

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

"The Water Is the Same"

Act Three

[Draft 2]

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Lisa washes a stainless steel bowl. Dries it. And then stands there with it, a woman holding an object that no longer has a job, unsure which cupboard is for things like that.

She puts it back where it always went, on the floor by the door. Empty.

Some things you retire gradually.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - DAY

Mary at the table -- upright, dressed, working. Laptop, printed forms, a legal pad. Across the top of one form: ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION - NONPROFIT.

Ted hovers with coffee, reads over her shoulder.

TED

The GoFundMe money?

MARY

What's left. I asked them.
(turning the laptop:
her post, and under
it thousands of
comments)

Eighty thousand people said
use it for the next dog.

(beat)

Not the next MY dog. The
next anybody's dog. Sullivan
knows the researchers.

Ted scans the form. Registered agent. Board of directors. His daughter is incorporating.

TED

You need a board. I could --
if you want, I know how
these --

MARY

You're treasurer. I already
wrote you in.

She goes back to the form. Ted stands there
holding his coffee, appointed.

INT. DR. SULLIVAN'S CLINIC - DAY

Mary in scrubs -- clinic scrubs, a summer job --
holding a trembling, geriatric BEAGLE on the
table while a tech preps a blood draw. The
beagle's OWNER (60s, scared, hovering) wrings
his hands.

OWNER

He hates this. He's going to
-- Buddy, be brave, buddy --

MARY

(even; assembled;
the stone set on
the table)
Don't ask him to be brave.
He can't do brave. He can do
ten seconds.

(her hands settle
the dog; to the
tech)

Go.

Draw done. Ten seconds. The beagle, astonished
to be alive, gets cheese from Mary's pocket.

MARY (CONT'D)

(to the owner)
Pay him every time. He works
for you.

The owner looks at his elderly dog, eating

cheese, jaunty. In the doorway behind them, DR. SULLIVAN watches, arms crossed -- a woman who lost the patient and somehow acquired the protege.

DR. SULLIVAN

You could do this for a living, you know.

MARY

I like having somewhere to be.

It's not an answer to the question Sullivan asked. It's the answer to the one nobody's asking.

EXT. FAMILY HOME - BACKYARD - DUSK

The hour with no name -- the hour that used to have a name in this family: walk time.

Mary stands in the yard among the weave poles. Not training. Not doing anything. The poles stand their crooked line, six of them, silvered by eight years of weather.

INSIDE, AT THE KITCHEN WINDOW: Lisa, watching. Ted joins her, towel over his shoulder. They watch their daughter stand in a yard at dusk next to an absence.

They don't speak. Their faces are doing the same math: the room going bare, the walls, the silence -- is it starting. Is it starting again.

Outside, Mary stays until it's fully dark. Then comes in. The screen door bangs -- ordinary, ordinary is good -- and the parents scatter to look busy.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Late. Ted, on his way to bed, passes Mary's door. It's open a few inches.

He looks in -- old habit, the doorway census --

MARY'S ROOM: dark. And Mary is on the floor.

Back against the bed. Knees up. Very still. The carpet in front of her, and nothing on it, and all of her poured out at the nothing.

We know this. We know this exactly. So does Ted.

His face at the door: the old terror arriving whole -- and something else arriving with it, newer, harder won. Both at once. Watch him hold both at once.

His mouth opens. Fifteen years of sentences line up behind his teeth: honey, what's wrong, talk to me, it's late, are you okay, I just want to --

He closes it.

He pushes the door open -- soft -- crosses the dark room, and lowers himself down the side of the bed to the floor. Beside her. Shoulder to shoulder. Says absolutely nothing.

The furnace hums. Somewhere outside, a car.

Mary doesn't look at him. But -- a minute in, maybe two -- her weight shifts. Her head comes down onto his shoulder.

Ted stares straight ahead in the dark, does not move his shoulder one millimeter, and holds the entire perimeter of the world.

We stay a long time. Nobody asks anybody anything.

The silence in this room has been terror twice. This is the third kind. This is the kind the dog taught.

INT./EXT. DREAM - WATERFRONT TRAIL - MAGIC HOUR

Light with no source and no hour, warm and low and completely still. The bay trail -- the familiar one -- but long. Longer than it is.

And on the trail ahead: SECRET.

Young. Whole. Coat blazing, that impossible tricolor shine. Standing in the gold, looking back over her shoulder at --

MARY. On the trail.

No words. There were never words. That was never what it was made of.

Secret holds her look -- the check-in look, ten thousand times across a life: you there? I'm here. You there?

Mary takes a step. Secret turns and trots on -- easy, that floating gait, fully herself -- ten yards, and stops, and checks again: you there?

Another stretch of trail. Another check.

And then Secret doesn't stop. She trots on into the low gold light, tail easy, ears soft, all the way into it --

-- not away.

Ahead.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Mary's eyes open. Ordinary ceiling. Ordinary light.

She lies still a moment.

