

The Recital



1

Everything changed after the first day of seventh grade. At most, I hoped I'd grown an inch or two, maybe start wearing a little bit of makeup, and become the sort of girl my classmates admired for being cool, aloof—sophisticated. Seventh grade was going to be the year I had my first kiss, charming the boy I'd been daydreaming about all summer. If only I'd known that I carried an unimaginable darkness within me, and it was about to make its escape—like a tsunami of black smoke gathering a terrible momentum with every passing second, poised to take out everything, and everyone, in its wake. Seventh grade was when I had a near-death experience. I'd never thought I'd be one to almost kill a girl.

Classes were over, and the hallway was empty. I was alone, standing in front of The Sacred Wall of Heights. I stepped close to the wall, leaned my head and my hands against it, then pressed my lips right below the line initialed *NDJ 6/97*. I clutched at its cold,

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straight hips, pretending with all my might that it was him. The wall was no longer ivory, but was smooth and mahogany like his skin. I yearned to run my fingers through his hair, but a first kiss shouldn't last this long. This was the third or fourth kiss I was practicing. I'd fallen so deep into my imagination that I could smell his musk.

Then, a rush of heat scurried up my hands. I leapt back, letting out a gasp as an ache arrested my palms and my fingers. My porcelain tone reddened and my heart raced. Shock and alarm slipped from my tongue in a hot whisper that was more of a sound than it was words. I tried to round my fists but it hurt.

I heard my name called from down the hall. *He* was walking towards me. I nearly fell right then, even though I was standing still. I'd gotten so dizzy with emotion that I'd turned into a flurry of feathers. What in the world was this pain? And why was it happening then?

I swallowed the pain and the nerves in a hard gulp, shutting my eyes with a whimper as I did. *I'm okay*, I thought. *I'm fine. This is fine.*

"How was your first day?" he asked.

"It was great. I can't believe we're in seventh grade," I said with stammered breath. I'd never been so thankful that my uniform skirt had pockets. I shoved my hands in them and looked him dead in the eye. *I'm not scared at all, Nemo Daniel Jones.*

"Neither can I," he laughed. He took out a marker from his afro and uncapped it. He was prepared for this moment, wasn't he? He knew he'd find me here. I hoped he didn't see me making out with the most sacred wall in the whole school. I hoped he didn't see me freak out about the fever that had sneak-attacked my hands. I could feel the warmth seeping through my pockets onto my thighs. I

wanted to cry. I wanted to run away. “You want me to measure you?”

“No,” I said, trembling.

“Why not?” he asked.

I had to look away from him. I spun around and found my initials from June. I swore I was never going to grow again. I went into middle school at four feet and eleven inches. Then, at the end of sixth grade, Nemo measured me. I’d grown an inch! There was my growth spurt. I was forever going to be the short girl. Five feet *nothing*.

This was the Sacred Wall of Heights, the wall where every student measured how tall they were at the beginning and the end of each grade. There were lines dated as far back as 1984. I even saw my older brother’s initials from a few years ago. It was a big deal for the students here. It was a ritual.

My heart was pounding against my chest as he came close to me. “Come on,” he nudged me. “Let’s do it. I’m sure you’ve grown.”

As much as I wanted to dash down the hall, I wanted to stay. I hadn’t felt this stuck since I’d gotten trapped in my closet playing hide and seek with my brother and sister one time a couple of years ago. I had wailed and screamed and when they finally got there, they couldn’t open the door.

I wanted to wail and scream right then, too. Sweat gleamed on my face and down my arms, the heat and the ache swelling in my pockets. I’d rehearsed this moment for weeks in my mind. I’d practiced this in the shower or at my mirror or on my pillows. I was going to get this right. It was going to be perfect.

I walked up against the wall and he drew a line slowly over my

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head. I wanted to tug at him and pull him close to me, lock his lips with mine, and start seventh grade off with my first kiss. I was drowning from everything. His face was so close to mine, and I held onto my breath as I stared at him. This moment had felt so long. I wanted it to both last forever and hurry up and end all at the same time.

“Alright,” he said, backing away.

I put my hands against the wall, its coolness took some of the pain away. A shiver shot through my body. “Did I grow?”

He said nothing.

“No?” I spat.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

Nothing. Five foot nothing! The line was next to the same one from June. I took the marker from him. “Your turn.”

Okay, here it was. This was how the ritual was supposed to go. I had to measure Nemo since he had measured me. It was good luck, and it meant that we’d be friends no matter what, at least for another school year.

He stood against the wall. “Can you reach?”

I scowled at him. “Yes, I can reach!” I couldn’t get a firm grip on the marker. I winced as I snapped the cap. *Ignore the pain, Edith. Here’s your chance.*

I leaned onto him, standing on my toes. I was going to take my time. I didn’t know whether to measure his hair or not. That’d be an extra few inches. When I went to start the line, my hand cramped and I dropped the marker. He laughed at me as he picked it up.

I clutched my hand. When he asked me if I was okay, all I did was stare at him. At his hair, at his caring eyes. I leaned onto him

again. I fixed at his lips, like Claire did to Bender in *The Breakfast Club*. I leaned my face close to his. His hands landed on my hips. The tips of our noses touched. I closed my eyes and could see all the butterflies and the fireworks waiting at the edge to burst away into flight. There was but an inch keeping us away.

Nemo lightly pushed me back as I heard someone call his name from down the hall. I felt like I was jerked from a dream, shaking and mired in a blushed daze. Julie Suzanne Cherry, my least favorite person in the world, came skipping down the hall. I backed away from Nemo. He glared at me with narrow eyes and slightly shook his head. I didn't know what that meant, so I kept looking at him, waiting for him to say something.

Julie slid into the tiny space between Nemo and me, her backside and her long, raven-black hair brushing against me. She took his hands into hers. "How was your first day?"

"I think I'm ready," he said.

"Good! And you'd been going on all summer about how afraid you were of being a seventh grader. Like it's a big deal." She leaned into him, pushing him against the wall. "Do you want me to measure you?"

He glanced at me but quickly returned his attention to Julie. Julie caught wind and looked over her shoulder. She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. "You need someone to measure you? You're going to have to wait. Obviously."

A chilled twinge shot through my neck. I'd barely gotten to see Nemo this summer. We didn't spend as much time together as I wished we did, and the reason why was standing right in front of me. Her arms were around Nemo. She'd won the grand prize, and all I

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got was a consolation prize of embarrassment. My cheeks burned as I remembered leaning in to kiss him.

