

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

a feature film

Draft 2

based on a true story, and on the book  
"I Made a Promise"  
by Mary Peters

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

"The Wrong Planet"

Act One

[Draft 2]

FADE IN:

EXT. BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON - WHATCOM CREEK - DAY

Late-summer light coming down through evergreens in pieces. Water moving over stones. The particular green of the Pacific Northwest -- not bright, not dark. Alive.

MARY, nine, crouched at the water's edge. Mud to the knees. Still -- but there's no waiting in the stillness. No coiled patience. She's just here, all of her, poured into the water she's looking at.

Up the bank, behind her: a birthday party. Streamers through the trees, a folding table, a dozen kids. She came down here ten minutes ago and the party closed over the space where she'd been.

Her hand moves. We don't see her decide. There's no breath before it. The hand is in the water and then it's out, and there's a crayfish in her fist. A mason jar sits in the mud beside her. The crayfish goes in.

She looks at it. Not studying. Just looking -- the way you look when the sun comes out.

IZZY (7) appears at the top of the bank. Shorter, softer, watching her older sister the way you watch someone you're trying to learn from.

IZZY

Mary! They're doing cake!

Mary doesn't turn around.

MARY

Come look.

Izzy picks her way down. Looks in the jar.

IZZY

It's gross.

Mary looks up at her. Not hurt -- Mary doesn't do hurt, not yet. Just a flicker, like a radio caught between two stations. "Gross" doesn't land anywhere. She lifts the jar a little closer, as if Izzy maybe just couldn't see it from where she was.

MARY

Look at it.

EXT. BACKYARD - BIRTHDAY PARTY - CONTINUOUS

At the edge of the lawn, where the yard gives way to the trail down: TED (40s) stands with a paper plate he isn't eating from, looking down through the trees at his daughter in the creek.

Beside him, ANOTHER DAD follows his gaze.

OTHER DAD

She's fearless, that one.

TED

Yeah.

He says it like a man agreeing to the visible part of something much larger.

Behind them, LISA (40s, capable, present) is herding kids toward the cake table. She catches Ted's eye. He tilts his head toward the creek: she's down there. Lisa nods -- of course she is -- and lights the candles.

EXT. BACKYARD - LATER

Cake plates abandoned on the grass. Mary is back among the kids, mud drying on her shins, the mason jar held up at the center of a knot of children.

They crowd in. The crayfish waves its claws.

KID

Whoa. Why's one claw bigger?

MARY

Look how he holds it up.

She's not answering the question. She's pointing at the better thing. The kids look. The crayfish holds its big claw up like a boxer. The kids scream with joy.

SPENCER (12, glasses) looks up from a lawn chair, a book in his lap.

SPENCER

It regenerated. They regrow claws. Takes about a year.

Nobody's listening to Spencer. They're watching Mary, who has tipped the jar so the crayfish rows the air.

MARY

I'm putting him back. Come on.

And she just -- goes. Down the bank. And the whole knot of kids streams after her, cake forgotten, the birthday girl in front. It's not that Mary asked. She was sure, and the sureness came off her like heat, and they wanted to stand in it.

Two GIRLS stay behind on the patio. One says something to the other, low. They look down the bank after Mary and there's a look between them, quick, carrying something.

At the top of the trail, Mary glances back -- at the two who didn't come. She sees them. She sees the look.

She holds it a second, whatever it is. Then the creek takes her back.

Ted watches all of it from the edge of the lawn.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN/DINING - NIGHT

DINNER. And it is LOUD.

Not chaos -- weather. Mary, mid-story, at full volume, standing partway out of her chair to do the crayfish's boxer arms. Izzy laughing so hard she's in danger. Spencer trying to insert a correction --

SPENCER  
Crayfish don't box, they're  
defensive posturing --

MARY  
He was BOXING --

SPENCER  
-- it's called a meral spread --

MARY  
(total outrage)  
You weren't THERE --

-- and the outrage is real, flashes like sheet lightning,  
and is gone the same second, because Izzy has fallen off  
her chair, and Mary's laugh comes up from somewhere below  
the floor. Ted and Lisa ride it like people who have  
lived at this altitude for years.

LISA  
Elbows.

MARY  
(elbows off, not a  
beat missed)  
-- and then he SWAM, backwards,  
they swim BACKWARDS --

TED  
You know why? The tail flex is  
actually faster than --

MARY  
Because it's better.

Beat. Ted closes his mouth around the rest of the  
explanation. Fair enough.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - LATER

Dishes done. Quiet now, the good kind. Mary at the  
cleared table with a paint set and a big sheet of paper.  
Ted at the counter with the last of the coffee.

On the paper: a shape. Gray, wet, off-center. It is not  
anything. She works at one small corner of it with total  
attention.

TED

What's it going to be?

MARY

(not looking up)

It's not going to be anything.

She keeps painting. Ted drinks his coffee. Izzy's bath is running somewhere above. The gray shape gets a long low curve under it. Still nothing.

Ted watches. There is no sketch. There was never a sketch. Her brush goes where it goes, one true mark and then the next one, and he watches like a man following a sentence in a language he doesn't --

-- and then it has legs. And the low curve is water. And the gray was always, obviously, a heron -- standing in the shallows, exactly the way herons actually stand, that hunch like a folded umbrella. Of course. It's exactly that.

Mary drops her brush in the jar, done, and is gone -- thumping up the stairs -- before the water settles.

Ted stands alone with the heron. He looks at it a long time.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ted at the piano, a song half-figured-out under his hands. He tries a chord. It's wrong. He tries it another way. Wrong -- close, but the top of it is wrong, and he knows it's wrong, and he stares at the keys like they're withholding.

Mary crosses behind him, ten years old, an apple in one hand. Without stopping -- barely -- she reaches past his shoulder and puts her hand down on the keys.

The chord. THE chord -- the whole thing, the color of it, the note he'd never have found on top like a window opening.

She's already leaving.

TED

Where'd you get that?

MARY (O.S.)  
(from the hall, mouth  
full of apple)  
Get what?

Ted looks at his own hand on the keys. He plays her chord again, slowly, one note at a time, like a man taking apart a watch.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Izzy, eight now, arms up, tongue out, concentrating.

Mary demonstrates a cartwheel. It is perfect. Textbook. Wheel-spokes.

Izzy runs, flings herself sideways, and crumples into the grass like dropped laundry.

Mary looks at her. Demonstrates again. The SAME cartwheel, exactly, to the inch -- as if the first one is still hanging in the air and she's tracing it.

MARY  
Like that.

IZZY  
But what do I DO?

MARY  
What I did.

They stare at each other across a gap neither of them can see the bottom of. Izzy runs. Crumples.

Mary frowns -- not at Izzy. At the air the cartwheel should have happened in.

EXT. SOCCER FIELD - DAY - DRIZZLE

Girls' soccer, age ten, the Pacific Northwest version: everyone soaked, parents under umbrellas.

The ball moves and Mary is already there. Not fast -- that's not what it looks like. It looks like everyone else is reacting to the ball and Mary isn't reacting to anything. She and the ball just keep being in the same place, the way the hand was in the creek before the

decision was.

She scores. Her teammates mob her, shrieking. She's laughing, buried in the pile, alive --

-- and then she's jogging back upfield alone, done with the moment before the moment is done, eyes already on the ball.

On the sideline, Ted claps, rain running off his hood.

INT. DANCE STUDIO - NIGHT

Hard shoes on hardwood -- an IRISH DANCE class, eight girls in a line, a TEACHER counting.

Mary in the middle. Her feet are unbelievable. Precise, fast, joyful -- the drum of it -- and here, for once, the whole social world is simple: there are steps, the steps are right or wrong, everyone's eyes are forward, and Mary is EXACTLY what this room wants.

The girls finish, gasping, laughing. A girl, RUBY, grabs Mary's arm to keep from falling over. Mary lets her. This works. All of it. This room works.

TITLE CARD: Three years later.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

The sound arrives before the picture: slamming lockers, three hundred voices in a tiled canyon.

Mary, 13 now, taller, walks the hallway. Around her, kids move in pods -- twos and threes, forming and re-forming, a flock behavior with rules written nowhere.

She's not shy. That's the thing to see: she walks like she owns the place, eyes up, full volume in a school where every other girl has learned to walk small. It's armor on everyone else. It never was on her.

A knot of GIRLS she knows -- Ruby among them -- waves her over, phone out.

GIRL 1

Mary. Did you see what Alyssa

posted?

Mary looks at the phone. A photo: a girl, posed, a sunset behind her.

GIRL 1 (CONT'D)

She's literally copying Megan's whole thing now.

MARY

What did she copy?

GIRL 2

The pose? It's literally the same pose.

Mary looks at the photo again. Really looks -- the way she'd look into a creek.

MARY

Everyone does that pose.

It's not a defense of Alyssa. It's a fact she found in the photo. The girls exchange a look -- quick, carrying something -- and Mary sees the look. She reads it the way she reads everything: perfectly, and only from the outside. Something happened just now. What happened is locked.

GIRL 1

Okaaay.

The pod re-forms, a half-step, and Mary is somehow on the outside of it. The bell rings.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - DAY

Lunch. Mary at a table of girls. The conversation moves like water -- who said what, who's with who, alliances forming and dissolving mid-sentence.

Mary eats. Present. Not small -- never small -- just on the outside of a game that has no ball, no field, no steps, nothing to be exactly right at.

GIRL 1

Mary. Jake or Ethan?

MARY

What?

GIRL 2

Who's cuter. Jake or Ethan.

MARY

(genuinely working  
on it)

For what?

The table LAUGHS. All of it -- some of the laughter is warm and some of it isn't, and Mary looks from face to face, sorting the two kinds exactly. That part she gets in one pass. It's everything else that's sealed.

GIRL 1

Oh my god. You're so random.

Mary smiles, a beat late. Under the table, her thumb finds the skin at the edge of her fingernail.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - ANOTHER DAY

Same table, same girls. A lull in the talk. Mary sits up.

MARY

There's a heron nest up the creek behind Sussex. The babies fledge this week. I'm going after school.

