a soft light rising

by asteristar

Summary

Having married to save Margaret's reputation after the Outwood inquest was forestalled, Margaret and John grow back together.

Notes

Title from Louise Gluck's "A Myth of Devotion." Things will hopefully turn out better for John and Margaret than the poem suggests.
Margaret sits in the drawing room, her sewing held loosely in her idle hands. Across from her, John is at his desk, his head bent close to the ledgers in the dim light of evening. She can see a last ray of sun where it stretches along the width of his shoulders and slides down his back. Soon it will be time to turn up the lamps.

It has been nearly a month since they married, she thinks, listening absently to the slight hum that always filters in from the mill, even after the workers have gone home. She’s noticed since their wedding that he doesn’t look at her. She is sure that he used to, before – she can remember that odd, slow heat that used to spread through her whenever he did – but now he keeps his head down as if she hardly existed. He calls her ‘Miss Hale’ when he speaks to her and every time it pulls at the raw edges of her heart.

The drawing room fills itself with shadow and Margaret rises from the sofa to take care of the lamps. John tilts his head slightly as she adjusts the lamp nearest to his desk, but he says nothing, and so she returns to her seat.

Sighing quietly, she leans back and allows her eyes to fall shut, allows herself to indulge in her favorite daydream, the one in which his proposal comes not from her father but from his own mouth. In that hazy world they exchange vows with giddy smiles and he whispers her new, altered name in her ear as a carriage takes them away from the church. If she were there in that world now, she thinks, she might get up and go to him, might rest her hands on his shoulders and feel the tension there ease.

But that image warps and shatters – he would shrink from her, she is certain. How fitting that she should find love in her heart just as he should cast it from his. After all, it is just what she deserves for lying about Fred, for allowing John to lift her from disgrace at his own expense.

His proposal had come in the form of a letter addressed to her father. It had been brief but polite and had explained that, as a result of the incident at the train station and the forestalling of the inquest, Margaret’s reputation was deteriorating and that, feeling responsible, he was offering a way out.

When her father had asked her what she thought, something had wrapped around her tongue – love, it had been, she knows that now – and spoken her answer for her. She’d said yes so quickly and so firmly that her father had raised his eyebrows and very nearly laughed. Later that evening, guilt had pressed in on her and she’d knelt by the side of her bed and prayed that she might one day be able to repay John Thornton. Now, she repeats this prayer every night, alone in a room down the hall from her husband’s.

John shifts in his chair and she starts, her eyes snapping open and her hands grasping reflexively at her sewing. The ledgers on his desk are shut and he has turned towards her, his eyes fixed on the floor. She waits. When he speaks, his voice is low and measured.

“I’ve written to your father,” he says. “He will join us for dinner tomorrow evening.”

“That is good news.”

John takes a long breath. “There is something he will ask you.”

“Oh?”
He does not reply. Rather, he gets up and goes to the window where the courtyard of the mill is just visible. There is something shuttered about him, Margaret thinks, something closed about the set of his shoulders.

“He is going to Oxford soon,” John says finally, “for a reunion. I think he intends to remain there some time.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.” He turns, staring determinedly at a spot above her left shoulder. “He will ask you to go with him.”

“To stay?”

“Yes, to stay.”

She nods. There is a wild sort of panic beginning to writhe at the bottom of her stomach, and she cannot look at him without feeling as though she ought to grab hold of something. “And what is your opinion?”

“Me, Miss Hale?”

“Yes.” She swallows hard, and then lifts her chin proudly. “What do you think?”

“I think I would not stop you.” He looks unhappy with the words the minute they leave his mouth, and he takes a half step towards her. “I mean that nothing will hold you here, Miss Hale, should you wish to leave.”

“I understand.”

She looks down at her sewing, at the folds of her skirt, and hears him move towards the door.

“I will leave you to rest,” he says quietly. “You seemed tired, before.”

When she looks up, he is gone, and with his chair pushed in and the ledgers closed and lined up neatly, it is almost as if he were never there at all.
Dinner the next evening is a quiet affair. Mr. Hale arrives and the three of them wait in the parlor until the meal is served. Margaret asks her father about the house in Crampton and is careful to avoid any mention of Oxford. John eats little and says even less.

