The Summer of Nothing to Say

By Frannie Lindsay

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She bought the sheet music for Clair de lune for five francs sixty years ago on the banks of the Seine. The early June sun shone crisp and hot through the thick foliage and on the water as it casually lapped its banks. She could forget, amid the crowded outdoor book and music kiosks, that her body was broadening and softening; that womanhood was trying—too soon, too insistently—to befriend her. She wanted in this moment only to sit at an old upright in the basement of an obscure left bank chapel, and sight read. The priest might open the door, gently curious, and then close it behind him, hoping to listen without disturbing the prayerful effort of a little, earnest piano student.

The pages are yellowed and brittle now, the Scotch tape that once held the torn places together has left wide brown lines.

In the morning, some of her neighbors watch game shows. In the late afternoon, others begin supper preparations and watch the local news before an early bedtime. She allows herself thirty minutes of practicing every day between 11:30 and 4 o'clock. She always closes the window and turns on the AC before she plays. The solitude protects her from gossip or a scribbled complaint—she imagines lots of exclamation marks—under her door. The solitude allows her to start her Rachmaninoff G Major over and over again, playing the same difficult phrase until she can feel it breathing and ample under her fingers; or work on the opening of the B minor Scarlatti until her touch produces a delicate but singing pianissimo. The retired teamster who lives next door asks her if she ever plays any Bruce Springsteen or Bob Seger.

Clair de lune is in D flat. She lays her fingers on the opening minor thirds—F and A flat—that echo each other an octave apart. Charlie has fallen asleep under the piano. She has come to think of the piece as a benediction. She wishes someone could hear this in the careful tenderness of her hands. She wonders if her playing—she has been without her teacher, whom she loved, for over fifteen years—conveys it even a little. Although she is not confident, she lets the music carry her. Away from the senior living complex. Away from the walkers and wheelchairs clustered in the lounge, from the cigarette butts that litter the sidewalk near the entrance. Away from the bent-over man who lives down the hall who never takes off his face mask, wears his misshapen gray cardigan knotted around his waist, won't ride the elevator with her, and slams his door snarling "oh *God*!" should their comings and goings coincide.

For these thirty minutes, she allows herself a fragile worthiness. Today is cool and overcast. She considers turning off the AC and opening the window. She considers playing Clair de lune *(let's face it,* she thinks, *it's a crowd-pleaser*) to the group of women who just got home on the Thursday Market Basket van service and are now gathered at the round table in the courtyard below. She imagines them nattering on—each woman with her own occluded griefs, it occurs to her now—about the exorbitant price of the halfway decent cheeses.

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On this particular humid Tuesday evening, she doesn't feel like petting Charlie. She has lived in the senior apartment complex for four months. Now with most of her hair fallen loose from its barrette and twirling kinkily around her shoulders and her shirt off baring her small breasts, she feels too young to be here. Here in this eighth-floor studio apartment with its indoor-outdoor carpeting and standard issue Venetian blinds. She predicted that this elaborate move after fourteen years in a triple-decker Victorian would somehow break her. That, while trying to acclimate, she would cry most afternoons—a time of day when crying seems a particularly solo occupation—bitterly and without relent.

Having given up on his unblinking but devout gaze, Charlie slides out from under the piano over to her computer chair and begins licking the toes of her right foot. Her affection for the little dog is intermittent, but she admits to herself, even if listlessly, a reassuring pleasure in his grainy, warm tongue against her skin. She stops trying to think of what to write next in her memoir, a first attempt at prose after the publication of her sixth book of poems three years ago. She can

see the words filing character by character, line by line across her laptop screen, each a sudden, personal irritant; the ornate wrought iron desk lamp she got last week at Goodwill; and her cell phone and blue mini stapler lying beside it. She realizes with a startled candor that her mind feels idle again and that it will remain thus no matter how late she stays up.

She wishes she were tired. It is past midnight. She has once more substituted an eight-ounce container of yogurt for dinner. She has lost too much weight and she knows it. The difference between hunger and yearning has stopped mattering. But the inability to engage with language as she once loved doing overcomes her now with its blank noise—a loathsome whir—reminding her simply to turn the AC back on. She misses John—the erotic and capable everydayness of his large hands; his easy rapport with Charlie; his kitchen counter a panoply of naturopathic supplements and dog bowls; his bedclothes gritty with beach sand; the rustic thatch of coarse fur on his chest; even his offhand disregard for her writing. *Stupid*, she thinks. She misses John.

