



"Dazzling. Brimming with truth and beauty."  
—Jeff Zentner, author of *The Serpent King*

Phantom

Limbs

Paula Garner



P H A N T O M  
L I M B S

P A U L A G A R N E R



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*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past,  
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,  
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:  
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,  
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,  
And weep afresh love's long since cancelled woe,  
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:  
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,  
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er  
The sad account of fore-bemoanèd moan,  
Which I new pay as if not paid before.  
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,  
All losses are restored and sorrows end.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, "SONNET 30"

WHEN I FINALLY HEARD FROM MEG, IT WAS May, historically her month of choice for upending my universe. It was the ungodly hour of swim o'clock—I was checking my messages in the dark with one eye half open, synapses barely firing, when the sight of Meg's name in my inbox jolted me awake. But with Dara due at any moment to lasso me for another morning of abuse in the pool, there was no time to process Meg's brief message, let alone respond. I grabbed a pack of blueberry Pop-Tarts from the kitchen cabinet and headed out.

The morning was a hazy purple, chilly enough to make my breath mist. I guided the screen door closed so it wouldn't bang and wake my parents—a pointless gesture,

since Dara's style of arrival in her ancient, souped-up Corolla could jar the fillings right out of your teeth. I tossed my backpack and my swim bag under the magnolia and sat down to wait for her. I reread Meg's message, then turned my eyes to the house next door that I still thought of as hers.

It was the first time I'd heard from her since we said goodbye in her bedroom, just us and the dust bunnies that had been hiding under the furniture, her parents waiting outside with the moving truck. I clung to her in that empty, echoing room as if the last thing that mattered to me in all the world was being taken away. Which, after the clusterfuck of the preceding year, it basically was. And there wasn't enough thirteen-year-old swagger in the known universe to keep me from bawling.

Minutes later they pulled away, Meg gazing out the window at me through teary eyes. She might as well have driven right off the face of the earth, because I never heard from her again. Until now, that is. A mere three years and four months later, not that I was keeping track.

Moving on was never my strong suit.

I opened my Pop-Tarts and gazed at the horizon's pink glow, breathing in the smell of rain and earth. On the branches above me, I could just make out the fat magnolia buds. Any day now they would explode into a fucking carnival of white and pink flowers—a spectacle that had kicked me in the nuts for the last three years. But now? Now I didn't know how to feel about it.

Four springs before, the most amazing thing happened under this tree. My best friend and I were moving out of childhood and into uncharted territory. Our bodies were catching up with us—Meg’s more overtly than mine, but what I lacked in physical maturity I made up for with a Herculean imagination. I was thinking less and less about whatever used to occupy my preadolescent mind and more and more about stuff that would have made Meg blush if she knew. Like how she’d look in a bikini that coming summer. And the way she smelled, all warm sun and green apples and something heady, like a secret I wanted in on. And—mostly—what it would feel like to kiss her. I could not tame this preoccupation no matter how hard I tried. It was like shoveling smoke.

On a warm night in May, right under this magnolia, it happened. The memory of that kiss still made my stomach flip over. What would it be like to see her now? What was she like? It figured that just when I started to face the fact that maybe I’d never see her again, she was coming back to town.

The squeal of tires in the distance signaled Dara’s imminent arrival. I got up, tossing the remains of my Pop-Tarts into the bushes and brushing the crumbs off my jacket. She screeched around the street corner, then barreled into my driveway with an eleventh-hour turn, nearly running me over. I leaped out of the way as she skidded to a stop.

“Jesus!” I yelled. “You almost killed me.” I glanced up at

the house. If my mom had seen that, my days of riding with Dara would be over.

Dara poked her head out the window. “You shouldn’t stand in the driveway,” she said.

“I was on the grass.” I pointed to the tire tracks in the yard, just visible in the first light of day.

She gestured me toward the car with the stump that remained of her left arm. “Come on, get in. I need doughnuts.”

I tugged on the rusted door and climbed in, buckling my seat belt as tight as it would go—the wisdom of experience. “How come *you* get to have doughnuts?” She never let *me* eat crap before practice. Knowingly, anyway. I considered my Pop-Tart indiscretions to be my own personal business.