Silence. The kind with a shape to it.

RUBY

(kindly, which is  
worse)

Like -- why, though?

Mary looks at Ruby. The question doesn't land anywhere. Why. There is no why. The herons are THERE.

MARY

To see them.

GIRL 2

Have fun?

A ripple around the table, the look passing girl to

girl like a note being handed under a desk, and Mary watches it pass, all the way around, in high resolution.

MARY

Okay.

She goes back to her sandwich. Full volume, undiminished, visibly fine. Whatever it costs is happening somewhere we can't see. Yet.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL - CAFETERIA - A WEEK LATER

Mary arrives at the table carrying her backpack in front of her. Something in it is heavy.

She sets it down, unzips it, and lifts out a MASON JAR. Water. Weeds. And a salamander the color of wet rust, its ridiculous orange belly against the glass.

She sets it in the middle of the lunch table like a centerpiece. Like it's obvious. Like it's nine years ago and this always works.

MARY

Look at it.

Silence.

GIRL 2

Oh my GOD.

Not delight. A hand goes over a mouth. Somebody's milk almost comes up. And the phones -- three of them, up and out, that fast.

GIRL 1

(filming)

Mary. What. Is. That.

MARY

(to the good part)

It's a rough-skinned newt. The belly's a warning. He's the most poisonous animal in the whole state and he's in our CREEK --

She's radiant. She is completely certain, the sureness coming off her like heat, and no one wants to stand in

it, and around her the table is performing horror for each other's phones.

Mary sees it. Sees all of it -- every face, every phone, the warm laughter nowhere in the room. Her sentence just... runs out.

She looks at the newt. The newt looks back. The only two creatures at the table with no idea what just happened.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Phone light on her face.

The video. Her own face on the little screen, radiant, saying "look at it" -- and the caption, and the laughing emojis stacked up like a hand over a mouth. She scrolls. Comments. She reads all of them. She doesn't put the phone down until she has read all of them.

Then she's at her mirror.

She looks at her own face the way she looked at the photo of Alyssa. Really looks. Turns it. Pulls the skin of her cheek tight, lets it go. Looks at her nose from the left. From the right. Lifts her shirt hem: looks at the stomach, grabs the skin of it, hard, harder than examination needs --

-- and lets go, and pulls the shirt down, and stands there breathing at herself.

On the desk behind her: the mason jar, empty now, holding paintbrushes. The water long gone.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner. Four places set -- Spencer's chair has become the mail chair, stacked with catalogs. He's seventeen, mostly gone already, college brochures in the stack.

It is LOUD. But listen: the register has changed.

MARY

-- because it's DISGUSTING,  
I'm not eating something's LEG,  
why does everyone act like

that's normal --

LISA

It's the same chicken as last week, you loved it last week --

MARY

Last week I didn't THINK about it. God. Why would you say that? Now I'm thinking about it.

She shoves the plate. Not at anyone -- away. It stops against the water glass, chicken untouched, and now watch: Lisa's eyes go to the plate. Weigh it. Say nothing. There's a whole scale in that glance.

IZZY

(small, testing the weather)

Can I have it?

MARY

(whipping around, full volume, all of it real)

WHY does everyone CARE what I EAT?

Silence. Izzy looks down.

And then Mary's face does something complicated -- lightning that can't find ground -- and she's up, chair scraping, gone. Feet hard on the stairs. A door.

Ted looks at Lisa. Lisa is still looking at the plate.

TED

(calling upstairs, reasonable, so reasonable)

Mary, come on back. We're just having dinner. Nobody's --

A sound from upstairs. Something hitting a wall.

Izzy eats her cereal-sized bites, eyes down, a kid making herself smaller at the table where her sister used to do the crayfish's boxing arms.

INT. IZZY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Izzy in bed, lamp off. Through the wall: Mary's voice -- not words, just the shape of rage, rising, cracking. Something falls or is thrown. Then crying, the kind that sounds like it hurts the throat.

Izzy pulls the covers up to her nose. She's eleven. She is learning to read weather through a wall.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - ANOTHER NIGHT

A knock. Ted's head around the door: Mary is on her bed, back against the headboard, knees up, phone face-down beside her. Contained. For now.

TED

Hey, kid. Got a minute?

Nothing. He comes in anyway, sits on the end of the bed. He's rehearsed this on the drive home; you can tell because it comes out so smooth.

TED (CONT'D)

Mom told me what happened with the -- at lunch. The video.

(beat)

Kids are idiots. You know that, right? Thirteen-year-olds are literally insane, their brains aren't done, it's not about you --

On "it's not about you": Mary's shoulder tightens. A small thing. He doesn't see it -- he's looking at his hands, building the next reasonable sentence.

TED (CONT'D)

-- everybody goes through this. I promise. I know it doesn't feel like it, but when I was your age --

Her thumb finds the skin at the edge of her nail. Digs.

TED (CONT'D)

-- and you know what, in five years none of these kids will even --

(he stops himself;

new approach; gentler)  
Just -- help me out here. Talk  
to me. What's going on with  
you? Because this isn't you.  
Where's the kid who --

MARY  
(very quiet)  
Stop.

TED  
-- who'd walk into a room full  
of strangers holding a snake --

MARY  
Stop. Stop --

TED  
I'm trying to HELP you, I just  
want to understand what --

MARY  
(a scream, hands over  
her ears, total)  
STOP!

Silence. Ted, frozen, half off the bed. He was being  
gentle. Every word of that was love. He looks at his  
daughter -- knees up, hands over her ears, face turned  
away like someone shielding from heat --

-- and he does the only thing left. He goes.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Ted stands outside her closed door. Inside: breathing,  
trying to slow itself.

He raises his hand to knock again. Doesn't. Stands  
there, a man holding a toolbox in front of a fire.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Lisa at the counter, tea going cold. Ted comes down,  
sits. A long moment.

TED  
I don't know what I said.

LISA

I know.

The way she says it. He looks at her. She holds his look, and there's no blame in it -- just two people reading the same page of a manual for a machine neither of them was issued.

INT./EXT. - VARIOUS - THE NARROWING

No music. Or almost none. Days doing what days do:

-- The bathroom, morning. Mary on the scale. We don't see the number. We see her step off, step on again, as if the scale might have gotten it wrong. Step off. Take off her hoodie. Step on again.

-- Breakfast. A plate with half a piece of toast, engineered to look eaten -- torn, redistributed, the crumbs arranged. Lisa clears it without a word. Weighs it in her hand on the way to the sink. That scale again, the one in her eyes.

-- School drop-off. Mary in the passenger seat, hood up, July outside. Lisa's eyes flick to the sleeves pulled down over Mary's hands. Back to the road.

-- The dance studio, through the window: the line of girls drumming the floor. Mary's spot in the middle: someone else in it.

-- Mary's bedroom, glimpsed through the door: the drawings coming off the walls. Not torn down -- removed, neatly, one at a time, leaving pale rectangles like the outlines at a crime scene.

-- Night. The kitchen. Lisa on the phone, low, one hand flat on the counter like she's holding it down.

LISA

(into phone)

...twice. She went twice and said it was pointless... no, I know. I know that's what they do, but she won't --

(listening)

...yeah. No. We can't MAKE her go, she's --

(listening; then,  
barely)  
I don't know. That's the thing.  
I don't know.

-- The upstairs bathroom, day, empty. Lisa with a plastic grocery bag, moving through it quietly: razors. The scissors from the drawer. A prescription bottle. She's fast and thorough, someone doing a task she has read about doing, hating every second --

-- and in the mirror over the sink: MARY, in the doorway, watching her mother do it.

Lisa stops. Neither of them says anything. There is nothing to say that wouldn't be a question or an answer, and neither exists. Lisa ties the bag. Mary watches her carry it past, out, gone.

Hold on Mary in the empty bathroom. In the mirror where her mother just was: her own face.

EXT. FAMILY HOME - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Spencer's little Honda, packed to the ceiling. College. The family on the driveway -- Ted, Lisa, Izzy hugging Spencer around the neck.

Spencer looks up. Second-floor window: a curtain, not moving. Whether she's behind it, we can't tell. Neither can he.

SPENCER  
(to Lisa, quiet)  
Tell her I said --

He doesn't finish it, because there's no end to that sentence that does anything. Lisa nods anyway. The Honda backs out. Izzy waves until it's gone, then keeps standing there, the family shrinking by one on a lawn that used to hold a whole birthday party.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DAY - IZZY'S 12TH BIRTHDAY

Streamers. A folding table. A cake. The same backyard through the windows, but the party's inside this year -- October, rain. A dozen of Izzy's friends, a couple of AUNTS AND UNCLES, noise.

And MARY. Downstairs. Present. Hood down, sleeves down, at the edge of the kitchen. Standing very still --

-- and this stillness we haven't seen before. Not the creek stillness. This is the stillness of a held thing. Of will. She is doing something enormously difficult that looks like standing in a kitchen doing nothing, and only Izzy -- who keeps glancing over, hopeful -- seems to know it's a gift.

AUNT KAREN  
(arriving, delighted,  
loud)  
THERE she is! Miss Instagram!  
We never see you anymore!

Mary's jaw sets. Holding.

AUNT KAREN (CONT'D)  
(holding Mary at  
arm's length, the  
once-over, fond)  
Look how GROWN UP -- god,  
you're all cheekbones now,  
are you eating enough? What  
are they feeding you --

The room's noise pushes in. Karen's hands on her arms. The once-over, the cheekbones, the eating --

AUNT KAREN (CONT'D)  
-- and I want to hear  
EVERYTHING, how's school, do  
you have a boyfriend, what --

MARY  
Don't TOUCH me --

It comes out at a volume that stops the room. Karen's hands fly back. And it's already too late, the held thing is out --

MARY (CONT'D)  
(to Karen, to the  
room, to everything,  
shaking)  
-- and stop LOOKING at me,  
all of you, stop --

She's backing up. Her hip catches the counter, and the sheet cake -- Izzy's, candles not yet lit, HAPPY BIRTHDAY IZZY in blue -- slides, tips --

-- and hits the floor, face down.