“I was just leaving,” I shrugged. “You two can, you know, whatever.” I glanced at Nemo again but my hands were getting hotter, like I was holding them over a stove fire. I scurried off down the hall and into the girls’ bathroom. I turned the cold water on and shoved my hands under the water, splashing with little care. The heat cooled after a minute. I turned off the water and sat in silence—the kind of silence that doesn’t want to be silent, the kind where echoes are screams brooding like water just about to boil. The whole floor would hear me if I screamed, like I wanted to, but I bit my lip as hard as I could. I stared at the fogging mirror, fighting urges to cry and to throw up. They were probably kissing right now. That witch had stolen Nemo away from me. And here I was, alone and terrified from some weird, excruciating fever in my hands.

I left the bathroom and walked back to the Sacred Wall. I stopped right before I got there, peeking around the bend to see if they were still around. Nope. My chest tightened when I saw two new lines where we had been standing: *NDJ 9/97* and *JSC 9/97*.

Julie had grown two inches this past summer.

I wanted to scribble over every line on the wall. So many students had grown. So many of them were taller than me. It was bad luck that I didn’t measure Nemo in return. I hated how much I cared about rituals and superstitions. I would be scribbling over everyone else’s aspirations and their hindsight and their good fortune. If I couldn’t have any of those—if I was going to be stuck being the same old Edith forever—then why did I have to watch everyone else celebrate their happiness and their stupid traditions?

I had a red marker in my pencil case. I fought through my books and dug into my backpack, grunting as I pulled it out from the bottom. I found the marker. I looked up at the wall, scanning for each time I saw Julie and Nemo's heights. I wanted so much for this to be how I keep them still. They would never grow again, just like me. And no one would've known it was me if I'd ruined the wall.

"Edith?" someone called out to me. Evanthia Katsaros, my favorite teacher, was walking down the hall. I shoved the marker in my case and threw it into my backpack.

"Hi Miss K," I said softly. "I'm sorry, I was just about to head to the auditorium."

"It's okay. I'm late, too. You want to head down together?"

I nodded. I took one last look at the wall. Something had gotten into me, tugging like it wanted me to fall and break into pieces. I didn't fight it, either. I had let it wrestle with me. I stayed there, looking at my initials. I'd never been so upset before.

2

I clung to the edge of the auditorium stage with my toes and spread my arms. I was flying. Silence, warm late summer sunlight, and swarms of dust motes poured from the tall stained glass windows. I had dreamt many dreams in the auditorium. Sometimes, I'd take naps in the balcony instead of going to lunch. I would daydream when I was worried about a test. I didn't study much. I didn't have to. I was naturally a straight A student who'd gone unnoticed, and as much as I wanted to keep it that way, I knew that if I wanted to do *this*, I might have to sacrifice some of my solitude.

I'd flown a long way in my mind, all the way to December. I'd landed at the annual Christmas Eve Festival. The auditorium had filled up with kids and their families dressed up in Santa hats and ugly sweaters. Aromas of gingerbread and spruce and gift wrap billowed as the festival was about to commence. Applause was brooding and the grip of my toes tightened. Their eyes would be on me. Murmurs of who this girl was would thread amongst the kids,

especially the eighth graders. But in the center of the crowd was the reason I was doing this.

“Where did you go?” Miss K said, whisking me from my dream. “Were you flying again?”

She sat on the piano bench behind me and tilted her head in a way that reminded me of how my little sister looked at me. Miss K was earnest, sweet, kind and pure. She knew me well. I thought of her more as a friend than as a teacher.

“Can I play a song for you?” I asked.

“That’s what I was hoping we were here for,” she said. She stood from the bench, opening her palm as she curtsied.

I sat at the piano and relaxed my fingers down on the cold keys. The odd fever from earlier had crept back into my hands, but I shook them and told myself *it’s okay. It’ll go away again. It’s been a nervous day.*

I felt alive as I played the song for Miss K. I’d swallowed the pain from the fever and from Nemo long enough to reach the end. Then it all came rushing back to me as I lingered on the last chord.

Miss K clapped and cheered. I forced a smile as the pain crescendoed.

“That was wonderful,” she said.

“Thank you,” I stuttered. I clasped my hands in my lap between my knees. I bit my lip and told myself to keep it together. This wasn’t even the hardest part.

“You’ve come a long way,” she added, sitting next to me and wrapping her arm around me in a side embrace. “I’m so proud of you, Edith.”

“The song isn’t finished yet. Me and my Dad are still working on it,” I said. “But I was wondering—”

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I trailed off. I couldn't look at Miss K. I stared at my hands and at the keys, then into the empty auditorium. If I wanted my dream to come true, I had to ask. Being around Miss K made me feel like there was nothing to worry about. I would've bet she had enough warmth to bring world peace if she wanted to. But part of me was still scared. What was I doing to myself? What was coming over me? Where did I find the nerve to try and kiss Nemo and play a song in front of someone other than my Dad? Was this why my hands had gotten so hot?

"Wondering what?" Miss K said, nudging me back from space.

"I—I was wondering if I could play at the Christmas Eve Festival." That took the last bit of wind out of me and I got dizzy and sweaty. Then my stomach churned and I spat more words. "A recital. Not too long. Maybe three songs? I don't know. This song, too!"

My shoulders tightened. I wanted to tuck my face into my blouse and hide. But words kept spilling, staggered and coy. "It would be my Christmas present. To my Dad. And—"

I wanted him to see me, his precious little Snowpea, playing the piano on the biggest stage that I could. We'd been writing this song together all summer. I wanted him to see an entire auditorium listen to our song. I wanted the song to echo against the walls and seep into his heart in a way that it wouldn't in our living room. He would think I was beautiful in a flowing white dress with silk gloves and heeled shoes that clicked with every step. Even if for a moment, I'd be the best daughter in the whole world. Everyone would ask me about the songs and I would tell them: I wouldn't have been able to do it without him.

He was the reason that was in the center of the crowd.

“Oh, Edith,” she said. Her whole face opened up. Her nostrils, eyes and ears lifted as a smile blossomed like a sunrise over a plane horizon. She nodded and didn’t say a word, like I had taken her breath away.

I couldn’t wait to go home and tell Dad.

