

Silent Reply

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Comment

This is an excerpt based on a novel outline I drafted last spring. In the fall term the fiction assignment for MAIS 616 (Writing the Self: The Experience and Potential of Writing for the Purpose of Personal Development) inspired me to begin writing the story. This is the climax scene of the novel plot. It is a fictitious illustration of how new media is changing relationships, such as a shifting cultural expectation that we should always be available anywhere because of the technology of texting and cell phones.

Driving down the dirt road amid the fresh green of spring, Margaret contemplated what she had just done. She had released herself with that final phone call before she left the chalet. She had tried to break up with Robere in person but had been unsuccessful. His lure, his physical presence, enveloped her mentally and emotionally. His presence, always larger than life, consumed her. She had lost her way. She had forgotten her thoughts, her decision, her resolve. His presence was too persuasive. If she allowed herself to be wrapped in his words, and in his arms, she could stay there forever, but then who would she be?

His words the morning after they were together for the first time were words that lifted her. *Margaret, you are an incredible woman. Tu es une femme incroyable.* He spoke softly with his French accent. *You deserve to be acknowledged, nurtured, and wanted. This is your time now. You have been doing everything for your children and your husband. A husband you know is having an affair. Your children are grown. Be independent of their happiness and find your own.* A surge shot down her spine and swirled inside her as she remembered how he felt so warm, wrapped around her as they stood outside facing the sunrise together on that cool crisp winter morning, whispering those words into her ear. His warm breath nestling into the nape of her neck while he nurtured her with those words.

Her cell phone ringing broke her entrancing thoughts and the silence of the car. It was Robere's ringtone.

Pick up, Margaret, Robere urged silently as he held his phone in one hand, steering with the other. The road ahead connected him to Margaret, his means to his end. He had to go see her at her chalet. Why did she break up with him with just a phone call? He burst out loud alone in the rumbling truck, "All I need, I mean, all she needs is me to remind her that her husband does nothing for her as a person. She was *subsumée*, swallowed up when I met her. Lost in a

so-called perfect relationship. It was only perfect because she had stopped objecting. She cannot just be defined by her roles in others lives. Mother to children. Wife to him. Lover to me. I am not defining her. I am just catching a glimpse of who she could be. Who she would be, if she would release herself from the life she is resigned to grow old in. I have to make her understand, reawaken her own thoughts and desires. I need to remind her that I love her more passionately, with more life than she would ever have with him. Why does she not see that? I have to see her. I have to stand in front of her – no, that is not it. I am not blocking her. I just need to convince her to stop and think about what she really wants.”

When the pavement ended and the dirt road began, Robere felt the truck swerve on the gravel. Speeding to reach Margaret, he had not slowed down to compensate. He pulled the truck back under control, braking to stop it from fishtailing. One hand on the wheel, holding the phone with the other, he reached over to press redial.

Pick up, Margaret. Her voice mail clicked in again.

On the passenger seat beside Margaret, the phone rang again. Robere again. She let it ring. Never the type to take risks by answering while she was driving, now she wondered if she should pull over. No. She would not be thwarted this time. She had let him convince her to change her mind before, but not this time.

Robere was desperate to reach Margaret. He would text her. She might be ignoring his calls, but she would have to read a message right there on her phone. He fiddled with the keys, texting. *Écoute-moi! Listen to me.* He pressed Send.

Fixated on the phone, Robere frantically cried out, “At least look at it, Margaret.” Nothing back.

When the text came in, Margaret knew it was Robere’s signal. She kept driving, the phone in her peripheral vision on the next seat and Robere in the periphery of her mind, edging to the foreground.

“No. Not this time, Robere,” she said out loud, “give me the space to pursue what you kept encouraging me to do. I cannot be tied to just our story. Let me figure out my own future and then we will see if our paths converge again.”

Under her ribcage was a yearning pang for Robere’s physical presence. He was so strong in spirit and determination. And in muscle, his arms sculpted, young and tanned, his craftsman hands able to sling a hammer or softly lift an injured bird. She already missed those hands and what they could do for her, to her.

