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Jacqueline Vogtman

## A LOVE LETTER FROM VERY FAR AWAY

The first obelisk appeared in a cornfield outside our town of Bowling Green, Ohio, just a few years after we'd survived the latest pandemic, right when we thought things were returning to normal. It probably wasn't the right word for the structure, *obelisk*, but that's how the first article referred to it, so the name stuck. It was 30 feet tall, and pretty wide, a sideways trapezoid stuck into the earth by one of its sharp corners. The surface was smooth black like obsidian, though the scientists who tested it said that's not what it was. They ultimately admitted, rather sheepishly, they couldn't tell us *what* it was.

It started out as a local wonder. News stations referred to it as an Object of Mysterious Origin, or OMO; alien enthusiasts from neighboring counties came by the dozen and made comparisons to *2001: A Space Odyssey*; parents took their children to gaze and wonder and try to climb the thing with no luck. Our own son was seventeen at the time, teetering on the edge of adulthood, but even we took him once. He stood there, disinterested, staring instead at his phone, and you and I, we simply regarded our reflections in the glassy black of the trapezoid's surface, wondering what would happen to us when he eventually left the nest. What would we have to hold us together?

Soon, structures popped up in other places across the country. First, another cornfield, this one in Iowa. Then a farm in upstate New York. Beside Lake Ponchatrain in Louisiana. On a mountaintop in Colorado. In the middle of the Arizona desert. Right along the border in New Mexico. In an alleyway in Oakland, cracking concrete. And finally, in the Badlands, where no one noticed at first because it blended so well into the landscape.

The first obelisk arrived on the Spring Equinox. By the time we realized they were popping up all over the country, the politicians were rabid. They assumed it was an act of aggression from another country. They speculated that the material might emit some kind of dangerous energy. Local officials roped off the structures with police tape, a large yellow square at least 100 yards on each side. It reminded me of those years back, when the pandemic hit and the playgrounds were closed off with caution tape as if they were crime scenes. Our son was nine then, at an age where he still sometimes asked to go to the playground but was beginning to prefer video games. When the playgrounds closed, he happily resigned himself to pre-teenagehood, and I, of course, mourned.

While new buds shivered in the wind, politicians argued about who sent the obelisks and why, throwing accusations around like cherry bombs. By summer, though, they realized America was not the only place these structures appeared. They were spotted in almost every country across the world, dotting the globe like jagged black jewels. When the politicians realized this, some of those on the far right took a different angle. They were no longer a threat but a gift from God. They argued that America had received more of these blessings than any other country because America was the most blessed country on earth. They urged local officials to remove the yellow tape and encouraged all Christians to flock to the rocks. ("Flock to the Rock" even became a national catchphrase for a while.) Some of them began setting up camp there, the most devout followers making fervent attempts to chip away at the obelisks, hoping to collect fragments like the relics of saints. The structures, though, could not be broken, not even the tiniest bit, not even a sliver. That aspect in itself should have proven these things were alien in origin; human-made things are always so fragile, so quick to fall apart.

I remember the first time I saw you, some twenty-five years back, at an arts festival on Main Street. The way you were

dressed, with a smock, heavy pants, and heat resistant gloves, you looked like you stepped out of the past, a blacksmith. You stood in front of a furnace holding a long metal pole, and when you pulled it out, a glowing ball of molten glass hung on the tip. You turned the pole around and around as you made your way to the table, and then you rolled the molten tip in a pile of colored glass, the colors melting beautifully. Finally, you took the pipe and blew into it, the liquid glass growing with your breath, your neck reddening, the veins standing out as you blew, and as I stood there watching with the rest of the crowd, I wondered what it would be like to touch that neck, the warm pulsing vein, move my hand up higher to the stubble of your jaw, your cheek, what it would be like to rub my own cheek against yours.

I stayed even after you finished your demonstration and the crowd walked away. I wandered over to the display table, where you had some pieces for sale. I grabbed the first thing I saw, which I later found out was a pipe for smoking weed. I didn't smoke at all then, but a few months later when we began dating we used it a few times sitting on the roof of your apartment, and then many years later we used it again when our son was a toddler and we were trying to get the spark back, and we lay together on the lawn behind our tiny house looking at the stars, touching each other, wondering how we got so old, not realizing how young we still were.