3

When I got home, I was alone. My hands were still hurting. I took a cold shower until the fever went away. Shivering, I got dressed and went to the kitchen for ice cream. I was going to be absolutely sure that I'd froze this fever away. But when I scooped the ice cream into a bowl, I'd started to warm up again. I held the bowl and watched as the ice cream melted. In not even two minutes—I watched the microwave clock—my ice cream became a hefty portion of chocolate milk. I poured the ice cream out. I didn't bother to wash out the bowl. I didn't want to touch anything anymore. What in the world was happening to me?

My Mom was a nurse at the hospital. I wanted to call her and tell her what was happening to me. She would know what was wrong. She always knew how to treat us whenever we got sick. It wasn't often that I caught a cold, let alone a fever. I never liked taking medicine. If I called, she would tell me to take something.

The pain made me wince when I picked up the phone. I wanted

to cry and I wanted to fight it, too. I wanted to be strong. I didn't need medicine. Mom always said when people get sick, it's usually because of stress or not eating right. I did eat three slices of pizza for lunch. And then there was Nemo and Julie. I didn't want to tell her about all that.

I went to my room and leapt onto the bed. I replayed the scene at the Sacred Wall in my head. I squeezed my eyes shut and held a pillow over my face to drown the memory. No luck. It only got more vivid. The solvent scent of permanent marker tinged my nose. The scalding look Nemo gave me that made me feel like I was just another girl. How weak my legs felt when I leaned in to kiss him, and how his slight push nearly made me fall. I piled the pillows and swung and punched. I took one of the pillows and pulled at its sides. I wanted to rip it apart, grunting as I brought strength from as far down as my belly. I tossed it across the room without looking, hitting my desk lamp. It toppled to the floor and shattered.

I left the lamp in pieces and plopped down on the bed. The lonesome afternoon stillness embraced me, like a hug brimming with sympathy. The day was telling me it was going to be okay. And for a moment, I believed it. I listened to the birds singing in the tree outside my window. I heard children playing in the distance once I opened my ears.

Then, I buried my face in my pillow and cried.

"Why her?" I whispered.

"Wake up, wake up," I heard over and over. I awoke and beside me was my little sister tugging at my shoulder. Her name was Jenna, but we all called her Cannoli. She had an obsession with the Italian

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dessert pastry, and we were certain the sugar this little girl ate made her the sweetest kid in the world. It was nice to wake up to her beaming smile and her wide hazel eyes.

"I'm up," I said. The afternoon had passed by and the evening sunset flushed my room with crimson.

Cannoli wore her backpack. This woke me up for sure.

"How was your first day?" I asked.

"We put our supplies together, and we colored our name tags for our desk! And we had to think of a word that rhymed with our name. And then the teacher took us to recess and we played games with each other!"

"Did you tell the teacher your name is really Cannoli?"

"No! That's not my name. That's my nickname!"

"Yeah, but did you cry when Mom left?"

"I didn't cry. Mommy cried."

"Did you give her a hug when she did?"

"A hug and a kiss. And I told her I loved her. And I told her that I was going to be home soon! And then she stopped crying."

I laughed. "Is Mom downstairs?"

"Mm-hmm. She got cannoli for us!"

"She did? How do I know you're not lying just to get me out of bed?"

"I'm not lying! Cross my heart and hope for pie," she said, drawing a cross over her chest. "Come on!"

Cannoli jumped off the bed and scurried out of my room and down the stairs, shouting "Mommy! Edith was asleep! I woke her up. She's coming!"

She hadn't noticed the broken lamp. Thank goodness. She would

have gone and told Mom right away and I wasn't ready for that conversation.

As I climbed out of bed about to pick up the pieces, I noticed the fever was gone from my hands. I could move them without them tightening and aching. I breathed a long sigh. It was like I had woken up from a bad dream. Maybe it was stress and too much pizza after all.

I picked up the broken lamp pieces and threw them into the trash, then took a book from my desk and made my way downstairs. Mom was in the kitchen. As usual, she wore bubble-gum pink scrubs, and her long hair was tied up in a bun. Her back was to me as she slumped over the sink, lathering her hands with soap and water. Cannoli sat at the table as she munched on her cannolo, swinging her feet and humming a song.

"Hi Mom," I said.

When she turned, I knew what she was going to ask. I didn't want to talk about it.

"Hey Snowpea," she said. "How was your first day?"

"It was fine." I leaned against the wall with my hands in my pockets. "It's just school."

"Don't tell me you're bored with school already."

"No. I'm not."

She began to unpack the grocery bags on the counter. "You should join a club. Or try sports. You and Lenore could play softball together."

I wasn't athletic. And I didn't want to play chess or be a tutor for the elementary kids. I wanted to play piano. We had one in the living room. Why would I want to stay after school when what I wanted

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was at home? I didn't want her to keep pushing suggestions, so I nodded and promised that I would think about joining something.

I had fallen in love with piano over the past year. I had Dad to thank for that. Every Sunday, he would play records with me—from jazz to classical, to soul and funk and rock-n-roll. He would sing all the words or hum along with the instruments, waving his hands like he was a maestro. We would make hot chocolate and then we'd practice the melodies we'd heard on the piano. He could pick up from the middle of any song and play. As baffling as it was, he always insisted that songs were like people: they may seem different, but they are all so similar, and once you've met enough of them, it gets easy to figure them out.

"Is Dad coming home tonight?" I asked.

Mom stopped loading the refrigerator and sighed. "I'm not sure, Snowpea. I haven't heard from him."

The last few weeks, whenever Mom came home, she would go straight for the kitchen and open a bottle of wine. She talked to Aunt Tegan on the phone for hours, complaining about how stressful being a nurse was, and how no one appreciated her enough, especially the doctors who thought they knew everything. She always put a desperate emphasis on *everything*, like it was her last breath. She and Aunt Tegan would talk for hours. Mom and I barely spoke a few minutes. Even though she was home, I missed her.

"Do you need help with dinner?" I asked.

"No, I got it."

I settled on the living room couch with and opened my book. I was reading *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. Miss K had given it to me as a present at the end of sixth grade and I was reading it for the

second time.

But tonight, I got distracted. I snuck upstairs to Mom and Dad's room, carefully opening the creaky door. They always kept their room neat. Their king size bed was made and their lotions and sprays and polishes were lined straight on the dresser. I picked their cordless phone up off its receiver and held it tight. Then, I took it to my room and locked my door.