After the last plates are cleared, Margaret leaves the two men together with their brandy and goes back into the parlor, where a fire has been lit. Her sewing is waiting for her on the couch but all day she has borne the weight of John's silence and it looks far too heavy for her to lift now. Instead, she wanders over to John's desk.

He's left a few sheets of paper sticking haphazardly out of a drawer, but otherwise the surface is orderly. His ledgers are stacked on one side of the desk and his inkwell is positioned carefully so that it hides most of the large ink stain that spreads across its back left corner. Running one hand over the chair's high, stern back, Margaret pulls it back a little to accommodate her skirts and sits down gingerly.

If she turns her head a little, she can just see the spot on the couch where she usually sits. This is how John sees her – a small, hunching shadow in the evening.

"Are you enjoying my chair?"

She twists around sharply, her hand flying to her mouth in surprise. John is in the doorway, his eyebrows raised as he looks at her. There is a slight curl at the corner of his mouth that makes her breath catch in her throat.

She gets up and pushes the chair back in, brushing her skirts back into submission. "I'm sorry," she says in a rush. "I couldn't face my sewing."

John lets out a short, startled laugh, and her answering smile is the wide sort Aunt Shaw always used to discourage. This is what it might have been like, she thinks as his mouth settles back into its customary line.

"Your father thought he might speak to you now," he says, coming towards her, his eyes fixed on his desk.

"Yes, all right."

She does her best not to look at him as he reaches past her to the stack of ledgers. He pulls a book from the middle – old, with a peeling binding and gold-edged pages – and then retreats from her, his shoulders drawn back and away.

"Will you go upstairs?" she asks, the words spilling out of her as he heads for the door. He stops, glancing back at her over his shoulder.

"Yes, I think so."
"I'll come say goodnight, then. When my father's gone."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

She tries to smile but it feels rather like a grimace. "The aim of saying goodnight is, generally, to say goodnight."

She knows this is not a ritual they usually engage in, but she remembers the pressing silence of the evening before, the way he faded from the room like sunlight, and she cannot bear another night of it.

"All right," he says finally, and then he's gone and her father is peering into the room with a warm smile.

"Shall I come in, dear?"

She escorts him to the couch, her hand at his elbow, and sits close by him, her head bent near to his.

"So, Papa," she says lightly. "Oxford?"

"Yes," he replies. "My school friend – you know Mr. Bell, don't you? – he's invited me down for a stay. A great many of us will be there, I think."

"I imagine you would like it very much."

"Indeed." He shifts on the couch, turning to look more closely at her. "Margaret, you might come with me, you know. For a long while. I know you have your duties here, but John's a good man. He wouldn't keep you from your father."

She bites back a laugh that tastes of bitterness. "You're right. He is a good man."

"He would let you come with me. I'm sure of it."

"I know he would."

They are quiet for a moment. Margaret stares at her hands where they clasp the sleeve her father's coat. Then Mr. Hale leans in and kisses her gently on the forehead.

"Think about it," he says softly, "and visit me tomorrow."

She nods, and they stand together.

At the door, Margaret helps her father into his outer coat and peers out the window to check the weather.

"You might tell John to focus a bit more on his Aristotle," Mr. Hale says as he adjusts his hat. "I'd hoped for a rousing discussion."

"Oh, and what did you get instead?"

"Altogether too much talk," he replies as he steps out the door towards the carriage, "about mythology. Goodnight, my dear."
Margaret lingers at the door for a long moment to watch her father's carriage pass through the gates, and then she lights a candle and goes upstairs.

The door to John's bedroom is closest to the landing and hers is down the hall. She is used to the way her stomach tightens as she passes his door, but not to the way it nearly turns over as she stops in front of it now.

Her knock is clear and firm. The door swings open almost immediately and she looks at everything but John as she crosses the threshold. The bed is neatly made up with white linens, and there's a large, dark chair by the fire. Next to it, a small round table is piled generously with sheets of paper, and a book, one she recognizes from the parlor, keeps them in place.

John steps around her and takes a few paces back, his face impassive and shadowed. He's left the door open behind her, and a draught from the hallway is plucking at the hem of her skirt.

"Right," he says, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "So. Goodnight."

She feels ridiculous, now, for coming all the way in here just for a word or two. Surely, there must be something else she can say.

"Your book," she blurts out.

"My what?"

"Your book, from before. From the parlor. Could I borrow it?"

"You want to borrow a book?"

"And to say goodnight. But yes, the book."

