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The Cameo Necklace

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The Cameo Necklace

Acknowledgements

2016 Fiction Editor's Choice Award

The Cameo Necklace

by Shannon Young

“Gracie, Gracie!”

Consciousness crept upon me slowly. Yet even with closed eyes I could sense the brightness of the summer sun, filtering through my blinds. I tried to roll over but couldn't. A warm mass restrained me.

“Get off, Doodle,” I mumbled.

“Gracie, come play outside with me.” My seven-year-old sister tugged my silky duvet cover away from my sleep-weakened grasp. I blindly reached for the cool, smooth layer in vain.

“I'm trying to sleep.” I then grabbed one of my pillows to pull over my head, but Doodle tugged it out of my hands and sprawled on top of me, whispering in my ear, “Come play with me or I'm going to spit on your face.”

At that, I opened my eyes for fear there was already a conglomeration of frothy saliva dripping from her mouth.

“Please, please, please.” She shimmied her tiny body against me. I saw that she wore her favorite outfit: a long pink shirt, cut like a dress, and striped pink and purple leggings to match.

Even then, when I was only ten years old, Doodle had a way of being able to get me to do anything. For instance: while I was growing up, one of my favorite pastimes was to sit on my carpeted floor listening to *Harry Potter* on cassette tapes and putting together puzzles. Sometimes when I would listen to Harry's adventures, I would just lie flat on the floor and daydream that I too was part of the wizarding world and that when my letter from Hogwarts finally came, I would join Harry, Ron, and Hermione on their next great quest. But far more often than not, midway through some momentous scene, Doodle would come barging in, long hair flying, crowing that she wanted to swing, or play make believe, or race, or swim—and all it would take was a minute of her begging (sometimes on her knees for dramatic effect, tiny pale hands clutched in front of her as if I held her life in my hands) and I would give in, leaving behind my friends at Hogwarts.

When I assented on this particular summer morning, Doodle shrieked and pirouetted out of my room. Groggily, I followed her down the hall to where she was putting on a pair of light-up Little Mermaid sneakers. “Let's pretend run away.” She jumped up to open the door, but I grabbed her hand.

“Wait, we have to tell mom. And we need provisions. And Bud.” Our mother never let us go outside on our own without our German shepherd because she worried we would cross paths with the black bear, coyotes, and bobcats that roamed the surrounding woods. We lived on the top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere Connecticut, and we often spotted wild animals.

“I want Smartfood.” She dashed to the cupboard to grab the bag of popcorn and began to fill two plastic Ziplocs with the cheesy snack.

I told my mom that we were going outside, grabbed a lunch box, and collected a bunch of cherries and strawberries, and when Doodle wasn’t looking, four Oreos for a surprise dessert. I watched Doodle dance around the room as she waited for me to make us some sandwiches—ham and cheddar for me, and plain mayo with the crust cut off for her.

Just watching her twirling made me feel dizzy. She had started taking ballet lessons in downtown New Milford with my old dance instructor Miss Bonnie. I’d only taken classes for about six months before I begged my mother to let me quit; I lacked any sort of balance and was by far the worst ballet dancer in my class. Doodle, on the other hand, adored Miss Bonnie and her class, and had been continually practicing for their upcoming recital ever since they started learning their dance routine in May.

“When do you get your costume?” I asked, zipping up the last little bag.

“I don’t know,” she swirled, “but Miss Bonnie showed us pictures and mine is going to be purple—only two other girls get to wear purple with me, all the others are in red and blue.” This was clearly a point of great pride for her.

Once I finished putting our lunch box together, I opened the door and called to Bud and Doodle and I chased after him, past the tall metal gate surrounding our pool, past the open field of grass with the camping spot where our dad built fires to toast s’mores in the summertime, and down a little hill into the forest, littered with fallen oak and white birch leaves that crunched under our feet. We owned twenty-three acres of land and as far as we were concerned, the surrounding woods were the great wilderness undiscovered to anyone but us, except maybe to the Indians who lived there many years ago.

“Which way?” Doodle slipped her little fingers into mine and grabbed Bud’s collar with her other hand.

