



A KISS OF JAMESON

SIERRA WHITE

Prose Contest First Place

It is 7:35 pm when I get the text.

Cass: pregame in dreads room come down

Cant. Chem test Monday sry b:(

Turning my attention to the splay of papers in front of me, I start to sift through chapter three of eight that I still need to look over. I swear, not even five seconds later, I hear the unmistakable sound of my phone's vibration. I sigh before answering her call on the third ring.

"Ava! Get your ass down here, girl! It's Friday night, have a little fun!" Cassidy screams in my ear, making it evident she has already started her version of 'fun.' She wasted no time forgetting about her homework this weekend. Like she always said, "Ain't no shame in an early pregame." My eyes graze over the list of formulas I had just written down in my notes before putting my head into my hands and letting out an exasperated sigh.

"Cass, you know I can't. I just have too much."

"Come onnnnn Carter will be here," she teases. It is as if I can see the smile form on her lips through the line.

Honestly, I can't believe how easily I gave up. Actually, I can. It's probably because at that moment I would rather do anything besides chem. Hell, I would be content just watching paint dry. After taking four chemistry classes over the course of my entire life, "chemisery" is a term I am well acquainted with. I am burnt out. I deserve a break, right? I start to create an itinerary: I would hang out for a few hours, nurse a beer, and then get right back to work around 10:30-11. Plus, it's just a kickback with friends. I'd be safe, right?

That was my first mistake.

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I don't know why I hate the rain. Fall and Spring are the worst—they're our wet seasons here. I remember when I was six and the transformer blew at school. My first-grade teacher, Mrs. Cunningham, had to sit with me in the dark for all of recess because I was crying so hard. She had told my mom she had never seen such an outburst from a student before. She suggested therapy, but Momma said it was just a phase that would pass with time. She was wrong.

There was another time at my Oma's house when it stormed. Oma means 'grandma' in German. (She said it was because it was easier to say, but Opa thought that it was because she didn't like how old she felt being called a grandmother. She is a proud woman in that sense.) Anyways, it was a perfectly clear day. The sun was shining, and there wasn't a single a cloud in the sky, but Opa said he could feel it about to storm in his bones. In his bones! Sure enough, not even two hours later it started to rain. I've read that animals can sense it, too. That's why Mama made me put the horses in the stable when they started bucking and acting all strange. It was a pretty good sign that a thunderstorm was approaching.

Over the years, I've started to pick up on the signals: the way the sparrows and squirrels closed themselves in the bird boxes Opa and I made and how the cat would go hide in the shed. The air would smell funny, too, like that warm grassy smell you just have to experience for yourself. It would stick to your lungs the way one's thighs stick to a leather car seat, leaving behind a sort of humid dewiness. Something about certain scents just linger around like that even miles away when you thought you've escaped them, and it isn't until you smell it again that you're taken back to those specific moments. I guess that's what rain would do to me. It gave off this feeling of hiding like the squirrels did. I felt trapped, helpless even, at the smell.

“Look who finally showed up!”

I am greeted by a clamor of voices and Cass’s head colliding with my collarbone in a warm but clumsy embrace before I take my spot on Drew’s bed. At this point, Drew tells me he has already cut Cass off and for good reason. Drew is practically holding his girlfriend up at this point. He sets her down on the extra bed in his room before addressing me. “Where have you been?” Drew asks as he hands me a cold one from the fridge, pops the tab and plops down beside me.

“She’s been studying like a loser!” Cass slurs, before getting distracted and laughing at something on her phone. I shake my head—girl really can’t handle her liquor. I mean, I wasn’t that much bigger than her, but I’d never been this bad off beer.

“Yeah, basically though. Hawkins scheduled a Monday exam.” I roll my eyes as I take a sip, letting the malty texture coat the back of my throat.

“Nerd.” Drew replies. “Shoulda just dropped his class when ya had the chance like I did, but hey, it’s Friday. Live a little.” He shrugs, downs his beer, crushes the can on his forehead, and shoots it in the trash. He gives me one of those “I’m hot shit” looks and I roll my eyes.

