
FICTION

Requiem in L Minor

Karen Rosenbaum

Today the L's. In the old address book, the L pages are impossible—phone numbers lined out, zip codes scratched in, whole entries x'd or margined with a question mark. Even the H's are more decipherable. Now, on the dining room table, the new address book is lying open waiting for me to carry on. To mark my place, I stick the ragged post-it that Baxter had affixed to the cover five years ago: "Dearest Char, the rest of this present is my offer to copy and correct all entries in legible handwriting." The new book, the cover awash with birds, was a Valentine's gift. Baxter never got around to giving me the rest of the present.

Baxter was awash in good intentions. Now he is just awash—floating, fighting the flow. Sometimes he is all affection. Sometimes he can hardly look at me. Eighteen years, mostly good. More than a partnership, our tiny family. No parents, no children, but Lauren is coming over this afternoon, after her classes. She comes every week now. I know it's her idea, not Ramona's, though I imagine she reports on me to her mother. If Lauren were my daughter instead of my niece, she'd probably feel she *had* to be here. Instead she's relaxed, doesn't say much, just plops down on the floor or on my bed. A gift in a kid who's not even twenty.

Ramona drove up once after the surgery. She couldn't sit for more than a minute. She walked back and forth, from Cocky's cage to the window. She kept asking if she could do anything, laundry, vacuuming. I told her we have a housecleaner, but she seemed not to hear. Two, maybe three times this year, she's phoned, but she can't think of anything to say or maybe she can't make herself say what she is thinking. Instead she mails us notes, lots of notes, on flowered cards, and tells us she is praying for us.

Ever since I started college and stopped church, ever since I let loose of that iron rod and the word of God, she has felt threat-

ened by me, has disapproved of me. Of me and my men, she would say. But sisters share so much. I know she will be devastated when I die.

I chew the top of my pen. It tastes about as good as the mush Baxter brings me for breakfast. Everything tastes bitter. Today is a good day though, just a little dizziness. Moby brushes against my leg, waits for me to massage his neck, then bounds onto my lap and stretches up to the table. He's taken a liking to the big wooden bowl in the center, and he curls up now inside it. The bowl was a gift from Nathan when we were young in Berkeley, two decades ago. I shake my head, rattle and rearrange my thoughts. I have spent the last months stacking and sorting. Now I'm redoing the address book myself, struggling to make my letters legible so that Baxter will be able to find everyone. Well, almost everyone.

Angela and Mark Laird

I was maid of honor when Angie and Mark got married. I was seventeen, two years younger than Angela and the other bridesmaids, all of us stuffed into red velvet dresses and red suede pumps. I didn't go to the actual wedding because it was in the Mormon temple, where you had to do special things and make special promises. Everyone assumed that some day I would have a temple wedding, too; no one was disappointed in me yet. I stood next to Angie during the reception because we were second cousins whose mothers were not just cousins—they were best friends who had long hoped that their daughters, Angela and Charlotte, would become best friends, too.

We never did. I adored Angie's mom. Vilate was lively and funny and quick; Angie was lethargic and simple and slow. Even though I was younger, I found myself bossing her around, and she never seemed to mind. When my folks left me at Vilate's house in Palmdale for a week every summer, I was squished into a three-quarters bed with Angie, who slept very soundly and took up more than her share of the space. I wasn't used to bumping into someone else's arms and legs at night. Even the years Ramona and I had to share a bedroom, she had the upper bunk because she was so much older, and I had the lower bunk to myself.

Except for the nights, though, I liked going to Palmdale.

Angie and I played croquet next door, in her uncle's big backyard, with more cousins, including the handsome Lewis, who bragged that he would join the army when he was eighteen. We tromped downtown to the little grocery store Angie's dad managed, and he gave us Tootsie Rolls and Necco Wafers. We hung out with Angie's friend Bonnie Alice, across the street, and looked through movie magazines.

And then suddenly Angie was nineteen, and her roundness became almost voluptuous, and her white-blonde hair was smooth and fine. She surprised everyone by making it through a year of college and met, through her handsome cousin Lewis, Mark, an almost-as-handsome second lieutenant in the army. They were married just before Christmas. When they moved to Texas, Angie sent me recipes for Marshmallow Jell-O Cool Whip Mousse and German chocolate cake. I was taking a college English course, and I knew that my teacher would have defaced Angie's letters with red marking pens.

Angie and Mark visited Palmdale every summer, and they'd drive over to La Crescenta to see us while I was still living at home. Every summer Angie looked fatter. After half a dozen miscarriages, she finally carried a baby to term, but he died in the hospital, and she almost died, too. Though Mark's faith wobbled, every loss somehow reaffirmed Angie's. Through the Church's social service program, they adopted two boys, who, according to Mom in later years, didn't turn out so well, which probably meant *not* that they turned out to be bookies or burglars, but that they didn't turn out Mormon.

