

# What Would You Do?

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To my loving, supportive mother, father, sister, and brother,  
for always encouraging me to write, explore my passions, and try new things  
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## Trapeze Artist

Trapeze. It's a form of free-fall. A form of *graceful* free-fall. We are performers and therefore we must act. The audience expects a show, and we will give them one. Time stops for the artist when she hangs from the arms of her partner – their trust in each other as solid as the poles that connect to form the circus tent. That second before he lets go of her, that anticipation of no restraints, defines trapeze. When I am in the air, swinging by my limbs, the audience disappearing in black light below me, I escape. I escape from the world, my mission, and people's expectations.

For Circus Imperiale, the trapeze act is the Grande Finale of the show. Each time, my partner and I perform our standard tricks individually, before moving onto the partner throws and catches. The two of us fly through the air, connecting and disconnecting from flying trapeze to static trapeze. Of everything, I like the flying the best. It's the riskiest part, the most heart pounding, nerve-racking, adrenaline fueling. The Circus Master has high standards for his performers. We aren't one of those trick circuses that have magicians who rely on chance. Each and every one of our performers are screened and tested, and the Circus Master handpicks those he wants himself. We're known for our talent as the best travelling circus in France, and people from all over have come to recognize our big purple tent, a contrast to the standard red and white circus tents. For authenticity, we don't have safety nets or safety lines when we perform. So, the feel, the risk, the possibility, the rush... I love everything about free-fall as I fly through the air.

Our circus stays in each town for only five nights: one to set up and get ready, three to perform, one to pack up, and we never return to a town already visited. For every town we visit, I approach the town's circus tree right before we leave and carve the cat

symbol my father used to draw when he wrote notes to me, a habit from when I first joined the circus ten years ago. If my father ever saw these carvings, he'd know I was here.

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My partner finds me at the circus tree just as I carve the last whisker of the cat. "We're about to leave. You're the last one left," he says, and then looks at the cat carving. "You know that if he wanted to find you, he would have already, right?" he adds softly.

"He still can," I say and put my flip knife back in my pocket. "I like to think that he knows I haven't given up on him."

"Even though he gave up on you," he frowns, but I shake my head and walk towards the loaded wagons. I find the Circus Master and climb into the seat next to him.

"Where next?" I ask. He glances at me sideways.

"Actually, I got a request from a *l'hôpital*... a surprise showcase as a child's last wish, so we're going to Nice," he says, trying to gauge my reaction. The Circus Master's voice fades away as I recall pushing through the crowds of people in the lobby of the theatre, clutching my Papa's hand as he glanced behind at me to smile mischievously before facing forward again. I touch the golden locket around my neck.

I was going home.

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Papa had performed in the variety theatre just down the street from my childhood house in Nice. Even though the theatre owner knew me, he always insisted that every audience member pay a fee to attend the performance and sit in his seats, but my father

always managed to sneak me in so I could watch him fly on stage and see the life of entertainment. In the lobby, my father held my hand as we pushed past throngs of people, the wooden smell of the theater mixed with the scents of the spectators as the chandeliers sparkled above us all.

“Sit here, little Kat,” he’d tell me when we got into the seating area, kneeling in front of me. “I’ll be back after the show. One day, we’ll be flying on this stage together.” He was the best trapeze artist, I could tell right away. His confidence, his grace, and his attention to the audience all proved this.

“That’s my Papa,” I’d tell the couple sitting next to me.

“Is he really? *Merveilleux!* You must be proud.”

I’d nod and puff out my chest a little.

When there weren’t any shows, my father took me to Theatre Royale to practice on the stage. We spent many hours there, practicing and experimenting. I had come to recognize the splintered floor and the dim lighting better than the chipped paint of the walls of my bedroom. My father was my teacher, giving me advice and perfecting my form. At that point, I had mastered the basics and become almost as talented as my father when he was my age in solo acts. “Brava, Katharine,” my father clapped. “Soon, you’ll be one of the most talented trapeze artists out there!”

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Every now and then on our last day in small *villes* with fewer people, the Circus Master will allow the audience to interact with the performers. This was another trait that separates us from other traveling circuses. After the finale, when we all come back on the stage to bow and boost our egos from the cheers of encore, the Circus Master thanks

everyone for coming in his booming show voice, and invites members of the audience to come down to the circus performance ring. This was the case for the *ville* we stayed in before travelling to Nice.

Around me, the townspeople headed to their favorite acts, asking about each performer's history, tips, advice, and demonstrations. On the side, the juggler's fans tossed fruit to his quick hands. Next to him, the tightrope walker tied a low rope for the school kids to try - all of them falling as soon as they stepped onto the rope as classmates laughed at their shared clumsiness. Near the middle, the contortionists became pretzels on demand, surrounded by clapping townsfolk. Across the floor from me, the town girls circled the Strongman - admiring up close his buff masculinity that, to their disappointment, could seldom be found in skinny town boys at their age. I saw the Circus Master standing near the benches, nodding his head approvingly as he oversaw our interaction with the town.

"Why did you want to fly?" A little girl looked up at me with wide eyes as she hid behind her mother's protective skirts. Her mother smiled and stepped to the side, pushing her daughter out gently towards me.

"Mind your manners, Lucie," she scolded lightly, and Lucie clutched her mother's hand before bravely asking me again, this time away from her trustworthy shield.

"Why do you do it?"

"My Papa taught me," I said. "He's a trapeze artist too."

"Is he here too?" She ducked back behind her mother's skirts but was pulled back out again.

"No, I haven't seen him in a few years," I said, kneeling in front of her.

“Oh, where is your Papa now? Mine couldn’t come tonight because he has to stay at work late,” Lucie said, glancing at her mother to make sure she was correct. Her mother looked uncomfortable, but nodded. “But I don’t think he’d let me go up so high and fly,” Lucie added.

“Papa loved to fly,” I said to Lucie. “And he loved me, so he wanted to share that experience with me. But he always made sure I would be safe.”

When I was twelve years old, my father and I had been practicing aerial grace when the theatre owner came running in, yelling at us for coming in uninvited. “You Americans never listen! I don’t care how many years you’ve been here, or how good you are. I *will* kick you out of this theatre! She is too young!” My father had lifted me off the low trapeze bar and carried me out of the theatre, tipping his hat to the theatre owner along the way and smiling because he knew he wouldn’t really get kicked out. Not to disrespect the owner, however, my father had built me a makeshift mechanism in the backyard for practice until I got old enough that the theatre owner would consider me to perform on his stage. We’d practice together before dinner, and often before we ate, my father would bring out two glasses, one with a little red wine and the other with a lot of *jus*, and he’d toast “*to the day little Kat flies with her Papa!*”. We’d drink to it and he’d remind me how I look more and more like my mother each day.

“Do you love to fly? Is it scary?” Lucie asked me.

I smiled. “I do. It is at first, but if you do it safely, it feels *sensationnel*.” I chose not to mention the lack of safety lines to her.

“What did your *maman* say?” Lucie looked up at her mother, who brushed her daughter’s cheek in such a tender manner that I looked away.



“She died when I was born,” I said. Lucie let out an *oh!* and hugged her mother’s legs. I patted her head and stood up. I never met my French mother, but I could picture her from my American father’s descriptions.

*“She flew like no other!”* My father liked to describe how he felt when he first met my mother at Theatre Royale, and how he’d come to love my mother, the theatre, and flying trapeze. He wasn’t very good at it back then – coming from America and preferring static trapeze - but after my mother died, he became determined to be the most well known flyer around, in her memory. By the time I was old enough to comprehend the risks, dangers, and skill involved in trapeze acts, he was quite renown as a flyer at Theatre Royale. Leaders of troupes came up to him all over, offering more money, but my father turned them all down.

“Why don’t you want to join a circus?” I asked my father one night while he was tucking me in.

“This theatre, it’s magical. It’s where I met your mother and fell in love, it’s where I had the opportunity to teach you, and it’s where I can fly, and live, and be free from any restraints,” Papa explained, sitting on the edge of my bed.

“The only circus I would consider joining if I wanted to leave is Circus Imperiale. The best travelling circus around. Everyone knows about the talent and skill of their performers.” He kisses my forehead. “But, little Kat, my life is here at Theatre Royale, with your mother’s spirit and with you.”

Lucie’s wide eyes followed me as I stood.

“Do you fly for your Papa?”

The question caught me off guard. I did before, so that we could fly together, and later so he'd become alive again. But, that was over a decade ago.

"I don't know," I said, and Lucie came back around from her mother's legs and looked up at me in the eye.

"If you love something, you should do it for yourself."

The juggler rode by, juggling on his unicycle, and Lucie started to chase him with the other kids. She went a few steps, then turned and waved to me, before continuing her chase.

Her mother smiled at me. "Thank you for talking to her," she said. "Lucie has always been curious, but shy and scared of heights her entire life. She wanted to talk to you the most, so I'm glad she got a chance to."

She left to check on her daughter, and I found myself returning to Lucie's original question.

Even though I didn't practice at Theatre Royale anymore, I went there to attend my father's every show, until his last. When I was four months shy of turning fifteen, a fire destroyed the theatre. Papa and I had been wearing our bathing suits walking towards the port to watch the ships when we saw the smoke. People were running, holding onto their belongings while others ran towards it with buckets of water and sand.

Papa stopped one boy with sand, "What's burning?"

"Theatre Royale and the nearby buildings! The firefighters are on their way." The boy shouted before heading towards the smoke.

"*Non...*" Papa stared after the boy.

“Papa! Let’s go!” I said, tugging his arm, as people pushed past us to get away from the smoke.

“*Non...*” People were shoving to get us out of the way.

“Papa, the boy said the firefighters were coming. We can’t do anything to help anyways!” I tugged his arm again.

“Katharine, go back to the house,” Papa said and broke loose, running towards Theatre Royale. I chased him, crying his name.

“Papa, come back!” I shouted but he disappeared in the crowd of people.

When I reached the theatre, the smoke had filled my lungs and my eyes watered. I saw Papa at the theatre entrance, trying to get inside.

“PAPA! What are you doing!” I coughed, running towards him. In the corner of my eye, I saw the firemen coming with their fire hoses.

Papa glanced at me, waved me to go away, and then got the door to open and snuck inside. *If he dies, I am alone. I am an orphan.*

I ran to the firemen to get them to save Papa. One of them pulled me away from the smoke while they went inside to get him out. They came out carrying an unconscious Papa.

“We need to get him to *l’hospital*,” a firefighter tells me. “A falling log injured his leg and he has inhaled too much smoke.”

Papa woke up sixteen hours later. In his hand he clutched a golden locket. After he put it around my neck, the doctor came in to talk to Papa, who asked to be alone. *He could’ve died and left me alone in this world, but he still wants to be alone right now. He*

*would've died for a theatre, for a locket, for my mother, but not for me.* I squeezed the locket.

Later, the theatre owner told everyone he wasn't planning to repair it.

"A bad omen," he had said, "to have burned down only two months after the Moulin Rouge in *Paris*."

My father barely ate, drank, or slept, and he no longer called me "little Kat." I had started to expand on my knowledge of the trapeze by then, using the makeshift mechanism in our backyard to fulfill both our dreams of being on stage together.

"Papa, *venez*, come look!" I'd yell excitedly when I mastered a new trick, running into the kitchen, holding the end of the rope that was my safety line. But my father would just sit at the table, staring out the window, his leg in its cast. "Well done," he'd say absentmindedly, barely glancing my way. A wave of disappointment would wash over me, but I'd brush it away, going back to the backyard to keep practicing. *It's going to be okay. He's going to heal and I'm going to practice until I get really good. One day, I kept telling myself, I will be good enough to perform on stage with Papa.*

Why exactly was I a trapeze artist?

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Instead of practicing with the rest of the circus, I spend my first day in Nice roaming the streets I grew up in. I pass the pastry boutique where Papa used to buy his surprises for me. Back before the theatre closed down, when Papa was extremely busy around show days and didn't have time to stay with me, he'd leave little notes on parchment, addressed to me by his signature cat face.

*Kat, Had to leave early today. Got a surprise for you tonight.*

*Kat, Long practice today. Don't stay up for me. Lunch and dinner on table.*

*Kat, Love you. Will be back before sunset.*

He'd always come back with some sort of treat or dessert for me. If I was supposed to be asleep, he'd come into my bedroom and kiss me on the forehead, putting the pastry by my bed for a morning surprise. I knew because I always waited for him no matter how late he would return, pretending to be asleep so he wouldn't scold me, but making sure he got home safely.

I pass the *librairie* that I liked to visit when I had the day to myself, then the grassy field where the other kids liked to play ball, but I never joined because I would rather work on my technique. Those kids called me a freak, but I didn't care because I had my Papa and he was all I needed. *Magnifique*, the papers had called him. *Absolument incroyable*.

I'm sweating from anticipation, as I get closer to my childhood home. What if Papa returned here, just waiting for his little Kat to return home? For the first time in years, I begin to doubt my decision to run away. How would I react? Should I hug him? Yell at him? Cry in his arms? I rub my sweaty hands against my *chemise* and force myself not to get my hopes too high up.

When I see the house, I'm shocked at how different it is. The windows no longer had creaky shutters and the door was painted a fresh lime-green. I'd wager that the interior walls were no longer chipped. A boy of seven or eight rides by me on his bicycle.

"Hey!" He cries out, stopping in front of me.

"*Bonjour*," I say. "Do you know who lives here?"

"*Oui*. I live here with *mon oncle*. Why?" He eyes me suspiciously.

My head is dizzy and I can't respond right away. The boy watches me curiously as I push away my anxiety. "Oh. Nothing. I just used to live here."

"Oh," he says.

"Is there a wooden machine with a bar hanging from it in your backyard?" I ask, but the boy shakes his head.

"I don't think so. Why? Did you lose it here?"

I knew it was unlikely, but I still felt sad. "*Oui*, I lost it a long time ago."

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For most of my life with Papa, I woke up to him bustling around in the kitchen – flipping crepes and boiling eggs for breakfast - or walked into the backyard to find him whistling as he worked on the practice mechanism. Other times, when it was silent, I'd walk into the kitchen and find one of his cat notes on the table. After Theatre Royale closed down, most days were silent and I would always find him on the couch, facing the window to the backyard, looking lost and confused. I made us meals and tried to cheer him up before going to the backyard to practice. I thought that if I could get good enough for us to fly together, my Papa - the Papa I knew- would come back to me. That morning, it was silent as usual, but when I went downstairs, I didn't find Papa sitting on the couch.