You had taken off your gloves to ring me up. Your hands were large and dirty, nails clipped short. When I handed you cash for the pipe, our hands brushed, and I noticed how hot your skin felt, as if the fire had seeped underneath it. You told me to come by your store sometime. I raised and lowered my eyes, said I would. A few weeks later, I did, and that was the beginning of our story.

By fall, the "Flock to the Rock" group had split into two factions: those who believed the obelisks were proof of our goodness, a gift from God himself, and those who claimed the opposite, that they were a mark of evil and associated

with America's sins (which, in their minds, had more to do with promiscuity and homosexuality rather than, say, the genocide and slavery on which the country was built). This group claimed the obelisks marked the end of the world; soon the sinners would be struck down and the worthy would be rewarded. Neither of these groups entertained the idea that the structures came from aliens, though, so at least they agreed on that point.

Of course, there were other theories floating around too. There was a vocal group who spoke about the Deep State, who claimed the obelisks were just the latest in a series of the government's attempt to control us. There were the alien enthusiasts, who saw the obelisks as proof of alien life, though they disagreed about the actual purpose of the structures. (Were they a type of technology? A way to surveil us? A weapon? Were the obelisks themselves extraterrestrial life forms? Where were the actual aliens, anyway?)

Then there were those who watched the news, read the articles, listened to people talk in the grocery stores, and still didn't know what to believe, what to feel, except sad that everyone was fighting all the time. There were those who didn't care because they were so wrapped up in the little drama of their own lives. And there were those who *couldn't* care because they were working three jobs and still struggling to pay rent or because their sons were dying in the streets. None of these problems left when the obelisks arrived; it's just that some people stopped paying attention to them, and they were replaced in the national conversation with something seemingly more important.

When I was young, my parents used to take me to Blockbuster to rent movies on Friday nights. It was the only business left in a run-down strip mall, and my dad called it "the last Blockbuster at the end of the world." Of course, this was before the entire chain went out of business, before pandemics and quarantine, before obelisks. In the alien movies we rented, often starring Will Smith, all the countries in the world put

their conflicts aside when faced with a common enemy, the aliens. It seemed so simple: the path to peace on earth was a violent and dangerous invasion by an alien species. As I grew up, I understood how far removed from real life movies were—but still, part of me was surprised at the way things turned out after the obelisks arrived, not just in our country, but between you and me.

You and I watched the news together sometimes, but more often we sat on opposite sides of the couch and scrolled through our phones, reading articles from various sites or browsing the comments sections on social media. At first, we scoffed at the same things, rolled our eyes, shared concerns about the rising tension in our town, our country. We didn't talk about it much with our son, who, being a teenager, was mostly wrapped up in his own life, starting senior year of high school, breaking up and getting back together with his boyfriend, staying out too late and coming home smelling slightly like pot.

As the fall wore on, though, you began to repeat some talking points from the conspiracy theorists. I laughed them off at first, but soon you were repeating them more often, almost every evening when we plopped ourselves down on the couch after dinner and scrolled through our phones to the soundtrack of some old comedy in the background. It wasn't until Halloween night that I realized you were serious. Our ranch house was across from a cornfield on a lonely country road, but there were several cross streets, so we got a good amount of trick-or-treaters each year. This year, alien costumes dominated. There were the usual green ones, then a few more creative, purple, polka-dotted, many-armed, many-eyed. We sat on the porch and sipped some spiked cider as the chill of dusk came on. After the most recent group of alien kids had left our step, you shook your head.

“Shame, kids are being brainwashed.”

I asked what you meant, and you launched into a diatribe I had heard before, but never from you. They're teaching kids that aliens are real, you said, but won't talk about God

in school. Kids are being taught to worship the wrong thing. They're growing up with loose morals. You stopped there, and I looked at you skeptically. I wanted to say, Are you not the same man who owns a glassware store that sometimes sells bongos to underage teens? But more trick-or-treaters arrived, and the conversation was dropped. We spent the rest of the night giving out candy, eating some ourselves, and watching the moon rise in silence.