“You have to follow the stone walls.” I took my leadership role very seriously and gestured in a superior manner to the long wall of hand-stacked, loose stones that ran through much of our woods. “Did you know these walls are hundreds and hundreds of years old?” The rock walls that ran throughout

the forest were varying shades of gray, but many were freckled with moss that made patches of green like the surface of an algae-filled lake.

“Wow.” Doodle tilted her head back to see the tops of the trees, utterly in her own little world.

Her given name was Bernadette, but I’d called her “Doodle” ever since my parents brought her home from the hospital and I couldn’t pronounce her real name. She’d been my Doodle since day one.

I led my sister towards a wide rock, silvery in the sunlight from the mica that littered it, and we climbed to the top, following Bud, to an area covered with bright emerald moss. As we ate, licking the powdered-cheese residue off our fingers, we talked about the cultural fair coming up at our elementary school. Doodle was jealous I got to do Egypt while her class had to do Mexico. And then somehow we started arguing about which *Lizzie McGuire* episode was best.

“Frankie Moonis!” Doodle insisted.

“Frankie *Muniz*, twerp.” I rolled my eyes at her. “And no way! The Aaron Carter Christmas episode is soooo much better. Talk about the best present ever—I would die if I got to be in one of his music videos.”

“Oh I almost forgot.” Doodle covered her mouth with her small hands before digging into one of the pockets in her long shirt. “I have a birthday present for you, Gracie.”

“It’s not my birthday for another two weeks.”

“But I can’t wait to give it to you! Mama showed it to me and said it was grandma’s, and that I could have it when I was older, but then it was so pretty I said I wanted to give it to you for your birthday.”

She unwound a long silver chain, at the bottom of which swung an antique cameo pendant with azure ivory surrounding the woman’s face. The image’s face was in profile, allowing a clear view of the woman’s slightly upturned nose. She wore a heap of curls atop her head, with several loose tendrils falling down her back. I wondered who she was; she had the same impish nose that Doodle and our maternal grandmother shared.

Doodle clumsily pried open the edges, to where the pendant—a locket I realized in awe—opened and an engraving read: *per sempre*.

“What does it mean?” I breathed.

“You like?”

“It’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.” She held it out to me and I rubbed my hands on my corduroys, getting rid of the last remnants of cheddar flavoring, before cradling the necklace in my palms.

“Let me clip you.”

Doodle tossed my hair out of her way, gently but impatiently, and linked the clasp of the necklace behind my neck while I held the locket against my chest to keep it from falling.

When I think of Doodle, I think of that day when she gave me my favorite necklace and the way how after she hooked it around my throat, she came around to my side and plopped herself into my lap, grinning up at me, gap-toothed, light brown hair flying everywhere as it always did, telling me I looked like a princess.

“Where is it?” I heard my door bang against the wall from the force that had opened it.

“God, Bernadette, I’m getting dressed here!” I wrapped my towel back around my naked body as Doodle stormed into my bedroom and opened my closet door.

“You took my fucking blue zebra Aztec chiffon dress!”

“I don’t have your zebra whatever dress.”

“I don’t believe you. I’m supposed to meet Nathan in half an hour and I still need to do my makeup.”

I sighed and walked out of my bedroom to check the laundry room. Sure enough there the dress hung, looking harmless. “It’s right here, moron!”

Doodle flew into the small room and pinned me against the washer as she reached for her dress, hanging above the dryer. Our mom must have washed it by hand for her.

“I didn’t know you were going out tonight. I thought we were going to get dinner as a family. I have to go back to Tufts on Monday, you know,” I said as she grabbed the dress.

She rolled her eyes at me, “Oh my God get over yourself, Grace. You’re just here for Easter. The world doesn’t need to stop.”

Before I could reply, I realized what was dangling from her neck.

“Bernadette, that’s my necklace! Where did you even get that, I had it in my purse.”

“Calm down. I’m just borrowing it.” She rolled her eyes at me like I was the unreasonable one.

“But—” I was about to insist that it was my favorite necklace, but stopped. I felt awkward admitting it was my favorite.

“It’s mine anyways,” she said, peeling off her jeans and tank top, re-

vealing a matching red bra and underwear set over her curvy figure. I watched as she pulled the dress over her wild hair. I don't know why she always felt the need to undress in front of me; it made me uncomfortable and wonder how many other people had seen her without her clothes on. With her thin waist and large breasts, she didn't exactly have the body of an innocent seven-year-old anymore.