"Papa? Papaaa! PAP-" I stopped shouting for him when I saw the note on the kitchen table. It's the last cat note he ever wrote to me. My heart felt like it stopped beating and it got hard to breathe. By the time I finished reading the note, it was wet and crumpled from my tears and grip.

*Katharine, I'm sorry. I need to get away from what remains of Theatre Royale, trapeze, and your mother. Please stay with Camille. I will find you when I am ready.*

*Love, Papa.*

I had gone to Camille, the landlady, heart-wrenched and bawling.

“*Le pauvre,*” she said, brushing my hair while I cried into her stomach like a surrogate child. “Only 15 and already an orphan.” It was in that moment that I decided I would run away and join Circus Imperiale, the best travelling troupe around, Papa’s favorite. I was not an orphan. I would find Papa – wherever he was.

I shake my head clear of the memory, to get rid of the anxiety that was starting to build.

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The theatre is run down, from years of wear and tear after the fire. Wooden planks block the door entry and there is a faint sign saying, “*femme.*” It’s clear that some people, either orphans or homeless, have been sneaking into the theatre. I laugh bitterly at the memory of sneaking in to watch my father on stage years ago. I go into the theatre using the makeshift entrance by those who recently snuck in. The lobby is dim and dust, ash, and cobwebs cover every countertop, every smashed window, and every chandelier. A few chandeliers had fallen onto the ground.

I walk to the doors in the back and push them open to reveal what had been my second home. The red carpet under my feet is no longer plush like it had been for my last walk down the aisle towards the stage. I don’t go onto the charred stage. Instead, I sit on a moth-eaten seat in the first row, and gaze upwards. Everything was set in place for a

last trapeze performance. The firemen had put the fire out before it had burned the entire thing down to ashes.

I can picture my father as a young man stretching on the stage, fresh off the streets as an American street artist, new on the job at the beautiful Theatre Royale. He sees my mother, an experienced French flyer, somersaulting through the air and he instantly knows he needs to get to know her. He approaches her, but she's not impressed with his nouveau status. But he's charming, and convinces her to get dinner with him. Their relationship blooms. He buys her the golden locket with his savings. She helps him get better every day and soon they're flying together on stage. The theatre owner is so impressed with their compatibility that they become permanent partners. She moves in with him. A couple years later, they get married, right in this theatre, a small wedding so beautifully decorated that even the theatre owner cried and said he would cover all expenses. My mother takes time off when she gets pregnant with me, and this is the first, and only, time my father is more excited to go home than be on stage, because she is at home and I am within her.

*He's gone, I realize, staring at the empty stage. He's left me and he's not coming back. He loved this theatre that contained the memories of my mother more than he loved me. I hear his voice as he toasts, "to the day little Kat flies with her Papa!" but now I realize that dream will never come true. I think about all the trees I've scarred with the cat drawing and about the passersby who wonder what the cat means.*

*It stands for a girl looking for her lost papa. A girl who keeps ten years of hope that he didn't really abandon her. A girl who started trapeze for him, who kept with trapeze for him, but now a girl who has realized that she has moved on and will start*



*doing what she loves for herself. Flying for my mother was Papa's downfall, and I can't make that mistake... no matter how much it hurts. I haven't given up on you, Papa. But I need to let go.*

I think about how scared I am.

“If he wanted to find you, he would have already...”

“If you love something, you should do it for yourself...”

My first tears fall. Hours later, a scattering sound of a rodent reminds me that I am not alone, and that this abandoned, rotting theatre is not the safest place to be. It's getting late and it is time to go. The Circus Master and the rest would soon start looking for me. Opening night is tomorrow and it is going to be long day. I had returned to my hometown, to Nice, to this theatre, but once Circus Imperiale leaves, I would be leaving forever. I take my knife out of my pocket. The silver blade glints in the darkness. I brush the ash to the side and start carving into the wooden stage, taking care into every detail, every stroke. When I'm done, the cat stares back at me, as if promising that she will watch over the theater and watch out for my Papa for me. I set the knife on the edge of the stage before walking back up the aisle, into the lobby, and out of the theatre. I know that I won't be carving anymore.

Trapeze. It's a form of escape. Trapeze artists. We are performers. We are tough. We have to be. If we weren't, then we would fall down instead of up. If we were scared of the future, how could we climb up the ladder to those heights above the audience, to the heavens? When I open the heavy doors of the theatre, the sunlight temporarily blinds me after being in the dark for hours. When I take in the dirt roads, the people walking by

– giving me looks for coming out of a destroyed theatre – and the fresh air, I feel as free as when I am free falling and I know I am no longer scared.

### **The People We Never Meet**

Getting the job was easy. I simply drove to Kent, the city nearby, and gave a few places my contact information. Most liked what they saw and called me in for an audition. I did my research, asked my questions, and went in prepared. One club interested me more than the others. The pay was reasonable and the hours were known to be employee-friendly.

“And that’s the last of the paperwork,” Mr. Henry said, putting the last sheet into my new file.

“Your contract has been finalized until next year. As part of your job, you will bartend on Tuesdays. Lessons start tomorrow and you will be following Angel around for the first week. Do you have any questions?”

I sat in Mr. Henry’s office, a large room with golf awards hanging all over his walls. I wasn’t expecting the office to have this decoration, but rumor had it that Mr. Henry was a big shot in golf back in the day. Now, he had his club to keep him busy.

“No, Mr. Henry,” I said and he stood up from his leather chair behind his desk to shake my hand. “Thank you for having me.”

“We’re glad to have you on the team, Winnie. Or should I say, Crystal. Welcome to Missy’s.”

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I had been working at Missy’s for a few weeks when I first saw him. He came in every now and then; clearly not interested in the entertainment that his money paid for, but instead was here for his friend. He bought drinks as expected while politely refusing our services, so even Mr. Henry didn’t mind his presence. His friend was loud and

rowdy, a big spender and an even bigger drinker. The club depended on people like his friend. After too many hours or too many beers, he'd always put his arm around his friend, and talk to him softly, slowly walking him out of the club. I liked how naturally kind he seemed. He didn't come against his will and he wasn't just tolerating. He genuinely cared about his friend.

For some reason, they only came in on Tuesdays, and never ordered directly from the bar.

"Cute guy wants a Bulleit bourbon, neat. Cute guy #2 wants a Budweiser. Open tab," Bunny said, leaning against the bar as she waited for me to prepare the drinks.

After I first noticed him, I became aware of him every time he came to the club when I was working. It wasn't hard. He was extremely tall, and built like a bodyguard. His friend was also tall, but very thin. Both were more handsome than the customers who usually visited. *He* always ordered bourbon, neat. Bourbon man. That's what I've come to think of him as.

Naturally, the girls targeted them, but it quickly became established that bourbon man was only here to support his friend.

"Gay," the girls whispered amongst themselves in the dressing rooms, either to defend their injured egos or to justify his lack of interest. I just observed him from behind the bar. His demeanor interested me, but I never talked to him. After visiting for a few months, he and his friend didn't show up again. We all sighed in disappointment, but it was to be expected: those kinds of males never lasted long in our establishment. Rumor had it, the friend just got out of an 8-year relationship and Missy's was his first step to recovery. Whether my bourbon man was gay or not, we never found out.

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Sometimes I wondered if things would be different if we had met. Would there have been an instant connection? Would my life be different?

“What do you want to do with your life?” He’d ask as we sat in the outdoor section of my favorite cafe at noon, underneath a purple umbrella, drinking our favorite lattes. He’d pay as expected, the gentleman that he is.

“How do you know I don’t want to be a stripper? That I don’t like being Crystal?” I’d ask and he’d give me a look.

“You’re too young. Why stripping?”

I’d look at his Fossil watch and his fashionable outfit and stare him down. He’d be rich, of course. It’s only natural given how he went to Missy’s, spent money, but did it all for someone else’s benefit.

“I have to pay for rent somehow, don’t I?” Our conversation would delve deeper, into hidden dreams, realistic goals, and even some personal secrets. By the time he paid for my drink, he’d know all about me. My real name, the cause of my parents’ deaths, my reason for leaving my aunt, my desire for independence, my dreams of being on Broadway, my intent to save money for school through stripping.

He’d believe in me. No assumptions, no lectures. There was always judgment of some sort when talking about my job - with friends from outside of work, guys I’ve dated. I didn’t even tell my aunt what I do for a living.

“I don’t live with Aunt Mary anymore,” I’d tell him. “I moved out to be less of a financial burden. She never wanted kids of her own, anyways.”

He’d squeeze my hand for comfort.

“She worries about me but I think she’s a bit glad to have the house back to herself,” I’d say nonchalantly. “I love her, but I don’t want to impose myself on her anymore, especially now that I’m old enough to live on my own. Hence, my job!”

I’d show him my excel files with my elaborate budget plan, my intention to save the money I make, my countdown to theater school. He’d look over them carefully, skimming for possible mistakes – not out of doubt but to look out for me.

“I’m proud of you,” he’d tell me. “You’re a strong girl.”

We’d talk about other things too, and I’d get to know about him, because we wouldn’t have a one-sided friendship. He’d tell me about his successful career as a lawyer, his pet dog Wiggles named after the dog’s tendency to shake his butt, and his awe for dedicated athletes who don’t eat desserts.

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When I was eleven, my parents were killed in a car accident while I was at school. Mr. Walker had just finished explaining to us why a basketball and tennis ball dropped from the same height would reach the ground at the same time. We were out on the sidewalk, so he could demonstrate. Then he asked us what would happen if we dropped the two with the tennis ball beneath the basketball, and vice versa.

“If the tennis ball is on top of the basketball, it’ll shoot up,” said Mr. Walker and he let go of the two balls. I watched the tennis ball rise higher and higher, imagined it going above the trees, into the clouds, up, up and away. I wondered what it would be like to disappear that easily. In the distance, sirens rang, announcing their presence throughout town. I couldn’t explain why, but somehow I knew they were for me, and I wanted to disappear. The school bell rang and my classmates ran away for lunch. But I

stood there staring at the sky, listening to the sirens get louder and louder until the police, led by the principal, found me twenty minutes later to take me to the police station, where my aunt was waiting to take me to my new home.

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Grocery shopping was done on a budget. I always went in with a list and usually wouldn't let myself buy anything beyond it. Sometimes, however, I let myself indulge.

I couldn't reach the Lucky Charms cereal box on the top shelf, when someone reached over me and grabbed a box. The person handed me the box. He was very tall and I recognized him right away. It was my bourbon man up close.

"Thank you," I said, taking the box.

"Of course," he said, squinting at me. "You look familiar." I blushed at the thought that he remembered me out of all the girls at Missy's.

His phone rang just as I was about to answer and he gave me an apologetic look.

"Sorry about this. Well, I hope you have a great day!" He picked up his phone with a curt hello, the sign of a businessman or lawyer or some sort of established professional, and walked away, pushing his grocery cart. I couldn't help blushing that he remembered me.

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Sometimes, I have bad weeks. Everyone has them at some point. When these weeks happen, I'd hit the bar. If we had met, I'd call him.

"Get me wasted," I'd tell him. *Take care of me* was implied. We'd take shots after shots and soon I'd be creating a pyramid of upside down shot glasses.

“Why do you like bourbon whiskey so much anyway?” I’d try his glass of Jim Bean and make a face, before ordering two tequila shots.

“Cheers,” I’d say, and we’d clink glasses.

“Are you gay?” I’d ask, to clear the air from the earlier rumors at Missy’s, but he’d just smile suggestively at me before licking the salt on his hand.

And, when it was time, just like his friend at Missy’s, he’d watch out for me. The bartender would come over with more Fireball as I flip over another glass but my bourbon man would wave him away, shaking his head.

“Ok,” he’d say to me after closing his tab, “Let’s go home.”

“I’m good at what I do,” I’d mumble as he supports my weight and lifts me from the barstool. “I’m making money. I’m managing on my own. I’m not a kid anymore. *Why don’t you trust me?*”

I’m referring to people in general, of course. People who judge me for being a stripper. People who call me a slut. People who think I can’t make it on my own.

“I trust you, Winnie. I just want to protect you, too,” he’d say, calling a cab, and I’d lean against him. All I ever wanted was someone to understand and accept.

“This must be how your friend felt, after he was dumped,” I’d ramble nonsense. “You were so good to him. I don’t know that many people as nice as you...”

When I woke up, I was in my bed at my apartment. Alone and silent. Ready to take on the next day.

---

I didn’t always go to Kent just for work. Sure, it was more expensive to live in the city, but that didn’t stop me from going for fun. My favorite cafe was situated in the heart



of downtown, between the city library and a pizzeria. Once a week, I'd take my aunt to the cafe, and we'd catch up on life. It'd been almost half a year since I'd moved out of her house in Kent to the town nearby.

"Tell me more about this mysterious job of yours," Aunt Mary asked me. I twirled the coffee stick around, causing the milk heart in my drink to split in half.

"Winnie, I've taken care of you for ten years. I know when you're trying to cover something."

"Aunt Mary, I have something to tell you, but you have to promise you won't assume anything right away. You'll listen to my side." I took her hand in mine. She frowned.

"Darling, I can't promise anything, especially not when you make it sound like you've committed a crime."

I smiled, "Don't worry, I'm not a criminal. But the reason why I work at night is because I'm a stripper." I paused and the words hung in the air in front of us, mentally echoing from one brain wavelength to the other, filling up our heads with stereotypical images from six-inch heels to fishnet thigh highs to lap dancing. Aunt Mary cleared her throat, and slowly removed my hand from hers.

"I'm sorry. I must have heard you wrong. Did you say you were a sex worker?"

"I work as a stripper, Aunt Mary. I'm not a prostitute. It's a decently safe job! My boss, Mr. Henry, is really fair. There are rules in the strip club to protect us."

"Come back and live with me, Winnie. I can support both of us while you work. Quit your job, and find something respectable to help save money for school." Aunt Mary said, shaking her head.

“What? Aunt Mary, I’ve been supporting myself for almost half a year. I’m doing *fine* on my own.”

“I knew this would happen when you go into the real world. You can’t even find a decent job to support yourself.”

“Listen to me, please! I do have a goal in mind. I haven’t given up on theater school and I don’t plan on stripping for the rest of my life. But I am independent and I can survive on my own. Just trust me, please.”

“Oh, I’ve failed your mother. Quit your job, Winnie, and we will pretend this never happened. You clearly can’t live on your own.”

I stood up. My chair scraped against the floor, causing Aunt Mary to look up in shock.