I reached over and turned down the stereo, which was blasting the Rolling Stones. In Dara’s car, I was never in the right decade. Jagger was crooning “Miss You,” which wasn’t going to help me stop thinking about Meg. Haunted? Dreaming? Waiting? I could have written the lyrics myself.

“I get to have doughnuts,” Dara explained in a prickly tone, “because it doesn’t matter what *I* eat.”

Arguing was as pointless as it was tempting. In Dara’s view, I was a career swimmer whereas she was a has-been—an aspiring Olympic hopeful whose career was tragically cut short. So while my body was to be regarded as a temple, hers was more like a motel for transients.

She jammed the gearshift into reverse and glanced at me

as she turned to back out of the driveway. “Dude. You look like shit,” she said. “Did you just get up?”

Did I just get up? What the hell time did *she* get up? I’d stumbled out of bed about four minutes before she showed up. Oh, for just one freaking morning off . . . But Dara would have dragged me to the pool by the nipple if she had to. Like an Olympic swimmer, Otis Mueller didn’t take days off. Unlike an Olympic swimmer, Otis Mueller would never make it to the Olympics. But try telling Dara Svetcova that.

She blinked at me, all round blue eyes and milky-pale skin, as she backed into the street.

“It’s barely morning, Dara. Of course I just got up.”

She peered over at my lap, an impish smile on her face. “Do you still have morning log?”

I cringed. “God, Dara, it’s morning *wood*. And no,” I said, shoving her head back to her side of the car. “Eyes on the road, pervert.”

She shifted into first and set us in motion with a burn-out loud enough to wake the dead—as if I didn’t have a hard enough time convincing my parents that, contrary to appearances, Dara was a safe driver. She enjoyed few things more than making noise with her car. She navigated our little town like it was the Indy 500, revving the engine and tearing around corners and dumping the clutch. There was no mistaking the one-armed tyrant and her unlikely choice of transmission: the stick shift.

“So how long does it last?” she asked, blowing through



the stop sign at the corner. “Do you have to jack off every morning to get it to go back down?”

I ignored her. Was nothing sacred? Apparently not, and I only had myself to blame. Dara had no brothers, she’d never had a boyfriend, and she had no patience for reading. I was the source of her knowledge about “morning wood”—and pretty much everything else about the male body.

In the pursuit of the kind of education you don’t get in school, Dara and I played a game that went like this: she’d ask me something, and then I got to ask her something back, or the other way around. It was understood that the purpose of this game was to procure information of a sexual nature, but given our collective lack of experience having sex with other people, all that was left to discuss was our experience having sex with ourselves. As a result, we’d learned a lot about the workings of the opposite gender’s body—although in truth, I wasn’t convinced it was the male physique that interested her most. Her eyes often seemed to gravitate toward the same places on other girls that I was always trying my damndest not to look at.

Dara turned into the Dunkin’ Donuts lot and parked diagonally across the perpendicular lines. “Come in with me,” she said, climbing out of the car and slamming the door. She was wearing her “Kiss My Splash” T-shirt with no jacket, even though it couldn’t have been fifty degrees out.

I followed her inside, lured by the sweet, yeasty aromas. The cases overflowed with fresh, tender doughnuts; my

eyes lingered longingly over the chocolate ones with their crackled glaze before I spotted the Bavarian Kreme—Meg’s favorite. She would put away two of them with a large caramel iced coffee and then insist that her eyeballs were vibrating in the sockets. She’d press my fingertips to her closed eyes and say, “See? Can you feel it?” I smiled, remembering. Dork. Of course I couldn’t feel it. But when I was that close to her, vibrating eyeballs—real or imagined—were the last things on my mind.

Dara ordered two jelly doughnuts and a multigrain bagel. Not hard to guess which was for me.

The counter guy tried not to stare, but it’s a fact that stumps where limbs are supposed to be are riveting—a reality that didn’t escape Dara.

She waved her stump at him. “You wanna touch it?”