Then she gets up -- and there's something in the getting up. It has a direction in it.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

The family at breakfast. Mary comes down, takes toast, and says it to the room, flat, the old register, the I-need-a-dog register:

MARY

I'm going to Utah.

Beat. Izzy, over cereal:

IZZY
What's in Utah?

MARY
A breeder.

The word lands on the table and sits there among the dishes. Nobody breathes for a second. Ted sets down his coffee, and here it comes, you can see it coming, the paragraph -- flights, dates, is-it-too-soon, have you thought about --

TED
When do we leave?

MARY
I'm going by myself.

Ted absorbs that. The reflex and the lesson have a short, silent fight on his face.

TED
Okay.

That's it. That's the whole negotiation. Lisa slides the jam across the table to her daughter, and if her eyes are shining, she's aimed them at the toast.

EXT. BREEDER'S PROPERTY - RURAL UTAH - DAY

A different planet: red rock, dry gold grass, huge sky. A ranch gate. A YOUNG BREEDER (30s, sun-creased, friendly) walks Mary out toward a paddock.

YOUNG BREEDER
They're eight weeks. Blue merles mostly, one red. You said on the phone you didn't want to be told anything about them?

MARY

Just let me sit with them.

The breeder opens the gate and, unusual for his species, actually leaves.

FIVE PUPPIES in the dry grass -- a tumble of blue merle thunderclouds. Mary sits down in the dirt. Cross-legged. Still.

The creek stillness -- older now, deeper water, but the same water.

The avalanche arrives: paws, teeth, ears. She receives it with her hands. It tumbles on.

And ONE comes back.

Blue merle. One blue eye, one brown. She doesn't lean in and stay -- that's not what happens -- she plants herself in front of Mary, cocks her head at forty-five degrees, BARKS once, bites Mary's shoelace, and falls over her own front feet doing it.

And for one second -- one -- a pen in Oregon is standing in this paddock, firs instead of red rock, and a small black tri crossing the dirt like a hand into water --

-- and then it isn't. Because this puppy has already gotten up, sneezed, and attacked the shoelace again. This one is nobody but herself. Loud where the other was quiet. Ridiculous where the other was grave.

Mary looks at her -- and doesn't reach for the second that just passed. Doesn't try to hold it, doesn't try to erase it. Lets it be what it was: a wave, changing shape.

The puppy gets the shoelace free and is extremely proud.

MARY

Yeah.

(beat)

Okay.

The breeder, at the fence:

YOUNG BREEDER

That one's got opinions,
fair warning.

(beat)

She got a name?

MARY

Promise.

He doesn't ask why. Strangers never get to
know how much they're being spared.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON - RED SQUARE - DAY

SUPER: FALL, 2022

The brick river of students -- and coming
through it, Mary and a HALF-GROWN PUPPY in a
vest that says IN TRAINING, and this is NOT
the old picture:

Promise is losing her mind about a pigeon.
Full lunge, vest twisting, a bark that
echoes off Suzzallo like a gunshot. Heads
turn everywhere.

Mary doesn't tighten. Doesn't yank. Doesn't
say no. She resets -- easy, cheerful --
walks a small circle, asks for a sit.
Promise sits, vibrating, pigeon-mad.
Cheese. They walk on three steps. Pigeon
explodes off the bricks; Promise explodes
after it; reset, circle, sit, cheese.

A PASSING STUDENT slows, squints:

PASSING STUDENT

Is that -- wait. That's not
the painting dog.

MARY

No. This is Promise.

She says the name and keeps walking, and the
student stands there holding both halves of
something he doesn't have the file for.

INT. UW - LECTURE HALL - NIGHT

Empty. Two hundred seats, lights half on. A UW FACILITIES GUY holds the door, skeptical.

FACILITIES GUY
Twenty minutes.

MARY
Twenty. Thank you.

A different janitor. A different campus. The same arrangement. Some protocols are portable.

Mary picks a seat in the middle of a middle row. Points at the floor. Promise looks at the floor, looks at Mary, looks at the two hundred fascinating seats, whines the whine of a dog being asked to fold infinity into a rectangle --

-- and tucks. Badly. Half in the aisle.

MARY (CONT'D)
(down, a whisper)
Good girl.

Cheese. They'll take it. Rome, day one.

She sits in the empty hall, the whole ritual run again from the beginning for a new student, and her hand comes down to one soft ear -- a different ear, a different softness, and her hand learning it.

INT. UW - JAPANESE SEMINAR ROOM - DAY

A small upper-level class, all Japanese now, rapid. Mary answers something at speed -- the pitch and fall of it native -- and PROF. MORI, older, gray now, nods and moves on, long past surprise.

Under the desk: a full-grown blue merle, tucked. Perfectly. Asleep, even.

One paw twitching after dream pigeons.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON - HUSKY STADIUM - DAY

SUPER: JUNE, 2024

Purple as far as the eye can see. Thousands of folding chairs on the field, families banked up the stadium walls, a PA voice reading names into the wind off the lake.

