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Landline [draft]

Selections for Ve.Sch
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When she calls, I'm glad, because I'm usually alone here and there's no one to talk to. I drink my tea alone. I stare at the walls alone. I think she likes me, that she's calling just for me, but when I ask if I can come over to see her studio, she says, "I don't let anyone in."

According to the stories I hear about her secret life, she keeps delicate pastel drawings that she does by the Hudson River hanging on clotheslines so they don't smudge. She's furiously protective of them. Buckets collect raindrops. She uses the oven for heat in winter. The roof is caving in. She hangs tarps over the clotheslines. She worked for Rauschenberg. She refers to him as Bob. They're in the process of removing the copper wire from her building, the wire I hear her voice over. It's a sixth floor walk up where she's lived since the 60s. A loft. They've been trying to kick her out for decades, but now they're just waiting for her to die.

I can tell from her accent, as she lectures me over the landline, that she's from where I'm from, a place I pretend to have left behind. I want to be rootless, but I'm not.

“Us Massachusetts girls, we have to be tough!” she says, like we are members of a private club. “Do you have a fan? Us Massachusetts girls need to sit by a window.”

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When she calls me, she can talk forever without listening, because I'm not talking. She lives alone and has no one to talk to.

“Don't you get lonely?” I ask her.

“Of course,” she says.

“So what do you do?”

“I toughen up!”

Her phone has stopped working again and she comes over to use ours. I tell her “I'm going to Massachusetts soon, maybe you could come.”

“No,” she says. “I don't go back there.”

Later that day, I run into her in that little park around the corner from where I work, the late summer sun just starting to set, her eyes looking into mine through pale sunglasses, her eyebrows scrunched together, her long

thin coats hanging gently to the ground. The light is as bright as the spring heat.

“Could I come visit you sometime?” I ask again, thinking maybe she’s changed her mind. She changes the subject.

I hear through the grapevine about her life, when she was still a redhead, still beautiful. “She’d live in a tent on the beach all summer and survive on mussels and clams! A real Yankee!”

The next time she calls, she says, “I know you’ve been asking about coming up to see my studio, but I don’t let anyone in. Don’t take it personal.” I said I understood, but I didn’t. I desperately wanted to be her best friend, the one she let upstairs.