He goes to the table and picks up the cracked volume. It must have looked quite pretty once, she thinks absently.

"This one?"

"Yes."

He holds it out to her, and she takes it with hands she hopes aren't shaking.

"Thank you," she says. "I'm sure I'll like it."

He waits a moment, and then she thinks she hears a low laugh. "Do you even know what it is?"

"Not especially, no."

Again, the soft echo of a laugh, and she lifts her chin, turning and going to the door. "Goodnight, sir," she says, and she means it to sound starched and stiff, like one of his collars, but somehow a golden sort of warmth bleeds through and she feels a blush rise in her cheeks.

"Goodnight, Miss Hale."

Later, in her own room, under the sheets and with only the one candle lit, Margaret cradles the book in her lap and lets it fall open as it will. It settles on a story near the front of the book, one with creased pages and soft, well-worn edges. This particular story has been read many times, she knows – the pages seem to swoon, rather than turn.
It is "Hades and Persephone." She reads.
here's your classic "woah my bad i had stuff to do" author's note. basically my undergrad thesis kicked my ass and here we are. this one's unedited and unrevised so i could get it out quick to you lovely and patient people.

John is not at breakfast when she comes downstairs the next morning. Mrs. Thornton has been living with Fanny and Mr. Watson since the wedding, and so Margaret eats her meal alone, the table stretching long and bare in front of her.

She has plans to visit her father following breakfast, but before she leaves she returns to her bedroom to fetch the book of myths. Reading it the night before had sucked the air from her lungs. Seeing the crease in the binding, the one that told her just how often the book fell open to that story, had made her want to weep.

She hides the book in the drawing room, on the couch under the folds of her sewing. She will return it to John later, after she's been to Crampton and to her father.

When she arrives, Dixon greets her warmly and ushers her into the study, where Mr. Hale is waiting. He moves to get up as the door closes behind her, but she hurries to his side.

"No, Papa, don't get up." She bends over him and kisses him on the cheek. "Are you well?"

"Very, my dear."

"I'm glad to see everything looking in order," she says, sitting down in the armchair opposite him. John is here often, for his lessons, but she rarely visits Crampton, preferring to have her father's presence brighten the gloom at the Thornton house.

"With Dixon in charge, it could hardly be otherwise."

Margaret tries to twist her mouth up into a smile, but the weight of what she's here to discuss pushes it down off her face. Mr. Hale watches her for a moment, and then reaches out, laying a hand gently on her arm.

"So," he says. "We have something to talk about, don't we?"

She nods. "Papa, why did you tell John?"

"About Oxford?"

"Yes. You told him in your letter about dinner."

Mr. Hale leans back in his chair. He has a look about him she's seen before but cannot quite understand, the kind that says that he knows something she does not.

"I did," he says. "I wanted you to hear it from John."

"But why?"
"I thought, perhaps…” He waves a hand dismissively. "It's hardly relevant now. Have you spoken to him about coming with me?"

She shifts in her chair, looking down to where her shoes poke out from under her skirts. "Not in so many words, no."

Her father makes a small noise, something that sound suspiciously like a laugh, and Margaret looks up sharply.

"My dear," he says, "may I tell you something?"

"Of course."

"I mentioned last night that John and I spoke at length about mythology."

"You did."

"There was one myth in particular that John was particularly focused on—"

"Hades and Persephone," she says, sitting forward suddenly.

"Yes." Her father smiles. "How did you know?"

"There's a book of his. Myths, and things. I borrowed it to read and that story… it stood out." She thinks it best not to describe just how well-worn the pages had seemed to be.

Nodding, Mr. Hale continues. "Then you're familiar?"

"Yes. Did he say why it interested him?"

"Margaret—"

"Because I can't understand him," she says, hotly.

"You can't?" There's that small, swallowed laugh again. "John posed a question to me that I will now pose to you. He wondered whether Persephone would leave the Underworld, if she were given the chance to escape."

Margaret blinks slowly. "But she eats the fruit of the Underworld. She can't leave."

"John was entertaining a hypothetical situation, it seems."

"Oh."

"He was adamantine," Mr. Hale says, "that Persephone would flee from Hades. What do you think?"

"Papa, really. I'm sure your conversation was very interesting but I'd much rather know why you had it."

Dixon comes in just then, bearing a tea tray and some biscuits, and Mr. Hale falls silent.