I dialed and waited for it to ring.

"Harper, Dalbey, DeLaMater, Manhattan office, this is Fiona, how may I help you?"

I paused. I wasn't expecting a secretary to answer. "Is Da—I mean," I stuttered. I asked for him by his real name.

"He's left the office, may I take a message?" Fiona sounded kind and gentle and southern.

"No, that's okay. Thank you."

I smiled. He was on his way home! And when he got here, I would tell him about my recital.

I was excited when I heard the front door knob jangling. But it was only my older brother Yaden. He got home just in time, as it was a little after seven and Mom and I were setting up the table for dinner. It was important to her that we have dinner together as a family as much as possible.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said.

"It's okay," Mom said. "How was work?"

"Great!" He was wearing a green work polo with his gray school uniform slacks. He had started a job at a video game store called FuncoLand. "I have to do training for a few days but I got to sell a

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few games.”

“That’s nice,” Mom smiled. “You’re a working man, now.”

He chuckled. Yaden had stayed in his room all summer playing video games, or going over to his friends’ houses to play more video games, so it was kind of funny to think of him with a job. He had gotten a haircut over the weekend and I noticed he must have lost weight over the summer. He was getting chubby last year. But right then, he looked sharp and grown up. His transformation didn’t make sense to me.

Yaden was a senior in high school. He’d been working his part-time job to save up for a car because he was going to go away for college. He’d applied to Syracuse, University of Pittsburgh, and Hofstra University. I remembered those because they were all far away. Not to mention Dad was always asking about it over the summer. Mom wanted him to stay home and go to a school here in Philly. I wanted him to stay, too, but I never chimed in. I only listened. I was happy for him, but I always felt down and I’d lose my appetite at dinner. My brother was a dork and he played video games and he teased me all the time, but I loved him and I didn’t want to see him go.

“Should I set up a plate for Dad?” I asked Mom.

“No, don’t worry about it,” she said. “I’ll set aside some leftovers.” Her smile faded as she set Cannoli’s plate on the table.

We all sat down and Mom stared down at her plate, picking at her food. I watched her for what might have been a whole minute and I don’t think she blinked once. She gazed as she twirled linguine noodles with her fork.

Cannoli was always the most talkative at dinner. “I had a dream

last night and there were rainbows in the snow. And I drew it at school. The teacher liked it.”

“Bring it home. I’ll put it on the fridge,” Mom said. Her voice was low.

“Yeah!” Cannoli quickly swallowed a mouthful of pasta and carried on. “And a girl in class has pigtails. I want to have pigtails, too. Can I have pigtails, Mommy?”

“Sure.” She met Cannoli’s cheer with a dim nod. Mom hadn’t even taken a bite of her food yet. She got up from the table and opened a bottle of wine.

“I can do Cannoli’s hair, Mom.”

“Okay,” she said as she popped the cork from the bottle and poured a glass.

“What time is Dad coming home?” Yaden asked after a crunchy bite of garlic bread.

Mom sat back down and took a gulp of her ruby red wine. She picked up her napkin, dapped her lips and took in a breath. She looked at me, and then at Yaden.

“Your father won’t be home tonight,” she said, looking at the empty seat across from her.

“Why not?” I whined. I wanted to snatch the words back into my mouth. I sounded rude, questioning her like she was another seventh grader I called Anita instead of Mom. But that was my eagerness all built up, waiting to tell him the great news.

“He’s still working,” she said.

“Is he staying over Aunt Tegan’s?” Yaden asked.

I bit my lip and grasped my silverware tight in my hands. What a maddening day it had been. And the one exciting thing that I was

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happy about I couldn't share yet.

Mom tilted her head back, shifting back and forth and around like there was a tightness in her neck.

"He's staying over," she said. She took another long sip of her wine. "He's not staying with Tegan."

4

Sister Maggie was the teacher who everyone feared. No one dared to say a word in her class. The eighth grade boy whose locker was next to mine had told me yesterday that she would shut the windows when it was warm or open them wide in the winter if anyone broke the rigid silence.

Sister Maggie had sharp eyebrows and small lips. She was round with salt and pepper frazzled hair, probably from the stress of teaching The Good Word to kids like us. She was classically militant like a nun from the nineteenth century. The eighth grade boy told me Sister Maggie kept whips, belts, and wooden spoons in the locked classroom closet. She also archived detention slips and framed copies of tests from students with failing grades. I wasn't too worried about all that. I was quiet and failing Religion class was almost impossible.

Nemo had this class with me—he sat in the back of the room. I looked back at him, my line of sight clear in the last two minutes before the period bell rang. Nemo never noticed me staring; he was

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too busy slouching over his notebook.

I wondered if he could hear my heart thumping. I wanted to whisper his name and wave at him. I wanted to sit next to him and read what he was writing. He was deep in thought, biting his pencil. He erased a line before scribbling again. I wondered if it was one of his poems. He wrote the best poems. They weren't sapped with love. He talked about the wisdom of trees and the power of music. I especially liked the ones about music.

I bet Nemo would be thrilled to hear about my recital. He always got excited about the things I was excited for.

All summer, I dreamt of us writing poetry and songs together. He could sneak over to my house on days when Mom and Dad were both at work and Yaden was away with his friends. We could play on my piano and have snacks and when we were exhausted from brainstorming all day, we could sit on the couch and watch *Animaniacs*. I'd sit as close to him as I could, lean on his shoulder—and during commercial breaks, we'd kiss.

"You didn't call me last night!" Lenore said, plopping in the seat in front of me and shocking me out of my daydream.

"I'm sorry," I said. I glanced over at him one more time before I gave Lenore all my attention.

Lenore Roslyn Close had been my best friend since fourth grade and I told her everything. There was one minute left before class, and there was so much I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her about the recital, but not until I told Dad—he had to be the first one. I would have told her about the fever in my hands, but when I woke up that morning, I was fine. I wanted to tell her I hadn't called because I was sad Dad was staying in New York. I wanted to tell her that I missed

walking home with her yesterday. But as I was about to open my mouth, she stopped me.

She gripped my hand tight. “Did you do it?” she whispered, leaning close to me with wide eyes.

“Do what?”

“I saw how you were staring. Did you two...?”

“No.”

