The room hangs in silence and Dennis is going to sob. He stands and pushes his way out of the row, whispering *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. The people flatten to let him pass. Lear says his next lines. The gilded doors sigh shut behind Dennis. From the grand hallway, he can tell when Anna steps up for curtain call, can hear the whole room rise with a roar.

People pack the lobby, pushing to congratulate their friends. Dennis flattens himself against the wall as the crowd jostles him. Sweat pricks at his underarms. He sees Anna, grinning, taking an old man's hand

in both of her own, her head tilted as he praises her. There is a line to greet her, and Dennis takes his place near the end. When there are only three people between them, she glances up and smiles, then returns her attention to the girl in front of her. When Dennis finally approaches Anna, he isn't sure if he should hug her, but he does. The back of her dress is fitted with a line of tiny buttons. She thanks him for coming all this way. Her face is startling so close up. Her skin is smudged with dark eye makeup laced clean with paths of tears. She's smiling at him. He can't find the words and he feels self-conscious, standing here gazing at her like this. He tells Anna that it was his pleasure. "Thanks," he says twice, and steps out into the fringe of the room.

Back in the darkness of his car, he feels exhausted. He wraps his arms around the steering wheel and leans forward to rest his face there. After a few moments, he sits up and sees her as if she were glowing in the dark—Anna, in the parking lot, appearing and vanishing between cars as she walks. Dennis is out of his car yelling her name before he realizes it. She's wearing her costume dress, holding the hem off the ground with both hands, and she's talking to a boy, who stands in place as Anna peers at Dennis through the night air. She holds up one hand to tell the boy to stay. A cigarette smolders between two of her long fingers.

"Sorry," she says when she reaches him, letting the skirt fall and gesturing with the cigarette. "I never do this. You caught me."

Dennis pretends to wave it off. "You're a grown woman, obviously." Obviously was one word too much. "Sorry." The sorry was also too much.

She asks him if he's heading home as the dark sky starts to break above them. He wants to say no if she's going to invite him somewhere. Dennis feels rain on his face. They get into the car to stay dry and Anna cracks her window to keep the smoke out. The boy is gone.

"You lost your friend," Dennis says.

"It's fine," she says and rolls her eyes. "Wouldn't be the worst thing that ever happened to me."

"You know, I joke about you being an adult, but you really shouldn't do that in your costume," he says, nodding at her cigarette.

“I’m not even supposed to wear this outside,” she says, gesturing upward, “let alone in a *rain* storm. You’d die to know all the unsavory things I do in this dress.” She blows smoke out the window.

“Oh, come on,” he says, “come on.”

Anna asks about home and the theater. He recounts the upcoming season—Chekhov, Greek tragedies, Anne Frank for the 10–13-year-old set. Actors still show up to audition, mostly younger siblings of former cast members.

“We miss you,” he says.

“Aw,” she says.

Yesterday he met the Three Sisters cast at the door and told them rehearsal was cancelled because he was feeling sick. Then he went straight to bed, slept with candles lit and buried the wish that the whole place would burn before he woke.

Small raindrops collect in her hair and catch the haloed parking lot lights.

“I was thinking on the drive up here about that scene in *Little Women*.”

She laughs. “Oh, my God. That was so long ago. I was a kid.”

“I bet I think about it every day.”

Anna looks at him and says, oh.

Dennis says sorry. His mind buzzes like a trapped insect.

Then he says that she has made everything worth it.

Anna stares ahead for a long moment, her hand poised at the window. She says, “I think I need to go, actually.” The rain is worse.

The theater, full of faulty wiring and overloaded outlets and stuffed with scripts and moth-eaten dresses. The kids dare each other to run into the room where his bed is and they gag and wheeze afterward. His bathtub is unusable, full of trash. He showers once a week at his mother’s.

“Dennis, you cannot say that stuff to me.”

“Wait,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

Anna exhales hard and the smoke from her mouth rushes outside. She asks if she should roll the window up and he stumbles and says no, no, it’s okay. She thanks him again for coming. Dennis says her name

but she waves without looking back and her shadow disappears into the rain. The storm roars at the roof and falls around his car thick as a velvet curtain, oozes in through the open window. He could be the only person for miles. He sucks the wet cigarette air and kneads his face with his hands.

When the rain begins to let up, Dennis creeps along the main drag until he sees a pizza place lit up with neon and college students. Alone in the chapped leather booth of the restaurant, he's surrounded by tables of kids parading for one another. It seems to him that this world is a million miles from Anna's. He wonders if she eats here, if she has friends like these loudmouths around him, all yelling at once to be heard. When the waitress, a pretty brunette, comes back to refill his ice water, he asks if she goes to school in town and she says yes, she's a sophomore majoring in Economic Studies. Her friendliness is practiced; she eyes the pour, making sure that none spills, as she speaks. He asks if she's made it to see *King Lear* yet, and she gives her head a tight shake.

"A good friend of mine is in it," he says, wiping the grease from his hands with a napkin. He picks up the program from where it sits next to him and opens it for her, pointing to Anna's name.

The waitress smiles. "I'll have to check that out sometime," she says, nodding, and he points out the dates and times but she is already walking away, introducing herself to another table, palming her round tray of plastic glasses.

In the silence she leaves, Dennis fiddles with his paper straw wrapper and imagines their conversation had she stayed. He tells the waitress that if she does go to the play, she should notice of the thrill of being an audience member. If she sits, quiet and open, she can appreciate the falling hush of the room right before the actors walk onstage. She can notice the noises the audience makes when their attention breaks. They get lost in a complicated sentence, or a careless actor speaks toward a wall, or sometimes a good line just doesn't land right, and the audience shuffles their feet. The rows fill with the sound of paper whispering and turning as people re-consult their programs, leaning toward the stage for reading light. They clear their throats without realizing. Dennis had learned to adjust his performance: project wider,

Speak up louder, capture them before they wander any further.

If nothing else, he says to the waitress, she should see Anna up there. Anna, so good it could break your heart.

In the circle of light below the hanging bulb, Dennis sips his soda through a straw and re-reads the program. The staff list—lighting, set design, props, dramaturg—takes up nearly two pages. Anna “has appeared on other stages in Indiana before her appearance here tonight.” The waitress would be changed after their conversation. The kids around him crowd at each other. Anna could walk in and sit across from him and smile, and the booth would be one place she could never misunderstand him. He closes his eyes against the din and recites an old monologue, five years gone, to see how much remains.

Lindsey Gates-Markel is a big ol’ ham born and raised in Illinois. Her short fiction has most recently been published in *Bluestem*, *Whiskeypaper*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*. She’s constantly trying to recreate Livejournal in the 90s at youareamongfriends.com.