I would have laughed at his horrified expression if I didn’t feel so bad for him. He was a small guy, Pakistani, maybe, and he barely looked old enough to have a job. He backed up so fast, it was a miracle he didn’t end up in the doughnuts with his ass all coated in custard.

When he handed Dara her change, he said timidly, “What happened to your arm?”

Oh boy.

She met his eyes for a long moment, then said, “It just fell off. I woke up to this thud in the middle of the night. It had fallen right onto the floor.” She nodded. “Doctor said it was probably from eating too much sugar. Too many

doughnuts.” She shoved the change—more than five bucks—into the tip jar. His bewildered expression as he registered her response made me want to punch her in the head.

You’d never guess by looking at her how merciless she was—she had a face as sweet as a rose, until she opened her mouth and let the knives fly out.

I followed her out to the car. “You know, you could cut people a little slack.”

“What the hell does he need slack for?” She stuck the doughnut bag under her stump and opened her door. “He has two arms and his whole idiot life ahead of him. The world’s his fucking oyster.”

“People don’t see stumps every day, Dara.”

Dara’s arm ended just above the elbow. It wasn’t horrendous, as stumps go; it was round and fairly smooth save for some scars. And it was useful, too: she could carry things with it, hold beer bottles for opening, help with steering when she needed to shift while turning—things she wouldn’t be able to do if the amputation had been higher. The problem was one of visibility. I, like most people, carried my damage on the inside. But Dara wore hers on her sleeve. Literally.

She took her doughnuts out of the bag and bit into one.

“You know,” I said, staring as she licked jelly from the corner of her mouth, “it’s not like one doughnut would kill me.”

“Baby,” she said, turning the ignition and revving the engine, “you get your hundred breast cut, and I’ll buy you all the doughnuts you want. Shift.”

I reached over and did the shifting, which was my job whenever Dara multitasked with her one good arm. “I have until next February to qualify for state,” I pointed out, eyeballing her other doughnut nestled on the white bag near the gearshift. Its sugary surface sparkled and winked—I swear it was flirting with me. My bagel tasted like a damp dog biscuit.

“State? State’s the least of my worries.” She glanced over at me. “Oh, Christ,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Here.” She held out the doughnut, using her stump to steady the wheel.

I snapped up the doughnut before she changed her mind. “Why?”

“Because you’re killing me with those fucking puppy eyes.”

“No,” I said, chomping into the doughnut, “I meant, why is state the least of your worries?”

“You’ll have no trouble qualifying for state if you get to where you need to be by the end of the summer.”

“Which is?” I was confused; I had already qualified for the summer championship meet.

“Well, you’ll have to drop about four seconds this summer to stay on track to qualify for Junior Nationals by next summer. After J-Nats, all we need is to drop three more seconds to qualify you for Olympic Trials.”

I managed to not laugh out loud. Dara was asking me to

drop ten seconds in a race that took just over a minute. I just wanted to cut the two seconds that would get me to the high school state meet. And maybe make finals my senior year. But Trials? Ever? Pure delusion.

Somehow it seemed to escape Dara that this whole Olympics thing was ridiculous—I'd never be that good. She was the real talent. I'd just needed something to do after Meg left, something to get me out of the house, which had become an unbearable place, and to get me out of my head, which was even worse. Swimming kept me from drowning. I liked it. Sometimes I even loved it. And yes, I wanted to kick ass in high school swimming—maybe even college swimming if I was good enough. But that's about as far as my swimming aspirations went. Unfortunately, I'd let myself be Dara's pet project for three years, and she was looking for the payoff, which to her meant only one thing: the Olympics. She didn't care if it was in one year or five or nine; it was the pot of gold at the end of her rainbow, her *raison d'être*. And I was the leprechaun who was supposed to take her there.

So until I rustled up the cojones to kill Dara's dream and face the consequences, I'd be getting up before the freakin' roosters.

"Hand me my bag," Dara said, gesturing toward the backseat. When I gave it to her, she leaned forward and stuck her stump into the wheel to steer and dug into the purse with her right hand. As the car veered perilously out of the



lane lines, she pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was a schedule, mapped out day by day to the smallest detail. “We’ll do dryland three times a week and work on technique between morning and evening practice. If we don’t cut corners and don’t skip Sundays, we can do it—I know we can.”