“No. I’m tired of you thinking I’m still a *kid*. I’ve faced plenty of ignorance from people judge me for who I am or what I do. I thought you’d possibly understand better, but no, you’re assuming the worst in me like everyone else! I’m sick and tired of this! I can and have been surviving on my own all this time. I actually like my job. Did you ever think of that?”

Aunt Mary started sobbing, and I sat back down, instantly ashamed.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Mary, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m the one who should be sorry. Since you won’t quit your job, it looks like I’ve failed mine.” She stood up and walked away.

---

I signed up for a dance class in my town to keep me distracted. I showed up the first day, dressed in a tank top and shorts, to find the other participants already stretching.

Of course, I was excited because it had been a while since I've danced in a class. I wasn't picky about what kind of dance I did. I could pick up almost any style quickly. I figured getting back into practice of lessons would be a good idea, especially if I wanted to get into theater school and be on Broadway. One girl, Maggie, began talking to me, giving me her dance life story, starting from when she was five to her current job as a modern dance instructor for kids.

"What about your job? Anything related to dance?" She asked me.

"Oh... well, not really. Kind of," I said, shrugging. She begged for details.

"I'm a stripper, so we dance a bit," I said. The room fell silent.

"Did you say you were a stripper?" A girl from across the room asked me through the mirror. I nodded, and then ignored the look she gave me, which most of the dancers in the room gave me.

"How can she even afford this class?" I heard one girl whisper to another, and felt my face heat up.

"Make sure your boyfriend never comes here to pick you up," she replied and they started giggling. I glared at them.

"Wow, that's kind of cool," Maggie said earnestly. "So you do sexy dances."

"I guess," I said, looking back at her. "But I grew up with traditional ballet and jazz. I'd love to learn modern sometime," I added. Maggie took the bait.

"Oh my god, yes, I'll definitely teach you!" She paused. "But can you show me pole dancing? Do you work in the city, then?"

"I commute to Kent, yeah. And not all strippers know how to pole dance," I said and Maggie's face fell.

“But I do, because the club I work in has one,” I continued, and smiled at her.

“I’ll teach you if you teach me.”

“Yes! It’s a deal.”

---

I saw my bourbon man at a stoplight intersection the other day. I swore it was him. He’s not exactly the hardest person to miss. I passed him at the intersection and thought about calling out to him. There were so many people around and he didn’t see me at all. Tall, strong, towering over everyone else at the intersection, his attention was on his destination - not his environment. I was surprised. I would have thought he would have been the observant type. It was nice to see him though, even if we didn’t talk, and I felt happy for the rest of the day, even when I checked my phone to find four new voicemails from my aunt’s best friend-- all of which were bound to ruin my mood.

“Winnie, you can’t do this to Mary. She practically raised you. You guys need to fix what happened between you two.”

“Winnie, please call me back.”

“Winnie, you need to act more responsible. This isn’t a game. This is your life!”

“Winnie, I’m neither your mother nor your guardian. Pick up your phone and talk to me like the adult you claim to be.”

I deleted the last message just as I walked past Missy’s. Mr. Henry was no bourbon man, but I just needed to talk to someone. He was practicing his swing when I walked into his office.

“Crystal! What a surprise to see you so early in the day,” he said, putting his golf club on its stand before sitting into his leather chair.

“Mr. Henry, I don’t want to strip for the rest of my life. I’m only 21,” I said quickly and he looked surprised.

“Of course not, I understand. Your contract is only for one year, after all. You can leave after that whenever. But I thought you liked it here?”

“Winnie,” Mr. Henry said, after I told him about Aunt Mary. “While you might not agree with your aunt, she’s right in a sense. You also are an adult, and I understand your desire to explore on your own. But you’re young. The sky’s the limit. Do you know what happens when you drop a tennis ball over a basketball?”

“It flies up.”

“Exactly! You’re the tennis ball. Your aunt wants to be your basketball, assisting you to reach your full potential. I’m not telling you what to do, but I think you should let her help you.”

---

If I had met him, my bourbon man would have taken me ice skating, one of my favorite pastimes. My daddy used to take me ice-skating all the time as a kid. There was an ice rink about half an hour away from my childhood home and we’d turn it into a day trip about twice a month. We always got pizza at the rink’s food parlor for lunch, as a break between falling on our butts and whizzing across the rink. Skating from morning to late afternoon, we’d sit on the bleachers afterwards, rubbing our tired feet as we watched the Zamboni smooth the ice over.

During the winter, if we were really lucky, the pond near our neighborhood would freeze over, and we would pull out our skates and show off to the rest of the neighborhood kids. My daddy would then tell me to let the other kids borrow my skates if

they didn't have any, and we would teach them how to skate. I loved how my daddy thought about other people, making sure no one was ever neglected.

It had been a while since I've last skated though, so if my bourbon man and I went skating, we might be shaky at first. I'd need some time getting used to being on ice, and he'd need time getting used to his bulk on thin blades. Maybe he's skated before, perhaps with a previous partner or as a child before he grew so tall and big, but maybe he's never skated in his life. Either way, I'd teach him and show him the ropes, guiding him from one end to the other until he felt confident enough to let go of the sides of the ice rink. If he fell, he'd laugh it off and get up to try again. He'd be a fast learner, good with balance and wary, but not afraid, of risks. Before long, we'd be skating at a decent pace, sometimes holding hands, sometimes chasing one another. If I were having a bad day, he'd cheer me up. If I weren't, then ice-skating with him would probably be the highlight of my week. Afterwards, we'd get pizza together, and I'd tell him about my ice-skating days with my daddy.

---

My bourbon man arrived on scene at Missy's yesterday. I saw him walk into the club from the stage. To my knowledge, he hadn't been here in over a year, since he was last here with his broken-hearted friend. *He must be here to see me*, was my rationale. Why else would he show up at Missy's alone? It was me he remembered at the grocery store. I looked around, but no one nearby seemed to recognize him. It was as if he was just another customer. Did he want to talk? Was he in trouble? He had come on a day I was working on stage, so did that mean he was here for a show? To watch me in my environment – as Crystal instead of Winnie? I watched Diamond go up to him, but he

shook his head and headed for the bar. That's right, my bourbon man wasn't here for anyone's entertainment. He was not interested in these girls. He was the perfect gentleman.

I flipped my hair back and grabbed the pole with my manicured hands, slowly stretching my arms as I slid down, arching my back to elongate my torso. My bourbon man was still at the bar, talking to Chastity who was bartending tonight, so I gave my audience a seductive smile, dipped my head, and licked my lips. It bothered me that he was still talking to Chastity. Last year, he never talked to me when he came in, and he had only come in on the day I bartended. The guys on the couches below me whistled, so I slid back up the pole and wrapped my leg around to lean my body backwards, head tilted to look at the world upside down. At the bar, Angel had joined their conversation. He asked a question and Chastity laughed, nodded her head. I watched as he turned to Angel, who grabbed his tie playfully, dragging him towards a VIP room, his left hand already reaching into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. I stood up just as he passed by, briefly glancing at the stage with no recognition, before stepping into the VIP room.

Fate works in funny ways. I'm not sure if I even believe in it. But if it's real, reality works for fate. And when reality hits, illusions shatter, dreams disappear, and expectations fail. I didn't think about him anymore. He came in a few times after that night by himself, but he was no longer my perfect gentleman. I called Aunt Mary back after that night, apologized for my very child-like behavior. I remained stubborn about living in my apartment, but relented on letting her watch over me – harming my absolute independence but healing our relationship. I showed my excel files one day over coffee to her, and she read them carefully as I fidgeted in my chair.

“These are wonderful, Winnie. I’m so proud of you. You’re growing up,” she said after an eternity of silence and I hugged her. Maybe, just maybe, complete independence could wait a little longer. Adults are, after all, merely oversized children at heart.

I still work at Missy’s, to Aunt Mary’s initial dismay. But she has come to accept it. Sometimes, when someone interesting walks into Missy’s, I wonder what life would be like if we met. Because sometimes, the people we never meet are those we believe in the most.



## Wendy

The cries of a baby. She's crying, and crying, and crying. *Go to her, comfort her*, my instincts whisper but my senses don't oblige. *Save her*. It's black as night but my eyes are blind and my body can't feel. Only my ears work. They work well enough that they almost make up for the rest of my senses. They work so well that I can hear the baby's thoughts underneath its cries. *Where is mommy?* The cries turn into screams and the screams turn to muffled gurgling and then the gurgling suddenly becomes complete silence. And my ears work well enough to tell me what my hands and eyes and nose and mouth cannot: the baby - *my baby*- is dead.

I wake up screaming Jane's name.

----

They call me mentally unstable. I hear them whispering behind my back. They call me paranoid. I see them giving me odd glances when they think I'm not looking. They talk to me condescendingly, pretending to care when really they just want me away.

"You look tired, dear. Maybe you should rest early tonight." A pat on the back, a brush of my hair, a tight squeeze of my hand.

"Poor Wendy, don't work yourself too hard, you fragile girl." A peck on the cheek, a nod of acknowledgement, a gentle hug.

"Thank you for your concern, ladies," I always reply with a polite smile and cold eyes, and they take the hint, leaving me to whisper in their clusters in the corner, calling me Crazy Wendy, Dreadful Wendy, Wouldn't Want to Be Her Wendy. I have made enemies of these society women whose husbands work with mine by refusing their false affections. I am nobody's pet.

My husband Oliver always finds me sitting by myself on the patio - regardless of the weather - watching the night sky. If it is a cloudy day, I watch the clouds shift across the sky. If it is a clear day, the constellations keep me company. The cold doesn't bother me, but on most nights, my husband will wrap a shawl around my shoulders, to protect Weak Wendy from the chill.

"The beautiful hostess!" Oliver says, sitting down next to me on porch bench. "Our guests await you inside."

I sigh and lean into his shoulder. "You know how much I dislike these business dinner parties."

He wraps his arms around me. "I know. And you are doing so great. Thank you as always. When we retire, we shall buy a house in the woods, where dinner parties are only with the wild animals and socializing is for close family."

I kiss him on the cheek, "Thank you." He grins and pulls me in closer, his mouth finding mine, but then we are interrupted by Oliver's brother John, who has come to say farewell.

"Lovely Wendy! A successful party, as always. Thank you. Oliver, I'll see you on Monday at the office!" John shakes Oliver's hand as we stand up and gives me a hug. We walk back into the house to send him out. With his departure, the rest of the guests follow suit, thanking us for the wonderful party as usual, telling me to rest up and shaking Oliver's hand. Then the house is finally quiet.

-----

Peter visits me in my dreams again that night. He's still the tall, lanky boy that I remember, when I first met him many years ago. This time, we are in a green grass

meadow, sitting underneath the willow tree, overlooking the pond. The geese honk at the ducks that waddle peacefully in the water. We are silent on the picnic cloth, him sitting against the tree trunk, and me lying on my back with my hands behind my head. I'm thirteen again and Peter is fourteen and we are happy to rest in silence, one with nature.

"Wendy," Peter suddenly says and I look over at him. He's got a fierce look in his eyes.

"Why have you got to be so difficult, Wendy?"

Suddenly, he's on top of me, pinning me down, and I can't move. He lifts the skirt of my dress up and fumbles with his pants. He tries to kiss me but I bite him and draw blood so he hits me. I try to kick and thrash and yell but the ducks continue to float on the pond, the wind blows the willow tree, and the geese honk until they are louder than me as my voice grows hoarse. In the distance, I hear a baby crying for mommy.

Oliver wakes up to me screaming in my sleep and comforts me until I'm too tired to stay awake, as much as I want to avoid any more nightmares. He goes through this routine every time it happens but knows better than to ask what my dreams are about. I know he's relieved that I get the nightmares less as time goes on. He doesn't ask me who Jane is anymore when I wake up screaming her name.

"Shh, it's okay," Oliver says. *I don't feel okay*, I think.

"It was only a dream," Oliver says. *How many of the same nightmares do I have to have before I can be rid of them?* I think.

"You're safe with me," Oliver says. *I can't even tell you what my nightmares are about*, I think, ashamed.

“If only I could help you, Sweet Wendy,” he says right before my eyes close and he sounds like the society women who are simultaneously scared of and disgusted with me.

-----

When I first held Jane in my arms, my heart grew bigger than my undeveloped body was ready for. All for the baby girl whose pink face was scrunched up and little mouth wide open, filling the room with more sound than such a small thing looked like it would be able to do. I gripped her in the thin blue blanket, singing the soft lullabies that Mom used to sing to me, until Jane quieted down. The nurse was surprised to find me kissing the sleeping baby’s forehead when she came back. Even then, she had to pry Jane’s bundled body from my gripping fingers. Jane and I were a funny pair – two over-shrunk actors playing roles out of our league. An over-shrunken, shriveled baby predicted to die within a few weeks and a child as her mother.

The hospital told me they had to keep Jane overnight for a few days because of her poor health. Once discharged, I took the bus home. Back then, I was still Young Wendy, Bright Wendy, Cheerful Wendy, but when I got home, my mother slapped me across the face so hard that a red welt was on my cheek for three days. She’d never hit me before and I stood there, shocked, holding a hand to my face.

“You gave a life but you will also kill one if you keep her,” she yelled at me. “She won’t live past childhood with you- there are too many problems!”

Then Mom realized what she had done as I stood there holding my face. She cried out and grabbed my shoulders to wrap her arms around me. She cupped my cheek, rubbing the redness.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just can’t,” Mom said as she hugged me tight. She took me into the kitchen and grabbed an ointment from the shelf to rub on my cheek. She brushed the tears on my cheeks and kissed the top of my head.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, and I forgave her for her impulsiveness.

Jane was prone to infection, constantly sneezing and coughing when she wasn’t crying. She needed medicine and breathing devices. The doctor told me many big words of problems I couldn’t even comprehend at that time.

“You can’t keep her,” Mom said again a few days later after I get a call that Jane was ready to come home. “You’re only thirteen. I’m at the factory all day and you’re at school. No one will be around to take care of her. *Give her away!* You grew up without a father. Do you really want your child to grow up without one too? She deserves two parents who will be around and have time for her.”

I brought Jane home and we hid in my room, where I set up her crib.

*Child*, I thought, standing on the tip of my toes to watch her sleep. I touched her wrinkled baby nose with my finger as I peeked over the crib bars.

“Child,” Mom whispered as she stood in the doorframe, watching me and shaking her head in grief and shame and anguish. She looked up to the heavens and prayed to all the gods she knew, even the ones she didn’t believe in.