"Thank you, Dixon," Margaret says, as the older woman leaves, the tea set arranged neatly on the desk.

Mr. Hale takes a long sip from his cup, and Margaret waits, the quiet closing in around her. When
he finally speaks, his voice is low and calm – it reminds her of the way he used to rehearse his sermons back in Helstone.

"You aren't coming with me, are you, my dear?"

She tips her head back and shuts her eyes. "I don't know."

"It's all right."

I can't understand him," she says again, softly. "I can't."

"Margaret." Mr. Hale gets up and holds a hand out to her. "It's all right. Would you like to go home?"

She sleeps until dinner. When she comes down to the table, John is there, sitting in his usual spot at the table.

"Oh," she says.

He looks at her for a moment, eyes wide, and then stands up, jolting the table accidentally and shifting the already set silverware a few inches out of place. His coat is off, cravat undone, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up.

"You're here," he says.

"Yes."

"I thought you'd be there."

"Where?"

"There."

"What?"

"Oxford."

"Oh." She presses one hand to her stomach, to settle the fluttering. "Well, Papa's not leaving today."

"Of course."

"Yes." He seems so startled, so utterly thrown, that she takes a shuffling step backward. "Should I… should I go?"

"What? No. No, no. It's dinner."

"I know."

"So you should eat."

"I will."

She sits abruptly, and he follows, staring down into his napkin. They wait a moment, and then John clears his throat.

"We'll wait for the food," he says.
"Yes. Let's."

They go into the drawing room together, John stepping aside at the doorway to allow her to pass through first. She sits down on the couch and picks up her sewing, leaving the book of myths hidden underneath it. It is important to her, for some reason, that he not see it until she's ready to return it.

He takes a seat at his desk, and she watches from under half-closed lids as he shifts, opens his ledger only to close it, and drums his fingers lightly on the desk. She has never seen him quite like this before.

"Well?" he says sharply, and she jumps.

"I'm sorry?"

"Miss Hale." He stands up and paces away before spinning back to face her. "Please."

She takes a long breath, and suddenly feels very calm, and, oddly, very angry. "Please, what?"

"When are you going?" he grits out, eyes fixed on the floor.

She gets up and thrusts the book towards him, her arm steady and her voice sure. "Here."

"Miss Hale-"

"I did not like it."

And maybe it is the venom in her voice, the way she wipes her hands on her skirts when he takes the book from her, that makes him look up to meet her eyes. "What?"

"The book. I didn't read all of it, but what I saw… I didn't like it at all."

"I'm sorry," he says, haltingly.

She steps past him to leave, stopping just inside the door frame. Perhaps this will be easier if she doesn't look at him.

"And I'm not," she says. "Going, I mean. I'm here. I'm staying here."

She goes upstairs before she can see his reaction, and later, tucked in her bed, if she hears his footsteps start down the hall to her door before turning back, she pretends not to.
fourth

Chapter Notes

this is the last chapter kids (also how ridiculous is it that a story i always meant to be a quick little thing took so so so long for me to finish like woops my bad)

John, as she has come to expect, does not join her for breakfast the next morning. She is used to it, now, to the sight of his empty chair and to the silence that hangs over the table, broken only by the muffled noises that filter in from the mill.

As she is finishing her meal, the maid comes in and gives her a note. It's from John – she's watched him pore over the ledgers enough to know his handwriting – and it's addressed to a Miss Hale. Seeing the name that is no longer hers laid out plainly in ink stings, and she blinks rapidly to keep her eyes dry.

Miss Hale,

You will not, I am afraid, find me with you this evening for dinner. I apologize – please do not delay your meal on my account.

He hasn't signed it, she notices. Is it supposed to be a slight of some kind? Or was he simply in a rush? And if there had been a name, would it have been John, or Mr. Thornton? She folds it back up.

He is gone all day. In the afternoon, she thinks briefly of bringing him lunch (it seems a very wifely thing to do, after all) but halfway to the kitchen, she stops, the idea that he might reject it turning her to stone. With a resigned heart, she pushes it from her mind and returns to the drawing room.

Alone at the dinner table, it feels to Margaret as though the evening arrives in a rush, the sun sliding down and out of the sky so quickly that she is caught in the dark, the lamps not yet lit. The maid comes in and begins to adjust them, and Margaret stares at her plate, her appetite gone.