IN THE STANDS: the family, a full row. Lisa. Izzy -- twenty, sunglasses pushed up, already crying and pretending otherwise. Spencer, flown up, tie and all. And beside Ted: DAN (60s, weathered, permanent -- you'd never pick him out of this crowd as a man who is statistically impossible).

PA VOICE
...Mary Grace Peters,
Bachelor of Arts, Asian
Languages and Cultures...

And onto the stage, unhurried, walking her line: MARY. And at her knee, in a little purple bandana: PROMISE.

The stadium does what stadiums do for a dog: a wall of delighted noise. Promise's tail goes -- one bark at the roar, entirely unprofessional, and the roar doubles, charmed.

Mary takes the diploma. Shakes the hand. Turns to walk off --

-- and the JUMBOTRON finds her. Girl and dog, forty feet tall. And the camera operator, bless him, tightens on the mortarboard, and the stadium reads it out loud in twenty thousand voices at once, a ripple of it running up the bowl:

On the cap, in white paint, in her hand:

WE DID IT, SECRET.

IN THE STANDS: Izzy grabs Lisa's arm. Lisa's hands come up over her mouth, the old gesture, the fence in Oregon. Spencer takes

his glasses off. Dan looks at the cap, then at his brother.

And TED --

Ted looks at the four words, forty feet tall.

The stadium hears a victory lap. Twenty thousand people hear a champion thanking a coach. Only this row -- only this man -- knows what it is: a receipt. A promise, made at night, in a bedroom, to a dying dog. Kept. Reported. Addressed to the one who changed her conditions, care of the whole roaring world.

Ted doesn't cheer. He couldn't if he tried. He watches his daughter walk off the stage into the crowd, into the noise, into the world she was never built for and lives in anyway, the dog at her knee --

-- and she doesn't look for the family in the stands. She's not performing this for anyone. The cap already said it, to the only audience it was written for.

DAN
(leaning to Ted,
quiet)
Who's Secret?

TED
(eyes on his
daughter; a long
beat)
The one who got her here.

The PA reads the next name. The wind comes off the lake. Life, roaring on.

EXT. WHATCOM CREEK TRAIL - LATE AFTERNOON

SUPER: SUMMER

The green cathedral. Light coming down through the evergreens in pieces, the creek loud and bright below the trail.

THE FAMILY, hiking, strung out and unhurried: Lisa and Izzy ahead, arguing happily about nothing. Ted behind them. And Mary and Promise -- two years old now, magnificent, opinionated -- bringing up the rear on purpose.

Mary stops at a break in the trees. Below: the bank. THE bank. The exact one -- rocks, mud, the pool where crayfish live.

She looks at it a second.

MARY
(to Promise)
Okay.

They peel off and pick their way down. Mud to the knees, immediately -- some things don't change and shouldn't.

At the water's edge, Promise stops. The creek moves and glitters and makes its noise. She has never been in water that talks. She wants it and doesn't, wants it and doesn't, paws the shallows, retreats, scolds the creek with one bark --

Mary wades in to her knees and stands there. Doesn't call. Doesn't coax. Just stands in the moving water, being the condition.

Promise gathers herself into a decision shaped like a catastrophe --

-- and LAUNCHES. Belly-flops into the pool, paddling like a paddle-wheeler, graceless, ecstatic, ears sideways, absolutely swimming --

Mary LAUGHS. The floor laugh. It bounces off the water and up through the trees.

UP THE TRAIL: Ted stops. Turns toward the sound.

MARY (CONT'D)
(calling up, not
turning around)
Dad. Come look.

Ted comes to the top of the bank.

And there it is, the first frame of the movie, recomposed: the father at the top of the bank, the girl in the creek. Twenty years. The party is long over. Everybody came down this time.

Lisa and Izzy drift back along the trail, drawn by the laugh; they stand at the rail of the bank with Ted, and below them Promise churns a circle around Mary, snapping at the water she's made of, and Mary stands in the middle of it, mud-streaked, soaked, undammed --

Ted watches. And when he speaks, it's easy. No question mark has ever weighed less.

TED

How's she doing?

MARY

(watching the dog;
not turning
around)

She's doing great, Dad.

Beat.

Neither of them is talking about the dog. Neither of them says so. The creek carries it, the way it carries everything -- downstream, changing shape, the water the same.

IZZY

We're losing the light!
There's ice cream involved
in this plan!

Promise hauls out of the pool, achieves the bank, and shakes a galaxy of creek water over all four of them. Screaming. Laughter. Mary climbs up, soaked, and Ted steadies her the last step with one hand, and doesn't make it a thing.

They walk down the trail together, the four

of them and the dog, into the pieces of light. Their voices fade the way voices do.

The camera doesn't follow.

It stays at the creek -- the bank, the pool, the rocks, the water arriving and arriving and arriving from upstream, catching the last sun --

Still running. Still here.

FADE OUT.

A CARD, white on black:

For Secret.

THE END

[NOTE FOR PRODUCTION: over the credits -- the real footage. The actual Irish dance video. The actual flower painting, petal by petal. The real graduation cap. The audience should walk out having seen that none of the impossible parts were invented.]