The girl was certifiable. The Senior Championship meet was two months away!

I stared at the paper. My whole summer, sunrise to sunset, right before my eyes.

It’s not like Dara had never done this before—pushed me to my limits, taken over my every waking hour. And I’d always let her. Even during summer, when everyone else sort of takes it easy. But Meg’s message had changed everything. If she was coming back for three weeks, there was no way I’d be spending all my time with Dara. Not if I had anything to say about it.

“You’re not gonna be here to train me next year,” I pointed out. “What happens then?” It was going to take a hell of a lot more than just a summer’s worth of hard work to get me to Junior Nationals—and an absolute miracle for me to qualify for Olympic Trials. And Grinnell would be waiting for Dara in August, which actually kind of surprised me because I didn’t think she had the grades. But I was relieved they wanted her. Sometimes to me Dara going to college sounded like the beginning of a long, relaxing vacation.

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Why not?” It seemed like a fair question. Why push myself to chase the impossible if she wasn’t going to be around to see this through?

“Because, don’t worry about it!”

Dara logic.

As she blathered on about my summer in her POW camp, my thoughts lingered on Meg. *What happened to her?* We’d been practically inseparable for nearly three years. Did she really just forget me? If I was supposed to give up on her at some point, I never got the memo. I guess a guy with half a brain would consider the long silence “the memo.” If not that, then the football player might have driven the point home.

Since last year, when she finally appeared on Facebook, Meg had been posting pictures of herself with some padded Neanderthal. That they weren’t just friends was agonizingly clear. I, on the other hand, had been a lone wolf this whole time, unless you count the companionship of an eighteen-year-old dictator of frankly indeterminate sexual orientation.

“. . . and between practices we can grab lunch at that pizza buffet a few blocks from the pool—they have a salad bar . . .”

We were almost at the high school. The sun rose over the horizon, streaking orange and yellow through the remaining purple. It was a new day, in all sorts of ways. And as much as I was loath to bring up Meg to Dara, I knew that Dara, with

all her grand plans for me this summer, would need to know sometime.

“So guess what?” I said, shifting into second as Dara slowed to turn into the parking lot. “Meg’s coming back to Willow Grove.” It felt weird to say it, like I was making it up. “For three weeks. Apparently.”

“You know what that means?” Dara asked, tires squealing as she rounded the edge of the lot and sped into a parking space, stopping so suddenly that the seat belt nearly sliced me in half. She thrust the gear into first and yanked up the parking brake.

“It means,” she continued, grabbing her stuff from the backseat, “you need to knock off more than two seconds in the next three months. Do you realize how much work that’s going to take? Your turns still suck, and your starts aren’t great, either. Sometimes your breakout is sort of fucked up.”

She wasn’t even listening to me.

She got out of the car, slammed the door, and strode toward the school, her muscular little ass doing its famous *swish-swish*. I grabbed my bags and ran after her.

“Did you hear what I said?” I asked. “Meg’s coming back. So I might be kind of busy while she’s here.” I hoped that wasn’t just wishful thinking.

“Meg who?” She yanked open the door to the athletic entrance.

Man, she really knew how to piss me off. Dara knew

perfectly well Meg who. She'd heard plenty about Meg, although it hadn't taken long before she lost patience and told me that love was for chumps and to get over it already.

"Meg Meg," I answered.

"You mean the girl who landed you in therapy?" she said without looking back. "The girl you write all the froofy poetry for?"

I followed her down the hallway toward the pool, gritting my teeth. Calling my poetry "froofy" was one of Dara's cheap go-to's for emasculating me. And I was in therapy before Meg even left.

"Yes," I said, catching up with her. "And it's kind of a big deal. If you were my friend, you'd be happy for me."

She whirled around and faced me. "You know what? Fuck you. I've been here for you every fucking day since that girl left you in the dust. So don't give me that *if you were my friend* shit—don't talk to me about who your friends are. *I'm* your fucking friend. Which is more than you can say about her."