"Whatever." I crossed my arms over my own towel-covered body, and went back to my room, locking the door behind me, and sat on my shiny duvet cover. Once alone, I felt overcome with regret for coming home in the first place. *I could be in Boston hanging out with Devon.* I was going to stay at school originally; things had been tense with my parents ever since they found out that I'd applied to a trip to Greece for the following semester without asking. I didn't tell them until after I received my acceptance. I would be spending the fall of my senior year in Athens. I hadn't meant to be dishonest, but I knew that if I'd told them, there would have been many long conversations about finances before I even heard back from the program. To be fair, I knew they would be annoyed with me, especially because I had already studied abroad in Italy during my junior year of high school. The Athens program was so competitive, though; I didn't want to go through all the drama if I wouldn't get accepted anyways.

I think Doodle was especially rude to me this trip home in part because she was bitter I got to go on another abroad trip. She was also just a bitter seventeen-year-old. When I went to study in Italy, she had been mad at me, and I think she still was, but back then it had been bitterness because she had missed me and had wanted me around. This time, it was because she was jealous I would be abroad again and she would be in Connecticut for another full year before she could escape to college.

I reflected on how Doodle looked older than a senior in high school, and how somehow our roles felt reversed, with me the little sister getting left behind while my prettier, more experienced sister went out on a date with a cute boy—the kind of boy who never would have even looked my way in high school—an Alpha Delta at UConn with dark curly hair who had a hockey scholarship.

I laid down on my silky Caribbean-colored blanket, knowing that I was even more jealous of the guy than I was of my sister because she would rather hang out with him than me. Even though I came home this weekend to see her, even though she could see him any other weekend. Now I was the bitter one.

I ended up going out to dinner with just my parents. When the topic of

paying for Athens came up, as I knew it inevitably would, I forced myself to take deep breaths before I answered my mother's repetitive questions and my dad's various safety concerns. I wished that Doodle had come and softened the tension with her long winded complaints about her teachers who gave her worse grades than she deserved or the latest drama with her friends. Even though, if she'd been there, she would have whined how unfair it was I got to travel so much, and how our parents spent all their money on me, at least it would have deflected my parents' attention away from me. If Doodle had come they would eventually have had to take on the draining task of placating an unhappy Doodle.

When Doodle knocked on my window to let her in later that night, because she'd forgotten her key, I didn't even comment on the stench of cigarette smoke.

"Thanks," she said, jumping from my window seat to the carpeted floor. I quickly closed the window behind her as the cool, April air began to fill my room. There were patches of snow still, now brown with mud, splattered across the lawn that was lit up by the lamp my mother had kept on for Doodle.

"Mom ordered you tiramisu to go."

"Sweet." She tore her heels from her feet and sprawled across my bed with a groan. "I'm so freaking tired."

"Why, did you get a workout in?" I asked with a wink, setting aside the copy of *Jane Eyre* I'd been reading.

"You're such a bitch." She chucked a pillow at me, smiling. Her brown hair, the color of a lightly creamed cup of coffee, was strewn across my bed. Ever since Doodle had hit puberty, and started looking more like the older sister, I became constantly torn between feeling jealous of how beautiful she was and feeling protective because I was sure I wasn't the only one impressed by her looks. My own shoulder length hair, short and dark like espresso, had nothing on my little sister.

"I'm going to grab my tiramisu," she said, rolling off the side of my bed.

"How about two forks, Doodle." She glared at me for using her nickname, but when she came back she was holding two forks.

Doodle stayed for brunch on Easter Sunday, but then went over to one of her friend's homes and I didn't see her again before I had to head back to school. She had forgotten to give me my necklace back, and when I went into her room to look for it before I left, I couldn't find it anywhere.

It was the spring of my senior year of college, two weeks short of graduation day. Doodle had just left for Spain with some of the friends she'd

made during her first year at Vanderbilt.

I received a text from my mother asking when she should make reservations for dinner after the commencement ceremony for the three of us.

“The three of us? What about Doodle?” I had called her immediately after receiving her text.