On one of our first dates, when we were still getting to know each other, you had proudly stated that you were agnostic. Later, you told me the truth: You were raised in a strict, emotionally abusive Evangelical household, but you had broken with the church years ago and weren't even sure if you believed in God anymore. I was also raised Christian, but my parents took me to a Unitarian Universalist church, where women were priests and all colors and cultures and sexualities were warmly welcomed and we were taught that God was everywhere. And though I strayed away from religion in general over the years—you and I never went to a service except on Christmas and Easter—that sense of God permeating everything stuck with me.

Once in a while, I noticed that kind of spirituality in you. You were sometimes asked to create stained-glass windows for local churches. I'd watch you work in our shed, and at times it looked like light was emanating from you, though it may just have been the reflection of the glass. You worked quietly for hours, and when you returned to the house you had a stillness about you. It reminded me of how I felt after I'd worked on a painting all day, losing myself in a waking dream and then finding myself new on the other side.

That Halloween night, you ended up going to bed early and I stayed up watching scary movies, which had always been a ritual of ours. One of the movies I watched that night was *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which made me think of aliens, which made me think of you. I felt a shift in our relationship, a new distance that wasn't there before. I stayed up after the

movie was over, sitting by an open window that let in a brisk fall breeze, waiting for our son to come home, thinking how much I missed the days of trick-or-treating with him. When he finally came in the door, I was surprised to see him in costume. He was wearing big feathery wings and had glitter all over his body. I laughed.

“I didn’t know you dressed up! Are you an angel?”

He laughed, too, said, “I’m an alien, mom, can’t you tell?”

As fall wore on, you started taking days off work and visiting the nearby obelisk. That in itself didn’t bother me, except I knew you went there to argue with people. You often came home still angry, and one time you were brought home by the police. When I asked you about it, you said you tried to knock the foolishness out of someone.

Then, the night before Thanksgiving, you didn’t come home at all. At first, I wasn’t worried. Our son was out, too, with his boyfriend, and I relished the quiet. It might have been the first time I had the house to myself in months. By the time our son came home, though, I was getting worried. What if something had happened to you? When you arrived back home in the mid-morning, you smelled like booze and campfire. I was pissed.

“We were trying to set them straight,” you said.

“Who’s *we*? Who’s *them*?”

You didn’t answer. “Those people, they don’t have a clue. They’re worshipping these things as if they’re something good.”

I was standing at the counter, chopping celery for the stuffing. “How do you know they’re not?” I stopped chopping and looked at you. “How do you know anything?”

Your eyes flitted from angry to hurt and back again. I knew I had said the wrong thing. You had told me once that you felt a step behind me intellectually. It wasn’t true, but you were insecure about the fact that I had gone to college and you had not, that you became an apprentice glassblower after high school and I had gone to school to study and make art and



learn how to become a teacher.

“It’s in the Bible,” you replied coldly. “Read it sometime.”

I shook my head, opened my mouth to apologize or call you an asshole, I wasn’t sure which, but then you continued: “These people, all these years, acting like their behavior would never catch up with them. But it has. All the sex, all the abortions, all the gays and trans and all the fucking libs who say they’re *woke* but are really more asleep than anyone else.”

I stared at you in disbelief. I’d never heard you say anything like that before. I gave you a moment to realize what you said, to catch yourself. You didn’t.

“You do remember,” I said, shaking, trying to hold back my rage, “that our son is one of those *gays*, right?”

I saw the anger in your eyes falter, transform into sheepishness, guilt. But that shame made you defensive, and you raised your voice. “Yeah, well, I didn’t mean him. He’s not like the rest, anyway.”

“What does that even mean?” I cried. I realized I still had the knife in my hand and threw it in the sink with a loud clatter.

Our son must have heard because he came downstairs, rubbing his eyes. He stood in the foyer like a child just woken up from a nap. “What’s going on?” he asked, his voice small. He wasn’t used to this. We had never been a shouting family.

“Everything’s fine,” I said. I tried to smile but felt my lips trembling, so I turned my back.

You went outside to the shed. I got a new knife and continued chopping vegetables, wondering what was happening to us, what had just been broken.