Child, the society women and children defined me, blissfully unaware that I had a baby hidden at home. But none of it bothered me. How Jane was conceived had been awful but I loved her with all my heart. I was still Caring Wendy and no one outside could tell anything was wrong.

-----

I met Peter when I was ten and he was eleven. He moved next door with his uncle. Quick to smile, he was even quicker to make friends. We bonded over running, school, and animals within the first hour of meeting each other.

“Race you to the lake,” Peter would say and I would drop whatever I was holding and run as fast as I could. We both loved to run and were always seen racing each other around town - to the general store, to the library, to school with our backpacks. We found solitude and power in running.

Peter didn't like his uncle, and was always finding excuses to leave the apartment. Before the first year of meeting him was up, he knew me better than anyone else. There was no distinction between Angry Wendy, Kind Wendy, Merry Wendy - because to him, I was just Wendy.

“Wendy!” He'd call me. “Wendy, let's go!”

“Go where?”

“*Second star to the right and straight on 'til morning,*” he'd reply.

“What?”

“Let's get out of here,” he'd grin.

“Alright,” I'd say and he'd take me on another adventure. He was mischievous and fun but he always took care of me. Our trust in each other grew faster than a shooting star flying across the night sky and we often sat on the roof at night, watching the stars. He pointed out Polaris, the North Star, shining bright in the sky. We'd always wish upon it.

“I wonder what's out there,” Peter said one night after we had decided we were best friends.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “But it’s pretty.”

“It’s probably a whole different world. Similar to ours. But nicer and kinder and safer. No smog, no fighting, no anger,” Peter said and then he’d show me his newest bruise from his uncle, explaining what he did this time to deserve it. Every time, I’d touch it gently, and then hug him tight. I’d think about Mom, who worked from dusk to dawn in the factory - long hours with minimum wages - but always found time to tell me bedtime stories, tuck me into bed, cook me food, and sew me pretty dresses for special occasions. I knew I was lucky and it made me feel bad for Peter - whose only crime was being an orphan.

Peter told me to never say goodbye, because that meant going away, and going away meant forgetting. “I would never forget you, Peter,” I used to tell him, and always said goodbye anyways as I walked into my home. I could picture him scrunching his face at me, frustrated that I didn’t listen. He never told me goodbye, always saying “see you later” instead. I was never sure whether it was because he feared his uncle or the world outside of our friendship, secrets only I knew. Feared the day that it really was goodbye, and one of us would actually leave, and therefore forget.

-----

Oliver comes home with a surprise for me tonight. He walks into the kitchen where I just finished preparing salad and wraps his arms tight around my waist. I turn to him to face him when a big Newfoundland comes into the kitchen.

“What in the world, Oliver. What’s going on?”

Oliver winks at me and claps his hands at the dog. “Come, Nana! That’s a good girl,” He bends down to scratch the dog’s ears when she walks over. I watch his fond smile, his eager tendency to love. Oliver looks up at me from the floor.

“Surprise!” He grins. I frown at him, and then bend down to scratch Nana’s ears. She sniffs my hand.

“Hello, Nana,” I say. Nana licks my hand.

“She likes you!” Oliver beams, and then tells me how obedient Nana is. I let him defend his case for a few minutes then kiss him mid-sentence. I know he wants children and this is his attempt at a surrogate child. Since I am the reason why we don’t have children, I allow it.

“Alright, we can keep her,” I say. “Clearly, you already have a new love.” Oliver grins and shakes his head. I rub Nana’s tummy. “Welcome to your new home, Nana,” I say.

Oliver and I had met at the University and he had chased me until I agreed to go out with him. He was a business student and I was studying French. “I always knew you were interested,” he had said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear as we laughed at our university courtship after our fourth year anniversary. “Something was just holding you back. Mysterious Wendy.”

“I’ll love you no matter what,” he had said after he had first witnessed one of my episodes. I was secretive with my enigmatic past, and respected him for understanding that while not believing any rumors about me.

Oliver always wanted children, and one thing that attracted me to him was his intense excitement for being a father. “I’ll play with them, teach them catch, and take



them out to ice cream,” he would say, running to scoop me up and throw me over his shoulder, as if I was a child. I’d laugh, but deep down knew I would never have a child again. It broke my heart but I couldn’t tell him yet.

When Oliver proposed to me in the garden surrounded by my favorite roses, I cried so hard he got scared that I was stuck in the past again.

“Yes,” I said, kissing him. “I want to say yes,” I said between tears and he looked stricken.

“But?”

“But I can’t have kids,” I shrunk away from him but he grabbed my waist and pulled me back towards him.

“She said yes!” He yelled to the sky and then kissed me. “We can discuss this after the wedding,” he said. “I don’t mind adoption or some other form either. But for you, I’ll agree to anything within reason.” He grinned and I laughed. We hugged and I closed my eyes. I knew he loved me so much that he would make that sacrifice even though he didn’t know the reason why.

-----

“Do you ever wonder what life would be like if we didn’t have to grow up? If we could have a choice between staying young forever and being adults?” Peter and I liked to play leapfrog on the street and I asked one day between breaths.

“Nah, I don’t think about that,” he said as he put his hands on my back, applying some pressure as he bent his legs. He jumped over and I kept my head ducked to avoid collision.

“Oh,” I said and he squatted low, but I stood there, with my hands pressed lightly on his back, not preparing to jump.

“Wendy?”

I thought about the blood on my sheets last night and my excitement that I was finally on my way to becoming a woman, like all the beautiful, poised older girls I admired at school. I had run to Mom to tell her the news and in her sleep-deprived state, she had hugged me tight, repeating “my baby girl is growing up” over and over again into my hair as her tears dripped onto my hair. After I had returned to my bed, I was no longer excited to grow up, after seeing how terrified it made Mom to see me out in the real world.

“Wendy?” Peter stood up and turned to look at me. “What’s wrong, Wendy?”

I looked up at him, with his disheveled hair and curious eyes. “Your hair’s getting long, Peter. You should cut it soon,” I said and he gave me crooked smile.

“Don’t scare me,” he said. “I thought you were in trouble or something for a second.”

“The only trouble I’d be in is being best friends with you, you wacko,” I laughed, giving him a small push on the chest. He stumbled backward a bit before catching my hands, looking at me funnily. Then he gave a wicked smile I’d never seen before and pulled me into a hug. “Best friends forever, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said as chills I’ve never felt before shuddered through my body.

-----

When I was a babe, Mom sang me lullabies or told me stories every night to help me fall asleep. She brushed my hair every morning, tied my shoes, and made my favorite

soup when she could. When I grew older, I saw how exhausted she was, trying to support the two of us, especially after dad died in a mine explosion when I was six. Mom spent more hours at the factory and was always gone before I woke up in the morning.

“My baby,” she’d say when I ran to hug her every time I heard the front door opening. I’d tell her about my day as she cooked dinner for us, and she’d listen to every detail, asking questions when I forgot to clarify and giving advice when I asked for it. When I asked her about her day, she’d smile at me, shaking her head.

“Stay young as long as you can, little Wendy. I hope you never have to face the world as I do. I hope the world changes before you grow up,” she told me.

At night, Mom still made time to sing, but more often than not, she was the one who fell asleep in my bed next to me. I’d stroke her hair as she stroke mine, kiss her on the cheek, and blow out the candle. When I woke up in the mornings, she’d be gone to the factory, but breakfast would be on the kitchen table and clothes that I had thrown on the ground the night before would be neatly folded by my bed.

After Jane entered our family, Mom no longer had the energy to sing at night, and the task became mine as I sang Jane to sleep, brushing aside my mother’s pleas.

*We can’t afford her,* Mom cried. *I already work overtime just to feed us, and now you want me to try work longer to feed an extra mouth?* Mom yelled. *She’s so sick! We barely go to the hospital ourselves; how can we keep her alive?* Mom sobbed.

*Do you want her death on your hands? How will you live with yourself?* Mom challenged me but I had already sold my heart to the devil and the devil was Jane. I changed Jane’s diapers myself and went to the general store to buy the cheapest baby food. Mom tried to stop me at first, tried to talk to me at first, but to no success. I

pretended not to see Mom crying in her room when I passed by, crying from seeing her child endlessly care for a child of her own - playing grown-up long before she should ever be allowed to.

Whenever I forgot something Jane needed, I was punished by Jane's crying, which always broke my heart. By the time I realized whatever it was, however, I'd find it sitting outside my door, placed there by Mom. If I was doing homework and forgot the time, Jane's crying would remind me to feed her. Mom's baby food would save me time from going to the general store to buy more, if we ran out. If it got cold during nightfall, Mom's blankets would remind me that Jane's thin body got colder much quicker than the rest of ours. If I slept longer than I planned to in the morning from exhaustion, I'd find Jane's diapers changed, her body and clothes clean, and milk bottle empty as Jane happily licks her lips from being satisfyingly full. But Mom couldn't bring herself to love Jane as I did and I couldn't let Jane become an orphan, like Peter.

"Give her away," Mom implored. "Let her have a real life, with real parents and real care."

The only time Mom seemed to forget everything was when I woke up screaming in the middle of the night, from dreams that had started happy but always ended as nightmares. She comforted me as she did before the baby had been born, or even detected, by rocking me close and keeping me safe. The dreams ended the same. Peter and I playing leapfrog, Peter and I tossing ball, Peter and I at school, Peter and I in the meadow, Peter and I in the lake, Peter and I at the general store, Peter and I... no matter what Peter and I did as we had always done before, I always woke up crying and shouting and kicking, ever since that night in his room, when he smiled that wicked smile again.

*Why have you got to be so difficult, Wendy?*

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I find it easy to love Nana. Anyone who visits loves her. My bond with her is stronger than others. We have something in common: we are both anomalies. An indoor dog, Nana prefers being obedient and helping out with chores in an interesting manner. She's smart, and helps with small tasks, from moving dirty laundry to pushing the vacuum cleaner to keeping me company while I cook.

She is a dog, however, and needs to move, so I take her on on morning and evening jogs. She gets pretty dirty so I decide to bathe her in our bathtub, especially since she loves to sleep on our bed. I turn on the water to draw a bath when the telephone rings downstairs. I go down to answer. The caller tells me to write down lengthy information for an important delivery for Oliver. Barking makes me finally hang up, and I run upstairs - a feeling of déjà vu washing over me from more than a decade ago.

When I get to the bathroom, Nana is jumping around on the floor, barking at the overflowing tub. I stand there, hand on the door, staring at the water-filled tub, the dripping water as it spills over the sides, the running tab spouting more and more despite the obvious completion of its job. Nana continues to bark but I can only hear a baby's cries turn to screams to gurgling to silence.

I was three months shy of turning fourteen, still young, clueless, hopeful when Good Wendy, Loving Wendy, Optimistic Wendy broke and Disturbed Wendy, Wretched Wendy, Numb Wendy was born. Mom had stepped outside - she couldn't stand the sight of me playing grown-up anymore that day. I had pushed her limits when I accused her for not giving Jane a chance to live by not believing in her future despite how sick Jane was.

“It’s a miracle she’s even lived this long!” Mom yelled.

“It’s *not* a miracle. It’s me! It’s her *mother* who helped her live -- with no help from *her* mother!” I yelled back.

“If you want no help from me - then don’t expect my help. You can live in my house, eat my food, but don’t expect my support anymore- then you’ll see what “no help” *really* means,” Mom brushed the tears from her cheeks as she stormed out. I drew a bath in the baby tub for small, sickly 3-month-old Jane and put her in, patting her head, washing her arms, as she splashed water. Water landed on me, leaving their wet marks on my shirt and hair.

“Jane, stop!” I giggled, tickling her, trying to forget the argument with Mom. I knew how much she did for me, supporting the three of us with her time, money, and energy. I knew she knew I loved her. I just also loved Jane. I had hope. Jane cooed and I kissed her on the forehead. The doorbell rang, and I ran downstairs – some boys and girls wanted to me to come out and play.

“I can’t,” I said against my desire run around with them. They pouted and whined.

“C’mon, pretty Wendy, we never see you anymore,” the girls begged.

“Do you know why Peter moved away?” the boys asked. Their chatter grew as they talked over each other to get answers to questions I avoided.

“I’ll come play tomorrow,” I said feebly, and a new chorus of protests rang out.

“You say that every day at school, but we never see you anymore!” The girls shouted.

“Well, I guess a little while couldn’t hurt. I haven’t played in a long time,” I said and everyone cheered. “I just need to change,” I said but suddenly heard crying from

upstairs, then screaming. I had forgotten about Jane. The others heard it too as everyone slowly fell silent.

Slamming the door shut, I ran upstairs, skipping two stairs at a time. I felt cold and hot at the same time and it wasn't until I was back in the bathroom that I realized the screaming had stopped.

Mom came home to find me rocking on the bathroom floor, hugging the blue corpse that had once been her granddaughter. The tub full of water but the baby tub upside down. While the nurse had been able to eventually pry Jane from my hands three months earlier in the hospital after her birth, Mom wasn't as successful. I clutched the corpse for hours like a young girl with her favorite doll. Eventually, Mom just hugged me tight, rocking with me as we both grieved.

More barking and nudging from Nana snaps me out of my frozen state and I turn the water faucet off. Then I sit on the water-soaked floor and cry as Nana licks my face.

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When Oliver comes home, the first thing he does is carry me into the bedroom, wrapping me in a towel and helping me change out of my dripping clothes into a clean bathrobe.

“Oh, my unfortunate Wendy,” he says as he wipes my eyes. I am too tired to respond. After he tucks me into bed, he leaves to wipe the bathroom floor and then goes downstairs to make a few phone calls to get our water-damaged ceiling repaired. Nana hops on our bed to snuggle against me.

Oliver comes back into the bedroom and gets into bed with me. I lean against him. “Want to talk about it?” He asks for the first time in years. I shake my head and he sighs.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me,” he says and I suddenly feel unfair as Nana, our surrogate child because Oliver can’t have what he wants the most if he is with me, lays her head in my lap.

*Jane.*

“I was raped when I was thirteen,” I say, staring out the window. He has patiently put up with me every day, as my mother did. He deserves the truth. Nana jumps off the bed and goes downstairs. Oliver stares at me.

“What happened?”

“I had a best friend, Peter,” I say. “We were really close, inseparable almost. One day, we were in his room and he wanted to try this thing his uncle did with his lady friends. I didn’t know what was going on; I was so naïve and I trusted him. When I realized I tried to tell him to stop, but he said everything would be fine and insisted, even though I was crying and trying to push him away...”