Upstairs, the hall is collecting shadows, and she pauses outside John's door. It's open a crack – somebody's been in to light a fire. Carefully, she steps inside and goes to the large chair that always sits by the hearth. John won't be home for a while longer, she thinks. There's no harm in resting here for a bit.

Some hours later, she jerks awake. The fire has gone down, and she stands, reaching for the poker and coaxing the embers back to life before turning around to look for John. Only, he isn't there.

What she sees now, what she didn't see before, is the book of myths, back on the table where it had been the last time she'd come into this room. She approaches it warily and flips it open to the pages where John has, sometime since the night before, placed a bookmark. Suddenly, she is blindingly angry.

It's ridiculous, she thinks, taking a quill from his nearby desk and scribbling in the margins. Hasn't she made herself clear? Hasn't she said, very specifically, that she doesn't like it at all?
It is worthless, she begins, to consider such ridiculous hypothetical situations. Why ask if Persephone might leave the Underworld? She obviously cannot.

"Miss Hale?" says somebody behind her.

"Just a moment, please."

And furthermore, why concern yourself with this particular story at all? Where on Earth – indeed, sir, where in Milton – might you find a comparable situation? To what lot in life as you and I know it is there, in this story, an applicable moral?

"Miss Hale, I must ask: what are you doing?"

"Something," she says, whirling, "that needs to be done." The quill falls from her hand. "Oh. It's you."

John is in the doorway, his hands resting at his throat, where they had, at one point, been in the middle of untying his cravat.

"Well," he says, "it is my room."

"It is." She glances down at the book, and shifts slowly to one side, so that her skirts block it from sight. "I suppose I'll leave you to it, then."

"What were you writing?"

Well, she thinks, giving up and taking the book into her hands, there's no sense in hiding it now. "I had some thoughts," she says.

John watches her for a moment, and then finishes loosening his cravat. "Could I read them?" When she hesitates, he smiles shyly. "You've written them in my book, after all."

She holds it out, and he reaches for it, shutting the door absently with the other hand. "Ah," he says, as he steps closer to the fire for better light. "You saw my bookmark."

"I did." She retreats to the other side of the table and breathes in deeply. "Why did you put it there?" He doesn't answer, only bends his head closer to the page, and she tries again. "Why do you return so often to that story?" Again, he remains silent, his brows drawn together. At last, what feels to her like minutes later, he looks up.

"What is this?" he asks.

"Excuse me?"

"This." He tosses the book towards her, and she catches it against her chest, the pages crumpling. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"What?"

"It's cruel, Margaret, to tease the way you have. I didn't think you capable of it."

It surprises her, that her name sounds threaded through with fire (or, really, that he says it at all).

"It's not a joke," she says. "I can't imagine why you'd think so."

"You can't?" He's nearly yelling now, and it should shock her, after a month of silence, but it makes a smile pull at the corners of her mouth. "And yet somehow, you're laughing."
"I just find it so strange," she bursts out, "that you should care so deeply about this one story. My father told me what you talked about. Why should it matter to you so?"

"You do not think we might find something in it of our own world? You do not suppose there are women trapped by circumstance?"

She sighs, and comes very close to rolling her eyes. "Oh, I am sure there are. But we are not speaking of these general and hypothetical women, are we?"

He seems startled, and his words, when he speaks them, sound choked. "We are not."

"After all," she barrels on, "general and hypothetical women do not usually inspire this sort of interest." She holds up the book, still clutched in her hands. "What Persephone have you known, sir?"

A flat and bitter laugh comes cracking out of him. "Another joke, Margaret?"

"Honestly," she says. "Fanny is happily married and by all accounts your mother loved your father very much."

"And you?" he says, after a moment.

"Certainly not a Persephone." She looks away. "I've never had a pomegranate. I couldn't possibly be."

She hears him let out a long, slow breath. "You are," he says, "infuriating."

"I am not the one devoted more to a book of myths than to his wife."

"Infuriating and confusing."

"Again, I suggest that both of those terms should in fact be applied to you."

"Please, Margaret," he says, wearily. "Will you tell me something?" She nods, and sets the book back on the table. "Why didn't you go with your father?"

She could explain it away as the result of financial concerns. Or she could say, perhaps, that Oxford's climate didn't suit her.

"I didn't want to." Or she could say that. John doesn't respond, and she shifts from foot to foot. "I'm sorry. If that wasn't what you wanted."