We went weeks without speaking, avoiding eye contact as we passed one another in the hallway. I tried to put on a cheerful face for the students in my class, but as the winter came on, I was feeling defeated. After all this time, was it really over? I started looking up apartment rentals nearby. As I was scrolling through listings, I came upon your old apartment, the one you lived in when we first met, above the bar on Main Street. How

strange, after all that time, to see inside the rooms again. It looked different, new paint and floors, but there were the same old radiators, the same old windows from which we watched drunk college kids fight and fall in love a hundred times a night.

Seeing that old apartment gave me pause. I stopped looking through rentals, but I bookmarked a few. I wasn't giving up on the idea completely. But then, later that night, I was cleaning out my closet, and I came across the glass birds. You made me the first one, a hummingbird, in our first weeks of dating, gave it to me with a tag attached, on which you had written in small messy script: *My heart beats fast as hummingbird wings around you.* The second one, a bluebird, you presented to me in the hospital the day after I gave birth to our son, when I was still ragged and crying. The third one was a cardinal. You made it for me after I had my miscarriage. She would have been a girl. I think you meant to give me hope, that our daughter was out there somewhere, the old idea that when you see a cardinal it's a visit from a loved one. But it was too soon after the miscarriage and reminded me too much of what I had lost, so I had taken it, along with the other two birds, and placed them at the back of the closet, where they'd been now for so many years.

I picked up the hummingbird. One of its wings had broken off, and I cursed myself for being so careless, for forgetting how delicate your glasswork was.

I looked into marriage counseling, but every place I called was booked solid for months. It seemed the national argument over the obelisks was infiltrating many other marriages besides ours. One day, you found me at the kitchen table, crying, phone in hand. For the first time in weeks, you spoke to me, asked me what was wrong. When I told you I was looking into marriage counseling but couldn't find us an appointment, something in your face softened. You sat down and apologized, sincerely, for what you had said. You didn't know what came over you. It was like all the other voices you'd been listening

to took over. You were sorry. You loved me. You loved our son. You looked at me hard when you said that, your eyes shining. I took your hand.

After that, we had a few good weeks that turned into a few good months, but as it got closer to the one-year anniversary of the obelisks' arrival, things started falling apart again. There were rumors of people disappearing. People left their beds in the middle of the night, were seen wandering close to the obelisks, and then were just gone. After the first dozen or so disappeared, it became clear there was a pattern: They were all women. Most of them were middle-aged or older, although there were a couple in their teens and twenties. In the scramble to come up with an explanation, some media outlets framed it as an abduction. The alien believers claimed the aliens were using the women to start a new race of alien-human hybrids. The "Flock to the Rock" group were confused. It was possible the women had ascended in Rapture, but they were just ordinary women, many who didn't even go to church. And what about all the good men who deserved to be chosen as well? The group you had been following, who looked at the obelisks as a sign of the apocalypse, went back to sin, as always: These women were daughters of Eve, and their disappearance was a warning of what would happen if we didn't repent.

No one considered the possibility that the women weren't taken. That they just left.

Soon you began spending nights at the obelisk again, camping out, arguing with the other men there, absorbing the hate speech of makeshift preachers. You stopped going to work. At first I thought you were just taking time off, but then you told me the shop was closing. There was no money coming in. The economy was tanking. People were too busy fighting to care, though. People started putting signs in their windows, some saying *Take me!*, others warning about the dangers of sin, still others promising people like our son they would burn in hell. I saw fistfights erupt in parking lots. I saw children come into

my classroom hungry, frazzled from their parents' fighting. I brought granola bars for them and talked to the guidance counselor, but she was overwhelmed.

I tried to take refuge in art, but it didn't work. I wasn't inspired. The paintings I made of the obelisks turned out like flat black trapezoids. I couldn't capture their energy, the way they glowed. Our son came out to the shed one afternoon, watched me work, saw me throw my paintbrush down in frustration. He came up behind and hugged me, and I thought we must have done something right, having raised a son so gentle.

He and I had a long talk that night. He talked about how scared he was, threats shouted at him from passing pickups. He didn't want to stay here anymore. I told him that was okay, I'd always known—I'd always *hoped*—he'd leave Ohio for college. But he shook his head, said no. He wanted to go farther. He wanted to go abroad, France. An art school there had accepted him and would pay his tuition. I want to be an artist like you, he said. That he saw me that way, as an artist, rather than a wife or a mom or a teacher: I grabbed his hand. I said, of course. No matter what it takes.