“Did you chicken out?” Lenore asked.

“No.” I didn’t want to tell her about Julie. “Well, sort of.”

“What do you mean, sort of? Either you chickened out or you didn’t. Not that hard. What happened? You get cold feet? Sweaty palms?”

I sunk in my chair.

“Look,” she said. “It’s a big move. So, if you are chicken, just hold his hand. That’s how you let someone know you really like them. Do it after class. Seriously.”

The bell rang, and Sister Maggie waddled into class, closing the door behind her. Lenore spun around, her straightened raven-black hair whirling with her. I took one more look at Nemo. He shut his notebook, threw it in his bag, and pulled out another as the class collectively muttered, *Good morning, God bless you, Sister Maggie.*

She wrote on the chalkboard in elegant cursive: *Original Sin*. She underlined it with a screeching stroke. “Does anyone know what this is?” Her voice was raspy and I could smell cigarette smoke on her as she paced past my desk. “Anyone?”

Nemo raised his hand. “Is it the sin Adam and Eve committed in the Garden of Eden?”

“Yes it is, Mr. Jones. And of the sacraments we talked about

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yesterday, which one do we receive to save us from original sin?"

Lenore's hand shot up. "Baptism?" Lenore and Nemo were the smartest kids in our grade. I did have the best grades out of all three of us in the second semester of sixth grade, though. I was catching up. Sometimes, we studied together last year. We helped each other out, but I had decided that I was going to have the best grades out of all three of us this year.

"That's right, Ms. Close," she said. "You are baptized because Adam and Eve deprived you of holy justice with their rebellion in the Garden of Eden. But despite your baptism removing you from sin, you've grown. You're about to turn thirteen, if you haven't already. And now, like Adam and Eve, you're capable of rebellion. You're no longer a guiltless, sinless child of God.

"Children before the age of thirteen are promised into heaven. God forgives you, for you do not know the weight of your sins. Until you turn thirteen. This is why we practice the sacraments. This is why we study religion. Why we go to church. And why we pray." She slammed the pointing stick against the board. "Original sin."

I felt like I'd been whacked with a wild branch in a surprise wind. My birthday was coming soon. On January fourth, I was going to be a teenager. I wanted to tap Lenore's shoulder. Her birthday was the same day as mine. We called ourselves the cosmic twins, born only four hours apart. Did she feel the same abrupt fret I did?

If I died after I blew out the candles on my birthday cake, did that mean I wouldn't get into heaven? Would I be stuck in purgatory repenting for whatever sins I had accumulated? I shouldn't worry. I was a good kid. But maybe it was what I *wasn't* doing that was the

sin. Mom and Dad hadn't taken us to church since the Sunday after Easter. I never prayed on my own. And I was guilty about how I thought of Nemo.

I had to be better at being good. I knew I wasn't good enough, even if I didn't want to believe anything Sister Maggie said.

When the period bell rang, I poked Lenore. "Did you hear what she said?"

"Uhh, about what?"

"About turning thirteen?" I said.

"Yeah. So?"

"You're not worried?"

"I am worried," Lenore said. She turned and nodded towards the front of the classroom. "I'm worried that you're going to let Nemo get away."

Nemo was on his way out of the room. Pesky butterflies woke up in my stomach and bounced around. Of course, I was cursed with the clumsiest love butterflies any stomach has ever had in the history of human kind.

Lenore nudged me. "Go. I'll see you after French. And I want details. Don't chicken out."

I sighed. She made it sound like this was easy.

I dodged students, bumping shoulders and squeezing past idle chatterboxes standing in the middle of the hall. I called Nemo's name, and he stopped and turned to me. He met me with a smile.

"Is Sister Maggie crazy or what?" I started as we walked together. Ms. Cutillo's classroom wasn't far—I didn't have much time to do this.

He laughed. "All the nuns are loopy. You know she's just trying

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to scare us with that turning thirteen stuff, right?"

"I don't know."

"You mean to tell me you bought that?"

I blushed. Yeah I did, but I said nothing. I lowered my head and he laughed at me. But not the kind of laugh that erupts from the stomach, but a chuckle that slips from the throat with empathy.

"You're too gullible," he said.

I kept my head down, watching his hand swing back and forth as we walked. Around the next bend, we'd be walking right into French. I tugged at the collar of my uniform. Then, I let my hand fall to my side and inched closer to Nemo. I felt his fingers brush against mine. He didn't move away from me. I took his fingers with mine, and I nearly fainted.

"Hey!"

I stumbled, shoved from behind. Julie. She glared at me, her eyes narrow and her lips pursed.

"Julie!" Nemo cried out. Other students stared at us.

She gave him the same mean glare before stepping over to me. "What was *that*?" she said.

"What was what?" I asked.

"I saw what you did. Trying to hold his hand?"

"I wasn't." I glanced at Nemo.

"Julie, chill out," Nemo said, getting between us. She shoved him aside.

"I will *not* chill out. Look, Edith. I'm going to need you to stop talking to my boyfriend. Stop walking with him. Stop looking at him. Alright?" She was in my face.

Boyfriend?

Students watched on, muttering *oohs* and other things under their breath. *Are they going to fight? What's going on? Who's that girl Julie's grilling?*

I said nothing but stared back, pretending to be firm and fearless.

Julie gripped my collar. "You hear me?" she said loudly.

Her grip was tight. I choked on my breaths and lost my balance.

"Julie!" Nemo yelled. He pulled her away from me.

The commotion around us stirred. The kids were getting excited. Someone yelled out *girl fight!*

I quivered from my fingers down to my toes. I didn't want to fight. I didn't think I could throw a punch right. I certainly couldn't muster the audacity to hit another person. I mean, there was one time I slapped Yaden when he was teasing me about the first test I ever failed. I had been crying in my room and he kept calling me stupid, whispering the word over and over again through the little space between the door and the floor. I snatched the door open and when he stood, I swung at him with all of my might. He had yelled out in pain, and I had winced, feeling immediately contrite.

Julie wasn't a sibling, though.

"Come on," Nemo said. He took Julie's hand and they walked past me, pushing through the audience.

Everyone looked at me. I wanted to hide, but if I ran, they'd laugh at me. I stood there, staring back with a scowl. *Just go away. All of you.*

Then, I felt what was like an electric shock in the palms of my hands, and my fingers cramped. I slipped past the students. I had to shove most of them out the way. Some of them pushed back at me. I

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ran for the bathroom and put my hands under cold water.