I’d known Drew since my first day at Bradley. He had offered to help carry some of my boxes up to my dorm for me. I had been really scared for starting college so far away from my home in South Carolina and Drew made me feel like it wouldn’t be so bad. He had become the brother I never had. He was the reason I met Cass. They had been dating since seventh grade. They were the epitome of the term “relationship goals.” “If only my ex could have taken some tips from them.

“So what’s this thing you got going on with Carter? Gotta know if I’m gonna have to fight him. I mean, we both know he doesn’t stand a chance against these guns.” He says pulling me into a chokehold and half-flexing.

“Weakkkkk! Do you even lift, bro?” I squeal through a ragged breath. Drew could easily R’KO me right here. He was one of those guys who bought protein powder by the bulk and got up at 5 every morning to go lift but would never actually fight anyone. He let me go and started laughing.

“But really, what is going on?” He asks.
I shift a little on the bed.

Honestly, I don't know what it was that Carter and I were doing. We hung out sometimes after class, but I wasn't sure what entirely we were. We had kissed maybe twice, but that was really it. I guess we were friends with benefits—limited benefits that is.

"I honestly couldn't tell ya. Too soon to tell I guess." I shrug my shoulders and finish off my beer. That was as much as I knew to be true. I had just gotten out of a long-term relationship where the boy had cheated on me because he "didn't know how hard long distance would be." Carter was nice though. He wasn't like my usual taste in guys. He was more spontaneous, and I liked that about him. I wasn't sure if I was ready to jump into a relationship right now, but I did enjoy his company.

"But you like him, right? I just don't want you to—"

"Ayyyyyy, I brought the good stuff!" A voice bellows, turning our attention to the door. A tall boy with chocolate brown hair and green eyes walks in with a bag over his head. He's wearing an oversized white Red Sox jersey which is unbuttoned to reveal a fitted white Hanes tee underneath—classic frat boy outfit. A large number sixteen is on his back,—Andrew Benintendi. Not a bad choice, I think.

"Carter!" Cassidy screams, holding her red cup up high before making her way over to the fridge. Drew whispers something to her, probably about how she should drink some water because she starts to pout and head back to her bed. Carter is pouring out double shots and throwing them back like it's water. He hands one to Drew, then looks at me. He nods, motioning to the shot glass in front of me. "Ava."

I shake my head. "I'm good. I think I'll just stick with beer tonight. I got an exam I have to study for later." Drew starts to step in, but Cass whispers something in his ear and drags him away toward her.

"Come onnnn. Just one? It's your favorite," Carter teases. I peer at the liter of mango rum sitting on Drew's desk. What the hell. I deserve a break. With a smile on my lips, I reach for the clear liquor. Our fingertips touch slightly as the glass moves between our hands. Tilting it back, I taste the sweet mango for a second before it's overtaken by a burning feeling in the back of my throat. Carter laughs.

"Dang, girl. Easy." He smirks as he pours another. "One more." I know I shouldn't, but his smile is so contagious, and I don't wanna be a buzzkill.

“One more.” I tease.

He hands me the glass and shakes his head.

I throw my head back. This time my vision gets a little fuzzy and I can no longer taste the mango, only the burning feeling of regret.

“Are you sure you don’t wanna go to Sig with us?” Cass asks. She’s seemed to have bounced back pretty well. Water is a godsend, I swear.

“Nah. I should probably head back. See ya later. Be safe.” I shout before trying my best “I’m sober” face and heading out the door.

“Wait, Ava!” Carters says, lightly grabbing my arm. I feel the goosebumps hatching from his touch. “Maybe after, I can drop by. Ya know, give ya a break from studying.” His voice is sweet like honey.

“Yeah sure. See ya then,” I whisper. I walk the rest of the way to my room with a huge smile on my face.

