[A chapter excerpt from KEEPING MUM: ON MOTHERS & MORTALITY by Lauren Paige Kennedy]

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***The Strange Man on the Greyhound bus.***

Now I will tell you about The Strange Man on the Greyhound bus.

I think of him sometimes, this man, whom I recall as I having the look of a Traveling Wilbury. My memory is fuzzy, of course; it was the fall of 1987 and I was spinning with the discombobulating shock of first-time grief. But in my mind’s eye he is fairly tall. Lanky. Shoulder-skimming brown hair. Definitely carrying a guitar in its beaten case. Scuffed brown boots tucked beneath his faded blue jeans. A plaid flannel shirt? Is it red? Or does he instead wear a zipped leather jacket in the shade of worn buckskin? He is older than me but not old. Is he thirty? Maybe thirty-five? I don’t know. I can’t see him anymore.

I am standing in front of the Student Union waiting for a bus to take me to the suburb where my mother lives, slightly more than an hour’s drive. Levi, who has been airlifted by Medevac helicopter two days before from our college town to an excellent hospital in his own city of Chicago, is scheduled to be disconnected from his many tubes and wires sometime tomorrow afternoon. I am heading to my suburb so my mother can drive me into downtown Chicago first thing in the morning. To catch Levi before he goes to send him off and say goodbye. As one does when this sort of thing happens beyond the small screen of your favorite soap opera.

The bus is late, as is the afternoon. The sun is already sinking in the October sky. There are a few of us loitering there at the curb as we wait, the large stone water fountain still bubbling before us on Library Mall, the mingling of dark trees lining this open space already losing their leaves. I fish around in my book satchel, which I always wear with the narrow leather strap crisscrossed between my impressive breasts, for a pack of cigarettes. I am too thin, too blonde—almost platinum at the time—and too pale. I must look like a strung out Debbie Harry, my young blue eyes both puffy and pink, my fair skin practically translucent. I light the cigarette. As I do The Strange Man approaches me.

“Can I maybe bum one of those?” he asks politely, nodding toward the crinkled pack in my hand, which then cost a dollar to today’s inflated rate of roughly ten times that.

I say nothing. Just tap the pack against my palm and give him a spare Marlboro. I reach over and light it for him. He cups his hand around my flickering Bic lighter, sheltering the faltering flame against the autumn wind. He takes a deep drag, says thanks, and then moves back a few respectful steps, giving me my space. I look the other way, uninterested. Lost in thought.

The bus pulls up. I board and head straight to the back, because in those days you can still smoke inside a Greyhound bus. Perfectly insane, am I right? To designate a smoking section in an enclosed cabin? As if this might prevent paying passengers in the front from inhaling such poisonous fumes? Sort of like how the Brits are forced to endure my endless *whingeing* on a train some years in the future? But this is how things work in 1987. On airplanes, too. A lot has changed in thirty years.

A few other students find seats away from me, closer to the bus driver, whose broad back is walled and motionless in his stiffly uniformed shirt. Only his eyes move and dart in the large rearview mirror. The cabin is otherwise empty. I stare listlessly out my window at the stalwart, stony Student Union, thinking about how just two weeks before Levi and I sat together in two close chairs doing our Econ homework, he explaining the math, which, try as I might, I cannot do. And brooding over the grim task at hand tomorrow morning in Chicago.

I don’t notice The Strange Man with the look of a Traveling Wilbury boarding the bus, but he does.

Suddenly, he speaks. At the back of the coach. Directly to my left.

“Excuse me,” he says, trying to land my attention, but not in an aggressive way. Startled, I look up to his face, for I am now sitting and he still stands. He hovers from the aisle above the available seat next to mine, battered guitar case in one hand.

 “Mind if I sit here?” he suggests, again politely. I am too destroyed to be present in any real way in this moment—perhaps I imagine he wants more of my cigarettes?—so I shrug. “Sure,” I say without much emotion before turning to the window once again. This passive agreement is not at all like me. I am, to a fault, reticent around potential creeps and perverts, as well as all loser guys on the make. He has the look of none of these types, but you can never be too sure. I am not the sort of girl who invites strange men to sit next to me on Greyhound buses bound for the suburbs of Chicago, just as I am not the sort of woman who wears a skimpy bikini top beneath a plunging sundress to walk the dogs at eight a.m. Still, I do both, all the same. Why do I agree on this day? There are dozens of empty seats all around us. I don’t know. But I do.

He hoists up his guitar into the overhead rack above us. He has a small backpack, too, which he rests at his feet as he takes his seat next to mine.

I don’t remember how we begin speaking. Do I ask him his name? If I did I can’t recall it. Lance? Was his name Lance? Maybe. I’m just not sure. But as the bus pulls away from the curb he gently lures me out. By the time it winds around the shimmering waters of Lake Mendota and reaches the interstate some twenty minutes later, he knows everything. I am full-on blubbing by then, wiping away streaks of too-heavily applied black mascara from my too-pale, freckled cheeks.

We light two more cigarettes. I tell him what I must do the following day. What I and every other pilgrim making their way to that hospital must face. “It doesn’t feel real,” I remember telling him, my head and shoulders shaking in confusion. Then, remembering The Strange Man’s guitar positioned above us on the rack, I add, “He was a musician, too.” I use the past tense, as if Levi’s death is already done.

 That’s when The Strange Man reaches down to the floor for his backpack. And pulls out a book from within it. I have never heard of the book, but he silently offers it to me. I take it from him, then rest it in my lap. It’s weighty. Full of drawings.

It’s called *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Why does he have it with him, I ask?

“I think we were supposed to meet,” he tells me gently.

I page through the book, a few of my falling tears wetting its pages. I quickly whisk them away, hoping not to smear the book’s ink. I apologize for this. He tells me not to worry about it. As I stare at the dense illustrations of men making their way down long rivers, and of souls sitting, Buddha-like, in tunnels of swirling light, he mentions the six *bardos*. He explains they are stages of transitioning consciousness between life, between death. And that Levi is traveling them now.

I can’t remember much else. I just recall being comforted by The Strange Man’s words, which sometimes do connect us. Moments before a perfect stranger, soon to become one again. And by these new concepts being presented to me as if planned.

We smoke some more. Talk some more. And then he rises, his suburban stop conveniently and by happenstance the very last one before mine.

I hand him his book.

“Keep it,” he says. “Good luck to you.”

I balk at this. “I can’t keep your book. But thank you for letting me look at it.”

He nods, says, “OK, then,” and takes it from me, sliding it safely into his backpack. We do not exchange numbers, or pretend our intimate conversation will ever be repeated. Then he reaches for his battered guitar case and makes his way down the narrow aisle toward the bus’s open door. And makes a fast exit. Strangers, resumed.

Through my window I watch him sauntering down the street subtly swinging his guitar case in his right hand, the sun nearly spent now, his back to me and to the departing bus, his pack slung over a shoulder. He does not turn around or look my way. He does not wave. I stare after him until we turn a corner and I can’t see him anymore.

I don’t know who the man was. I can’t remember his name. Was it Lance? Maybe it was. Of course I never see him again. But sometimes the universe delivers exactly what you require in the moment you need it most. Because, as I’ve mentioned here more than once, it’s much harder to be young than old. When you’re young every blow is a first of its kind. Every strike is a sucker punch.