Total silence. A dozen twelve-year-olds staring. Karen's hands over her mouth. Frosting on the tile.

Izzy, by the table. Looking at the cake. Then at her sister. And Izzy's face isn't angry -- it's worse, it's frightened, and Mary reads that face in one pass, in high resolution, the way she reads everything --

She bolts. Feet on the stairs. A door.

Nobody moves. Then Lisa is on her knees with paper towels, and the room restarts around her in that awful bright way rooms do.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - THAT EVENING

Party over. Paper plates in a trash bag by the stairs. The house quiet and bruised.

Ted comes up the stairs. Stops at Mary's door. Knocks, soft.

TED

Mary.

Nothing.

TED (CONT'D)

I'm not -- I just want to talk.

The door opens. A crack. Mary in the gap, eyes swollen, face gray. She got there before he knocked -- apologizing is a thing with steps and she has already done the steps:

MARY

I said sorry to her. I wrote it. I put it under her door.

TED

Okay. That's -- good, that's a start. But --

And he shouldn't say the next thing. Watch him not be able to stop the next thing:

TED (CONT'D)

-- what HAPPENED down there?  
Karen was just being Karen.  
She was happy to see you. She  
loves you, and you --  
    (softer, leaning in,  
    the gentlest  
    interrogation ever  
    conducted)  
-- help me. What's going ON  
with you? Just tell me what's  
going on.

MARY

I don't know.

TED

You don't know.

MARY

I DON'T KNOW.

TED

Okay. Okay.  
    (a breath; he  
    regroups; he comes  
    back with love and  
    a scalpel)  
It's her BIRTHDAY, Mary. You  
saw her face. I'm not asking  
you to be perfect, I'm asking --

MARY

    (and here it is,  
    the plainest  
    sentence in the  
    world, hands open)  
I just don't know what you  
want me to do.

TED

I don't want you to DO  
anything. I just want you to  
understand what you did.

Hold.

Two sentences, hanging in a hallway, four feet and no distance at all and an unbridgeable distance apart.

Mary looks at him. And what crosses her face isn't defiance -- it's the thing from the cafeteria, the sentence running out, the burn arriving whole. She takes it the way you take heat: a flinch that starts at the eyes.

The door closes. Soft. The softness is worse than a slam.

Ted stands in the hallway. He replays it -- you can see him replay it -- and find nothing wrong in it. He said the loving thing. He asked her to understand. That's all he asked.

He stands there a long time.

INT. FAMILY HOME - VARIOUS - THE SILENCE

And now the house goes quiet, and the quiet is the loudest thing in the movie so far.

-- The dinner table, four plates once, then three, and now: Ted, Lisa, Izzy, eating. The clink of forks. Mary's chair, empty. Nobody does bits. Izzy doesn't test the weather because there is no weather. That's the horror.

-- Izzy in bed, lamp off, listening at the wall.

Nothing.

She presses her ear against it. Nothing.

-- Mary's door, from the hallway, closed, the light off under it at 4 PM.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY

The room, what's left of it. Walls bare except the pale rectangles. The sewing machine gone into the closet. The terrarium empty and dry on the shelf, a clean glass box with nothing in it.

Mary sits on the floor, back against the bed. Hoodie, sleeves over her hands. Very still.

And here is the terrible thing, the thing the whole first act has taught us to see: it's the creek stillness. That total, poured-out presence, all of her attention on one thing --

-- except the thing is nothing. There's nothing in front of her. All that perception, the whole roaring apparatus of her, aimed at a patch of carpet.

The light from the window crosses the floor. The furnace comes on, and off. Downstairs a phone rings and is answered and the house murmurs and goes quiet again.

We stay here. Too long. Long enough that we understand: this is what the end looks like. Not a gesture. A girl who has stopped.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - 2 A.M.

One light on. Ted and Lisa at the table. This is not the first 2 a.m. and the table knows it.

LISA

Dr. Foss says there's an adolescent program at Children's. In Seattle.

TED

Inpatient?

LISA

Partial. Days.

TED

So we find -- okay. Okay. We get her assessed, we get on the list, I can drive her down Mondays if you take --

LISA

Ted.

TED

-- we make it work, people make it --

LISA

Ted. She won't get in the car.

Beat.

TED  
Then I'll carry her.

He means it. And he knows it's absurd, and his voice cracks on it, and Lisa reaches across the table and takes his hand.

TED (CONT'D)  
I keep thinking if I could  
just get her to TALK to me.  
If she'd just tell me what's  
wrong, I could --

LISA  
I know you do.

Something in the way she says it. Not an accusation. An observation, worn smooth from handling. Ted looks at her --

TED  
What does that mean?

LISA  
(too tired to build  
the sentence that  
would explain it;  
and anyway she  
doesn't have it  
either)  
Nothing. I don't know.

Silence. The refrigerator hums. Upstairs, a floorboard: or nothing.

TED  
(to the table, quiet,  
a man laying down  
the toolbox)  
We're at the end here.

Lisa doesn't correct him.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark. Mary on her bed, on her side, phone up, the glow on her face. Scrolling with a dead thumb. Not reading.

Just the motion, like a body rocking itself.

A video goes by. Then another. Then --

-- a dog.

A BORDER COLLIE, mid-air, threading a line of weave poles. Mary's thumb stops.

ON THE PHONE: the dog blows through the poles, misses the fourth, skids out. And the TRAINER -- a woman in a muddy yard somewhere -- doesn't correct it. Doesn't say no. Just resets, easy, cheerful, and the dog comes around and tries again, and misses again --

-- and nothing happens. Nothing bad happens. The dog gets it wrong and nothing bad happens --

-- and the third time it THREADS them, all six, and the whole video is the trainer and the dog losing their minds together in a muddy yard.

Mary watches it again.

The autoplay takes her: another trainer. A down-stay. A dog failing, failing, failing, getting a treat ANYWAY -- "we reward the try," the tiny voice says from the phone -- and Mary's face in the glow is doing something we haven't seen it do in half a movie.

We don't get a name for it. We just get: she watches another. And another.

The window behind her goes from black to blue. Birds start up. She's still watching -- sitting up now, knees under her, the phone in both hands like a bowl of water.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

Lisa comes down in her robe, half-asleep, on autopilot toward the coffee maker --

-- and stops.

Mary is at the kitchen table.

Downstairs. At the table. At 7 A.M. The shock of it crosses Lisa's face and she smothers it fast, the way

you don't startle a bird that's landed on you.

Mary turns the phone around. Holds it out. On the screen: the border collie, the poles.

MARY

Look at this.

Lisa comes and looks. It's a dog video. She watches it with the caution of someone being handed something that might be load-bearing.

LISA

(carefully)

That's a smart dog.

MARY

Watch what she does when he gets it wrong.

Lisa watches. The miss. The cheerful reset.

LISA

She just... starts over.

MARY

Nothing happens.

Lisa looks at her daughter. Mary is looking at the phone, running the moment again, the miss and the nothing, the miss and the nothing.

Lisa doesn't understand what she's being shown. She understands only that her daughter is downstairs, showing it to her. She would watch dog videos for a thousand years.

LISA

Show me another one.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING - DAYS LATER

Both parents at breakfast. Mary comes in -- comes IN, sits, at the table, third morning in a row, and Ted is still not used to it, his coffee stops halfway --

MARY

I need a dog.

Beat.

TED

A dog.

MARY

An Australian Shepherd.

Ted sets the coffee down. And -- watch him, he can't help it, it's how he's built -- he reaches for the toolbox:

TED

Okay. Well -- let's talk about it, because a dog's a big -- they're a working breed, Mare, they need hours a day. And we're not really a -- somebody has to walk it, train it, at some point school's going to --

The reasons come out in their reasonable rows. And Mary just -- lets them. They go past her like weather going past a house.

MARY

I need a dog.

Not louder. Not pleading. The same fact, laid down again, and with it that old heat, the sureness coming off her -- and Ted feels it before he can name it, feels the room change the way it hasn't changed in a year: his daughter is SURE of something.

LISA

(before Ted can  
build another  
paragraph)

We'll talk about it.

Mary nods. Gets up. Takes -- note it -- a piece of toast. Goes.

Ted looks at Lisa: what just happened?

Lisa looks at the toast plate: one piece gone.

INT./EXT. FAMILY HOME - VARIOUS - THE CAMPAIGN

She doesn't ask again. That's not how this works. What happens instead:

-- The living room TV, commandeered: training videos, sound UP, hours of them. Heeling. Recall. Shaping. The house has a voice in it again, even if the voice is a lady from a dog channel saying "yes! good!"

-- Dinner. Mary, absently, practicing a hand signal over her plate -- a flat palm, up. Across the table, IZZY, deadpan, sits up straight.

Mary looks at her. Izzy looks back. Neither smiles.

Mary gives the palm again. Izzy sits taller.

Ted and Lisa, at either end of the table, do not breathe. The girls hold it, hold it -- and break, both at once --

-- and the sound Mary makes is a LAUGH, and it's hers -- the one from below the floor, the crayfish laugh, extinct for a year -- and Ted has to look at his plate because his eyes are suddenly a problem.

-- The backyard, rain. Mary, hood up, hammering something: PVC pipe, six lengths of it, set upright in a line in the wet grass. Weave poles. She's building them from a video, from nothing, for a dog that does not exist.

-- The kitchen window, night. Ted and Lisa, dishes forgotten, looking out at the poles standing crooked in the rain like a fence around nothing.

LISA

It's not about the dog. You know that.

TED

I know. But what else are we doing that's working?

Lisa dries her hands. Looks back out the window.

LISA

(the real fear)

And if she crashes? If it's like the dance, like school, like everything since -- if

this goes too, then what?

TED

Then we're where we already  
are.

Beat. That's the whole argument, and they both know  
which way it points. Lisa folds the towel.

LISA

She named a price, at least.  
First thing she's asked for  
in a year.

TED

(looking at the  
poles)  
She didn't ask.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner, all four. Mary's plate is strategic geography,  
mostly untouched, but she's HERE.

TED

We want to talk to you about  
the dog.