His wrists wrestling on the steering wheel, Robere tried texting again. *Réponds! Reply.*

Another text signal interrupted Margaret’s thoughts.

Twenty years ago, when she was young and newly married, she could storm out of the house after a fight and her husband couldn’t chase her down with her cell phone. She could retreat to the silence of the car, calm her thoughts, create her space. She contemplated the difference in her age and Robere’s. Twenty years ago, Robere was just a child. Now he expected to get an instant reply by incessantly calling and texting her – a generation was a chasm between them. She grabbed the phone. She fumbled to switch it to silent mode, but threw it down to the floor before she could press the right key.

Robere was still distracted when the road curved. His truck veered to the shoulder. He shook himself back out from his drifting thoughts, pulling the truck back onto the road as it

straightened. The lush trees of the spring season lined up on either side, yet all he noticed were the shadows they cast on the road ahead. The trees pulled in and folded down, creating a tunnel in his line of vision. He must see Margaret. Convince her to understand. As his mind raced a jolting question surfaced. Was his consuming urge to convince her to see what was best for her in fact a guise for his own deep need not to be alone? After years of bravado, defying a need for anyone in his life, Robere was not willing to answer.

Écoute-moi! Robere pressed Send and held his breath for a response.

The text signal broke Margaret's train of thought. His signal. A beacon, which she had cast down to the car floor.

"No," she cried out loud, "I am resolved. I have told you, Robere, and now I am going to tell my husband how I feel. What I need. What I want."

On the road to freedom, she was willing to recognize that she had allowed herself to buy into the roles in which she found herself. Mother. Wife. Lover. Now it was time to move on and recreate, to redesign her life. She knew what that entailed. Robere would no longer be able to persuade or dissuade her. She was at an apex of change and the next step was to see her husband with adamant conviction.

Je t'aime. I love you. Robere pressed Send again.

Another text signal from her car floor. Margaret glared at the phone. None of his powers of persuasion would work now. Robere could not change her mind by bombarding her with calls and texts. She was out of his reach.

Please, reply. Robere pressed Send again.

Another text. Margaret's eyes, in a moment of guilt, glanced at the phone on the floor of the car. Was she being insensitive? Maybe she should at least hear him out? He had helped her realize she was entitled to space from her unfaithful husband. It was a tormenting secret she had been keeping to herself until Robere drew her deepest thoughts out to breathe. Margaret was grateful that Robere had challenged her to step out of her insulated shell and seize her own destiny. But she needed to go down that unknown path on her own. Until then, she couldn't continue to be with her husband or Robere.

Now Margaret found herself on the road to new possibilities. As she drove the trees appeared to open up instead of closing in. She fixed her eyes on the infinite blue sky above. There was a world out there that she had never paused to imagine or observe before. She had always kept her focus on the tree-lined dirt road in front of the car. The shadows of the trees seemed to number off the tasks she had ahead of her, whatever she needed to do any given day to be the ideal loving mother, the devoted wife. Today the sky expanded above her, vivid blue. Vast. There was a world ahead if she chose to grasp it.

Robere looked up from sending the text. The road had twisted again but the truck was not following the curve. Its wheel caught the dip in the shoulder off the gravel edge. Robere pulled it back onto the road, in panic turning the steering wheel too far, losing control of the truck as it fishtailed to the other side of the road. Robere tried to regain his thoughts. *Go back to the right side...look ahead...car-*

Margaret was so fixated on the unfolding sky above that she barely heard that last text signal from the floor of the car. A sinking feeling plunged deep inside her as she lowered her eyes

back to the road ahead to see the truck in front of her...

There is no shattering of glass, no screeching of skidding tires. Just a slamming crunch of metal compressing metal. The impact with the car veers the truck onto its side, airborne. In a silent moment, Robere sees only the blue sky above the green trees. A thud breaks the silence, then crunching gravel. Through his windshield, a glimpse of the dirt shoulder of the road. Rolling, a moment of sky. Rolling. Green grass. Blue sky. Black.