"What?" he says, at last.

"I thought maybe you wouldn't mind if I stayed here, but then you were gone all day and… well, I'm sorry, if you wanted me to go."

"I didn't. Want you to go, I mean."

"Oh."

"Margaret--"

"Why not?"

He runs a hand over his face, covering his eyes, and then drops it. "You know. You know very
well."

"I don't. You and my father both, you keep saying things I'm somehow expected to understand. Only I don't."

He looks at her then, the shutters gone from his eyes, and she feels her breath catch in her throat.

When she approaches, he stumbles backwards a step and holds out a hand as if to ward her off. She comes closer and grasps it in one of hers, winding her shaking fingers through his.

"I've been blind," she says. "But then, you have, too."

"What can you mean?" he asks, his voice rough and, she thinks, strangely frightened. She doesn't answer, only closes the last distance between them. This is the nearest she has been to him since the day of the riot.

"Margaret?"

She smiles, and leans up to press her mouth lightly to his.

He barely moves, his lips still under hers. She pulls back to look at him and feels her heart clench at the way his eyes are tightly shut, at the way his brow is so deeply furrowed. Letting go of his hand, she brings hers up to rest flat on his chest.

"John," she says.

Something in him breaks then. Tension floods out of his shoulders and before she can say anything more, his mouth is slanting over hers. The force of it knocks her back and he drops his arms to band tightly around her waist. She slides her hands up to the strong line of his jaw, to his hair, and arches against him, swaying slightly as he gathers her closer.

By the time he pulls away to press his forehead against hers, she's reeling and laughter is rippling from her mouth to his. When he seems about to say something, she reaches up to run her thumb across his lips.

"Before that," she says, "before anything, you need to know. You are not Hades, and I am not Persephone. You have not trapped me here."

He smiles. "All right."

"And you are going to put away that wretched book and never look at it again."

"I'm putting it away?"

"You are."

"Because I thought I might have one particular page framed."

"You are infuriating," she says, her tone an imitation of his, and he adjusts his arms around her until he's lifting her just off her feet.

"You cannot know," he says, his mouth brushing her temple, "how dearly I love you."

She closes her eyes for a moment, and then swings her feet back and forth. "That's wonderful," she says, leaning back as far as she can, "but would you please set me down before I become violently sick all over your coat?"
"Your emotions overwhelm me," he says, dryly, once her feet have hit the ground. She laughs, and takes his hand in hers. "Put the book away, and then we'll talk."
epilogue

Chapter Summary

i didn't even mean to write this but here's a drabble that serves as a tag to the story. not as unabashedly fluff as the fourth chapter (margaret has always felt so stoic to me; i can't really imagine her being hugely expressive), so if that's how you like your endings, you may not want this. (but it's happier than my hunger games au so that's something? sort of?)

They do not touch while they sleep. They are not those sorts of people.

John faces her, one hand only just reaching across the middle of the mattress (that is the sort of person he is) but Margaret wakes to the blankness of the wall, and to the soft sweep of wind through the window she always leaves open.

She loves quietly. He did not think she would, but she does. The sparking from that night with the book, he waits for it at first. Looks for more notes in every margin, listens for an undercurrent in every argument. And Margaret argues, still, she fights and he fights and they fight together, but the heart of her is all slowness and sun.

"I love you," he says. She wrinkles her nose, one corner of her mouth tugging up.

"I love you," he says. Her thumb feathers over where his pulse beats in his wrist.

"I love you," he says. "I love you."

And when it comes answering out of her, it sounds odd, as though she's speaking it in a language not her own.

A year in, their bedroom is dark, and tears push down his cheeks. Margaret is going pale, her eyes dry as they flutter closed.

"I do," she whispers. "I do, only I don't... I don't quite know how to say so."

"All right."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not angry."

"You are."

"I don't want to be."

She sits gingerly down beside him. Turns her head, presses it into the curve of his neck. And he thinks of her stillness, of the settling way she has that seems, he thinks, to belong to him.

"I'll try," she says. "To tell you." He feels her mouth move against his jaw.

"You already are."
He feels her smile, too.

They do not touch while they sleep, but Margaret rolls over before her eyes have finished opening. And the dip between her shoulder blades as she turns, the spaces between her fingers as her hand meets his - that's where he learns to look.

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