“She won’t be back from Barcelona until a few days later,” my mother sighed into the receiver. “Didn’t she tell you?”

She hadn’t and I was mad. I got the number for the pay-as-you-go phone my mother had gotten Doodle for her trip, and tapped my foot against the brick-lined pathway where I sat outside the library as I waited for her to answer.

“Hola, bitch.”

“So mom just told me you’re not coming to my graduation. What, you couldn’t cut your world tour three days short?” I covered my hurt with anger.

“What’s your deal? I go away one time after all the trips you’ve gone on, and you’re going to give me crap?”

“I’m not jealous that you’re abroad, I just think it sucks that you’re not coming to my graduation.”

“Well guess what, Grace, the world doesn’t just stop because you want it to.” I didn’t answer. I heard a siren pass on her side of the line. She sighed at my silence. “Would it make any difference if I told you I got you a really good graduation gift?”

I couldn’t help it, my anger started to fade.

“It couldn’t make it worse,” I said slowly.

She laughed; she knew she had me.

“You’re going to love it. I haven’t bought it yet, but I have it all picked out.”

“Is it edible?” I asked.

“Sorry, you’re just going to have to wait and see,” she teased. “I have to go. But good luck with the whole graduating thing. Assuming you don’t fail any classes before then.”

I rolled my eyes. “Goodbye, moron.”

“Adios, bitch.”

The day of graduation was perfect: high seventies, clear sky, smiling faces. The only thing missing was Doodle. I didn’t even mind spending time with just my parents. They took me out to my favorite Thai restaurant downtown.

“Hello?” My mom stood up from the dinner table to answer her phone. As she headed outside to talk to the person I’d assumed was Doodle,

my dad and I debated whether or not we would have room for dessert after we finished our Pad Thai. But then my mom came back in and everything changed. Her face was contorted, stiff, and the second I saw her mouth try to form words and fail I felt an iron mass plummet into my stomach. Heavy, cold, it made me feel sick. Dread filled my entire being and all I could think in my head was Doodle even before my mom could get the words out.

Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion and from a distance, like I was watching through the wrong end of a telescope in a dream. Words no longer made sense. My father led my mother out of the restaurant and I stayed at the table, the weight twisting itself violently inside my body, and as I tried to stand a thunderous sob choked its way out of my throat. I shivered. I clutched at my throat where my necklace usually rested, but I realized that Doodle had taken it.

They found her body outside a ceramic shop in Barcelona. Alcohol poisoning. The girls she had been with—her friends—said she had been with a boy the last time they saw her, but they couldn't remember his name and the police haven't had any luck tracking him down to get more information.

She was wearing my necklace—our necklace—when they found her. The day before the funeral my mother tried to hand it to me. Her hands shook. But when I saw it, I shoved it away. “I don't want it.”

“It's yours.” My mother spoke gently but firmly. I didn't answer, but instead stared at the wooden table where her lemonade glass was leaving a ring of condensed water. My mother set the necklace on the table in the space between us. I looked up at her tired face. She was only forty-six, but already wrinkles had begun to crease her soft features. I met her gaze for a moment before dropping my eyes back to the glass. I didn't think my mother could out-silence me, but as I waited for her to say something and got nothing, I eventually gave in.

“I don't want it, mom. It was hers anyways.”

She tilted her head and didn't answer until I looked back up to meet her gaze. “She was only eighteen, Gracie. She was selfish but she always wanted that necklace to belong to you.” At first I took blue cameo locket just to escape my mother. I intended to stick it in a drawer and not look at it until a day when I stumbled upon it, forgetting it was there—but I loved it too much to lock it away.

Doodle has been gone for six months. *Gone*. Like she's just *something* that was lost. Something that could be found again. As if she is a pretty, but

replaceable piece of jewelry that gets borrowed or misplaced, but is eventually found. I wear our cameo necklace everyday; I never lose the necklace. Sometimes having its cool back pressed close to my skin makes me feel brave, and I imagine it carries some of that selfish, naïve, wild spirit that belonged to Doodle. Other times it becomes so heavy that I reach up to pull it from my throat before it suffocates me. Every day is different. Every day I feel its weight between my throat and my heart. Every day the necklace is the one thing I carry with me that is not lost.