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I pull back the curtains and peer out the window at the rain outside. The sound of water picked up by the passing cars echo off the street below. The smell of wet pavement muddled with dirt wafts into my room. It’s enough to make me sick to my stomach. I’m cranking the windows shut when there’s a knock at my door. “Coming!” I shout. The wind picks up, causing the rain to collide against the pane of glass as I make my way to the door. Carter is leaning against the doorframe and his hair is a little damp, most likely a mix of sweat and rainwater. I open the door wider to let him in. He staggers past me and falls on my bed face first without even a “hello” my way.

A steady drizzle of water pitters against the window pane, and a soft glow of light from my lamp fills the dorm room. There’s a blue tint to the room as Twister drones on the television atop my dresser. We’re at the part where Jo’s father gets pulled into the tornado to his death. It’s quite sad, actually, for that to be last time she ever sees her father. I make a mental note to call my mother soon.

Carter is splayed out on my twin bed, sloshed out of his mind. His clothes are also wet, which leads me to hoping it’s just water, but

the stench of alcohol coming off of him has me believing otherwise. He had asked to come hang out after whatever frat party he decided to pay a visit tonight. That was actually how we met. One of the first weeks of school, I had gone with a friend to some party to meet more people on campus, and he was that kind of charismatic charmer that you couldn't help but want to be around. That was then. No one really likes to hang around drunk people when they're sober. After a while, they stop being funny and more of just a stressor that I would have to take care of. Given he was hardly ever sober, I probably should have known that this was a bad situation from the start.

Personally, I have no problem with people drinking. I am more lenient than my mother when it comes to alcohol. She hates it—doesn't even allow it in her house. She said she never understood why people would willingly drink something that makes them throw up their lunch and forget what they did the night before. She's under this impression that people become a completely different person with liquor running through their veins—like Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde different. She said too many people who drink become someone they said they would never be under the substance, and she didn't want to expose herself or me to that. I mean, I guess it makes sense. I, too, have seen people flip like a switch with a startling night and day effect, but I still think it can be done responsibly. You can't just close yourself off to everything that scares you, but I understand where she's coming from, too.

Her nickname is one that has stuck with me throughout the years as well. People called her "Snow White" in high school because she wouldn't even drink a sip. I admire her not only because she is a proud woman who's stayed true to her values but also because of how strong she is. When my father passed away, she held herself so well. Honestly, I don't really remember my father. Over the years, his voice and face got distorted into mere photographs and old home movies until it became how it was now: a ghost-like shell of a man I didn't know anymore. I had started to forget details in old memories of him, and it was a frustrating time. Now, I don't even try to recall them. He had died when I was five—heart attack, my mother said. It was quite hard on our family. Without a second source of income, my mom had to pick up extra hours at work, and being how young I was, I spent most of the days after school with my grandparents. Oma and Opa basically raised me. Oma taught me how to cook good food with basically anything in your pantry, and Opa taught me to fish and drive.

Don't get me wrong, I had a good childhood. I grew up a little quicker, but she tried to keep everything as normal as possible. She wanted me to do what was best for me, even if that was sheltering me from "the evils of the outside world." That included alcohol. She wouldn't have the stuff in the house. I didn't have my first sip of alcohol until I turned eighteen, and even then, I wasn't much of a drinker. Maybe a drink or two every other month. I definitely wasn't one to bar hop like Carter and my friends did. I didn't really see the point in it all. I guess some things my mother instilled in me had stuck.

I'm brought back to reality by Carter's touch on the small of my back. He pulls me towards him and caresses my neck with the tip of his nose. "Ava, babyyy," he whispers. "Avaaaa." His voice trails off as he kisses his way down my neck and into my collarbone before making his way to my lips. His lips are rough and taste of whiskey. It smells so familiar. I can't quite place it, but it makes me cringe.

"Carter, watch the movie okay?" He pouts and traces circles on my thigh. "Carter, the movie," I say a little more sternly. He doesn't seem to hear—or doesn't want to—as he continues to move on top of me. I push him away, shaking my head, but it doesn't stop him. He sloppily fumbles toward my bra strap. His hands are the cold kind of clammy. "Ava babyyy, I want you I love you.." He insists between kisses. Turning my head to create some distance, I try again, but he's got me pinned. "I love you." Kiss. "Ava." Kiss. "It's okay ... it's okay." He repeats like a broken record. His grip on my wrist is so tight, I can feel my skin rolling on top of the bone as he shoves my hand down the waistband of his jeans.