Mary goes still. Braced -- and it's awful, how visibly  
she's braced, how much of her is riding on this. Izzy  
looks from face to face.

LISA

We're going to say yes.

Mary doesn't jump up. Doesn't scream. She nods -- once  
-- like someone receiving confirmation that the  
surgery is scheduled.

MARY

There's a breeder in Oregon.  
She has one left from the  
spring litter. A girl.

TED

(a beat)  
We know. We called her  
Tuesday.

Mary looks up.

For a second nobody moves. Something is crossing the table between Mary and her father, and it doesn't have words and doesn't need any: they went ahead of her. They called Tuesday.

MARY  
When can we go?

LISA  
Saturday.

Mary nods again. Under the table her hands are shaking. Izzy sees it. Izzy's hand slides over, quiet as a note passed under a desk, and lands on Mary's knee.

Mary lets it stay.

EXT. INTERSTATE 5 SOUTH - DAY - RAIN

The minivan in the left lane, wipers going, the green corridor of I-5 sliding past. Two hundred miles of this.

INSIDE: Ted driving. Lisa shotgun. Izzy in back with headphones. Mary, middle row, window seat, forehead almost on the glass.

Nobody has spoken since Mount Vernon. The van is heavy with the thing nobody will say: this is a Hail Mary. They are driving two hundred miles to hand their daughter's life to a puppy.

TED  
(into the silence,  
gamely)  
There's a Burgerville in  
Centralia.

MARY  
No.

More miles. Lisa turns around in her seat.

LISA  
What are you going to name  
her?

MARY

I don't know yet. I have to  
meet her first.

Lisa turns back. She and Ted trade a glance across the console -- and the hope in it is so naked that both of them look away from each other, back at the road, the rain.

EXT. BREEDER'S PROPERTY - RURAL OREGON - DAY

A modest house, a big fenced yard, firs dripping. The BREEDER, CAROL (50s, weathered, kind the way vets and farmers are kind -- no cooing), meets them at the gate.

CAROL

You must be Mary.

Mary nods. From behind the house: barking, high and young.

Carol leads them around back to a pen. FOUR PUPPIES -- Australian Shepherds, nine weeks, merle and tricolor, an avalanche of them, all paws and teeth, wrestling in the dirt.

And ONE, at the back. Black tri, white blaze. Not timid -- separate. Sitting apart, watching everything with two different-colored eyes.

Mary opens the gate and gets on her knees in the dirt. Doesn't reach for anything. Doesn't call. Just kneels there --

-- the creek stillness. All of her, poured out, here.

The avalanche hits her: puppies over her knees, tugging her sleeves, joy in the fur. She receives them with her hands but her face is past them, on the one at the back, and the one at the back is looking at her.

The avalanche gets bored. Tumbles off to fight itself.

The yard goes almost quiet.

The puppy at the back stands. And crosses the pen -- not bouncing, not puppy-shaped movement at all, something more like the hand going into the water --

straight to Mary. And sits. Directly in front of her.  
Looking up.

Mary looks down.

Two creatures looking at each other with nothing in between. No pose. No performance. Nothing to decode. It is the first time in three years we have watched Mary be looked at without being read wrong -- because this one isn't reading anything. This one is just looking.

Mary puts her hand out, low, palm up. The puppy pushes her nose into it -- then walks the last step in and LEANS, full weight, into Mary's chest. And stays.

CAROL

Huh.

(beat)

She doesn't do that.

Mary's arms come around the puppy. Her face goes down into the fur and disappears there.

We can't see her expression. We can see her shoulders. They're shaking.

At the fence: Lisa with both hands over her mouth. Ted with his hand on Lisa's back, his jaw working. Izzy crouched at the wire, twelve years old, watching something good happen to her sister for the first time in living memory.

Mary lifts her head. Wet face, dog fur stuck to it.

MARY

(to the puppy)

Okay.

(beat)

Okay. Let's go home.

INT. MINIVAN - I-5 NORTH - DUSK

Rain gone. The sky doing its held-breath silver.

Mary in the middle row. The puppy asleep in her lap, boneless, draped like something poured. Mary's hand rides the little ribs, up and down, up and down.

Izzy leans over the seat back, chin on her hands.

IZZY  
(whispering)  
What's her name?

Mary looks at the puppy a moment.

MARY  
Secret.

IZZY  
Why Secret?

Mary looks out the window. The green going by, the first stars over the trees.

She doesn't answer.

It isn't coy and it isn't a secret. There's just nothing where the answer would be -- the name arrived the way the chord arrives, the way the heron arrives. Izzy waits, then accepts it the way she accepts gravity, and reaches down to touch one ear, gently, with one finger.

FRONT SEAT: Ted's eyes flick up to the rearview mirror. He mouths it at Lisa, silent:

TED  
(mouthed)  
Secret?

Lisa shrugs: don't look at me.

Ted's eyes go back to the road. Around a long curve, Bellingham-bound, the whole family pointed the same direction in the dark, and in the middle of it, in Mary's lap: a small breathing thing that will not leave her side for seven years.

EXT. FAMILY HOME - BELLINGHAM - BLUE HOUR

The minivan in the driveway, doors open, dome light on. Mary carries the puppy onto the lawn and sets her down in the wet grass.

Secret sniffs the whole world. The grass. The air off the mountains. The crooked PVC poles standing in the

yard -- built weeks ago for exactly her, before she existed.

She looks back at Mary.

Mary kneels. Secret crosses the grass and leans into her, and the two of them stay like that in the blue hour, the house glowing warm behind them, Izzy's face at the window, and for the first time since the walls went bare --

-- we can take a breath.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

"The Reprieve"

Act Two, Part A

[Draft 2]

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark. A wire crate in the corner, a towel over half of it, and from inside it: crying. Puppy crying, thin and awful, the loneliest sound ever manufactured.

Mary's bed: empty.

Mary is on the floor. Sleeping bag dragged alongside the crate, her arm through the wire door, her hand flat on the floor of the crate, and the puppy pressed against the hand, hiccupping down into sleep.

Mary's eyes are open. Listening to the breathing slow.

The room around them is still the bare room -- the pale rectangles still on the walls. But there's a sleeping bag on the floor, and an arm through a crate door, and that is not nothing.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Gray morning. Mary, fourteen, stands in wet grass holding a treat. Secret -- twelve weeks now, all ears and paws -- sits in front of her. Sort of. Briefly.

MARY

Sit.

Secret bounces. Tugs the hem of Mary's sleeve --

Mary pulls the sleeve back down over her hand. A small motion, automatic. We notice it. Nobody else is there to.

MARY (CONT'D)

Sit.

Secret pounces on a leaf.

Mary stands there, treat in hand, out-stubborned by a three-pound leaf-killer. This is going to be harder than the videos.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY - WEEKS LATER

Wreckage.

A couch cushion, unzipped by teeth, snowing foam. A shoe -- one of Mary's old HARD SHOES, the Irish dance shoes, dragged from some closet grave -- now missing its heel. And in the middle of the debris field: Secret. Tail going. Delighted with everything she has accomplished.

Mary stands in the doorway. Something's been building for days -- the failed sits, the chewed weeks, the no sleep -- and the wreckage lights it:

MARY  
WHY would you DO that?! What  
is WRONG with --

It's out of her at family volume, the full voltage, her father's sentence in her mouth --

-- and Secret FLINCHES.

Drops flat. Ears back. Tail tucked and pumping, eyes up at Mary, and it is precisely the flinch. It starts at the eyes. We have seen it a hundred times in this movie on a girl's face, and here it is on a dog.

Mary stops.

Whatever was coming next doesn't come. She looks at Secret -- Secret looking up at her, reading her, braced, wanting only for the weather to change --

-- and Mary reads that the way she reads everything. In one pass. All the way down.

She lowers herself to the floor. To the actual floor, flat, on her back among the foam snow, and turns her face away from the puppy and goes still. Palm open on the floorboards.

A moment. Foam settles.

Then paws, incoming. Secret climbs onto her chest, licks her chin, forgives her -- no. Not even forgives. There's nothing to forgive because nothing is being held; there is no ledger; the weather changed and the dog came back. Secret flops down on Mary's sternum with a sigh, four minutes old, the whole thing already never having happened.

Mary's hand comes up and rests on the little ribs.

They breathe.

Nobody asks anybody anything.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY - SPRING

Sun. Secret is bigger -- five months, the ears deciding what they'll be. The PVC weave poles stand straighter; someone has rebuilt them.

Mary crouches. Treat in the closed hand. Secret watches the hand like it's the only object in the universe.

MARY

Sit.

Secret SITS. Click -- Mary's thumb on a little clicker -- treat.

MARY (CONT'D)

Down.

Down. Click. Treat.

MARY (CONT'D)

Spin.

Spin -- clumsy, gorgeous. Click. Treat. And Mary LAUGHS, the floor laugh, and Secret comes up out of the spin ready to do anything, anything at all, for the rest of her life.

At the kitchen window, inside: LISA, dish towel stopped in her hands, watching. TED joins her. They watch their daughter -- animated, outside, LOUD, alive

-- run a five-month-old puppy through a repertoire.

Neither of them says anything. There's a superstition forming in this house: don't name it. Naming things is what breaks them.

Ted, though. Ted can't help himself. Later --

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY - LATER

Ted crosses the grass with PAPERS in hand. Printed pages, stapled. He's excited. He's helping.

TED

So I was reading about this --  
it's called shaping? There's a  
whole literature. Skinner,  
operant conditioning --  
reinforcement schedules. Fixed  
ratio, variable ratio --  
variable is actually stronger,  
counterintuitively, so if you --

Mary isn't looking at the pages. She's looking at Secret, who is looking at her. Something microscopic passes -- a shift of Mary's weight, maybe nothing at all --

-- and Secret rotates smartly and backs up, in reverse, through Mary's legs, and sits behind her facing forward. A move with no name.

TED (CONT'D)

(stopped, mid-word,  
stapled science in  
hand)

What -- how did you cue that?

MARY

She was ready.

TED

Ready how? You didn't say  
anything.