Oliver squeezes my hand.

“After that night, my nightmares started. But I tried to stay positive. He had been my friend, after all. I wanted to forgive him. But it wasn’t until a year later that my episodes began, when I lost hope... And that was because I was pregnant.”

Oliver lets go of my hand. I can’t look at him and it gets hard to breathe.

“I loved her, Oliver.”

“*Jane,*” he says.



“I was only thirteen,” I look at him.

“Oh, *god*,” he says, shaking his head.

“I killed her, Oliver,” I can barely get the words out and he hugs me.

“Mistaken Wendy, it’s okay,” he whispers.

“She drowned. I forgot that she was there and the baby tub flipped over while I was downstairs. I killed her, Oliver. I gave her life, I loved her and then I killed her, just as Mom said I would. She was only three months old.”

Oliver held me for a minute. “What happened to Peter? Did he know?” he asks after a while. I shake my head.

“He must’ve felt awful. I don’t know where he is now- I haven’t seen him since that night when we were in eight grade. So he never knew about Jane.” I pause. “He would have loved her though.”

“Oh, tragic Wendy,” Oliver says.

“Sometimes, I wish I never grew up,” I say. “Mom never wanted me to grow up. She knew what the real world was like. Mom kept Jane a secret- she didn’t want anyone to know to discourage my chances of marriage. I should’ve told you earlier. Habit, I guess. Especially after Jane’s death, there was no point to have people know. I’m already known as Weird Wendy, people didn’t need to know the reason why. But I shouldn’t have kept this from you.”

Oliver hands me a tissue and I wipe my eyes, taking deep breathes.

“This is why I can’t have kids,” I cry. “I can’t have kids, Oliver. I’m so sorry!”

He grabs me and makes me look into his eyes. “I’ve said it once,” he says slowly, “and I’ll say it again. I’ll love you no matter what. Even if that means no kids. Besides, we have Nana.” We smile at each other sadly.

“I love you, Wendy,” he says and I wrap my arms around him, kissing him as passionately as when we first slept together because he has said my name without the judgment of the society women. Because I am just Wendy again. Because I had found Oliver despite giving up. Because the past is the past and I can always build a new future. Because there is always hope.

That night, while Oliver remains asleep in bed, Nana curled up at his feet, I get out of bed, open our bedroom window, and kneel in front of it. Polaris shines bright above. I wish upon it for the first time in years, as I did when I was a little girl. I wish for forgiveness, from my mother, from my daughter, and from my husband. A light breeze ruffles the curtains and places a cold kiss my cheek as I wish. Then, at the last minute, I forgive.

“Goodbye, Peter,” I whisper before slipping back into bed and falling into a dreamless sleep.

## The Creek

The creek rumbled. *Hungry...*

Its waters defied gravity as they rushed to concentrate around the body. The large creek rocks grew sharp as knives, scratching away at the girl's head. Blood flowed out, turning the murky water red.

"Melissa?" A voice called out, above the cliff ledge.

The creek stilled its ripples. The rocks moved back to their resting places, sharp edges blunting to become natural. The water flowed as normal by the time the friend and police found the dead girl.

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*WOMAN FOUND DEAD IN CREEK – ALCOHOL*

*INVOLVED (1973)*

*DANVERS, August 28 – College student Melissa*

*Raines was found dead in the creek in the woods near Grimly Park yesterday. An autopsy showed the 19-year-old student had alcohol in her bloodstream and it is likely that she died from a head trauma due to the creek rocks. She appeared to have fallen from the ledge of the small cliff above the creek...*

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Justin skimmed the front page story of the newspaper his father was reading and examined the graphic black and white photo of a woman lying waist up in the creek with twigs tangled in her hair and scratches on her arms. He read the caption under the photo

as he slowly munched on his cereal. It was a plain granola cereal that he didn't enjoy. He was procrastinating, hoping he could throw his breakfast away if he waited long enough. The location in the caption caught his eye.

"Oh!" Justin said, "This happened right down the street." His father glanced at him over the top of the newspaper. He was reading the last article about the depleting squirrel population here in Danvers. Justin had heard about that at school – no one knew where the squirrels were going, but the once abundant species were now officially considered "exotic."

"The drowned woman," Justin said. "I didn't realize it was so close." His father closed the newspaper and shook his head.

"People these days: getting drunk and then stumbling into the woods at night for no good reason." His father was done reading this newspaper. Justin watched the woman disappear as the paper was folded in half and placed flat on the table. He wanted to watch some TV before school started, but his father had removed all the televisions from their house for the next few weeks. His father wanted Justin to become knowledgeable about current events through reading the newspaper. Justin supposed he would give it a try; perhaps father and son would bond over the new hobby.

"Honey, look at the time. We need to go!" His mother rushed down the stairs, her head tilted as she clasped her pearl studs into her ears.

"And you," she said to Justin as she kissed her husband on top of his head and then Justin on the cheek, "you need to finish your cereal and get ready to leave, or you'll be late for school."

Justin pouted at her, but decided to make it a game. Who will be done first: him with his cereal or his parents getting out the door. He spooned the last bite into his mouth, chewing while breathing through his mouth to not to taste the boring granola, just as his parents grabbed their bags, yelled “I love you, Justin!” (Here, Justin stopped concentrating on his cereal long enough to reply “Love you, too” back to his parents), and rushed out the door. It was a tie. He saw their car back out the driveway from the kitchen window as he put his bowl in the sink. He poured a glass of OJ and gulped it down to get rid of the granola taste.

Upstairs, Justin changed out of his PJs and into his middle school uniform, the white and dark red contrasting each other like blood in the snow, hot wax sealing an envelope, a dove with a rose. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and left for school.

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*It is to my greatest honor to donate to the town of Danvers five acres of land. The rest of my land should be split evenly between my two children. Let this donated land be put to good use by building a park that allows children to play, adults to relax, and keeps the town safe and out of trouble. To remove any rumors, this land is not cursed. Rumors are merely rumors – nonsense passed down for generations. While the Salem Witch Trials did partake in its burning around this area, there was no witch who haunts the land. A beautiful, scenic park open to the public will fix this reputation...*

*Signed,*

*Bart Grimly (1893)*

*DEATH OF LOCAL BENEFACTOR*

*Danvers, February 3 - Bartholomew Grimly was born, Jan 26, 1861, and departed this life, Jan 30, 1900, aged 39 y. and 4 d. In 1893, he donated his family land to become a public resource for the town of Danvers. Plans have been established to begin the construction of Danvers Grimly Park in 1915 and finish by 1920...*

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There were 20 minutes before school started, so Justin took his time walking. He shuffled his feet against the sidewalk in his slow manner, eyes on the ground, whistling a tune that he had heard on a radio commercial the other day. For some reason, the tune kept re-playing itself in his head. It wasn't even anything meaningful or distinctive to him, just some overused laundry detergent advertisement; the kind that his mother always fell for and went out to buy the next day. After he exited his neighborhood, Justin started to skip. He was glad to be outside. The sun felt warm on his skin. A few blocks ahead of him was the south entrance to the large public park, which he walked through to get to his school.

As he approached the Grimly Park south entrance, Justin stopped skipping and his whistling faded to silence. The normally calm trees looked darker than usual and the lack of people, which never bothered him before, felt eerie. He took the middle path of the

park trails. His heart started to pound and he broke out in sweat. He started speed walking, just wanting to get out of the park as soon as possible.

The benches outlined the walking path and the lampposts stood black against the green of the forest. The tune started playing in his mind again and he started humming along to it. But this time it was different. It was masking something, a nagging flicker trying to get past the tune's shield. It wasn't until he heard the slight flow of running water that he stopped humming.

*It was here.*

The black and white picture replaced the tune in his head and he imagined the dead woman in front of him with her twigged hair and scratched arms, lurching across the path through the woods to get to the creek.

*What could have made her leave the path? Where was she heading?* The article had said that her friend was waiting in a car at the entrance of the park. That is how the police knew where to look when the friend called 911 after waiting for an hour in the car that early morning.

A creaking noise made him jump, but it was only a homeless man on a park bench turning in his sleep.

*Were you there when she fell? Could you have done something?* But Justin couldn't fathom how a bum would have been able to help her. The bottle shaped brown bag near his feet suggested that the two had probably both been in the same intoxicated state that night. Justin shivered and, although tempted to go look at the death site, decided that he was late to school and should hurry along.

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*DEAD MAN IN WOODS – possible suicide (1911)*

*Danvers, January 13 – 35 year-old Benjamin Walters was found frozen to death in a small creek by the woods. Walters was found a mile into the woods away from his home, wearing nothing but pants. His feet were caked with blood and blisters from the path through the woods. There have been no sign of kidnapping or forced movement. Police are investigating this case as a possible suicide from the suicidal thoughts written in his journal...*

*WIFE SENT TO MENTAL INSTITUTE – talk of a killer creek (1911)*

*Danvers, April 3– Widow Martha Walters was sent to the Middleton Mental Institute after being recognized as mentally unstable by her physician. Walters, age 23, was suspected of being involved in her husband's death months earlier, but these were abandoned as the police declared her husband as suicidal. According to neighbors, Walters became weaker mentally and physically as she refused to eat, constantly talking about her husband's discovery of a living creek. Later, Walters declared this creek to be the devil's spawn and the murderer of her husband. Neighbors*



*had to restrain her from pulling out all her hair and  
eventually her physician sent her to Middleton...*

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Justin exited the park and made it to homeroom just in time for announcements. The second bell rang a minute later. His classmates prattled around him about what they did last night, what was for lunch, and the football game yesterday afternoon. They whispered and gossiped and laughed, not paying any attention to their teacher, who started off the day thanking parent donators for supporting the school.

Justin didn't participate in the chatter. But he didn't pay attention to the teacher either. He sat at his desk, thinking about the dead woman in the picture whom he never knew, the bum on the bench who wasn't always a bum, and the kids at this private school who didn't always take education seriously even though their parents worked hard to send them here. He thought deep and hard about the differences in life and why they exist. *I am pondering about the existence of life and the rules that come with it*, he thought, feeling intelligent. *Now I can prove to Dad that I have become more scholarly, and maybe we can get the TVs back.* Then he frowned, because there existed death and alcohol and drowning and homelessness in the world and all he could think about was getting the TVs back.

And he realized all things are related, but people take different paths. Sometimes those paths never cross, other times they intersect more than once. And today was just another day. It was another day for Justin, but it was not another day for the dead woman. It was another day to sleep on the park benches for the bum, but it was not another day where he and his classmates go hungry. He thought about his cereal this morning and

how he had wanted to throw it away just because of its taste – a waste to Justin but a treasure to a hungry man. He scolded himself for having had devised a breakfast procrastination plan; the homeless man from this morning would have appreciated the bland granola. He realized all this now, but when he slept tonight and woke up 20 years from now, while wiser and older then, he wouldn't necessarily understand the impact one woman's picture in the newspaper had on him as well as he did now. Justin smiled in sad realization that he can never look back and see things the same as he used to.

“Did you hear about that woman who drowned near Grimly Park?” Tim, who sat behind Justin, was whispering to Natalie, interrupting Justin's thoughts. Justin strained to hear Natalie's reply over the teacher's announcements.

“I did! What a ditz,” Natalie scoffed and Justin squeezed his fists. He never liked judgmental Natalie with her stuck up attitude.

One time, Justin had been invited to eat lunch with Natalie and her group, but when he sat down at the table, they told him he had to complete some tricks before he could eat. However, Justin refused to steal the upcoming Math test answers from the teacher's office. “Chicken,” Natalie said in a bored voice as the other kids bent their arms under their armpits to flap imaginary wings, screeching out high-pitched “bawk, bawk bawk”s. “Get lost, loser,” Natalie waved him away. Justin learned shortly after that whenever a test was coming up, a different kid would always be invited to eat with them – so long as he would get the test answers.

“My momma says that they're gonna build fences around the park paths to prevent future accidents in the woods,” Tim said, but Natalie dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

“My daddy says that’s just a rumor. The town always says that whenever something drastic happens, but nothing ever gets done. Remember the talk of filling in those darn potholes on Colonial Road? Well, that’s been the talk for years and those potholes still trip people up.”

Justin turned around to look at both of them. “Those potholes never hurt anyone. A human life doesn’t compare to bumpy roads.”

Natalie and Tim stared at him like he was an alien.

“No one asked you. Mind your own beeswax,” Natalie snarled.

“But, anyone with common sense would stay away from the park until the police figure out the whole story,” Tim told Natalie as red-faced Justin turned to face forward.

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*STUDY: MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF  
CHIPMUNKS (1823)*

*Danvers, MA – Observational study shows trend of fast depletion of chipmunk population in Danvers. Before, chipmunks could be seen in abundant numbers for fall, spring, and summer. For the past year, the chipmunks suddenly majorly decreased. Currently, a new study towards possible migration behaviors of chipmunks is being conducted. Scientists also considered the following possibilities: the spread of a new chipmunk targeting disease, a new predator in the area, or developing*

*infertility from the environment. The last option was ruled out due the speed of the disappearance...*

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The next day, Justin walked through the park to take the shortcut through his class. He had a good amount of time today and liked walking through the park. He decided to take a longer path to get to school so as to avoid the death scene. He was whistling and passed a couple sitting on the bench near the South entrance cupid stone fountain, admiring that flowing water that gushed out of the cupid's arrow tip. He greeted them and they smiled at him, instantly recognizing his school uniform. The woman patted her pregnant belly. Perhaps they wanted to send their child to his school later.

Justin heard a rustling in the grass amongst the crunchy, fallen leaves, and turned to look. He saw a squirrel poke its head up and look at Justin, who shouted in surprise.

The couple looked at him and he pointed to the squirrel, but it started to scamper across the path, past them, and the fountain to the other side.

"I haven't seen a squirrel in years!" Justin exclaimed, and the couple nodded nostalgically. The trio said goodbye to each other and Justin left because he had plenty of pre-school excitement.

Whistling in high spirits, Justin was almost at the center of the park when he spotted another squirrel. *Two squirrels in one park?* Justin was skeptical, and inched closer to confirm his eyes. The squirrel looked at him, and then started bounding away. Justin ran to follow it. What if he was following the squirrel back to an entire scurry of squirrels? He'd be famous.