When Vilate died of stomach cancer, Mom felt she had inherited the responsibility to lecture Angie on her weight. "You don't want to lose that attractive husband of yours," she would say. Angie would giggle and agree; but after all, Mark was a loyal, Church-going, tithe-paying Scoutmaster, a little too stout to turn many heads, and about as likely to stray as a turnip. At her dad's funeral, I noticed that Angie panted a lot. She waddled rather than walked. A few weeks after she buried her father, Angie died, too, of a heart attack, and Mark remarried a year after that and moved to Florida, where the more promising of their boys works in a repair shop for golf carts.

In the old book, I trace a light line through Angie and Mark's

address and phone number. Was Angie mostly happy in her life? Did her disappointments force her to reexamine her compliance, her passivity, her beliefs?

I hope not. I hope Angie did what I couldn't do. I hope she kept the faith.

Nathan Loewe

At least I know where Angie is. More or less. Mark had her body buried in Palmdale, next to her folks. Now Nathan—Nathan and I were born the very same night. Once we figured out that we were born the very same hour—he in Cleveland, I in Burbank. We met when we were twenty-two. I lived in the apartment directly beneath his in the twelve-unit building close to Cal, where he was a senior architecture student, and close to the hospital, where I was a dietetic intern. Nathan didn't have much hair, but he had class and confidence. I had lots of hair. It exploded around my face and down my back when I took off the net I had to wear at work. I felt a little inferior in Berkeley because I had majored at a small state college in what was then called "food science."

That year, Nathan and I spent countless hours together. We stomped our feet and clapped our hands for the banjo players at the Freight and Salvage. We walked the neighborhoods at night, covertly culling flowers from front yards. We talked about his inconvenient Jewish heritage and my inconvenient Mormon one and our roommates (who were briefly in love with each other) and studies and work and so many things, but I wonder now—has he had a lover of any sort? Was he gay? I'm shocked that I don't know.

I do know crazy things about Nathan—like his being the executor of the will of his elderly, eccentric aunt who lived in Chicago. The aunt always told Nathan that she didn't trust banks and their safety deposit boxes, so when she was gone, he should search for her valuables in her apartment—like hundred-dollar bills between the dinner plates and diamond rings in tubs of margarine in the refrigerator. When she died, he dutifully went to Chicago and ferreted about the kitchen. There were many partially used tubs of margarine in the refrigerator. Not one was the repository for jewels. There were many sets of china in the cupboards. There was no money hidden between the dishes. Nathan grumbled every time

he stuck his finger into margarine, every time he unstacked his aunt's dinnerware.

Until I met Morty, Nathan and I celebrated our birthday together. We exchanged presents—his always something beautiful—a glass music box, a polished serving tray, that big wooden bowl now full of big white cat. Once Nathan cooked the two of us a birthday dinner in his new flat in the city. Once I cooked. Once we made reservations a month ahead for Chez Panisse. Even after Morty, even after I went off to St. Louis and married Baxter and after we moved to San Francisco ourselves, Nathan and I still called each other on our birthday. At least once he came to dinner at the flat on Chenery Street. I can't remember exactly when I lost him, when a funny birthday card I mailed him was returned. I couldn't find him in phone books. I couldn't find him on the internet.

There's a cube of butter, but no tubs of margarine in our refrigerator. And there is only dust between the plates.

What if—most apt and awful of happenstances—Nathan and I are to die on the same day? And unless some sort of spirit whispers such secrets, neither one of us will know.

Carole and Ken Lidwell

Carole may still be around somewhere, maybe even on the next block. One can hide in cities though she wasn't the hiding kind. Carole doesn't have the same phone, but she may have the same name, the same husband, the same address. Somehow, however, I don't think so.

We used to do things together, subscribed to the same symphony series, usually met for dinner first. Though we were both fond of Carole, Baxter didn't like Ken, said he was as "rigid as a robot." I didn't like him much either. Ken was Carole's third husband. When I first met her—in a yoga class at the Unitarian Church—we discovered we had both been Mormons once upon a time. The past seemed to weigh less heavily on Carole though. She was good at getting rid of things—sixty pounds, long hair, gray hair, superfluous husbands, three sisters who had unacceptably right-wing views on everything from abortion to Zionism. Like me, Carole had cats instead of children. Unlike me, she had an executive job with an insurance company and dressed like one of

those women in the full-page newspaper ads: tailored pantsuits, silk blouses, discreet gold earrings.