Mary looks at him. It's not a hostile look. It's the look from the piano: "get what?" The question is asking her to see a thing she didn't do -- there was no cue, there was just the dog, ready, and her,

seeing it.

MARY

Watch.

And she turns back to Secret, and does it again -- does what again? Nothing. Nothing we can see. And the dog reverses through her legs and sits, and the dog is laughing the way dogs laugh, and Ted stands there holding his stapled pages like sheet music at a birdsong.

EXT. BELLINGHAM - RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

Streetlight to streetlight, girl and dog. The nightly walk. Secret trots at Mary's knee, off leash, matched to her stride like a gear.

They pass out of one cone of light and into the next.

BEHIND THEM, at the front door, held open one inch: Lisa, watching them go.

Ted's voice from inside, low:

TED (O.S.)

Is she --

LISA

Don't.

She closes the door as softly as a door can close.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner, four plates. And it is LOUD again -- listen, the old altitude:

MARY

-- so she knows LEFT from RIGHT now, like as WORDS, which means I can send her around the poles either way, and today she offered the reverse weave HERSELF, she invented it, nobody taught her that --

IZZY

Can she do it around ME?

MARY

If you stand still. You have  
to actually stand still --

IZZY

I can stand still!

MARY

You literally cannot, you're  
doing it right now --

Izzy freezes mid-gesture, caught. Laughter. Mary  
keeps going, a torrent, the crayfish energy, arms  
demonstrating a weave pattern over the table --

-- and while she talks, she EATS. Not performing  
eating. Just eating, absently, fuel for the torrent.

Lisa's eyes go to the plate -- the old scale, the old  
glance --

-- and find it half empty. Emptying.

Lisa looks away fast, before anyone catches her  
weighing it, and refills Izzy's water with the face  
of a woman not crying at dinner.

INT. DINER - BELLINGHAM - DAY

A booth. Mary, fifteen now, slides in. Secret -- full  
grown, black tri, gorgeous -- tucks herself under the  
table in one practiced fold and becomes furniture.

Across the table: Izzy, menu up.

This is a test. You can tell because Mary isn't  
looking at Secret at all. The not-looking is the  
test.

A WAITRESS arrives. Coffee pot, no-nonsense.

WAITRESS

You girls know what you --  
(spotting the dog)

Oh. Hon, we can't have --

MARY

She's a service dog in training. She won't move.

WAITRESS

(skeptical, looking under the table)  
...Huh. Well. She really won't, will she.

Secret, under the table, chin on paws: furniture.

The waitress goes. Izzy leans out and drops -- with intent -- a french fry. It lands six inches from Secret's nose.

Secret looks at the fry. Looks at Mary's shoe. Does not move.

IZZY

That's actually insane.

MARY

(to the menu)  
If she's going to come everywhere with me, she has to be perfect everywhere.

She says it like a fact of nature. Izzy eats the floor fry herself -- five-second rule -- and under the table, without anyone visibly doing anything, a piece of chicken finds its way from Mary's hand to a soft mouth.

Perfect everywhere doesn't mean unpaid.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The bare walls aren't bare anymore. No drawings yet -- something better: a corkboard with a leash, a clicker, ribbons from -- somewhere. The terrarium gone. The room belongs to somebody again.

Mary sits cross-legged on the bed, phone in hand. Secret's head is on her knee.

ON SCREEN: a new Instagram account. The username field, typed carefully:

my\_aussie\_gal

First post: a photo of Secret mid-spin in the yard, ears sideways, joy incarnate.

She stares at the post button. This is the platform where a newt made her prey. The scroll of curated faces, the hand-over-mouth emojis -- same app, same world.

Secret sighs on her knee, asleep.

Mary posts it.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - LATER

The phone, propped against a lamp. Mary is drawing -- DRAWING, a pencil, first time in the whole movie -- Secret asleep on the bed as the model.

The phone pings. She picks it up.

Eleven likes. Three comments. Strangers.

"OMG those EARS"

"what a good girl!!"

"aussies are the best, mine turned 12 today. give yours a hug from us"

Mary reads them. Reads them again. Every one of them is the warm kind. She can sort that in one pass -- and there is nothing else in them to sort. No look passing under the words. No second channel. Just people, somewhere, looking at her dog and saying what they see.

She holds the phone a moment.

Then she puts it back against the lamp and keeps drawing.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Furniture pushed back. Izzy stands on the couch with Mary's phone, filming. This is a production.

IZZY

Okay. Ready. Three, two --

MUSIC -- a fiddle reel, tinny from a speaker -- and MARY DANCES.

Hard shoes on the floorboards. The drum of it, the old precision, feet doing what her feet do -- and SECRET, moving with her. Through her legs on the beat. Around her on the turn. Backing, weaving, spinning, matched to the reel and matched to Mary, the two of them stitched together with invisible thread --

It's the most alive we have seen Mary since she was nine years old. And the dog -- the dog is DANCING, there's no other rigorous word for it --

IZZY

(behind the phone,  
losing it)

Oh my god. OH MY GOD --

They stick the ending, girl and dog, Secret sitting proud between Mary's feet, and Mary is breathing hard and laughing and there is nothing wrong anywhere in the world.

MARY

(to Secret)

Good girl.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

Mary at breakfast. Toast, actually eaten. Her phone, face down, starts BUZZING. And doesn't stop.

She turns it over.

The screen is a waterfall. Likes, comments, follows, stacking faster than the screen can draw them. The dance video, posted last night: the number under it is six figures and climbing while we watch.

And a text banner drops from the top. RUBY -- a name we haven't seen since a lunch table:

RUBY: MARY. you're going VIRAL. an irish dance page posted it, my cousin in DUBLIN

just sent it to me. DUBLIN.

RUBY: this is the coolest thing anyone from  
our school has ever done btw

Mary reads it. Reads it twice.

Izzy and Lisa are at the counter. It would take one  
word to detonate the kitchen -- Izzy is already  
vibrating, watching over her shoulder --

Mary gets up, takes her toast, and goes to the  
living room, where Secret is on the rug. Sits down  
next to her. Holds the phone in front of the dog's  
face -- the waterfall, Dublin, the six figures.

MARY

Look at it.

Secret looks at it. Then licks the toast.

That's about right. Mary eats the licked toast,  
one arm over the dog, watching her number climb.

EXT. BELLINGHAM - PARK - DAY

Mary throws a disc; Secret arcs out and takes it  
out of the air like it insulted her family.

Nearby, a MAN wrestles a bouncing LAB PUPPY on a  
leash. The puppy jumps on a stranger, plants two  
mud feet --

MAN

(yanking the leash)

NO. Bad dog! BAD dog --

Mary goes still.

It's a small stillness. But we know her stillnesses  
now, and this one is the held kind, the kitchen-at-  
the-party kind. Her eyes are on the puppy: flattened,  
confused, braced -- reading its person, finding no  
information, only weather.

The man notices her looking. Half-defensive:

MAN (CONT'D)

He knows better.

MARY

He doesn't.

It's not an argument. It's a fact, laid down. The man blinks. And then Mary says the next part, and listen to it -- it comes out in a different register. Even. Assembled. Like a card being read, or a stone being set down on a table:

MARY (CONT'D)

He can't know better. He can only know what happens. Ask him for something he can do. Then make it happen, and pay him. Don't ask him for anything he'll fail.

The man stares at her -- teenage girl, immaculate dog sitting untethered at her knee like an endorsement.

MAN

...Pay him.

MARY

He works for you. Pay him.

She turns and goes, Secret falling in at her knee. The man looks down at his puppy. The puppy, braced, reads him.

Slowly, feeling like an idiot, the man digs out a treat.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Mary, scrolling her own comments. Thousands now. Hearts, dog emojis, Ireland flags. Her thumb moves down the warm waterfall --

-- and stops.

"The way you two communicate. My daughter is autistic and she has this exact thing with animals -- like the rest of us are hearing through a wall and she's just IN the room with them. Anyway. It's beautiful to see. ♥"

Mary reads it.

Reads it again.

The room is very quiet. Secret, on the bed, lifts her head -- reading something, the way she does.

Mary's thumb hovers. Then, slowly, she types into the search bar, and we see the word go in letter by letter, the first time it has appeared in this movie:

a-u-t-i-s-m

She reads. We don't see the screen anymore. We see her face, lit from below, absolutely still --

-- the creek stillness. All of her, poured into it.

The light from the phone shifts as pages turn. Secret puts her head back down, against Mary's leg, and the two of them stay like that, deep into the night, one of them reading, both of them still.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - MORNING

Ted and Lisa at breakfast. Mary comes in, phone in hand, and puts it down on the table between them, screen up. An article.

MARY

Look at this.

They look. We hold on the parents -- we don't need the screen -- as first Lisa and then Ted arrive at whatever word is standing at the top of that page.

A long moment.

TED

(very carefully)

Have you been -- reading about this?

MARY

All week.

(beat)

It's me. The whole thing is

me. There's a test. A real one, at UW. I want to take it.

Lisa looks at Ted. Years of specialists and counselors and programs offered and refused -- and here is their daughter, asking to be assessed, as flatly as she once said "I need a dog."

LISA

Then we'll get you the test.

Mary nods. Once. Takes her phone back and goes to feed Secret. Through the doorway we can hear the kibble hit the bowl.

Ted hasn't moved. His coffee's going cold. Lisa watches him staring at the middle distance, somewhere between the table and fifteen years.

LISA (CONT'D)

Ted.

TED

Yeah. No. Yeah.

That's not a sentence, and neither of them corrects it.

INT. UW MEDICINE - CONSULTATION OFFICE - DAY

A quiet office. DR. AMARA OYELARAN (50s, unhurried, the kind of person who never fills a silence just because it's there) closes a folder.

Mary sits across from her. Lisa in the second chair, one seat back. Secret lies at Mary's feet.

DR. OYELARAN

We finished scoring everything. And it's what you thought it was, Mary. You're autistic.

Beat.

DR. OYELARAN (CONT'D)

I find people want a minute, right about here.

MARY

I don't need a minute.

She doesn't. We're looking at her and there is nothing to steady, nothing shaking. What's happening on her face is almost the opposite of shock. It's a settling. A weight finding a shelf.