Justin slowed to a walk when the squirrel bounded into the forest. He had run all the way across the park towards the southwest end of the park, where he usually took his shortcut. The squirrel had gone into the woods, where the death site was. Swallowing hard, Justin stepped across the protective line of the edge of the path, towards the dark shadows of the forest. The air here was significantly cooler from the lack of sun and Justin shivered. In the dark, the shades of blacks seemed to dance around him and come alive. *Don't be stupid*, Justin told himself, scowling. *I'm not a chicken! I'm just in the woods near Grimly Park.*

His quest suddenly became one to prove himself by going deeper into the woods, more so than finding the squirrel, which was long gone by now. He heard the flow of running water and curiosity got better of him. He decided to check out the creek that the woman drowned in. As he walked towards the noise, the noise suddenly got louder and seemed to have a smacking noise, as if water on rock. He approached a small cliff. The water sounds were coming from below and he forced himself to look over, making sure he remained a good distance away from the edge.

The creek was flowing with different shades of red. Hundreds of dead squirrels were littered among the banks and within the running water. The creek was extremely full, almost overflowing, with water and looked more like a gushing river than a small creek. The sharp rocks jutted out along the cliff and seemed to be moving as they jammed into the bodies of the squirrels and the entire scene looked like a bloody, gaping mouth. The water noises sounded between a mix of smacking of lips and drooling of saliva for more.

*Hungry...*

Justin heard this word within the water stream.

Screaming, he jumped backward. It was suddenly quiet as if the water completely stopped moving. Still screaming, Justin turned around and ran as fast as he could, towards the sliver of a light that indicated the park, a safe zone.

He knew he had crossed the invisible boundary between the woods and the park when he felt the warmth of the sun back on his face, but he still shivered. *What just happened?* Justin looked back into the woods, hearing the gnashing consumption of the creek's mouth. Then he ran to school.

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*A KILLING CREEK? – Homeless Man's Disorderly  
Conduct (1866)*

*Danvers, September 13 – Weeks since his first  
“discovery”, Michael Puntz has been asked to leave his  
camp on the Colonial Street and re-locate outside of  
Danvers. Puntz, known more commonly as “The Colonial  
Bum”, started talking about a killing creek and has caused  
disturbances in the town. Puntz had previously been caught  
trespassing on Robert Grimly's land but Grimly let him  
avoid charges. Now, he has vandalized several shops by  
writing “THE HUNGRY CREEK WILL EAT YOUR  
BABIES” on their windows and has got into fights with  
school kids. After breaking the nose of fourteen-year-old  
Richard Jones for calling him crazy, Puntz was sent to*

*court for disorderly behavior, whose decision was to  
ultimately send Puntz to the Middleton Mental Institute...*

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Justin walked into homeroom late and his teacher frowned at him for interrupting. He quickly went to his seat and sat – still trying to process what he had seen.

“What happened to you? You look like you saw a ghost,” Tim said, poking Justin in the back. Justin turned around to look at him with wide eyes, but didn’t say anything. What could he say? Natalie laughed at his gaping face.

“Don’t matter. Your beeswax is your own business, right?”

Justin wanted to tell someone what he had seen, but couldn’t think of whom. His teacher? His parents, maybe. He didn’t have anyone his age he could turn to.

“Are we still on for visiting the creek after school?” Natalie asked.

“Of course!” Jenny replied. Justin tensed. He had to say something.

“I still don’t think that’s a good idea...” Tim said. But Natalie dismissed him again.

“Just because you’re too chicken doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun,” she said. Tim shrugged, looking indifferent. “It’s your life,” he said.

“Darn straight,” Natalie smirked. Justin barely processed their words as he saw the squirrel bodies littered on the bloody bank. In his mind, the bodies slowly morphed into those of his classmates, staring up at him lifelessly as the creek rocks became dinner knives.

“Don’t go!” Justin blurted. The classroom got silent, and Justin felt all eyes on him.

“Justin? Is everything okay?” His teacher asked.

“You have to stay away! It’s a killer creek!” Justin whispered to Natalie before turning around to nod slowly to his teacher.

“Please face forward in class,” His teacher said, not unkindly.

He felt a sharp poke into his back then heard Natalie whisper, “Stop sticking your nose into my beeswax, you crazy.”

Throughout school, Justin thought about how to save annoying Natalie and anyone else she was looping into her stupid scheme. He knew that people would follow her just to stay on her good side, however stupid it was. During lunch, he made an anonymous call to the fuzz, but they re-directed him to the mental institute in the next county.

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*MISSING PERSON (1924)*

*Danvers, November 11 – Julie Boston was last seen in the newly established Grimly Park. Boston, 10, was last seen playing near the park benches by the south entrance by her classmates, who left to go home for dinner around sunset. Boston did not return home and a search party was sent out that evening...*

*MISSING PERSON FOUND – drowned in creek (1924)*

*Danvers, November 25 – Julie Boston, age 10, who went missing near Grimly Park two weeks ago was found*



*dead yesterday in the woods near the park. She appeared to have drowned in a small creek flowing in the woods below a small cliff...*

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After Math, Justin went to the principal's office and told the secretary he had an emergency. Once seated into the tall leather chair in the principle's study, Justin went straight to business.

"I overheard a couple girls talking about going to where the high school girl died a few days ago, after school," he said.

"Justin, do you need to lie down for a while? You look awfully pale..." The principle looked concerned.

"No," Justin shook his head, "I'm fine. This is about those girls!"

The principle shrugged. "What do you want me to do? If they're planning to go to a park outside of school hours, I can't really stop them."

Justin squirmed in his seat, gripping the armrests.

"It's not just a park. It's a creek that's killing the squirrels!" He blurted.

The principle stared at him then started chuckling. He got up and led Justin out. "Where do kids these days get their crazy notions from? If you need to rest, ask my secretary for a pass to visit the school nurse. Have a good day, Justin," he said, closing the door.

Justin turned to the secretary and asked for a pass to the nurse's office. The secretary took another look at Justin's pale face, and signed it off as the rest of the day.

Justin knew he had to take things into his own hands to the next level. He gave his science teacher the pass that excused him from class, but instead of going to the nurse's office, he snuck out of school, running towards the park. *I'm going to put a stop to this for once and for all, and I'll save those stupid girls.*

Justin ran to the shortcut through the park as if going home. He ran until the edge of the forest, then walked through the forest and went straight to the cliff and looked down at the creek. It was no longer red and squirrel bodies had disappeared. Perhaps he *had* gone crazy for a while, seeing what he wanted to see instead of what was realistic. The water flowed in a calming manner and he noticed that the air wasn't even that chilly, despite the lack of sun. Why did he come here again? He couldn't remember. *This creek is normal*, he told himself, *and I can even conquer it.*

The cliff wasn't that deep, so he climbed down along the side. When he landed on the bank, he became aware of the sharp edges of the rocks in the water. He watched the water ripple for a while then turned around to head home. *It's a normal creek and I have conquered it.* He grabbed a rock jutting out of the ledge to pull himself up, but it started to wiggle and suddenly slipped out. Justin cried out as he fell backwards into the water. A sharp pain exploded in the back of his head. The sun's rays escaped past the tops of the park trees. The air cooled down and the flowing water began to speed up.

*Hungry....*

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*DEAD BOY NEAR GRIMLY CREEK – drowning similar to  
previous death, police investigating (1973)*

*Twelve-year-old Justin Brown, son of David and Julie Brown was found dead at the same location as recently deceased Melissa Raines. Police are investigating what they suspect to be a possible murder, or possible prank gone very wrong. Grimly Public Park, due to its vicinity to the crime scene, has been temporarily closed until further notice...*

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## Platonic

A boy in a black leather jacket skates by the bench I sit on in Central Park, where I read a novel. As I watch his receding figure become smaller and smaller, a series of memories are triggered.

It started during the summer between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I had just transferred to St. Moore's Boarding School, and was attending summer classes. Campus was quiet during the summer, almost a ghost campus, where students didn't fill the hallways or sit on the grass between classes. Jenny and I were roommates. Everyone else was older so we stuck to each other like old friends who have known each for years, not days.

"So what are you here for?" Jenny asked from her top bunk, lying on her back chewing on twizzlers with a book propped against her stomach on the first night we met each other.

"Introductory Biology," I said from my desk where I was reading my textbook. "I need to take some pre-requisites that my old school didn't cover, and honestly this is the most convenient summer to do it."

"Twizzler?" Jenny asked and tossed me the bag before I could answer. I took one out and threw the bag back. "What a weird time to start your first classes here. You literally don't know anyone right now except me."

"Yeah, I guess. What about you?" I asked.

"Re-taking Algebra," she said. "Anyway, summer classes suck, but hey, at least we'll see the rising seniors around."

At St. Moore's, summer prep classes were offered to rising seniors to prepare for college applications. These classes were only offered the first two months of summer,

giving students plenty of time to go home or travel before the new academic semester started again. Since it was included in tuition, most families planned their summer travels around the prep courses – which were renowned for their usefulness. Rising juniors stayed on campus as well, for similar summer courses in SAT prep. Sophomores and transfers could take certain classes offered, such as my biology class and Jenny’s algebra class, but most rising sophomores preferred to keep their summer open – since their next two would be cut a few months short.

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Every Wednesday night, Jenny ate out with her small group from the church she attended. She never came back until late. Since I had class early in the morning, my nights generally ended early.

“Do you want to come with me?” Jenny had asked the first Wednesday since classes started but I shook my head.

“You’re not Christian or not religious?” She asked.

“Agnostic,” I told her.

“Hey, well, to each her own,” she said before leaving.

I had just gotten into bed when Jenny came back later that night, with a boy behind her. I didn’t notice much except that he was tall with dark hair.

“Oh!” Jenny said.

“Hey,” the boy nodded at me.

“Hi,” I waved from my bed and then Jenny pushed the boy out. “Sorry, Alli, I didn’t know you were sleeping.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. I just got into bed.”

“Well, I’ll give him this and then walk him out. Goodnight!” Jenny grabbed a book from her desk and left.

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The first time I met Zach, Jenny and I were on our way to the dining hall. We had just finished running and had red faces, puffing breaths, dragging feet, and downward heads.

“Jenny,” someone called out. We looked up.

“Hey!” Jenny waved and he walked to us. I recognized him as the boy from the week before. He was very cute. I couldn’t help noticing.

“Jenny, I have your book,” he said, pulling it out of his bag and giving it to her. Then he looked at me. “Who’s your friend?”

“Thanks! Alli, this is my good friend Zach from church. He’s going to be a senior next year,” Jenny said. “Zach, this is Alli, my roommate.”

“Hi, Alli, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He nodded his head in acknowledgement, looking interested, without the polite gaze that people generally had when introduced in passing to someone they would likely never see again.

“Hi,” I said, smiling.

“Well, we’re starved. See you tomorrow, Zach,” Jenny said, taking my hand and dragging me towards the dining hall. I glanced behind me to wave goodbye but Zach was already walking away.

Later that night, I tell Jenny how attractive I found Zach but she shook her head in disagreement. We pointlessly debated who was right for the rest of that night.

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I don't know when we became friends on our own, without having Jenny as the mediator in-between who connected us. After that interaction on the second Tuesday of summer courses, Jenny often took me over to his upperclassman side of campus to pester him.

"Hang out with us," she used to say. "Or are we too cool for you?" The three of us would eat dinner or study in the library together. I learned that Zach was a really good student who got 4.0s because he was genuinely interested in what he was learning. He wanted to be a surgeon and was hoping to go to Johns Hopkins next year. I was shy at first, intimidated by how attractive I found him, but gradually learned to enjoy spending time with them as friends. As the three musketeers.

Three must have bumped to two after I saw him skating on campus about two weeks after we were introduced.

"Hey," I shouted to him, waving, as he skated closer. He squinted and smiled as he stopped in front of me. I couldn't help smiling back at him as I noted the adorable dimple on his left cheek. He looked so cool and I couldn't believe that we were now acquaintances.

"Hey," he said, stepping on the edge of his board to bring it up vertically. "I wasn't sure if it was you at first or not." I pouted in offense that he didn't recognize me right away. "Where are you off to?" He asked.

"To a biology tutoring session," I said. "I didn't know you skated to class."

He shrugged. "It's faster and good practice since I don't have as much time to skate as I used to."

"Can you teach me sometime?"

“Sure,” he said. “Just let me know when you’re free.”

And then there were two.

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Jenny must have caught onto something before I did. Or at least before I admitted it to myself. Definitely before I admitted it to him.

“Alli! Is there something going on between you and Zach? I think he likes you!” Jenny exclaimed as we walk back from dinner with Zach about three weeks after meeting him, one week since I saw him skating across campus. “I’ve never seen him flirt with someone so much since his ex, two years ago.” I couldn’t help but smile, while feeling uncomfortable, not daring to mention how much Zach and I talked every day, since that day. I couldn’t tell her the number of times we had met up alone so far, how close we had become. Jenny was my friend but I felt embarrassed. I’d never had this kind of relationship before, with the amount of meaningless flirting that Zach and I did. I didn’t want her judgment. And I didn’t want her to not like me anymore.

“How can someone as amazing as him possibly be interested in me?” I asked, genuinely confused. She shook her finger at me.

“Stop it,” I laughed and pushed her hand away from my face.

“Alli, you’ve put him on a pedestal. You’re a catch. And he’s not even that amazing or anything. I don’t really understand why you would have a crush on him, but it seems like it’s mutual if you do.”

I shook my head. “No, we’re just regular friends. Plus, he hates romantics, and I’m the very definition of one. And trust me, I’m not interested in him like that – he’s just a friend.”



Perhaps if I had told her then, things would have turned out differently. If I had told her then, we, being the young girls we are, could have turned the entire future around. But I didn't tell her, my best but only friend. I didn't tell her, as I tried not to tell myself.

---

When I was seven, my dad signed me up for basketball camp and basketball teams. "You're going to be a basketball pro," he said, teaching me how to dribble, shoot, and rebound. It was fun and I liked spending time with him. He came to every practice, every scrimmage, and every game. It wasn't until middle school that I realized he was merely projecting his dreams through me. I realized I didn't enjoy basketball for the sport, but for the company. I quit basketball after I made the woman's team of my former high school because I wanted to spend more time committed to long-distance running. My father was upset but accepted defeat graciously.

"Well, if you don't love it for yourself, then you should definitely spend your time on something you do enjoy. I'll support you regardless," he said, putting the basketball away and pulling out his running shoes.

"Lace up, kiddo. Let's qualify for the Boston Marathon."

Even though I lost my basketball finesse, I still retained the delicate basic skills and perfect technique. Zach was impressed the first time we played ball but quickly challenged me for one-on-one. We were both competitive in sports – and we helped each other improve for a sport we had both put away at that time.