The fever was back. And this time, it was even hotter than it was yesterday.

5

Lenore stood at the mound of the baseball field, her hair tied up in a messy ponytail. She wore a scowl for the batter.

She and the rest of the team had gotten together with players from Holy Trinity to play a Friday friendly. I didn't know much about baseball, and what little I did know was because I was Lenore's biggest fan. She was the only one on the field wearing a blouse and plaid skirt uniform. Everyone else was wearing button-ups, slacks and ties. She was the best player in St. Vincent, and it didn't matter that she was a girl.

Strike-out! The batter went down swinging. He slammed his bat against the grass and let out a roar. Lenore walked off the mound calmly. It was the end of the inning.

Baseball was a big deal for our schools. St. Vincent had made it to the state championship this past summer. We lost, which tore Lenore apart. Had they won, they would have qualified for the Little League World Series—and Lenore could have been the first girl

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pitcher to record a win in the series. That was her dream, and it was her last chance to do it since she was going to be thirteen next season, one year too old to qualify.

The day they lost was the only time I'd ever seen Lenore cry. A girl so stoic on the mound collapsed into an hysteria of wails and tears, her face buried in her glove. No one could move her. The other team celebrated. It was a walk-off homerun off of her own pitch. A fastball that could have won the game if it were a strike.

I was there to see it. Everyone pretends to be in that position. Throwing the final pitch or hitting the ball out of the park to win the game. It's one of the most played scenarios in children's imaginations. But no one ever pretends to be on the losing side. No one ever pretends to have their dreams crushed.

Lenore was heartbroken for days, so I invited her to come over that weekend for a slumber party. That cheered her out of her slump. Ever since then, we've had a slumber party once a month. Our first one as seventh graders was going to be this weekend.

As the teams switched to the next inning, with the score at two-nothing St. Vincent, I looked past the two dozen or so students in the bleachers to find Nemo sitting at the top row. He'd been alone the entire game. He hadn't noticed me, but I'd been looking over my shoulders at him the whole time with my hood over my head.

I wanted to talk to him, but I was still sour from the scuffle with Julie in the hallway a few days ago. The courage only came in tiny surges. I'd wring my toes and my fists, wrestling with my cowardice. I was like a mouse hiding in her hole when she knew there was no one in the kitchen keeping her from the cheese atop the counter.

Screw it. If I sat here, the game would end and Nemo would go

home alone and I'd hate myself the whole weekend. Another surge came and it lifted me.

I climbed the bleachers. When I was next to him, I playfully tugged his hair. He spun to face me, and I saw his eyes light up. I smiled and then sat next to him, leaving only an inch or two between us.

"This is a close one," I said. "Think Lenore's going to get the shutout?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," he said. "Holy Trinity lost their best two hitters to high school this summer. Their going to have a hard time hitting anything come next season unless someone steps up."

"How do you know so much?"

"I almost went to Holy Trinity," he said. He let out an abrupt yell when a pitch was called a strike against St. Vincent. He shot his arm up in the air, and I noticed he had my only copy of *The Neverending Story* beside him. I had lent it to him last month. Nemo was an enigma. He could talk about sports or science or literature with matching fluency. And he was cute. How he let an average cheerleader get to his heart baffled me. I wondered if Julie had shared any books with him.

I glanced down at the inch between us. I leaned my leg against his, closing that little space. My heart fluttered. I looked at him and he said nothing, nor did he flinch.

"I missed you," I said in a whisper that slipped from my tongue. I hoped he hadn't heard me.

"Yeah, we didn't hang much this summer." He turned to me.

"What are you going to do to make up for it?"

"We'll just have to hang out more over the school year."

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“That doesn’t look like it’s going to happen,” I said.

The cling of a metal bat smacking a baseball snapped my attention back toward the game. Lenore had hit a ball deep into left field. All the St. Vincent students stood up. When the ball landed on the ground just past the Holy Trinity outfielder’s glove, we cheered.

Lenore dashed past first, watched the outfielder throw as she hit second, then locked onto third base. She dove, impetuously sullyng her white blouse. The ball landed in the third baseman’s glove far too late.

We sat back down and I stared at Nemo. “What’s so special about Julie?” I asked.

He laughed, combing his afro pick through his hair. “I don’t know, Edith. She’s nice.”

“That’s it? She’s nice?”

“Well, no. She’s—”

“—Asian and has big boobs?”

“No! That’s not it.”

“Then what, Nemo?”

“Why do you care so much?”

I closed up, caught off guard. *I’m the one asking the questions!* I crossed my arms and pouted as I watched the game. I could feel him looking at me. I felt the fever in my hands rise again.

Another hit on the field. A single to right field. The boy who hit it was thrown out but Lenore scored. Three to nothing.

I clapped for her. “I care because you’re my friend,” I said. “My friend has a girlfriend now. I want to know why he likes her.”

“Girlfriend?” he said, blushing. “I wouldn’t call it that.” He cleared his throat, shifted in his seat, then put his hand on my

shoulder. "I know Julie got a little beside herself on Tuesday. I'm sorry. I want you two to be friends, too. She's nice once you get to know her, I promise."

Nice. Is that really the only word you can come up with, Nemo? "Fine," I snapped. "Don't tell me." I got up and stomped down the bleachers.

"Wait, Edith," he called out to me.

I wanted to stop and let him speak. I wanted him to tell me he didn't like her, that he really wanted me to kiss him on Monday. I wanted him to tell me that he'd made a mistake and that he missed me this summer. But if I stopped and he didn't tell me any of those things, he would break my heart, so I put my hood over my head and kept walking, as the fever pulsed in my hands once again.

6

When I got home, I felt the urge to pray. I'd never prayed on my own before. I closed my door although I was home alone, sat on my bed, and closed my eyes. I wanted to breathe in the silence.

I'd been worried about getting lonely in the afternoons at home alone, but I didn't mind it after all. It was my time, and right now, and I needed someone to talk to who wasn't Mom or Lenore or Yaden.

I made the sign of the cross and folded my hands as tight as I could, like the tighter my hands were folded, the louder my prayer would be. My palms ached and blushed red with warmth.

"I'm sad," I said to God. "I'm scared. But worst of all, I'm angry. I'm angry at Dad for going a whole week without calling to talk to me. I'm angry at Nemo for not understanding me. I'm angry at Julie for embarrassing me in front of everyone.