One spring, Carole said Ken didn't want to renew the symphony subscription, but maybe she'd find someone else to make up the foursome, a woman friend. But she didn't. We exchanged Christmas greetings for a few years. Our Christmas card was always a picture of us surrounded by our feathered and furry menagerie, and Carole and Ken's was always a fancy gold-embossed card with curlicues and just their signatures. Then they didn't send a card at all for a few years, so we stopped sending them one, too.

Where have they gone? Carole and Ken and Nathan. Surely not to graveyards every one. And what does the song mean, "long time passing"?

Jill Leonard

Jill's mom Gloria was a long time passing. Gloria was my all-time favorite resident in the Autumn Gardens Nursing Home where I worked until I couldn't. I didn't get to know all the residents as well as I knew Gloria, and I knew only a few of their children as well as I knew Jill. Gloria's face was twisted into a kind of grimace—not a stroke, she said when I first talked with her about her dietary preferences, but a failed operation to remove a tumor above her jaw. Although she would get confused about time and place, Gloria was pretty sharp compared to most of the residents, and she could still walk those first years. She used a walker, one of those sit-down kinds, on which she kept her clipboard and crossword puzzles. "I'm a tough old bird," she boasted. During World War II, she had worked in the Richmond shipyards, "like Rosie the Riveter," she said.

Jill used to sneak through the side door of the kitchen to chat with me in my office behind the massive refrigerator. There were big black lines painted on the floor beyond which only staff members were supposed to go. Jill didn't visit her mother as often as she thought she should; and to my amateur-analyst eyes, she was a classic study in mother-daughter guilt. Jill wasn't an amateur. She was a psychologist, and she knew lots about guilt. She flew around the country, giving papers and listening to other people give pa-

pers. She had a lesbian partner with MS and an adult son with no job and a pregnant girlfriend.

My parents—but not my own guilt—gone, I paid a lot of attention to Gloria, giving her hand and shoulder squeezes and kisses on her powdery cheeks. Gloria was so different from my mom, who had crumpled into a little pile in her kitchen, cerebral hemorrhage they said, and died in a zippered blue housedress. Gloria went through periods of pulling her pant legs high above her knees. “I’ve always had good legs,” she said. She didn’t have bad legs, especially for an old lady in a nursing home, but they were very white, and I always wanted to look away when she was in exhibition mode.

The average stay at Autumn Gardens was two years, but Gloria had over four years before she had to trade the walker for a wheelchair. Unlike some of the residents, she wasn’t occupied with dying. She attended every activity the nursing home had to offer—word games, sing-a-longs, drumming, flower arranging. She went to Shabbat services with Rabbi Marsha on Friday evening, ecumenical Christian services with Reverend Pat on Sunday afternoon. “And I’m not even religious,” she said. “What are *you*?” she asked me. I told her that I didn’t go to church any more, but Mormon hymns kept running through my head. When I sang her the first verse of “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” she squealed with pleasure. Whenever we were more or less alone, Gloria would say, “C’mon, Charlotte. Belt out one of those Mormon ditties.” And I would. Some things you can never forget.

And then Gloria stopped wheeling herself about the way the livelier residents did—using their feet and pulling themselves with the side rails in the halls. Some of the light dimmed in her eyes. She seemed depressed. “I’m not good for anything,” she would say. I reassured her she was good for *me*. Jill became frantic, and I had to reassure her, too, which wasn’t easy because I knew what came next short-term and, unlike my sister, have never known what came next long-term. Gloria slept more and ate less. She liked sweets, so I ordered sweet sauces on everything that wasn’t already dessert. She still paid attention to her appearance though—bright pink and red jackets and knit pants and big baubly jewelry. And she still sometimes showed off her white legs.

“It’s *not* your fault,” I told Jill, who knew it wasn’t her fault but felt guilty anyway. I didn’t tell Jill about my diagnosis.

When Gloria died, Jill and I promised to stay in touch, and I printed Jill’s phone number neatly in the book. We didn’t stay in touch though, and then I got really sick, and I couldn’t imagine Jill would be happy to hear from me. I wouldn’t have been happy to hear from me.

Morty Lawler

10 Locksley Avenue. That’s still right. The phone number too, probably. I know because—though I’ve not had contact with Morty for some years now, one of his ex-sisters-in-law has kept me apprised of his career and marriage changes. He’s an agent for artists, artists who work with metals and sell iron banisters and house and garden sculptures to people who have a lot of money. Morty has always known people who had a lot of money. When I knew him well—or thought I did—he worked for Clorox, which paid him handsomely but didn’t suit his image of himself.