She started walking again. When she reached the locker room, she turned back to me. "God, Mueller." She shook her head at me like I was pathetic, tragic. "She never even looked back."

# 2

IN THE POOL, WE WORKED ON SPRINTS. TO my eternal amazement, there were people who voluntarily showed up to practice before school in the off-season. Most of them did it because they wanted to stay in shape, but they had actual lives and couldn't make the evening practice.

There were six girls and eight other guys at the pool, despite the ridiculous hour, including—always—my medley relay team, because we were determined to set a school record, if a strong enough backstroker emerged to replace D'Amico, who was graduating. And of course there was Coach Brian, who oversaw the entire swim club, head-coached us senior swimmers, and who, I was pretty sure, never slept.



If Dara hadn't been there, I could have spent the whole time thinking about Meg as I put in my yards, lost in the blue blur and muffled echo of water. But even while she was swimming, Dara managed to keep an eye on me, occasionally even alerting me with her shrill two-finger whistle, which confused all the swimmers. That morning she paused on her way to the fountain to holler, "More rotation, Mueller! And quit breathing so much, you pussy! It's a twenty-five, for Christ's sake!" Everyone—including Coach—found this hysterically funny. I wasn't laughing, though. I was wishing she'd go fuck herself.

It's not that I was ungrateful. Dara had transformed me, both physically and mentally—I knew that. When I met her, not long after Meg left, my daily calendar was divided into a triad of moping, writing depressing poems, and shoving my face full of the pies my mom kept making. If baking pies was my mom's coping mechanism during those dark days, eating them was mine. If my therapist hadn't pushed her to get me out of the house that summer, my mom, lost in a dark vortex of her own, probably never would have hauled me to the pool for some fresh air and exercise, and I probably never would have met Dara and ended up her unlikely protégé. She could spot a sucker a mile away, even as she swam laps with her sort of mesmerizing one-armed technique. I had walked to the end of the diving board in my billowy board shorts, held my nose, and jumped. When I surfaced, I flailed my way to the side—to call it "swimming" would have been

generous. Enter Dara Svetcova, who flattered me with her attention. She was almost sixteen, which felt a lifetime older than my thirteen and a half years, and it didn't take me long to realize she was the subject of the tragic news story I'd seen a couple of years earlier. Even with one arm, the girl was epic; I couldn't imagine what she'd been like with two. She gave me some swimming tips and encouraged me, and the rest was history.

Looking back, I could see that she was the human equivalent of a Venus flytrap. Hindsight is indeed twenty-twenty.

I was approaching the wall for a turn when Coach stopped me with a kickboard. When I came up, he pointed toward the deck, his expression grim.

Dara huddled near the pool, clutching her stump, rocking.

Phantom limb pains. The sensation that the amputated limb is there, hurting, itching—sometimes even that it's moving or picking things up. The drugs only helped so much. The most reliable relief came from her mirror box: a rectangular wooden crate divided by a mirror. When she put her right hand in, what she saw was a pair of hands, which somehow caused the phantom pains to subside. But if she wasn't at home with her box, sometimes watching two hands rubbing together could help. And to see two hands, she needed someone. And in Dara's world, "someone" was me.

I climbed out of the pool and moved toward her, pulling off my goggles. Abby Stewart knelt beside Dara, rubbing her back, her forehead folding into lines of concern.

Dara looked at me, grimacing. "I need the box."

Abby stood, rising almost to my height. She had to be close to six feet tall. Her long hair, balled up under her cap, looked like a giant tumor on the back of her head. "Box?" Abby asked me.

"I've got it," I told her. "Thanks, though." I couldn't explain the box, especially not then. Abby was easily the most thoughtful, good-hearted person on the entire swim team, and I felt bad pushing her away, but even if anyone other than me *could* help Dara, they'd first have to penetrate her field of barbed wire.

"You don't need the box," I told Dara, sitting down across from her. "I'm here."

"It was swimming," she said into her knees. "It was stroking. I hate it when it does that. It fucks up my timing." Her stump twitched and jerked. "Jumpy stump" she called this phenomenon, and there was no controlling it: it was a ghost limb seemingly controlled by a ghost brain. "God, make it stop!" she said through clenched teeth, trying to wrestle it down.