MARY (CONT'D)

It makes sense. Everything makes sense now. The way I --  
(she stops; the sentence doesn't need finishing)  
There was a reason.

DR. OYELARAN

There was never anything wrong with the instrument, Mary. It's just tuned to a different --

MARY

(not unkind; done)  
You don't have to make it a thing. It's good news.

Dr. Oyelaran smiles -- caught being gentle when nobody needed it.

Behind Mary, one seat back: Lisa. Her hand is over her mouth, and above the hand her eyes are doing years of arithmetic -- every counselor, every program, every 2 a.m., resorting themselves around one word.

Secret sits up and puts her chin on Mary's knee. Reading the room, finding it good.

INT. FAMILY CAR - I-5 NORTH - DAY

Lisa drives. Mary in the passenger seat, window down an inch, watching the green go by. Secret is asleep across the back seat.

A long comfortable silence. Then, to the window, not to Lisa -- flat, factual, the way you'd report the weather:

MARY

I'm not just bad at being a  
person.

Lisa's hands tighten on the wheel. Ten and two.  
Eyes on the road. If she looks at her daughter  
right now she will drive this car into the median,  
so she looks at the road --

LISA

No.  
(steady; barely)  
You never were.

MARY

(still to the window;  
almost interested)  
There's no such thing. That's  
the part nobody -- there's no  
such thing as bad at being a  
person.

Lisa doesn't understand that, not all the way. She  
files it -- wife of a modeler, mother of this: she  
has a whole cabinet of sentences she doesn't  
understand yet.

Mile markers. Green.

LISA

You hungry?

MARY

Burgerville.

The smallest smile crosses between them, first  
cousin to a joke, and the car goes on north.

INT. FAMILY HOME - TED'S OFFICE - 2 A.M.

One lamp. Ted at his desk, laptop open, reading  
glasses on. He has been here for hours -- there's  
an archaeology of mugs.

ON SCREEN, fragments as he scrolls: clinical pages,  
papers, a parents' forum. Phrases surface and go  
by: "...may not intuit that others' minds differ  
from their own..." -- "...questions experienced as

demands..." -- "...behavior is communication..."

He stops scrolling.

Reads one paragraph again. And again.

Whatever is in that paragraph, it has his whole face. He takes the glasses off, and sits there, a systematic man at the bottom of all his systems, doing the math on every reasonable, loving, catastrophic sentence he has ever said in a doorway.

He closes the laptop.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Ted comes down the hall in the dark. Stops.

The HERON. Framed now, hanging where the family photos hang. It's been there for years -- we just haven't looked at it since she painted it. He looks at it.

A gray shape that was nothing, and nothing, and nothing -- and then, all at once, exactly what it always was.

He stands in front of it a long time.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

The door, open a few inches. Ted looks in.

Mary asleep. Secret stretched against her back, head rising just enough to find Ted in the doorway: a soft look, holding him there. On watch. Not worried.

Ted's mouth opens -- old habit, there's always been a sentence, fifteen years of sentences offered through this door --

-- and he closes it. Doesn't say anything. Doesn't need anything from her, not even that she know he's here.

He pulls the door back to how it was and goes.

Secret puts her head down.

INT. WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE - LECTURE HALL - EVENING

Empty. Two hundred seats, lights half on. A JANITOR holds the door as Mary and Secret slip in.

JANITOR

Twenty minutes. Then I do floors.

MARY

Twenty. Thank you.

He waves it off, gone. This has the ease of an arrangement -- not the first evening.

Mary picks a seat in the middle of a middle row. Points at the floor beside it. Secret pours herself under the fold-down desk, out of the aisle, invisible: the tuck.

Mary sits. Takes out a notebook, opens it, as if class were happening. The empty hall hums.

She drops a pencil -- on purpose. Clatter. Secret doesn't move.

She rustles the seat. Coughs, loud, echoing. Kicks the seat in front, once.

Secret, under the desk: furniture.

MARY

(a whisper, down)

Good girl.

Then she just sits there a minute, the two of them alone in two hundred seats, rehearsing a world.

INT. WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - DAY

The world, populated: thirty COLLEGE STUDENTS, backpacks, laptops, a PROFESSOR taking roll. Mary -- sixteen, youngest in the room by years -- in a middle seat. You'd never know the dog was there

until the kid next to her drops his phone,  
ducks for it, and comes up pale --

COLLEGE KID  
(whisper)  
There's a DOG under --

MARY  
(whisper; eyes  
front)  
She knows.

The professor calls a name. Another. Then:

PROFESSOR  
Peters. Mary Peters.

MARY  
Here.

Small word, big room. Here. Nobody laughs. Nobody  
turns around. A pen clicks somewhere; the  
professor moves down the list; the world keeps  
going, holding, roomful of strangers and none of  
it burning --

Under the desk, unseen by anyone, Mary's hand  
finds one soft ear.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY - SUMMER

An easel, low, dog-height. A canvas. A table with  
paints squeezed onto a palette. IZZY, fifteen now,  
films from the deck; TED watches from the steps  
with coffee, a man who has learned to attend  
things he can't explain.

Mary kneels by the easel. Secret stands before the  
canvas, tail loose, and takes in her mouth --  
delicately, an old hand at this -- a BRUSH.

MARY  
Okay.

Mary holds the palette up. Secret dabs the brush --  
red -- and touches it to the canvas. A mark. Small,  
curved, meaningless.

MARY (CONT'D)

Good. Again.

Dab. Mark. Meaningless. Mary turns the palette a few degrees; the brush finds a different red. Mark. Meaningless. The marks accumulate the way weather accumulates -- there is no sketch, there was never a sketch, there's a girl reading a dog and a dog reading a girl and a brush going where it goes, one true mark and then the next one --

On the deck, Ted has stopped drinking his coffee. He's seen this before. Years ago, at a kitchen table: the gray shape that was nothing, and nothing, and then --

-- petals.

They were always petals. The curved red marks close on themselves, a stem arrives in two green strokes, and the whole canvas is suddenly and retroactively and obviously A FLOWER -- crooked, alive, painted by a dog, of course, it's exactly that --

IZZY  
(behind the phone,  
a whisper)  
No way. No WAY --

Secret drops the brush and barks, once, at the flower. The most honest review in the history of art.

Mary laughs the floor laugh. Ted, on the steps, does not move at all, because the full coffee mug is the only thing holding him together.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner. The flower painting is propped against the wall, still smelling of paint. Izzy is narrating view counts off her phone --

IZZY  
-- okay it's at four hundred  
thousand. It's been SIX  
HOURS. Chelsea Clinton  
commented. CHELSEA CLINTON.

TED

What did she say?

IZZY

A heart and "this made my  
whole week."

Mary, eating, unbothered, reaches down to slip  
Secret something under the table.

MARY

(mouth half full,  
to no one, light  
as anything)

I can't imagine what it'll  
be like when that dog dies.

Forks stop.

It's not dark, the way she says it. It's the  
opposite -- an overflow, the sound of someone  
measuring how good something is by the only  
ruler big enough. She keeps eating. She has no  
idea what she just did to the table.

Lisa recovers first, refills waters. Ted looks at  
the flower against the wall. Izzy looks at  
Secret, at her sister --

IZZY

You're so weird.

MARY

Yeah.

Said like "here." The table restarts. The cold  
current passes under the boards of the movie and  
is gone.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Ted with the laptop, frozen. He turns it around  
to face the room.

TED

Mary. A rapper just posted a  
-- there's a compilation of  
your videos. It's --  
(refreshing;

refreshing again)  
Mary, it has a hundred  
million views. That's -- a  
THIRD of AMERICA has --

MARY  
(from the floor,  
where she and  
Secret are doing  
something  
complicated with a  
towel)  
Which videos?

TED  
Which -- I don't -- the  
dance one, the painting,  
the Jenga --

MARY  
The Jenga's old. Her stay  
is way better now.

Ted looks at his screen: a number with eight  
zeros attached to his daughter's dog. He is the  
one person in this house equipped to understand  
this number, and the one person in this house  
who cannot get anyone to look at it.

TED  
SportsCenter wants the  
sledding one. SPORTSCENTER.  
I watched SportsCenter every  
day for --

MARY  
(to Secret, re:  
the towel)  
Good. Again.

Lisa, passing through with laundry, pats Ted's  
shoulder in sincere condolence and keeps  
walking.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Lisa at the table with the laptop, reading  
email aloud. Mary stands at the counter making  
-- note it, in passing -- a sandwich she is

going to eat.

LISA

This one's a dog food company. They want -- okay, they want one video a month. For that they'd pay --  
(she has to read it twice)  
-- Mary, this is more than I made last year.

MARY

No.

LISA

You can hear the number --

MARY

No to all of them.

Lisa looks at her over the screen. It's not teenage stubbornness; there's no heat in it. There's no why in it either. It's bedrock, reported flatly, the way she names dogs and requests assessments.

Then Mary sets down the sandwich, and -- the register changes. Even. Assembled. The stone set on the table:

MARY (CONT'D)

They follow her because it's real. You can't pay for real. Paying for it is the thing that kills it.

She picks up the sandwich and goes to the yard. Through the window: girl and dog among the weave poles.

Lisa looks back at the number on the screen. Closes the laptop like she's putting a lid on something that will otherwise keep talking.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Late. The house asleep.

Mary in bed, on her side. Secret stretched long against her back -- seventy pounds of finished work, the puppy long gone, ribs rising slow.

On the nightstand, face up: the phone.

It lights. A notification. Another. Another -- silent, stacking, the numbers doing what numbers do somewhere out in the dark: Dublin and Dallas and Nagoya arriving one glow at a time, the whole roaring world at the door --

The phone glows and dims. Glows and dims.

Girl and dog sleep through all of it, breathing in step. One of Secret's ears tracks something -- a car, a possum, the planet turning -- and settles.

The room, unmoved.