It's funny, really, how deer freeze when a car's headlights hit them. Opa says that the light momentarily blinds them and they don't know what else to do. When I was young, it always baffled me why they didn't just run away—escape the so-called danger into the darkness beyond our dim halos cast by my grandpa's pick-up truck and into the woods. Maybe they are just being overly cautious and don't want to turn their backs on us just yet. I could understand that. I, too, have a few trust issues.

Oma says that their whole life can flash before their eyes in those few seconds. She used to have me count how long they stood there to figure out their ages. A deer with five vivid memories would have lived at least ten years. A rule of thumb, she said, was to double the number of memories for the age. I'd count a second per memory,

but I imagined that the filler memories came as fast as their heart-beat. I just wonder if their hearts were pounding as much as mine was now.

I take a moment to concentrate on my breathing and count.

One. When I was in preschool, I could have sworn that I could see tigers when I closed my eyes. I don't think my teacher believed me when I told her. She said that it was all in my head—that I was imagining it. But nothing has ever been more constant in my life than the lines of little orange and black tigers marching across my eyelids. I would talk to them some nights—tell them of my day, and in turn, they would tell me of theirs. Now obviously, they didn't actually speak to me—that part I know was just my imagination playing tricks on me, but sometimes late at night, I can see them. I think they are still looking after me, even now.

Two. There was this one time when I was four years old. It had snowed around eight inches that night before. I wanted to go outside so badly. I ended up bugging my father until he finally gave in. We put on layer after layer, strapped on our snow boots and ventured out into the cold. It was one of my favorite memories: gripping on to the edges of a black plastic sled as he drove around the yard on the four-wheeler. The air froze my face into a constant smile. I couldn't feel my cheeks for hours after and I don't think I even cared. After the third face plant, Dad stopped and dusted me off, laughing. He then helped me build a snow tunnel to hide from the wind, but when it fell in on me, my mother would yell at him for being "careless" and whatnot. Apparently, I could have died or something. She always did like to ruin our fun.

Three. It was my fifth birthday party. I had invited a few of my friends over to celebrate. We all had matching SpongeBob party hats on and little yellow fake leis around our necks. We all chowed down on a rich chocolate cake my mother had decorated, icing and crumbs all over our faces. However, the happiness didn't last long. Chocolate and presents can't silence the arguing we heard coming from the kitchen. It couldn't stop me from watching as my father burst through the door, green bottle in hand, and stagger over to me. He kissed me on the forehead. A "Happy birthday, Princess" escaped his lips and he patted me on the head before stumbling out the front door. I didn't know what to do. I could feel the eyes of my friends like beams directed into my soul and this huge headlight on me. And what did I do, you ask? I froze.

Just like how I was now.

I couldn't tell the boy no. He's guiding my hand now, his eyes in the back of his head in ecstasy. He claws at my bare back with his other hand, and I wince. He doesn't seem to care. I'm still in horror as his nails dig into my flesh and I yelp in pain. I can feel the grooves he's left on my skin. It was his way of making sure his touch would linger. I don't know what to do so I close my eyes and focus on the earthy smell of the liquor on his breath, taste of butterscotch on my tongue, and I keep counting.

Four. Opa and I are on the porch swing waiting for the sun to peek out over the bean field. I must have been around nine years old. There's an overwhelming smell of hazelnut wafting from the cup of coffee in his hand. I loved that smell. It made me feel safe. Opa wasn't much of a talker in the mornings. He was usually content just watching the fog clear, but today was different. "You're a strong girl, Ava. You know that right?" Not once does he look at me, just stares straight ahead and continues. "It's not the experiences in life that make us who we are, it's how we handle them." I blankly stare at him, confused by his words. He points off in the distance. I follow his finger. Hunkered down in the grass about 300 yards away was a whitetail deer. "You see that deer over there, Ava. See how its head is tilted up?" I nod. "It's smelling the air for danger."