I was the woman after his first wife and before his second. I didn’t last as long as either of them, but I apparently lasted longer than the third. He has children by the second, teenagers, a boy and a girl, whom he takes skiing and surfing, according to the ex-sister-in-law, who is very critical of his parenting skills. I think he’s given up on marriage, but there is another woman in his life, one much younger, I think, an artist.

I was ecstatic the first year Morty and I were together. We biked all over Berkeley and backpacked in the Sierras and went to black churches in Oakland because the music was so fine. Then he took the job in the Midwest and suggested I come too, and it all fell apart. I couldn’t understand why. When he moved back to California, I stayed in St. Louis, too paralyzed to make any more changes. And then I met Baxter and returned to the world of the living. I mattered to Baxter. And he has a wonderfully long attention span.

We’ve seen Morty a few times over the years—run into him at a concert, a museum, once even at the funeral of a friend’s father. The meetings weren’t painful. He’s gained a little weight and lost a lot of hair. Not from chemo either.

I'm not up to analyzing why I've kept Morty's contact info over the years, but this is a good time to divest myself of it. I make three straight lines through his name and two through his phone number and address. Ginny would approve.

Ginny Lin

Ah, Ginny. I never wrote Ginny's entries in pen, even when I had recent addresses for her. Ginny had had so many addresses. In the old days, it seemed she would send a card every November with a new address to alert people with Christmas-card lists. She never included a letter, just a note ("Love hearing from you, girl!"), usually a picture. Usually a picture with a man, a different man from the year before. The last time I heard from her, Ginny had sent a picture of herself with *two* men, one black, one white. That one was from Chicago. Other cards had come from Atlanta and Boston, and a bunch had come from New York—all with different Manhattan or Brooklyn addresses. Baxter looked forward to Ginny's cards. He'd assign whimsical occupations to the guys. "That one probably sharpens knives at street fairs," he'd say. Or "Now she's gone and found a Latvian yoga coach."

Ginny and I had gone through college together, quitting for a couple of quarters to work and get enough money to ride a motorcycle around western Europe. Ginny did the driving; I straddled the rear seat. Back home, we introduced each other to unlikely men. Mom and Ramona had not approved of Ginny. She was too exotic, too wild, too much fun. Too foreign, they thought, but didn't say, even though Ginny's grandparents had come to California before my parents had. When I was in big trouble, it was Ginny I could go to, Ginny who knew who would help.

That has been so long ago. After Baxter and I moved here, she would come visit us, stay a weekend, always coming in very late. We haven't heard from her now for five or six years, and the Christmas letters we have sent were returned stamped with a smeary "Not known at this address." But Ginny is around somewhere. She has too much energy to die. She's probably attached to the King of Bahrain or someone like that. She'll resurface eventually.

But probably not in time. Anyway, I no longer have the kind of problems Ginny can solve.

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Even the new address book looks old. It is rather quaint. Kids like Lauren have probably never kept address books. They just store information on their computers and phones. Once there were rolodexes. Baxter used to have a box with business cards that he would occasionally alphabetize.

I was brought up to believe that there was a God with a really big address book. He kept track of everyone. That wasn't the metaphor used in Sunday School, but that was the idea. Mom and Ramona and maybe Dad accepted that idea. Ramona's girls, Lauren and Nita, don't appear to be believers though, which must cause Ramona more sorrow and shame than a wayward little sister ever could.

I close the old book and trace, with my finger, the birds on the cover of the new one with my finger. I can't remember ever really believing in the devil—the way I never really believed in the Easter Bunny. Santa—now, Santa I had believed in till Ramona shrieked out the truth in an argument when I was six. And Noah and Moses and Jesus, I believed their stories—though Jonah seemed pretty suspect even then. I tried, though, for years, on and off. Until there got to be too many troubles, too many transgressions, I tried.

"She's studying for finals," we used to say about someone who would "get 'ligion" at the nursing home. Not like Gloria. Gloria simply went to every activity at Autumn Gardens; if there had been an atheists' service, she would have attended that too.

But I wouldn't. Atheists think they know the truth. Even Reverend Pat and Rabbi Marsha aren't as dogmatic as that.

Baxter's black lab Betsy wanders into the room. Starting next week, Baxter is taking a leave of absence so he can be home. Betsy will be rapturous. The cats and the bird are mine; the dog belongs to Baxter. When I was a little girl, I was convinced that all cats were female, all dogs male. It was one of the stories that Ramona would later retell to torment me.

I should write to Ramona. No confession, no conversion. A letter of love. Love, no matter what. Mostly.

I sigh and open the two books again. Back to the L's. Back to those whose names won't vanish. I give Betsy a pat. There is pleasure in starting on an empty page.