"Come on." I tapped her knee to get her to look up. "Watch."

She opened her eyes and I rubbed my hands together.

"Good, just stay focused," I said, hoping to distract her not just from the pain, but from the silence in the pool and the eyes, all the eyes. The last thing we needed was for her

to be aware that everyone was staring. There was nothing she hated more.

She focused on my hands, her stump occasionally jerking.

I glanced around, and when I did, everyone quickly resumed swimming, pretended they weren't watching. My eye caught Kiera Shayman's, and she gave me kind of a sympathetic smile. I looked away, heat creeping to my face. Kiera was a total siren—an hourglass-shaped breaststroker (which led to the predictable locker-room remarks) who, according to Dara, was into me. And even though Dara was at least as clueless as me on these matters, I still blushed redder than a tomato any time Kiera so much as looked my way.

I patted Dara's shoulder. "Better?" Her stump seemed to be settling down.

"What's gonna happen when you're not with me?" she asked in a small voice.

Honestly, I worried about the same thing when she went off to college. Making friends didn't exactly top her skill set. "You'll be fine," I said, with more confidence than I felt. I stood and pulled her up. "Now go swim."

She handed me her goggles. Dara manages pretty well on her own, but getting goggles on with one hand? Forget it. I helped her get them on, then put on my own. She stared at me for a minute, then flicked my goggles—a gesture I interpreted as some approximation of "thank you."

She turned and went back to swim. *Swish-swish*. Her suit crept slightly up her butt. I fought the odd urge to yank it out for her. I could never quite figure out if I needed to rescue Dara or be rescued from her.

This conflicted feeling was nothing new. Last year at the winter sports awards banquet, Dara sat next to me, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw her trying to cut into a chicken breast with the side of her fork. She pressed so hard, her hand shook with the effort, but the chicken just wouldn't cut. Then she tried her knife, which didn't do much better one-handed—it just slid the chicken back and forth on the plate. I didn't know what to do. Dara would rather starve than ask for help eating, I'm pretty sure. But I was ravenous from practice, and I thought she must be, too. So I cut up my whole piece of chicken and, as smoothly and discreetly as I could, swapped plates with her. No words were exchanged, no eye contact made. I knew I might be in for it later. I could just hear her: *Did I ask for help, asshole? Do I look helpless to you?*

But she never said a word about it. You just never knew with her. There were parts of her that were a total mystery to me.

I got back into the pool and finished my sets. Dara didn't yell at me any more that morning. There was nothing like a phantom limb incident to turn her spunk dial down to zero.

"Hey, Shakespeare, is Dara okay?" Shafer asked me in the locker room as he rubbed an Axe stick into his pits.



*Shakespeare*. More than once I'd regretted letting some of my poems be published in the school literary magazine. Another page from the "hindsight" file.

"Yup." I hated talking about Dara. For one thing, she wasn't very open with people, so I didn't feel like I should be open on her behalf — especially with Shafer, the freestyler on my medley relay team, who was a part-time asshole and a full-time pervert. For another thing, people always had questions about our relationship, and I didn't always have answers. No, we weren't going out. No, I wasn't paying her to be my coach. Were we best friends? Hell if I knew. We were together all the time, and we didn't really have many other friends. So maybe we were best friends by default. It didn't really jibe with *my* definition of best friends, which required one part me and one part Meg. I'd never really had a true best friend before or since.

Shafer sat in front of me on the bench. "What're you two gonna do without each other when she graduates? You're, like, fused at the hip."

"I'm sure we'll manage," I mumbled, pulling my T-shirt over my head.

I wasn't actually so sure. As much as I was looking forward to my freedom, life without Dara was pretty hard to imagine. But I supposed I'd manage. It wouldn't be the first time a girl had left me behind.

\* \* \*

After school I headed upstairs to my room, but I stopped in my tracks in the hallway. Where Mason's racing car bed had stood this morning, there was now a desk. My mom knelt, wiping the baseboards, her back to me.