"Danger?" I ask,
and for the first time all morning he glances at me.

"Yeah, danger. Deer have a heightened sense of smell. Their experiences make them sense certain dangers and they flag their tail as a warning to others. You get what I'm saying, Ava?" He lets out a heavy sigh as if he's questioning whether to finish his thought or not. Clearing his throat, he whispers, "People are like deer sometimes."

Five. The rain hits the metal roof of my house with the energy of a tidal wave. The sky is that dangerous kind of beautiful: greens and purples twisted into amber reds "like Nature's own take on an Amaretto Sunrise" my father called it. I never knew that was the name of a drink until I was older. I guess in some instances, ignorance truly is bliss.

I am five years old and hiding on the staircase. I had heard my dad's car door shut and stumbled down the stairs waiting to greet him. I wasn't prepared for what happened next.

The door slams and my father shuffles in with his hair messy and tired eyes. He seems to have aged twenty years since morning. There is a

half-empty green bottle in his right hand. He downs it and tosses it aside. Fumbling his way toward the fridge, he pulls another bottle out, pops the top. He seems lost in thought as I watch him standing there like that in the middle of the room. Another streak of electricity etches across the sky in branches that resemble the veins on his neck as he presses the long-neck bottle to his lips. I'd never seen him like this before.

The flash of light is enough to catch the cream Jameson label on the bottle, his favorite. I can't watch him like this anymore. I run towards him hugging his hips. I must've caught him off guard because he sways over further than I expect before bending down slowly and holding my shoulders for support. "Ava baby, what're you doing up? I want you to go upstairs now, baby, okay? I want you to get in bed and go to sleep now, ya hear?" He slurred. His breath smells funny, like the taste of those awful butterscotch candies my mother liked so much. The light cast shadows on his scruff. He didn't shave this morning. Usually he shaved before leaving for work "to protect the princess from tickles", but tonight the coarse black hair stippled his chin.

"Can you read me a bedtime story?" I ask.

He smiles up at me.

"Didn't your mama already read you one tonight?"

I nod.

"What one?" His voice is softer, barely audible if I had not been waiting for his reply.

"The Velveteen Rabbit."

"Ohhh. That's a good one. Did you finish it?"

I nod.

"Okay then, off to bed then," he concludes, and with one hand on my back, I am guided toward the staircase. He kisses me, tickling my forehead with the start of his beard. "Goodnight, princess," he mumbles and gestures his head up. I comply and start up the stairs to my room.

When the shadows completely cover me, I glance back. He shuffles back to the kitchen before sitting at the table with his head resting

in his hand. He looks so sad. I am about to turn around when something shiny catches me eye. Through the lightning, I can make out a glossy black handle peeking out from behind his hand. But as quickly as I make it out, the light is gone, and I'm left in the dark. I feel my way up the stairs and down the corridor to my bedroom.

I ascend the last few stairs and get under my covers, listening to the storm outside. A deep crack thunders from downstairs and a jolt of yellow zaps through the sky. A few seconds later I hear my mother scream.



Carter is lying on my bed sound asleep. A slight snore escapes his lips. The thunderstorm has picked up outside. I listen to the droning roar of water hitting the windowpane and look outside. The sky is that dangerous kind of beautiful: greens and purples twisted into amber reds "like Nature's own take on an Amaretto Sunrise." This time, I knew what it tasted like. A fork of lightning sets the sky ablaze, and the rumbling of thunder reverberates in the distance. I shudder and think of the lessons my grandparents taught me. For the first time, I knew what my Opa meant so long ago and for that I was grateful. People were like deer sometimes. And my Oma—my Oma was wrong about one thing. You can't tell how old a deer is based on how many vivid memories they have, but then again, maybe you could learn something even more telling. Maybe you find a piece of you that your mind buried a long time ago. Something that your brain tried to protect you from. Minds are beautiful like that. Intricate and confusing in ways that we are still trying to understand. Even now, all I'm really sure of is that Drew might get into his first fight, and I remember why I hate the rain.