The wave, still out at sea.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO-A

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

"The Fight"

Act Two, Part B

[Draft 2]

EXT. WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE - PARKING LOT - DAY

SUPER: SPRING, 2020

A graduation nobody planned: folding tables, traffic cones, a hand-lettered banner sagging between two light poles. Cars crawl through in a line, honking. Masked FACULTY wave from six feet apart.

The family minivan idles forward. Mary, nineteen, in the passenger seat in a gown. In the back, between Izzy and a helium balloon: SECRET -- and someone has put the mortarboard on the dog. It sits between her ears at a scholarly angle. She wears it like she earned it. Arguably she did.

A masked DEAN leans in the window with a diploma and a gloved fist-bump.

DEAN  
(muffled)  
Congratulations, Mary. You too,  
Secret. Whole office follows  
her.

They pull through. Horns. Izzy whoops out the window. Ted watches his daughter in the mirror, diploma in her lap, dog's chin on her shoulder.

TED  
Associate of Arts.  
(beat; to himself,  
mostly)  
Step one.

MARY  
(to Secret, adjusting  
the mortarboard)

You did the empty rooms. You  
should get two of these.

Steps are his. Rooms are hers.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT - MONTHS LATER

Mary at the table, laptop open. The screen glow on  
her face. Lisa mid-kitchen, Ted at the counter --  
both of them held in that parental gravity of  
pretending not to hover.

MARY

Waitlist.

Silence. Izzy, on the stairs, stops.

TED

Waitlist isn't no. Waitlist  
is -- statistically, waitlist  
is a strong maybe. There's an  
appeal process. A letter. We  
can --

Mary closes the laptop and goes upstairs, Secret  
rising from the floor to follow, and the sound of  
her door isn't a slam. It's worse. It's quiet.

Ted looks at Lisa: the old fear, back in the room  
like weather off the water.

LISA

Give her tonight.

INT. TED'S OFFICE - NIGHT - DAYS LATER

Two pieces of paper on the desk. Ted holds one; his  
reading glasses are on.

HIS -- we glimpse it -- is typeset, structured:  
"...continued interest... demonstrated capacity for  
rigorous coursework... unique circumstances..."

The one in his hand is Mary's. Handwritten, then  
typed, short. We catch only fragments over his  
shoulder --

"...I trained my dog in your empty classrooms

at night before I ever sat in one of them. I know how to get ready for a room..."

"...We do not need it to be easy. We have never once had it easy..."

Ted stops reading. Sits back.

TED  
You wrote "we."

MARY  
(in the doorway,  
Secret at her knee)  
It's true.

Ted looks at his own letter -- the good bones, the right words, the sentences with load ratings -- and crumples it, one hand, without ceremony.

TED  
Send yours.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Mary's phone, face up on the counter, an email open. The word "Congratulations" visible from space.

IZZY is screaming. Lisa has both hands on her head. Ted is reading the email out loud for the third time as if it requires verification. Secret is barking at the joy, tail helicoptering --

Mary stands in the middle of it, nodding once, the surgery-is-scheduled nod --

-- and then Izzy grabs her and jumps, and something breaks open, and Mary is jumping too, both of them shrieking like the party lawn twelve years ago, the dog orbiting them, and Ted gets it on his phone, crooked, half of it his thumb, the way the true ones always are.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON - RED SQUARE - DAY

SUPER: FALL, 2021

Brick as far as the eye can see, and STUDENTS, a

migration of them, and in the middle of the river:  
Mary and Secret, walking their line. The tuck-  
trained calm at full scale. Kids part around them;  
half of them do a double-take --

PASSING STUDENT

-- oh my god, that's the  
PAINTING dog --

Secret, on duty, doesn't so much as flick an ear.  
Mary walks like she owns the place. She has always  
walked like that. It's just that now the place  
seems to agree.

INT. MARY'S APARTMENT - U DISTRICT - DAY

Small, top-floor, slanted ceilings. Boxes. Lisa  
assembling a bed frame with the focus of a woman  
who needs her hands full.

Mary is placing things. Not unpacking -- placing.  
The corkboard: leash, clicker, ribbons. The flower  
painting, hung first, dead center, the nail found  
on the first try.

LISA

I took a place in Wallingford  
through Christmas. Month to  
month.

(off Mary's look;  
pre-armored)

I'm not hovering. It's twenty  
minutes. I'm a twenty-minute  
person until winter break,  
that's all, and then I'm a  
ninety-minute person again.

Mary looks at her mother a moment. Whatever moves  
across her face has no performance in it.

MARY

Twenty is good.

Lisa nods and keeps her eyes on the Allen wrench,  
and turns the next bolt considerably harder than  
the bed frame requires.

INT. UW - JAPANESE 101 - DAY

PROFESSOR MORI (60s, precise, kind) writes kana on the board, speaking a full sentence of Japanese at native speed -- then, in English:

PROF. MORI  
By December that sentence  
will be yours. Today we  
start smaller --

MARY  
(from the third row;  
the sentence back,  
complete, the pitch  
and fall of it  
exact -- an echo  
with her voice  
inside it)

The room turns. Prof. Mori stops with the chalk in the air.

PROF. MORI  
You've studied?

MARY  
No.

PROF. MORI  
Then where did you hear  
Japanese?

MARY  
Here. You just said it.

Beat. Prof. Mori looks at her -- the look, we know it by now: the birdsong look, Ted at the piano, Carol at the pen. Under the desk, across Mary's feet, the dog sighs the sigh of the only creature on earth who finds none of this surprising.

EXT. UW CAMPUS - PATH ALONG RAINIER VISTA - DUSK

Late autumn. Wet leaves pasted to brick. Girl and dog walking home in the long gold light, an ordinary perfect evening --

-- and Mary stops.

Nothing happened. To any eye on this path, nothing whatsoever happened: a dog trotting at a knee.

She watches Secret take four more steps.

There. A sixteenth-note late on the left hind. A nothing. A grain of sand in a gearbox that has run silent for seven years.

MARY

Secret.

Secret circles back, sits, looks up: what's the game? Mary kneels. Runs her hands down the left leg -- hock, stifle, toes -- pressing gently. Secret licks her chin: I'm great, this is great, are we doing something?

Mary looks at the leg. Looks at the dog's eyes. The eyes say nothing is wrong.

For once, the eyes and the body are saying two different things. It's the first lie Secret has ever told her, and Secret doesn't even know she's telling it.

INT. MARY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Mary on the floor against the couch, phone to her ear. Secret asleep beside her, the left hind leg stretched out. Mary's eyes don't leave the leg.

INTERCUT - FAMILY HOME KITCHEN: Ted at the sink, phone on speaker, Lisa drying dishes.

TED

Dogs tweak stuff, Mare. She's seven, she jumps like a maniac off that porch --

MARY

It doesn't go away. It's three weeks.

TED

Okay, so a soft-tissue thing. They take forever. Did you rest her? If you rest her two weeks and it resolves, that

tells you --

MARY

I rested her. It doesn't  
change. It's the same amount  
every day.

A tiny pause on the line. That detail -- the SAME  
amount, measured daily by an instrument nobody  
else owns -- and the ground shifts somewhere under  
Ted's paragraph, though the paragraph keeps going:

TED

...Could still be a dozen  
things, kiddo. Most of them  
are nothing.

MARY

(looking at the leg)  
It's not her leg.

TED

What?

MARY

(quiet; the fact,  
laid down)  
The leg is where it shows.  
It's not where it is.

Silence on both ends. In the kitchen, Lisa has  
stopped drying the dish.

INT. VETERINARY CLINIC - SEATTLE - DAY

SUPER: JANUARY, 2022

A small exam room. Secret on the table, cheerful,  
nosing the VET's pocket where the treats live. The  
VET (40s) has a laptop open to lab results, and  
the particular stillness of someone who has  
rehearsed a sentence in the hallway.

VET

The bloodwork came back. I  
want to walk you through  
what we're seeing --

MARY

Say it plainly.

The vet looks at her -- nineteen, alone, one hand resting on the dog's shoulder -- and grants her the respect of the plain thing:

VET

It's leukemia, Mary.

The room holds. Secret, bored with the pocket, turns and licks Mary's wrist.

VET (CONT'D)

Do you want a minute?

MARY

No.

(beat)

What do we do first?

But her hand -- watch her hand on the dog's shoulder. It hasn't moved. It's holding on the way you hold the rail of something moving.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

The drive done in the dark. Mary stands in the kitchen doorway with Secret beside her, keys still in her hand. Ted, Lisa, Izzy -- home from her own freshman year -- around the table. They know she drove up. They don't know why.

MARY

It's leukemia. The bloodwork is -- it's bad.

The kitchen does what kitchens do with a bomb: nothing. Every object exactly where it was.

LISA

Oh, honey --

MARY

I'm pulling out of the quarter. I already emailed. I'm coming home.

(beat)

Dr. Sullivan is here. In Bellingham. She does bone

marrow transplants on dogs.  
There are two vets in the  
country who do it and one of  
them is twelve minutes from  
this house.

She's not crying. She's laying track, fact by  
fact, the surgery-is-scheduled voice --

-- and underneath it, if you know where to look --  
and this family knows where to look -- the ground  
is shaking. Izzy starts to cry. Secret crosses to  
Izzy and leans against her legs, working, already  
working, and that -- the sight of the sick dog  
comforting the crying girl -- is the thing that  
puts Lisa's hand over her mouth.

TED

What does Sullivan need from  
us?

MARY

Everything.

INT. DR. SULLIVAN'S VETERINARY CLINIC - BELLINGHAM - DAY

A working clinic: linoleum, kennels somewhere,  
the smell you can almost see. DR. SULLIVAN (50s,  
forearms like a farrier, zero theater) studies  
films clipped to a lightbox, Secret's chart thick  
in her hands.

Mary across from her. Ted and Lisa behind, one  
seat back.

DR. SULLIVAN

I'll tell you what I tell  
everyone, and then I'll tell  
you the other thing.

(beat)

No dog has beaten this. That  
sentence is true and I hate  
it. Chemo buys months,  
usually good ones. That's  
the standard answer, and  
it's a real answer.

MARY

And the other thing.