"I don't like being angry. It's terrible. I should be happy—especially for Dad. He's making lots of money so he can take care of

us. He's got to do what he's got to do. I'm trying my best to be happy for him, I promise. But it's hard.

"I should be happy for Nemo, too. He's got his first girlfriend, even if he denies it. I'm jealous it's not me." I sighed as the heat in my hands intensified.

"I'm really scared that there's something wrong with me. I'm not sure what to do." Tears fell and a cold quiver caught in my throat. "I'm sorry that I'm angry. I'm sorry for being selfish and jealous. I'm going to try and be a better person from now on. I hope you forgive me."

I recited an Our Father, wiped the tears from my eyes and blew my nose. I hated crying. It was ugly and I got all snotty and my eyes would swell and I always got a headache afterwards.

I didn't know how to feel after I finished praying. I didn't feel any closer to wholesome than I did before I got to my room. I might have felt worse about myself. Was God listening? What did he think? If he could speak, what would he say to me right now? Would he scold me, or would he promise me it's going to be alright?

I fought the tears as much as I could and went to play piano until Lenore got here. Shostakovich, 24 Preludes, Opus 34 was one of the first cycles Dad played for me. Playing it was like building a thunderstorm with my fingertips, gathering the raindrops and the rumbles and filling them in the clouds, only to let a bit of it fall in the distance.

Time flew whenever I practiced and I needed time to fly. This week sucked, and I just wanted it to be over.

I played until I heard the doorbell ring. I leapt from the bench and swung open the door.

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“Hope you’re hungry,” Lenore said, “we brought pizza.”

Lenore’s Mom, Miss Karen, stood next to her. Miss Karen had a radiance about her—the kind that made butterflies dance around wildflowers. She had short black hair and always wore long, flowing sundresses. She brought me in for a hug, balancing the two boxes of pizza.

Lenore scurried to the kitchen and unloaded a set of jars onto the counter from her bright pink duffle bag. The jars were filled with colorful glistening powders. Then, she took out tiny bottles with handwritten labels on them: strawberry, lemonade, pineapple, and fruit punch. I picked up the jars and bottles, holding them up to the light and turning them upside down to see the powders and the flavored liquids swish.

“We’re going to make rock candy tonight!” she said. “But after pizza, of course.”

“Cannoli’s going to freak out,” I said.

“Well,” Miss Karen said, “I’ll leave you girls to your fun. I’ll be back to pick you up on Sunday afternoon, okay?”

“Sunday night?” Lenore pressed.

“Only if you get your homework done before then.”

“Deal.”

Miss Karen smiled and kissed Lenore on her forehead. “Edith, take care of her.”

“I will,” I beamed. “Thank you for the pizza.”

Miss Karen hummed as she made her way to the front door. She was graceful, like each step she took mattered. When she opened the door, she stopped and called out to Lenore.

She lowered her voice, suddenly somber, and whispered to

Lenore, leaning close as she held her hand over Lenore's ear. Lenore shook her head and uttered goodbye as Miss Karen walked out.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "The real question here is, which movie do we watch with pizza? I've got *The Princess Bride*, *The Goonies*, and *The Lost Boys*."

"*Pretty in Pink*."

Lenore sighed. "Again?"

"Yup!"

After Andie and Blane shared their after-prom kiss, and I had broken my record for most slices of pizza eaten in one sitting, Lenore insisted it was time to make rock candy.

Night had fallen and Cannoli was following us like a puppy. She pleaded that we let her help make candy.

"Only big kids get to make it," Lenore said as Cannoli admired the sheen of the purple powder. "But you get to eat as much as you like when its done."

"Okay, Norey," Cannoli said. She sat at the table and picked at the pepperoni on her half-eaten slice of pizza.

"Speaking of big kids," I said, "who measured you on The Sacred Wall?"

Lenore clipped a clothespin onto a wooden skewer and placed it into an empty jar so that the end of the skewer hung about an inch from the bottom.

"My friend Jesse. He's on the baseball team."

"Do you like him?"

"What? No." She poured water into a saucepan, placed it on the

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stove and turned on the burner. "I don't like boys."

"What do you mean you don't like boys? Not one?"

"No. Not one."

"You have to have a crush on someone, Lenore," I said.

"I don't."

"I don't believe you."

"Oh, well."

Lenore measured out sugar and put it into the water in the pan. I kept my hands in my pockets. I wanted to help but I was afraid to touch anything. What if I turned one of the jars so hot that Lenore would notice? All I could do was watch and hope she didn't ask me to do anything.

"Did you grow?" I asked.

"Two inches since the beginning of sixth grade. Not bad, I guess."

"Ugh. Not fair."

"You're still the same height?" she asked.

I stood next to her and leveled my hand at the top of my forehead, touching hers, too. I stepped back to look. Indeed, she was taller than me. We used to be the same height.

"I guess so," I said, defeated. I wondered who would end up the taller one. Or maybe we'd be lucky enough to end up the same height, like the twins I knew we were. She was letting her hair grow, and it was getting as long as mine. Maybe that was a premonition.

"It's not a big deal," she said. "Girls grow until they're eighteen. You could end up as tall as your Dad. Then you'd be upset because you're too tall."

"I *want* to be tall."

“Being tall is overrated,” Lenore said. “I think I’d like you better short.”

“Whatever.”

The water started to boil and after adding more sugar, Lenore stirred the mixture. Then, she spun around and pointed at me with the ladle. “So why’d you leave the game early?”

“I didn’t,” I lied.

“Dude, I saw you leave. I had a freaking shutout and you didn’t stay the last inning?”

“Are you mad at me?”

“I was. Not anymore. But only because Cannoli is here and she makes me happy.”

“I love you, Norey,” Cannoli blurted out.

“Hmm, see?”

Steam rose from the pan behind her.

“I left because of Nemo.”

“What happened?” Lenore lined three of the powder jars in front of me. “Open those, please. And pour them in the bowl.”

I gulped. I pulled my hoodie sleeve over one hand and held on to the jar. The lid was twisted on tight. But I turned it with all my might. When it popped open, I held the lid against my face. It wasn’t warm.

“Nothing. He was just being a jerk.”

“Can’t see Nemo being a jerk. What did you say to him?” She turned off the burner and let the water cool.