I remember our casual sneaking. We had been flirting with hidden gestures and secret smiles, and then flirting turned to shy acts of contact. Shy for me, intentional for

him. We snuck into the school's gym after dark with his basketball to shoot hoops. Common sense told me to go back and sleep. It was late and not only did I have a class tomorrow, but my midterm was the next week. Adrenaline decided that sneaking around with Zach would be fun. This was the night where we defined what we were.

Purely for fun. Just for the summer. Exclusive.

"This ends when school starts. No romance," he said, passing me the basketball.

"We keep this on the down low. We can't tell anyone, especially not Jenny," I said and shot the ball. Nothing but net. He rebounded and walked over.

"If anyone falls for the other, we end it immediately, and we tell each other honestly," he said, eyeing me.

I punched his shoulder, "Are you implying something? Please, you're not my type."

He laughed, "I can be extremely charming when I want to be. Consider this a warning." I hit his shoulder again. No strings attached.

He passed me the basketball. I shot and the ball went in. He caught it.

"Just... no sex," I said.

He tossed the basketball back to me. "What kind of friends with benefits doesn't fuck?" I shrugged and made another shot. He grabbed and held it, waiting for my answer.

"Oh, you know," I said nonchalantly. "The kind that doesn't fuck." He laughed again and I memorized that laugh – one of my favorite laughs – one that makes me keep wanting to be funny so I can keep hearing it, knowing I was the reason for it.

"Fine," he said, passing the ball again. "No sex."

The weekend after our shooting game, Zach went home to bring his car to campus. Parking during the summer was more lenient because fewer students were present, so the school offered a reduced rate for summer parking. He picked me up after class that Monday.

“Where can we go to hang out?” He asked as he pulled out of the main campus gate.

“I told you, I can’t hang out. My first test is on Thursday.”

“You’ll be fine. Summer school classes are easier than regular classes anyways.”

“No. Unlike some people,” I said pointedly, “I don’t get 4.0s. I really need to do well in this class.”

He frowned. “Fine, I’ll study with you in the public library then.” I grinned at him and he turned on his blinker to make a turn at the next light into the library driveway.

It’s taboo. It’s forbidden. It’s wrong. But parked at a secluded spot in the library parking lot in the middle of the day of the summer where kids come and go into the library with their parents, we fooled around for the first time in the backseat of the car.

“No sex,” I reminded him. He frowned, “So I’ve heard.” He leaned towards me but I turned my head sideways so he landed on my cheek. It wasn’t very comfortable for my neck. I looked back up when he sat up.

“Also, I’ve never kissed anyone before,” I said, blushing. He stopped what he was doing and stared at me in disbelief.

“Ever? How come?” He was on top of me so it was hard to look anywhere else except at him.

“You know... That idea of the first time being with someone special I’ve known forever.”

He smirked, “You and your firsts...” He paused. “Well, as cheesy as it sounds, you’re special to me and I really want to kiss you, however big of a romantic you are.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know how, what if I mess up.”

“If you let me, I can teach you,” he said. I nodded. And just like that, my first kiss was stolen away.

---

I get carried away in movies. I remember re-watching Disney movies at sleepovers when I was in middle school with my best friend at the time and instead of going to bed afterwards when we were supposed to, we stayed up all night discussing which princess had the best happy ending, and who we would be like if we could choose.

“I’d be Sleeping Beauty,” she said, holding her arm to her forehead, feigning fainting.

“Why Aurora?” I’d ask.

“Because her first kiss was her true love,” she’d reply from the ground.

“Well, her true love must first fight the evil queen!” I’d pick up a ruler and we’d fight for the princess’ honor.

“Go to bed, girls,” Her mother yelled from her room and we’d drop our weapons and dive under the bed covers. When no footsteps came, when no door opened, when no more sound travelled down the hallway, we would giggle and sit back up.

“My first kiss will be my true love,” I told her seriously. “My children will only be with my true love, too. My true love will be my husband.”

She nodded solemnly and we talked more before falling asleep.

I haven't seen those Disney classics in a while, but do find myself getting carried away in rom-coms and chick-flicks. The cheesy pick-up lines, the cliché flowers, the corny attempts to show interest. These used to be my weaknesses. I valued my firsts and told myself I'd save myself for my man. He'd have to know me well, and we'd have to have been together for at least a year. He didn't necessarily have to be the person I marry, but that'd be a nice bonus. I valued my firsts, so whenever a boy tried to kiss me in middle school, I would turn away.

"Prude," some boys said. "Scaredy-cat," some girls said.

But I ignored them, because I was doing this for myself. Not peer pressure, not religion, not parents, but because I wanted to. I believe that I will find my man, and I had wanted him to be my first everything.

Now, I realize that firsts are an ideal. They don't necessarily mean much, but that doesn't mean they don't mean anything at all. I will teach my daughters to try to not give into firsts until they are ready. But I won't force it, because lessons are learned from firsts, which are experiences meant to be explored. And sometimes, firsts come when you aren't ready, and those times could be worth remembering more than when you are.

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Zach used to go on photo excursions during the summer. Whenever the three musketeers were together, he'd bring his camera, taking photos of Jenny, photos of me, photos of me and Jenny, photos of our surroundings, capturing the happiness of the moment on lens. He found improvement through practice, and practice from campus. That day, he took me with him while roaming campus to take pictures of different

buildings. He got his photos, and I learned more about this campus that I would be living at for the next three years.

“I love flowers. There’s something about them,” he told me. I studied him as he bent to take shots of white tulips on the ground. I believe it was that day that I first got the notion to buy him the flower calendar.

“Flowers are beautiful. Especially purple ones,” I said. Our campus was lovely, with carefully planted flowers around campus, spreading a wide range of colors.

He laughed, “You and your purple. I’ll be sure to send you pictures of every purple flower I see from now on.” He’s thinking of me, I realized as I watched him get up to take pictures from different building angles. Even though he was targeting buildings that day, he always stopped to carefully focus his DSLR lens on every patch of flowers we encountered. Towards the end, we were near the chemistry building.

“Sit here,” he instructed. I was only with him that day to keep him company but I went to the bench and posed dramatically, changing every few seconds like a real model as he aimed his DSLR lens at me and clicked the shutter.

“Good,” he approved, quickly looking over what he had taken. Then he came over and kissed me for the first time out in the public. Not that there was anyone around. Not that we were dating.

---

I visited his room often that summer. It was no contest as to which place was more convenient. He with no roommate versus me with Jenny.

“What’s that?” I pointed to a covered book on the edge of his window next to his Bible and the poster-sized card I made for him. In miniscule writing, the colorful amount

of text surrounded pictures of us, motivational quotes, and images of flowers scattered around in an artistic manner. He had accepted the card and the flower calendar simultaneously surprised and pleased.

He looked up from his studying at his desk and moved to sit on the bed. I picked up the book. Such a small thing but stuck to my memory. It was completely covered in a homemade book cover of white printer paper. Tape held it together.

“It looks like a present. Can I open it?” He nodded and watched me flip through the pages. That was the first time I ever saw or heard about a Christian dating book.

Chapter titles overwhelmed me as I thought about high school senior Zach contemplating marriage before he even met his future spouse. *Finding the right girl for you. Finding room for God. Is the time is right? Sex versus making love.*

“I bought that a year ago after going to church with my mom one day,” he said slowly, drawing circles on my right leg.

“Why’d you cover it up?”

He stopped drawing circles but keeps his hand there. “I was embarrassed when I bought it,” he said. I refused to look at him, but I was fully aware of his fingers on my leg.

“Would you only marry a Christian?”

“Yes,” he said, not hesitating to think. *We’re too young*, I wanted to say. I wanted to leave his room before I dug myself into a deeper hole but I seemed to leave my body as I watched our encounter from above. My mouth asked, “Would you only date a Christian?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure. But I’m also not going to date anyone for a while. I’ve dated too many girls and I’m only getting older. The next girl I date will be my wife.” I could tell he was hopeful that his dream girl would show up soon, and I knew I was not she. I didn’t want it to be me. I knew I didn’t want to marry him. I was too young and had my entire life to find the one for me, as my romantic side believed I would. I had only known Zach for a few months, even if it felt like years at the time. But I was still upset.

There was a pause. “Why?” he asked. I put the book back next to my poster and his Bible. “No reason,” I said and went to the bathroom to splash cold water on my face.

---

The week before my summer final exam, Zach told me he needed to visit IKEA to buy furniture before he went home. St. Moore’s gave each student a summer/winter storage space where we could keep our belongings. Some dorms were furnished, but as we got older, we were given more freedom, and with freedom came responsibilities. Senior housing wasn’t furnished, and Zach wanted to store what he could at school instead of moving it back and forth with him once prep classes ended.

He asked me to go to IKEA with him over the weekend. When I told Jenny I would be gone all day, she gave me a look.

“Isn’t the closest IKEA three hours away?” She asked as she watched me try on different outfits.

“I think so,” I said as I decided on jean shorts and a fashionable tank top.

“You look nice,” she said suspiciously and I laughed.

“Calm down, Jenny, we’re just friends. I’m going as his friend,” I promised her and she opened her laptop at my dismissal.



“Since when would he ask *you* over me?” she said quietly as I left our room and the beginning crack of our friendship emerged.

At IKEA, we jumped onto different display beds and roll around a bit, not acting our age. He didn’t need to buy a mattress because he already had one that he was going to bring from home but he wanted to look at the bedframes. Eventually, he selected one that he liked and we moved into the other sections of the store. In one of the display bathrooms, he opened the solid white sliding door to reveal the tiniest shower unit. When he saw how small it was, he stepped in, grabbed me inside, and closed the door. He grinned and then kissed me, his hands in my hair and mine around his back. Just as quickly, we broke apart and slid the door open, stepping back out.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day,” he said, taking my hand to hold it as we kept walking, three hours away from anyone who could possibly recognize us. As if we were a couple.

I helped him pick out a mirror, shelving, and chairs when we got to those divisions of IKEA. Then we entered the lamps section. He was picky and wanted a specific kind of floor lamp, tall lamp, and desk lamp. We examined the desk lamps and floor lamps and he picked out matching ones that he liked. As he looked around for a tall lamp, I look at the hanging lamps section. There were so many beautiful styles: twigs of nature, modern, chandeliers, and colored. When I got to the last row, I saw baby lamps meant for bedsides. I was looking through the lampshades when I saw the flowered one. It was the exact pattern of Zach’s comforter and pillow cover, both of which he was very proud of. I grabbed a lamp and lampshade and put it in the cart.

Later, at the check out line, he pulled the baby lamp and lampshade from the cart and put it on the checkout stand. I saw his private smile at the pattern but he didn't look at me and continued to unload the other items.

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I often think about how Jenny and I drifted apart during that time. We weren't as close as before I met Zach, and I definitely will take part of the blame for that. But, even afterwards, her possible jealousy seemed to prevent her from making complete amends with me. As Zach and I got closer, Zach and Jenny drifted apart.

I met up with her throughout high school, long after Zach graduated, and we often laughed at our behavior that summer when we were roommates, agreeing to put it behind us.

"We're meant to be friends," Jenny said to me. "We were meant to be roommates that summer before you knew anyone else. It was so we could figure out that, even if we drift apart or get into fights, we will still always be here for one another in the end. I can't explain it, but I know it's God's plan for us. Things were meant to happen for a reason."

I thought about Jenny as Zach and I drove back from IKEA. It was normal to drive three hours out and three hours back to go furniture shopping for senior housing, wasn't it? He would do this with Jenny or with his future roommate, wouldn't he? There's nothing special about him asking me. Jenny was wrong. I tried to convince myself but part of me hoped there was more meaning to him asking me of everyone else.

Because, no matter what I told myself, it wasn't normal. Plenty of his friends had known him for years. Me, just a month.

"Let's play truth or dare," he said about halfway through the trip coming back.

“Jeez, I haven’t played this game since like middle school,” I said. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” he said. I couldn’t think of anything good so I dare him to prank call someone.

“Oh my god, Alli, that is such a lame dare,” he laughed. “Also, you do know I’m the king of all pranks, right? This is right up my alleyway.” He did it and I laughed at his New Jersey accent.

“Truth or dare?” He asked. I decided to be adventurous. Besides, we were in a car, what could he dare me to do?

“Road head.”

I stared at him blankly. He glanced over at me when he didn’t sense a reaction.

“Oh. You don’t know what that is.”

“No,” I said.

“It’s like a blow job, but while driving.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

“That can’t be safe,” I said.

He laughed. “I’m a good driver. It’ll be okay.” But I crossed my arms over my chest.

“No. Pass.”

He looked at me as if to argue but decided against it.

“Fine, party pooper. I’ll take a hand job for your dare instead.” He said. I hesitated – that couldn’t be very safe either. I didn’t even know people did this on the highway – but reached over anyway.

---

I was simultaneously glad and sad when summer school ended. I hadn't done well on my exam, and knew I didn't have a good start for St. Moore's, so I was glad the class was over. I told myself that I had been distracted, but I promised myself I wouldn't let that happen again, especially during the school year. Who would've known promises were meant to be broken?

I was excited to finally go home and see my family. But going home meant not seeing Zach or Jenny until school started.

The rest of summer was quick with two months of it already gone. Jenny and I didn't talk much, as expected during vacation. But Zach and I communicated every day, occasionally video calling each other when we could. I overanalyzed everything – every word, every detail, and every memory. Normal friends didn't buy chocolates and dinner for each other all the time. Normal friends didn't always hold the passenger door open. Normal friends didn't talk to each other every second of the day from “good morning” to “good night.” Normal friends didn't do romantic gestures for each other – and I'm a sucker for romance. If we were normal friends, I told myself, he would have been friend-zoned already.

I stayed in touch with him even when I went to Hawaii for a week.

I stayed in touch with him even when he went to London with his friends.

I stayed in touch with him even when I found out he drank too much and drunk texted me about fucking while touching another girl.

I stayed in touch with him even when I found myself hating myself for the dependent girl I had become.

I stayed in touch with him even when I knew I was falling for him. By then I knew I couldn't deny the truth to myself anymore.

---

I remember that night in August, a week before the first day of classes. I had moved into my new room at St. Moore's, in a different building from summer housing. I was a few days early, and most girls on my hall were still on vacation. Jenny told me she would be coming back the day before classes, and my new roommate wasn't to arrive until the next night.