The next morning, I woke early ready to start something new. A sculpture. I worked on it in the yard. If there were aliens watching us, I wanted them to be able to see it. At first, I didn't know what I was making. I felt my way forward, let the materials lead me. I used found objects, scrap metal in the yard, old bicycle parts, old toys, old siding, bottles and brush and buttons. At the end of the first day, I was sore and still didn't know what the sculpture would become.

When you stopped home that night to make yourself a sandwich, you asked what that monstrosity was in the yard. I didn't answer, and you didn't come to bed.

You wanted to destroy the obelisks. There was a handful of other likeminded men in town, and you'd been talking with them about doing it. You admitted this to me with a kind of pride. I shook my head, laughed it off; there was no way you'd

do such a thing. But as the weeks went on, I began to doubt my belief in you. You were becoming a stranger. Who knew what you were capable of? I thought about your past self, the man I loved, with the kind of wistfulness one reserves for the dead.

You weren't home much anymore, but when you were, our son avoided you. In your hurt over this, I could see a sliver of your old self. I told you his plans to go abroad for school; I'd already booked his plane tickets for the day after his graduation. I expected some kind of pushback from you; after all, as his father you should have been part of this conversation. But the obelisks were all-consuming. You simply shot me a wounded look, shrugged, said, Good for him, and went back to your furious scrolling.

Then you left and were gone for days. I continued to work on my sculpture. I realized, halfway through, that I was making a bird. I was surprised: over the years, birds had become a symbol of our love, a love that, as far as I could tell, was gone. But then I remembered birds had not always been a symbol of *us*. I had loved birds long before I met you; they'd been my favorite animal since I was a child. I loved the way they existed in two worlds. I was terrified of flying in a plane and had only done so twice, but I had recurring dreams where I soared above the earth, above plains and cornfields and canyons. I always woke up before I fell.

On the one-year anniversary of the obelisk's appearance, there was an explosion in the cornfield. Dozens of people were arrested, a few were hurt, and the rest were ordered off the site. The obelisk, of course, was unharmed. The police roped it off again with yellow tape.

You called me from jail. I swear I didn't do it, you said. I reminded you of our previous conversation. You said that was just talk, you wouldn't have really done it, you wouldn't have risked hurting anyone. Your voice was sincere, but I couldn't see your eyes. I agreed to come pick you up. You apologized the whole ride home, like a teenage boy being picked up from a party he wasn't supposed to be at.

That blast, you said, it woke me up. I could have died, and for what? I don't want to leave you. I don't want to leave our son. You reached out and touched my thigh, and it shot the usual warmth up to my groin. Still, I couldn't forget everything you had said. The distance between us was still there. Maybe you were returning to the man you were before, but I couldn't return with you.

We pulled into the driveway, headlights flooding the yard, spotlighting my sculpture.

"Oh," you said, and took my hand. "It's a bird."

I nodded, let my hand rest in yours for a moment, but I knew the bird didn't mean the same thing to both of us.

A couple years after I graduated college, we had a long-distance relationship, remember? It lasted almost a year. I had to go back home to New York because my dad had cancer, and I wanted to help my mom take care of him. In the months before I left, things weren't great between you and me. We'd been dating about four years, and our relationship had stagnated. Every night after our respective workdays we got together, ate takeout, watched TV, and attempted to have sex, though most of the time we were too tired. Then I would either go back to my apartment in the middle of the night or squeeze next to you on your twin mattress. I was frustrated that you weren't growing up. You were frustrated that our life together was no longer a party. We fought about it. We considered seeing other people. And then my dad was dying, and I was leaving. I thought it was over. Instead, you proposed the night before I left.

You didn't go down on one knee; you backed up a little as if you were afraid of me, and it was the first time I had seen you scared like that. As you stood there holding the ring, silver with a tiny sapphire stone, I realized I had power over you, and that power frightened me but it emboldened me too, made it easier for me to forgive you for all our past fights. Even now, the memory of the fear in your eyes that night allows me to forgive you again, to keep forgiving you even though I am

farther away from you than ever before.