DR. SULLIVAN

The other thing is a full protocol. Chemo here, then radiation and transplant down in California. It's brutal, it's expensive, and nobody can quote you odds because there's no data -- nobody's been far enough to make data.

(she looks at Mary straight)

Somebody's dog goes first. That's how data starts.

Silence. The lightbox hums.

MARY

She's not somebody's dog.

DR. SULLIVAN

(a beat; almost a smile; she's heard about this kid)

No. I don't suppose she is.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The whole table, papers everywhere: protocols, estimates. A number circled at the bottom of one page that makes civilians go quiet.

TED

I want to tell you guys something.

(beat)

Nineteen ninety-two, my brother Dan had leukemia. Not the slow kind. They put my marrow in him at Fred Hutchinson -- I was twenty-six, they ran it through my hip with a needle like a tent stake --

IZZY

Uncle DAN? Ski-trip Dan?

TED

Ski-trip Dan. There were twenty people in that cohort. Dan and one other man are alive. He walked out of that building and he's been walking around ever since.

(and here it comes,  
the engineer's  
sunrise)

And the dog protocol --  
Sullivan said it herself --  
it descends from that exact  
work. Same city. Same  
science. Same building,  
basically. You see what I'm  
--

(he's lit now)  
-- the one vet is HERE. The  
Hutch is THERE. It's all  
sitting right --

IZZY

(phone up, already  
building)

I'm doing a GoFundMe. I'm  
setting the goal at fifteen  
thousand --

LISA

Izzy, people don't --

PING. Izzy freezes. Looks at the phone.

IZZY

...That's Ruby's mom.

(PING)

That's -- I don't know who  
that is.

(PING. PING.)

Mom, I posted it forty  
seconds ago.

The table leans in around the little screen --  
the counter climbing, the names arriving, Dublin  
and Dallas and Nagoya, the whole warm waterfall,  
the world Mary built with a phone and a dog now  
running the other direction --

-- and across the table, outside the light of the phone, MARY. Wrapping a pill in a fold of cheese. Precise. Present tense.

MARY

(to no one; a fact)

She ate all her dinner  
tonight.

TED

(folding even this  
into the sunrise)

That's the appetite back --  
that's the prednisone doing  
its -- that's GOOD, that's  
the protocol working  
already --

Mary doesn't answer. She holds out the cheese.  
Under the table, gently, an old hand at this, a  
soft mouth takes it.

Everyone at this table is fighting. Only one of  
them is doing it in the present tense.

INT. FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - WEEKS LATER

Izzy asleep on the couch, laptop open, the  
GoFundMe page glowing: a number with five zeroes  
in it. Fifty-some thousand messages beneath it.

Ted, passing through, stops. Scrolls, careful  
not to wake her. We read over his shoulder:

"Secret got my daughter through her  
treatment. Videos every night in the  
hospital. Please win this one."

"From Osaka. For the good girl."

"I don't even have a dog."

Ted stands in the dark a while, a man doing math  
he has no column for.

His phone RINGS: SPENCER.

TED

(low)

Hey, Spence.

SPENCER (V.O.)  
(the family cadence:  
data first)  
So I pulled the veterinary  
literature on canine ALL.  
Median survival untreated is  
weeks; with CHOP protocol  
you're looking at months,  
but the transplant approach  
-- there's a Wisconsin paper  
-- it's genuinely novel, the  
math isn't zero, Dad --

TED  
I know, Spence.

SPENCER (V.O.)  
I'm just saying it isn't  
zero.

TED  
I know. I did the same  
reading.

A pause on the line. Two modelers, models  
exhausted.

SPENCER (V.O.)  
(smaller; the real  
call)  
How's Mary?

Ted looks toward the stairs. The long pause IS  
the answer, and Spencer, to his credit, doesn't  
fill it.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Ted's laptop: a spreadsheet, beautiful, color-  
coded. Platelets. White counts. Trend lines like  
gentle hills.

TED  
Look -- platelets are up  
eleven percent over the  
two-week average. And the  
white count's holding. If

this holds through Friday,  
Sullivan said the LA window  
opens --

Across the room, not looking at the screen: Mary.  
She's watching Secret drink from the water bowl.  
Just a dog drinking water.

MARY  
She's worse.

TED  
The numbers literally --

MARY  
She's drinking wrong. She  
rests in the middle now.  
Yesterday it was once. It's  
three times today.

Ted looks at the dog. The dog is drinking. It  
looks -- to him, to us, to anyone -- like a dog  
drinking. He looks at his trend lines, gentle  
hills, eleven percent.

Friday's labs will side with Mary. We won't need  
to see them; his face already knows it, and hates  
knowing it, and --

TED  
(quiet; laying down  
the toolbox all the  
way, this time for  
good)  
I believe you.

Mary looks over at him. Something passes -- the  
table's length, twenty years, no words for it in  
either language.

MARY  
Keep doing the numbers, Dad.  
Sullivan needs them.

She goes to the water bowl and sits down on the  
floor next to the drinking dog. Ted watches the  
two of them.

Then he pulls the laptop close and gets back to  
work on the numbers. It is what he has. It is,

at last, exactly the size of what it is.

INT./EXT. THE FIGHT - VARIOUS - COMPRESSED

Not a montage. Three rooms, held:

-- SULLIVAN'S CLINIC, TREATMENT ROOM. Secret on the table for an IV, and MARY working: her hands on the dog through the whole stick, one long steady signal. Secret watches only Mary. Doesn't flinch. The tech looks at Sullivan: they've never had one like this.

-- THE STAIRS, HOME, NIGHT. Secret at the bottom, looking up at the climb like weather on a mountain. She gathers -- and Mary is already there, arms under, seventy pounds and lighter than last week, carrying her up. Secret rides it with dignity. This has become the arrangement, and neither of them has ever remarked on it.

-- MARY'S BEDROOM. The dog bed moved beside the bed, then ONTO the bed. Pills in cheese lined on the nightstand like a tiny city skyline. Mary adjusting the blanket around a sleeping dog with the precision she once aimed at crayfish, at chords, at petals. Attention is her love language. It has never had this much work to do.

SUPER: ONE WEEK TO CALIFORNIA.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Late. One light. Mary at the sink, washing the med syringes, and --

-- it gets her. Mid-motion, out of nowhere: her shoulders. The sob comes up silent, the way you cry when the house is asleep and you're the one holding the line. She grips the sink and rides it, water running, back to the room --

Behind her: the CLICK of nails on the floor.

She freezes. Wipes her face fast --

Too late. Secret is up -- up out of the warm bed she can barely leave, walked herself down the

hall on that failing chassis -- and now, in the kitchen doorway, thin, patchy, magnificent, she plants herself. Looks at Mary --

-- and OFFERS. A spin. Half of one -- the body can't finish it -- she wobbles, catches herself, squares up, and lifts the PAW instead. Holds it up in the air, trembling with the effort, eyes on Mary's face --

The old ones. The behaviors that always, always changed this particular weather. She is reading her girl -- grief coming off her like heat -- and she is doing her job. She has never once stopped doing her job.

Mary stands at the sink, dish towel in her hands, and reads the whole thing in one pass, all the way down:

The dog is holding the rope.

The dog will hold the rope as long as Mary is on the other end of it. That's the whole message, delivered in a trembling paw: as long as you need me, I will not let go, no matter what it costs, and it is costing --

Mary makes her face calm. It takes everything we have watched her learn in twenty years of this movie, and she does it in four seconds. She crosses, takes the paw, sets it gently down.

MARY

Good girl.

Treat from her pocket. The soft mouth. Secret's tail moves: weather changed. Job done.

Mary sits down on the kitchen floor and gathers the dog into her lap, and over Secret's shoulder, where the dog can't see it, her face is not calm at all.

Hold there. The two of them on the floor. The water still running in the sink.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Later. The house dead quiet.

Mary lifts Secret onto the bed -- the practiced arrangement -- and lies down facing her. Nose to nose. The lamp low.

Secret's eyes on Mary's eyes. Nothing between them. There has never been anything between them; that was the whole thing, from the pen in Oregon to here: two creatures at zero distance.

Mary's hand on the dog's cheek.

A long time.

MARY  
(a whisper; four  
words)  
I will be okay.

ON SECRET.

Her face. Only her face.

The ears, which have been holding, settle. The brow, which has been working, unknots. Something that has been carried a long way is set down -- you can see it leave the body, an exhale that starts at the eyes and travels the whole spine, the weight going out of a working dog at the end of the shift --

-- and her eyes close.

Not death. Sleep. Real sleep, the deep kind, the first in weeks -- released.

Mary keeps her hand where it is. Watches her sleep.

We stay on the two of them, the lamp low, as long as we can bear it, and then a little longer.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Gray light through the curtains. The room ordinary. The tiny skyline of cheese-wrapped

pills on the nightstand, unneeded.

Mary, awake, lying exactly where she was.

Her hand is still on Secret's ribs.

They aren't rising.

She doesn't move. She doesn't call out. She stays, hand riding the stillness the way it rode seven years of sleep -- up and down, up and down, and now: the third thing. The one the wave teaches. She stays.

INT. FAMILY HOME - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - MORNING

The kibble bowl at the kitchen door, downstairs, untouched -- Lisa, holding it, looks up the stairs, and the house tells her. Houses know.

She climbs. Ted behind her.

Mary's door is open an inch.

They see.

Lisa's hand comes up -- to her mouth, then flat against Ted's chest, holding one of them back, it isn't clear which. They do not go in. There is nothing to ask and for once, God help them, nobody asks it.

Ted lowers himself down the wall of the hallway until he is sitting on the floor -- the hallway, this exact hallway, the one where all his sentences used to live -- and Lisa stands in the doorway of her daughter's grief with the bowl still in her hand.

At the end of the hall, in pajamas: Izzy. Twenty years old and eight years old, both at once.

Nobody moves. The house is very quiet.

We have heard this house quiet once before, and so has this family, and that -- THAT -- is the thing moving under this floor like a current under sand: not only what is lost, but what may

now come back.

INSIDE THE ROOM: Mary and Secret, girl and dog,  
the hand on the ribs.

The wave, on the sand.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

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.]