After all this time, she was finally de-shrining the room? She'd talked about it for years — turning the room into a craft-slash-gift-wrapping area or an office-slash-guest room — but she had never acted on it. I guess I never thought she would.

And then it hit me: she must have found out the Brandts were coming back. She couldn't leave Mason's room the way it was when they left. Couldn't let them know just how miserably we'd failed to move on.

The room looked so different; the canary-yellow walls seemed to jump out at me with the bed gone. A white scrape arched across the paint where the "spoiler" used to hit the wall — probably the result of Mason's love of jumping on the bed.

"Where is it?"

Mom startled and turned around. She had on Dad's Wildcats sweatpants, and her dark hair was in a ponytail. She was in "project" mode.

"Hey, Otie." She came over and gave me a hug that smelled like lemon Pledge and cinnamon gum. "How was your day?"

"Where is it?" I repeated.

The smile fell off her face, and that's when I noticed her eyes were red and puffy. "I donated it to charity."

I knew I should have cheered her on for this step forward, but what came out was: "Why didn't you tell me first?"

"We still have the crib, Otis. I kept that."

When Mason got his big boy bed, Dad moved his crib into the damp storage room in the basement. At some point someone had covered it in a light blue sheet so that no one would have to actually look at it when we went in search of extra dining-room chairs or winter coats.

Her eyes pleaded with me. "Do you know how happy that bed is going to make some kid? Better to do something good with it, don't you think?"

I averted my eyes, as unable as ever to meet head-on the intersection of her pain and mine.

"Hey, there's something I need to tell you." She hesitated. "It's about Meg and her dad."

"I already know. She emailed me." I slipped my backpack off my perpetually sore shoulders and turned to go, but then I turned back. "Wait, what? Meg and her dad? Her mom's not coming?"

She glanced away. "They're separated."

"Separated? Like, divorcing?"

"I don't know. I just know Jay is transferring back to Chicago and Meg is staying with him for a few weeks."

*Transferring back.* "Wait. He's moving back? Alone?"

"I really don't know, Otis." She took some pens from a box on the desk and put them in one of the drawers. "I haven't talked to them in . . ."

I stepped closer, leaning a hand on the desk. "How did you even find out —"

"Apparently your father is Facebook friends with Jay." She shoved the drawer closed, making the boxes on top of the desk jump. "You should probably also know . . . I guess Meg has a boyfriend, Otis."

"I know."

She glanced up. "You knew?"

"Saw their pictures on Facebook," I mumbled. I thought about explaining that Meg and I weren't actually friends on Facebook, but then I'd be admitting I basically stalked Meg, which probably wouldn't put Mom's mind at ease.

Her forehead creased with sympathy. I looked away, hating how pathetic I must look in her eyes. My gaze landed on a framed photo on the wall, glinting in the afternoon sun. It was one of Mason and me, sitting in the rocking chair on the night of his first birthday. I was reading him *Goodnight Moon*—my birthday gift to him, purchased with my own money, which felt like a big deal to nine-year-old me. He sat in my lap in his green-and-blue zip-up pajamas, sucking his pacifier, leaning sideways to look up at me, wide-eyed.

That picture never got easier to look at. Mason adored me. No one would ever feel exactly that way about me again.

I used to have a brother, and now I did not. People who knew me now thought I was an only child. But I was not an only child. My brother was always there. In a fleeting shadow, a muffled giggle, the smell of toast and jam . . . In dreams that seemed so real, for a cruel moment. In the permanent sadness in my mother's eyes. In my father's rare brooding silences. In the gnawing hole in me that couldn't be filled. He was right there.

I escaped to my room, where I sat at my desk and logged on to Facebook. Meg was so late arriving to the Facebook scene, I'd had paranoid thoughts that it was part of a strategy to keep me away from her. I'd signed up for Facebook as soon as she left, hoping it would keep us connected. But no. She didn't appear until last fall, not long after my sixteenth birthday (which I admit I'd held out hope of her acknowledging), and then she was posting pictures of herself with that macho asshole.