I still left for New York, but with the ring on my finger. I was there almost a year, and the ring kept us together because we knew on the other side we'd be starting a new life, our grown-up life, together. You came to visit sometimes, driving the ten hours in one day, and you sat with me at my dad's bedside. But mostly we talked on the phone, texted, emailed, wrote real paper letters and mailed them. My heart always jumped when I saw one in the mailbox. My mom laughed, teasing: So old fashioned! But those love letters were what got us through that time, that distance.

And that's kind of what this is: A love letter from very, very, very far away.

The night I brought you home from jail, you willingly slept on the couch, a kindness. I woke up in the middle of the night and knew there was something I had to do. I went into our son's room and looked at his sleeping face, his hands big like puppy paws, his curls splayed on the pillow. I kissed his cheek, as I used to when he was a baby.

Downstairs, you were sleeping, a mirror image of our son. I kissed you too. Then I went outside. In the moonlight the metal pieces of my sculpture glinted like jewels. I knew *what* I made—a big metal bird—but still didn't know *why* I made it. My whole life, I never really knew why I made art; it was just an impulse. It occurred to me that it could be the same for the obelisks. All this time, everyone thinking of the obelisks as some kind of message or weapon. But what if they were just art from another world?

I needed to go see it. And I wanted to bring my sculpture too, place it beside the obelisk, like starting a conversation. I lifted the bird, with difficulty, into the bed of the truck, and then I drove slowly down the road to the cornfield. It was quiet, no cars around, the houses mostly dark, though here and there the glow of dim lamplight spilled out from behind a downstairs window. I thought of all the people sleeping in these houses, how quiet they finally were, and I wondered

where everyone went in their dreams. I remembered my mother's sleeping face, how after a long day she sometimes fell asleep on the couch, the skin pulled tight across her nose and cheeks, her mouth open, snoring slightly, how far away she seemed. She died a few years back, during the pandemic. I wondered where she was now. And all those women who had disappeared, where had they gone?

When I made it to the cornfield, I saw yellow tape roping off the obelisk. No one else was there; after the explosion, everyone had been evacuated, and no one risked coming back yet. I pulled the truck as close as I could and then wheeled my sculpture on a dolly over to where the obelisk stood. My bird was dwarfed by the imposing trapezoid and looked inelegant, messy, all-too-human. Still, it felt right to leave it there.

What happened next is hard to explain, but I need you to understand: I wanted to go.

It started with a warmth emanating from the obelisk, which felt like sunlight, like lying on the beach as a teenager. Then there was a tingle. It started at the back of my neck and traveled down my spine, and then all the hairs on my body were standing on end.

Then there was light.

It came from above, underneath, behind, around me. It was blinding, and in that blindness I saw you and our son, I saw my parents, I saw my students and friends and neighbors and all our old dogs, all the apartments and houses we'd lived in, even my baby girl, and it was like I was saying goodbye, but I didn't feel like I was going away from something, I felt like I was going toward something.

And then I was above the earth, flying for the first time outside of dreams, and I could see below me the sculpture grow smaller and smaller until it was the size of a real hummingbird, and the obelisks shrunk in the distance to the size of pebbles, and the arguments over them seemed small, petty, of little consequence, but also forgivable from so far away.

The stars were so numerous and so bright. It was strange to think these were the same stars I gazed at while camping



with my dad as a child, the same stars we watched from your roof when we were young and in love, the same stars I got to glance at only sometimes as an older woman while walking the dog or taking out the trash. They were so close now. I reached out my hand to touch them, but instead a floating obelisk appeared in front of me. It was mute, but I felt it asking me a question, giving me a choice. And, forgive me, I chose to go.

I cannot describe to you adequately the speed at which I was rushed inside. I cannot describe the beings that populate the obelisk, I cannot tell you if they are aliens, or angels, or something else entirely. I cannot tell you who was right. I can only tell you it doesn't matter. The other women who disappeared, they are here also, and they are happy. We are happy. But that doesn't mean we don't sometimes look down on earth and miss it, miss you.

I see you there, with our son, gazing at my sculpture next to the obelisk. It looks like you're standing at my grave, mourning me. But I know that's not what's happening. I can see you looking at me through the bird, through the obelisk, I can see you reaching out your hand to touch the structure, and when you do, this is the message you will receive, and with your next heartbeat you will understand everything.