As for Zach, I hadn't seen him since summer school ended a month earlier. I knew he had moved back to St. Moore's a week earlier because of his new internship for senior year. I always thought about asking him to do something together, but decided against it because I didn't want to seem too clingy. Plus, he hadn't asked me to hang out either. Today, however, I was too tired to text. I really wanted to see him, so what the hell, who even makes up those dumb social rules about playing games or being mysterious anyways? I asked him if he wanted to get dinner.

When I stepped out of my room, he was parked in the spot right in front, leaning against his car. My heart started beating harder. I reminded myself that the summer was almost over. But a part of me still over-analyzed about why he still came to pick me up and get dinner, how was he attracted to me in the first place, and did he ever actually like me for me and not my body at all this summer?

Zach grinned and went to the passenger side to hold the door open.

"Thank you," I said, suddenly formal as if I didn't know him. As if we didn't have some sort of history together. He went to the driver's seat.

“How have those abs exercises been going?” He asked me, referring to my new resolve to use a 5-minute abs phone app every day. “Spot reduction doesn’t work, you know,” he said and I began to feel as if I had known him all my life again as we debated about the usefulness of crunches and sit-ups for the third time.

After dinner, we went to a local Cold Stone Creamery for dessert. Of course, I ordered chocolate devotion while he got French vanilla. I made fun of him for being so plain and boring as we sat outside and he jokingly punched me in the shoulder before grabbing my wrist to lick all over the chocolate ice cream. Then he made a face at the taste. *We were regular friends now. School starts in three days.* I had to constantly remind myself.

Around 10 PM, we looked up at the sky for the meteor showers that were supposed to be happening tonight. But, the trees blocked our vision except for the distant moon, glowing like a white shadow in the distance.

“I moved in yesterday,” he said. “To the senior building.”

“How is it? Do you like it?”

“It’s good. Ben doesn’t move in until Tuesday so it’s still kind of empty.” There was a pause. “Do you want to come look at it?”

I glanced at him but he was looking up at the trees and moon shadow.

“Okay,” I said. He looked at me and smiled and I wanted to touch his dimple and kiss him but I just smiled shyly back, looked at the moon shadow and clasped my hands under the table. Regular friends.

We got back to St. Moore’s campus and he showed me his room. He went to the kitchen to clear something up while I explored his new room. Some IKEA boxes

remained unopened while others had already been removed of their contents. His walk-in closet was larger than I expected. I was admiring the organization of his clothes, suits, and professional shoes when strong arms wrapped around me from behind and he leaned his head against my shoulder.

“I’ve missed you,” he said. I closed my eyes and counted to three to clear my mind before turning around.

“We said only through the summer. Summer’s over.” He gave me a look and I knew I should probably leave. But desire overpowered self-control.

“Technically, classes don’t start until Thursday,” he said, taking my hand and leading me out of the walk-in closet. His wide desk was already set up along with the bookshelves and drawers. He had his bed set up in the corner next to the window. A small flower lamp sat on his windowsill.

“That’s true...” I said and looked at the flower calendar that I had given him hanging on his wall and then we were on his bed, entwined and tangled. Somewhere our clothes came off along the way.

“Hey,” he said looking at me, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Hi,” I said before he kissed me and it was so slow and so good yet quick enough that I didn’t process or maybe I didn’t want to process and by the time it was over we laid there, breathing heavy, me in shock and him next to me.

“Oh my god,” were the first words out of my mouth. “Oh my god,” I kept repeating, getting more and more wild by the moment. He tried calming me down and hugged me until I stopped using his lord’s name in vain. Afterwards, we got dressed and he drove me home. I didn’t know if I hated him or loved him or felt something in

between. And I knew I couldn't tell Jenny. There was no way I could tell anyone. Whether it was shame or hurt I decided that my judgment wasn't worth much anymore. When we got to my building, he gave me an awkward hug over the car console and then I climbed out. After he had driven away, I took a long shower where tap and salt water intermixed as romantic dreams of saving my virginity washed from reality.

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When I was in middle school, my best friend cried during lunch when her boyfriend broke up with her. In public, I had hugged her, brushed her hair, patted her back, and told her he was too stupid to see how amazing she was. But secretly, I had felt embarrassed of her, and vowed myself to never cry over a boy. I looked in my dresser mirror that night, with my long hair falling past my shoulders, brown eyes staring wide back at me.

"They're not worth it," I told myself. "I'll never humiliate myself by crying over a boy."

They say the wise only get wiser as time goes on, because with time comes experience.

Zach had faded away. I counted the days until he would contact me and forced myself to stay away from contacting him. My resolution broke the day before school started, and I asked if he wanted to get lunch. His rejection chipped the black box of suppressed emotions. He's busy, he has other friends, he'll have time for me, don't worry, I told myself. But the black box was hammered at with each rejection he gave, each failed attempt to not contact him I made, and each new day until I finally came to a resolution that he was out of my life.



When he finally contacted me first, I was outside with the other sophomore girls on my hall making s'mores. He sent me a joke but instead of laughing, I glared at my phone.

"Screw you, bastard," I said under my breath and replied verbatim. He didn't respond.

Later that night, I went to Jenny's room, crying as I told her all about that summer fling and what I assumed was the end of a one-sided precious friendship. Then I thought about my middle school best friend and wiped away my tears. Not worth it, I tried to tell myself.

I thought about him every day after that night but I didn't contact him. His name in my message list dropped lower and lower as I made new friends every day. I was the new transfer sophomore student, and people were curious about me.

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"Don't go. Stay here with me." Jenny begged. I glanced back down at Zach's text. "You're better than this, Alli. Plus, it's already 11pm. Let it go," Jenny said. But I had already made up my mind.

Heart pounding and with sweaty hands, I left Jenny's room. Seeing him sitting on the bench with his black leather jacket and brown boots, I had to gather myself by taking deep breaths before approaching him.

"Hi," I said. He looked at me and stood up but didn't smile. His left cheek remained smooth and dimple-less.

"Hi."

We stood there for a moment and I folded my arms, feeling awkward. What was I doing? Why was I even talking to him? I missed him, but that was the Zach I knew before, the Zach I thought he was, the guy who I could tell anything to, the guy I trusted. The person standing in front of me was a stranger.

“Where do you want to talk?” I asked.

“There’s a walkway on top of the chemistry building,” he said. “The outside steps lead to it. It’s a nice view and we could talk there.” We walked towards the chemistry building. With my hands folded and his in his pockets, we made awkward small talk about how we’ve been since we last had contact. The chemistry-building bench that he took my photo on reminded me of summer.

“How’s your photography going?” I asked him as we started climbing the building stairs. When we reached the top, I looked out in awe.

“I’ve never been up here before,” I said.

“It’s peaceful,” he said. We sat down side by side on the walkway, our backs leaning against the iron railings as we faced the chemistry building structure. I stared straight ahead at the staggered lights inside the chemistry building.

“Alli, what happened? Why are you mad at me?”

“You drifted away,” I said. “After that night at Cold Stone. Summer was almost over. We were *literally* three days away, and still that night happened and then you basically disappeared. *You* disappeared first. Summer is over, you got what you want, and you used me and left. You got what you want, and fine, if that’s what you want then so be it. I don’t want anything else to do with you.”

I refused to blink because my eyes started welling up. He cleared his throat.

“Alli, I haven’t been sleeping well this past entire week. I can’t pay attention in class and my housemate keeps asking me what’s wrong with me and why I’m playing old school emo music all the time. I can only think of my best friend who I lost by being a dumbass. I’m sorry you thought I only got what I wanted and then left. That isn’t true. I really do think you’re my best friend as well, and when I got your angry text calling me a bastard, I didn’t know what to do or what I had done. So I asked Jenny what to do, and she told me to give you space. That’s why I haven’t contacted you this past week but I couldn’t wait any longer and I needed to see and talk to you so I held out until now.”

“What about right after Cold Stone?”

“I wasn’t lying when I said school was getting real tough. You know I want to get into Johns Hopkins and I really need to show them that I won’t burn out during my last year. I need to do well and my classes this semester are tough. I’m sorry I couldn’t hang out but I was really busy, just like I told you. I wasn’t ignoring you or ditching you or rejecting you because I wanted to. And I didn’t only want to hang out with you for benefits. I like you as a person and I like hanging out with you for you.”

I wiped my eyes. “I really trusted you. I told you over and over again how I was a romantic and how important to me “firsts” were... but you still... we broke my one condition.”

I looked over at him now and he hung his head. “I’m really sorry.” His voice cracked.

He looked at me. And I had hope. I thought that maybe he did care; maybe he was who I thought he was. So I was quick to let desire push away intuition.

“Can we still be friends?” He asked. I reached over to hug him.

“Yes,” I said. He gave me a strong squeeze and then we let go.

“So, since summer is over, we are back to being regular friends,” he said. I nodded.

“Completely nonphysical. Now, you can go find your Christian doctor or nurse girl,” I joked, ignoring the twist in my gut at this not-so funny jest.

“Yeah,” he laughed and disappointment stirred within me.

“Wow, it’s already been 4 hours!” I stood up. Zach checked his phone in surprise as we headed down back towards the sophomore building, where he had parked. At one of the intersections, instead of crossing the street, however, he grabbed my arm and gestured a right turn.

“Alli, do you want to see something even prettier than the walkway view?”

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We ended up at the parking deck. It all felt liberating and dangerous. We ran up the stairs, all seven floors, and even though I was puffing by the time we got to the top, I mustered enough energy to push through the doors with him that led to the roof level of the parking deck. My exhaustion was wiped away as I looked up in awe at the scatter of stars across the sky. The constellations above twinkled as the stars shone and the light breeze cooled down the hot summer humidity. The moon illuminated down on the town. I stood at the doorway looking up until he grabbed my wrist. I let him pull me across the empty parking lot. We stumbled at first and then broke into a synchronized run to the other end of the parking lot, to the edge of the concrete wall that let us see below. We put our elbows on the wall and leaned against it. My attention moved away from the sky towards the ground. I felt the urge to shout, to holler at the sleeping campus about how

great life is and let my voice be heard. But I didn't shout. The urge submitted to a sense to not disturb this beautiful nighttime stillness.

Zach watched me watch below. After the excitement from the newness of it all settled down, I realized that his dark eyes were focused on me, examining my every facial detail. I turned away but he grabbed my hand and pulled me to the middle of the parking deck. We sat down on the chilled concrete ground, with our backs to each other for support, our attention back on the clear sky.

"I used to come here at night to skate," he said. I leaned my head backwards against his right shoulder and he turned his head to press his forehead against my right cheek. I felt the tickle of his eyelashes as he blinked before closing his eyes.

"I always rode the elevator to the top and skated all the way to the bottom as fast as I could. There are usually no cars at night after ten, so anytime after was always the perfect time to skate."

"Shame on you, taking the elevator instead of skating up," I mocked and he laughed. I smiled, my eyes trailing the path of a faraway airplane.

"You never taught me how to skate," I said, tilting my head slightly to nudge him.

He laughed and lifted his head, "You never told me when you were free." I tried not to feel disappointed at the sudden rush of coolness where his forehead had provided warmth against my cheek. He shifted to face me and we sat side-by-side, crisscross applesauce, in the middle of the large concrete space, with only the stars and moon as our witnesses.

“Let’s play truth or dare,” he said suddenly. “Let’s continue our game from the summer. Truth or dare?” A friendly game as renewed companions, I reminded myself.

“Truth,” I said and somehow we ended up sitting closer together, our knees touching.

“Would you kiss me back if I kissed you right now?” He asked me. My eyes fell to his face and landed on his lips. I felt something stir inside me as I thought of our library trips over the summer. I looked back at his eyes.

“No.” I said, completely resolute. He smirked at me and uncrossed his legs, sitting with his legs upright and bent, surrounding me.

“Truth or dare,” I asked him, quickly.

“Dare,” He said and I was relieved. Truth be told, I didn’t know what I wanted to ask him of all the things I did want to know. I didn’t want him thinking I was insecure. Why did he really start talking to me again – for my personality or for my body? Did he really think I was his best friend like how I slowly had come to find he was mine? I shook my head and he studied me. He leaned forward a bit.

“I dare you to go to the wall and shout over the edge one thing you’re thankful for.” I said, just to get rid of him. But I was also curious as to what he would say. I uncrossed my legs into the position he was in earlier to stretch out my legs. He, thankfully, left my proximity and went to the walled edge of the parking deck.

He stood there, a figure contemplating out into the world, before putting his hands to his mouth and shouting, “I AM THANKFUL THAT ALLI HAS FORGIVEN ME!” I blushed and watched the moon while he came back over. He stood right above me until I

looked up at him and then squatted in front of me, right between my bent knees, remaining on the balls of his feet with his heels off the ground.

“Truth or dare,” he asked in a dead serious voice.

“Dare,” I said, holding his gaze.

“Kiss me.”

I laughed, breaking eye contact. When I looked back at him, he remained where he was, face still serious.

“What? You can’t be serious. First of all, my truth said I wouldn’t kiss you back, so if I kiss you, I’d be a liar, which defeats the purpose of this game.” I was stalling for time, because I could feel the part of me holding out slowly caving to the desire to give in, unless I could outwait this stupid impulse to pass.

“Also,” I said, “we agreed literally an hour ago, that we were going to be *friends* only. Purely platonic. With *no more* fooling around.” Zach scooted closer to me. I leaned away a little, uncertain. He leaned closer slowly, putting his hands on the floor to support his weight. I put my hands against his shoulders, as if to push him away.

“Let’s see how well your abs exercises work,” he smirked, his eyes focused on mine. I didn’t break eye contact as I leaned backwards at the rate he leaned forward.

Then, without warning and before I would have given out and fallen backwards on to the ground, he suddenly closed the thin space between us and kissed me, one hand on the ground continuing to support his weight on top of me, the other finding its way to the back of my head as he guided me to the floor completely, allowing my head to rest on his hand so that the concrete wouldn’t scratch me. The atmosphere changed as it became filled with old, ease, and habit as my arms wrapped around his neck and my legs brushed

against his. I closed my eyes and returned the kiss, dismissing the fact that I was a liar and our platonic contract hadn't lasted more than a few hours. *He will never date you...* the nagging thought lingered until I pushed it deep down into a black space that would soon be forgotten. Because in the moment, everything became so, so familiar as soon as his lips touched mine, and it felt almost as if the past week hadn't even happened. I was taken back to the carefree time of longing, pounding hearts, and hope – but hope for what? Even I didn't know the answer - and, in the moment, I refused to ask myself, *Truth: What was I getting myself into?*