He was so good-looking, it was only reasonable to despise him on sight. Plus, he was obviously a land animal, which I am not. I was the kid who always struck out. The kid who ducked. The kid who, ironically, didn't like getting splashed in the pool. I guess "sissy" is a fair description. Once in sixth-grade PE I got nailed in the side of the head with a football, and Meg saw it happen. She watched as I stumbled off the field to the nurse's office, clutching my throbbing ear as I attempted—unsuccessfully—not to cry.

She held her hand over her mouth, looking like she might cry, too, and somehow that made the whole thing about a hundred times worse.

Later I'd tried to make a joke about my lack of athletic ability. But she shrugged and said, "Who cares about sports?" Which filled me with happiness and hope.

Of course, the punch line was that she ended up with a football player.

Here it was, the picture that stopped me cold: He was in his football uniform, all pads and grass stains and ego, his arm draped so carelessly around Meg that the proprietary sentiment was unmistakable. And there was Meg, honey-colored hair coming loose from a ponytail, bright turquoise eyes turned upward at him. She'd posted other pictures of him over the last year, other pictures of *them*. But somehow, until I saw that picture—saw that heartbreakingly familiar look on Meg's face—it hadn't fully occurred to me that she might ever feel that way about anyone else.

When I first found her online, I wanted so badly to connect with her, to talk with her, but where to even start? *What the hell happened to you?* was probably not the smoothest strategy. The last thing I wanted to do was scare her off before we'd even reconnected. I couldn't tell her I had never really stopped loving her. And I didn't want to be in competition with her boyfriend. To me, that seemed ridiculous—offensive, even. He wasn't there when her dog got hit by a car; I was. He didn't hold her hair back when she threw

up at the Wisconsin State Fair after three cream puffs and a Tilt-A-Whirl; I did. He hadn't been her best friend, her first kiss, her first love; I had.

But he was something to her; the picture made that pretty damn clear. Whatever it was, though, it couldn't erase everything that had been between us.

Could it?

I logged out of Facebook and opened my email. I ignored the spam and clicked on Meg's message. It was kind of crazy how a few little sentences had turned my whole world upside down:

*Hi, Otis. It's been a long time, I know, but I wanted to tell you that I'm coming back to Willow Grove next month.*

*It'll be a short trip—just three weeks. But I thought you should know.*

*Hope you're well!*

*Meg*

Despite obsessing over her message all day, I still had no idea how to respond. Why was she coming? Did she want to see me? She wouldn't have made a point of telling me she was coming if she *didn't* want to see me, right? Unless she was trying to avert an awkward situation if we accidentally ran into each other? Should I ask her if I could see her? What was I supposed to say?

Over an hour ticked by. I'd have to eat soon, before Dara



picked me up for evening practice. And I didn't want to wait any longer to respond; it already felt weird to have waited most of a day. Should I ask her how she'd been? Should I ask about her parents? I didn't fucking *know* her well enough now to ask personal questions.

It didn't leave much.

After half a dozen failed attempts, I messaged:

*Wow, okay—that is news! Yes, it has been a long time. Let me know if you need someone to show you around town.*

I hoped she still had a sense of humor. Meg famously had no sense of direction. In fact, she'd gotten lost on the first day of school in fifth grade, three months after she moved in next door. I was taking the attendance to the front office when I heard someone sniffing in the hallway. Meg had gone to the bathroom and couldn't find her way back to the classroom. I don't think anyone was ever so glad to see me in my entire life. Tears shimmered in her eyes, and I almost couldn't take it. I wanted to put my arms around her, but we had never hugged before. So I just took her to the classroom, quietly pointing out the landmarks along the way: straight past the music room, left after the water fountain . . . When we got there, she looked into my eyes for a long moment before turning to go into the classroom. I still don't know exactly what was behind that look, but it stirred up feelings in me I'd never had before.

Meg's fear of navigating new territory stuck with her. For good reason, too: that girl could leave Chicago heading for Wisconsin and end up in Kentucky. It made me smile. Thank God for GPS. Without it, she'd be a lost cause behind the wheel when she turned sixteen this July.

I also hoped Meg had another kind of GPS. One that would navigate her back to me.

# Phantom Limbs

Paula Garner

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