Again she asks herself what her memoir, if she commits to writing it, will be about. She likes truth. And she is scared of it, scared of representing herself as the teller of it. If a memoir is to be a document by which readers remember the author, does she want to be thought of in perpetuity as a solipsistic older woman alone with her nervous dog? Isn't that how her few friends see her already? Should she even *write* a memoir, then, or let these paragraphs stand as one evening's candid yet evanescent exercise to stash in an unmarked folder somewhere—a kind of confessional doodling? Without saving her work, she closes her computer.

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He is just two years old, a long-haired Chihuahua with a bit of Pomeranian in him. He loves to be in your lap and will happily burrow under the covers with you all night. He is playful, smart, and very energetic. A vigorous romp with another dog or two leaves him exhausted and content.

Charlie would do well in a home with at least one other dog and one or two adults who are active and can spend a good deal of time with him. He craves human engagement.

Charlie is almost completely housebroken and understands when he has made a mistake. He catches on to voice commands very quickly.

This outgoing little dog can't wait to settle into the home that will encourage him to go right on being the spunky, confident boy that he is.

He is neutered, has had all of his shots, and is heartworm-negative.

Having written yet another farewell pitch for him, she lifts Charlie into her arms and holds him against her collarbone. The perfectly middle-parted cider-colored fur along his back is damp with the tears she hates shedding when no one is there. He is not a pretty dog. His small face with its bulging, expectant eyes, ears erect as poinsettia petals, and slight underbite all add up to a puckishness that intrigues her. He is so unlike the dog she imagined adopting in her late years. She opens her Gmail account and types in the first three letters of the name of the woman who runs Yankee Chihuahua Rescue. The address fills in automatically; she heads the email *Meet Charlie*. She copies in the four awful, upbeat paragraphs, asks herself again if she has lied, and saves the message, like the three preceding it, to Drafts. She kisses her dog on the top of his head deeply enough that a little of his fur gets into her mouth.

Outside her window, she notices that the all-day drizzle is turning into an earnest rain. The streets are shiny. She checks her watch: ten after five. It is time to take him for a walk.

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She sets the guillotine clippers, styptic powder, cotton balls, and muzzle out on the counter in front of the double row of urns where her seven greyhounds' ashes rest. All of her implements are parallel. She takes Charlie's small vials of trazodone and gabapentin out of the dog drawer. He tried to bite the groomer at Petco last week; a pedicure at the vet will run her a hundred dollars. She feels a certain sad, heady pride at her self-reliance. She wishes she had help. His nails are now so long that they have hooked into the weave of the indoor-outdoor carpet and yanked it loose in a few places. When he perches his front paws on her thighs and shins, they leave stinging pinstripes.

Charlie's tiny jaw is hinged with a much more powerful determination than she had anticipated. After several tries, her thumb and index finger bleeding

a little, she forces him to swallow the trazodone, then the gabapentin. He gags, she strokes his throat rhythmically. She feels dissociated in her sense of having *done* something to him. Soon he will begin yawning and slink into his blue dog bed printed with grinning yellow half-moons. His Lambchop, tennis ball, and RopeRabbit will lie strewn and neglected on the rug. The wattage in his alert eyes will dim, and he will become a little more pliant in her hands. She goes and pees. Then she downs one of her own lorazepam with a quick swig of Pinot Grigio.

First, she has to uncurl Charlie from the lowercase *c* he has formed with his drowsy body. Even sedated, he mounts a somewhat feisty struggle against this. She opens him out, exposing his belly and delicately kicking legs. She isn't sure which foot she winds up gripping in her left hand, but he doesn't want it to be there. She takes off her glasses so that she can see better close up. Charlie's nails are all black, so she has to guess where the quick is. She must take off only a minuscule amount. The clippers are difficult to work. She has to pinch them hard over each nail; it hurts her hand. With Charlie's legs protesting with this much vigor, she cannot see where she is trimming. Every few seconds, the clipper's handles slip out of her fingers and she has to start over. She can't keep track of which toe she is working on. The AC is on but her camisole is drenched and despite the lorazepam, she is shaking.

The guillotine clippers' instructions say she should give bits of cheese or beef after trimming each toe, and praise the dog in a high, happy voice. Except for the occasional profanity under her breath, she has worked in silence. She has cut some organic Vermont cheddar up in half-inch squares and put them in a plastic container. They are still in the refrigerator.

When she thinks she has finished all twenty nails, she runs her finger along the tips. They seem as long and fang-like as they were before she started. In another week, she will have to trim them again. At some point, she will dream up an explanation to the management for the torn rug. She is relieved only that the white bottle of styptic remains unopened.