“He can be a jerk. To me.”

“What do you like about him, Edith?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He’s cute. He’s smart. We share books.”

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We've been friends for a long time."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it? That's a lot." I sighed as I poured the last jar into the bowl. A mixture of purple-yellow daffodil and lime green shimmered like sand under the beach sun. "Can we not talk about this?"

"Fine."

Lenore took the skewer, dipped it in sugar and swirled it in the cooling sugar water. Then she poured the water into the empty jar nearly to the top. She put the skewer back into the glass.

"What flavor do you want?" she asked.

"Can you mix strawberry and lemonade?"

She nodded and poured some of the extracts from the bottles into my jar. Colors billowed and the water crackled and sparkled ruby and sunflower. She prepped a fruit punch jar for herself.

"What next? Don't you have to freeze it?"

"Normally, yeah, but..." Lenore sunk her fingertips into the powder in the bowl. She closed her eyes and stayed still for a few moments. She took a long breath, then with a pinch, drizzled the powder into the sugar water. The water cooled and crystals blushed with hue, clinging to the skewer like an old friend you haven't seen in a while.

"Whoa," Cannoli said from the kitchen table.

"Touch the jar," Lenore said with a sly smile.

"Okay," I said.

Steam rose from the water, vapor fogging on the outside. If it were cold, and my hands were hot, the jar might break—I remembered learning that in Science class on Wednesday. I held my

breath, hoping my hands would cool.

I reached out, lightly grasped the jar, then recoiled from the icy glass. “What? Lenore, how did you do that? What’s that powder?”

Lenore let out a victorious laugh. “I can’t tell you. It’s a secret.”

It was like magic. “Can I try next time?”

“It won’t work if you do it, but you can try.”

Midnight struck, and our yawns became relentless. Our hands were sticky and greasy from all the popcorn and rock candy we’d eaten. Cannoli was sound asleep on the couch and we laid on the floor. She tried to hang out with us as long as she could, but she didn’t make it past ten. I took her to bed while Lenore cleaned up.

Cannoli, half-asleep, cooed about a tummy ache and asked me to rub it away. I did, and I promised her that she’d feel all better in the morning. I kissed her on her nose and told her that I loved her so much. She murmured ‘I love you, too,’ and fell asleep the next instant. I watched as her tiny hands clutched her comforter. Her lips parted and she purred a little snore.

The fever had been gone since halfway through *The Princess Bride*. I sat in my room while I waited for Lenore, staring at my hands. The fever was like waiting for something to come out and scare you, over and over, and there was nothing you could do to stop being frightened. I promised to myself the next time the fever came back, I would tell Mom.

When Lenore came in, she leapt into bed and nestled with all my pillows. “My stomach hurts,” she said.

“Shouldn’t have eaten all that rock candy,” I said.

“Shut up.” She whined and grimaced into the pillows, and before

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long, she was hiding under the blanket, groaning about how she never wants to see another slice of pizza ever again.

I laughed. "You're going to want some for breakfast."

"No, I'm never eating pizza again. I'm not kidding."

I got under the blanket and took one of the pillows. After a minute, I asked, "Do you think my Dad's okay?"

Her face became serious. "Yeah, Edith. If something happened, your Mom would have told you by now."

"But she's been hiding in their room all week. She's barely spoken to us."

"It's probably just a long business trip. Did you ask your Mom when he'd be back?"

"No."

"Then ask."

I sighed. My eyes were getting heavy. Sleep was coming fast. I reached to switch off the light, and snuggled back under the blanket. Part of me wanted to tell Lenore about my recital. I still hadn't told anyone and it was killing me inside.

"Can we make friendship bracelets tomorrow?" I asked instead.

"Yeah." Lenore was as excited as she was tired.

We talked a little more, planning out our Saturday. We lulled each other with ideas of Saturday morning cartoons, Wicked Royal Penguin nail polish manicures, and blanket forts.

Halfway to my dreams, my thoughts dozed into senselessness. Chords played in my head, and I could taste hot chocolate. It was like I'd fallen into Sunday night, and Dad was home, and we were practicing piano as if he'd never left. As if this week had never happened.

I couldn't tell what was real and what was the dream anymore—until Lenore snapped me awake. She grabbed my arm tight, her nails digging into my skin.

"What's wrong?" I asked, wincing. My eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark.

Her grip got tighter and she pinched into me when I tried pulling away.

"Stop," I said, snatching my arm until I got out of her grasp. I threw the blanket away from me and sat up, staring at her through the dark until my eyes could see.

I felt a sharp pain in my arm. I was bleeding.

"Lenore, that hurt!"

Lenore sat up without using her arms, stiff like a robot. A smile twisted along her lips as she tilted her head. Her eyes were wide and she wasn't blinking, like she'd shot up awake late for school.

"What're you doing?" I asked. I grasped my arm.

She said nothing. She looked at me, motionless.

"This isn't funny," I said. I started to crawl out of bed. As my feet touched the floor, Lenore reached for my other arm. She pulled me back into bed and I landed on my back, nearly slamming my head into the bed frame.

I wriggled out of her grip. "You're scaring me."

Her smile waned to a frown. She knit her brows. "Help me," she whispered. Her voice was low and hoarse.

"Help you how?"

"Get her out of this body."

"Lenore, what are you talking—"

"I'm not Lenore."

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She crept over to me, leaning her face against mine. I was against the frame, its coldness clenching my back. "Are you sleepwalking?"

Lenore's stare was ghostly, like she was looking right through me. Her eyes dilated and the whites of her pupils were darkening.

I must have been dreaming. All the rock candy and pizza and fantasies of being Molly Ringwald were giving me a monstrous nightmare.

I closed my eyes. The wound would be gone if it were really a dream. I shut them tight, holding my breath and pursing my lips. By the time I opened them, it would be well into the night and Lenore would be sleeping peacefully beside me. My breaths were rapid and my heart raced.

I opened my eyes when I felt a tremor rattling the bed.

Lenore convulsed violently, lying on her back.

"Lenore!" I cried out. I put my hands on her face. I reached for her arms, held her shoulders. I wasn't sure what to hold or put pressure on. I didn't understand what was happening. I kept calling her name. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and saliva trickled from the sides of her mouth.

I screamed for Mom, not leaving the bed. I screamed over and over, louder and louder, until she finally came bursting into my room.