

Sleeping Ugly

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*For the caregivers out there, who lift us up when
we go down.*

You're beautiful.

Part I: Freefall

If ever the lid gets off my head
And lets my brain away
The fellow will go where he belonged -
Without a hint from me.

- Emily Dickinson

Reflection

I don't know how many times I've heard it, but it's a lot. Maybe a thousand times. It's this thing about memories and smell: that the most powerful sense when it comes to memories is smell. I don't believe it, and neither should you. Think about it. Think about the things you remember – the places, the events. You can hear sounds and see colors, see faces from your childhood friends like it was yesterday. You can't even count the images burned into your memory, or the thousands of words you know – melodies, sounds, colors, numbers, all those things. But really, just how many smells?

I'm thinking of the day it happened. I didn't know anything about memories then, or neurology. I had no idea about my brain. And I can't smell a thing – not the school bus, not the driver, not the freshmen girls sitting behind me, not even the browning apple core in the trash can behind the driver's seat. But I remember everything else like each second is a picture framed in my mind for as long as I care to keep it. The driver's name was Marcus. He was a middle-aged mulatto man wearing black sneakers, jeans, and a white t-shirt; he had thin gold-rimmed glasses, and he had a little bit of an afro, about two inches, and it was perfectly spherical. He always smiled and said good morning, calling every student by name when they got on – even in groups, he greeted everyone individually.

I remember the army-green vinyl on the benches, the texture with its tiny canyons carved into every inch like a topographical map of an imaginary landscape. The vinyl would stick to your legs if you wore a short skirt without tights, and the canyons would leave marks on the back of your legs. I remember my seat that day too. The corner by the aisle had been pulled apart and picked at by successive years of students, the same way mice

might tear at the yellowish foam and use it to build a nest. And the windows with the two plastic tabs you had to pull toward each other simultaneously to get the window down, I remember all these things.

That morning, I have this one image burned into my memory like a photograph. It was this moment, like a flash, when Marcus was turning the bus left onto Union Street by the car wash. The sun was coming up, and for a split second, it caught the window just perfectly and I saw my reflection through a squint.

You could picture it too through my eyes. Just look at how cute I was back then. I had this green flower-print skirt on, covering my legs just above a pair of bony knees. I can still see the flowers; they were purple lilies, matching the same light-purple Abercrombie sweater I had on. Above that was my squinting fifteen-year-old face, cute as a button Mom used to tell me. As always, I had this fake smile on – not that I had anything to be upset about till that day, but Mom – she was a pageant queen as a kid and a Pi-Phi at Yale, so she believed in outward appearances and that you could always make a friend with a smile – she'd trained me to believe that I was naked without it, and for the most part, it really did work. So there was the memory of that little smile that morning. The last one. The last carefree smile of my childhood tied off in a bow with the green ribbon of my ponytail. I have that. It's on the school bus window in front of us right now. The picture of me from the first Friday of November 1997, when I was fifteen, riding the bus to school, completely unaware that my entire life was about to shatter into a wreck sometime between first and third period. That's when things begin to get vague and cloud into a strange collection of incoherent events and colors and sounds and circumstances. But no smells. I can't smell a thing in those memories. That's just a myth.

Help

Mr. Giorgio my Algebra teacher was standing over me and I had this poking sensation in the upper part of my shoulder. Everything was blank before, and for a second, I didn't know where I was. Then I heard his voice again, a hard, barking voice that demanded attention. It was always like that. He was scary, and he was poking me.

"Miss Basile!" Mr. Giorgio said, towering over my desk.

My heart started pounding. I jerked up in my seat and I mumbled something that seemed to make sense to me, but as I heard the words coming out of my mouth, they sounded like gibberish.

"Am I not entertaining enough, Miss Basile?" Mr. Giorgio said.

"No, Mr. Giorgio. I love math."

Then I heard everyone laugh at me. The whole thing seemed surreal, like it was happening in a fog or something. I looked over at Evan Noyes sitting beside me and he was laughing too. He was always so nice to me, my little buddy from middle school, but even he was laughing at me now.

"Stop laughing at me!" I said real loud so everyone could tell how mad I was. "It's not funny."

"Miss Basile," Mr. Giorgio said. "It's your turn. Problem number seven, please."

"What about it?"

"Would you put it on the board for us please, like we've done every day since September."

"Up there?" I said, pointing to the blackboard.

"Unless you can write it on the blackboard from where you're sitting."

Evan looked over at me and was shaking his head.

“Stop,” I said to him.

When I got up there in front of everyone, I had no idea what I was doing. It was like a bad dream that you have about school, only instead of being naked, I was stupid. I forgot to take my book up there, and even if I had, I would’ve had no idea what page we were on. I stood there fumbling around for a few seconds while everyone laughed at me. It was making me angry and I had no idea how to get out of it.

“What do you want me to do again?” I asked, and I was really close to crying. I think my voice even cracked.

“Miss Basile, did you even do your homework last night?” Mr. Giorgio asked me, and I didn’t even know.

I was thinking that this couldn’t be happening. I mean, I always did my homework. I got almost every problem right. How could I not know whether I did it? But I didn’t. I was seriously going to cry in front of my entire math class.

Kristen McGowan got up from the front row and came up beside me. I didn’t even really know her, but she was the only one who could see I really needed help – not laughter – help, real help. She stood beside me and whispered.

“Are you okay, Riley?”

I shook my head no. Kristen put her hand on my shoulder and handed me a piece of chalk.

“Excuse me, Miss McGowan,” Mr. Giorgio said.

She turned around and just shot a look at big, scary Mr. Giorgio like she’d tear his arms off if he finished the sentence. He didn’t. Kristen McGowan was my new hero. Nobody messed with Mr. Giorgio, but Kristen did.

Then she started telling me the correct numbers and letters to write down, one by one. Her voice was soft and gentle, and the sound of the chalk sliding over the chalkboard reminded me of rocks sliding down the side of a mountain, even though I hadn’t really seen that many mountains.

It seemed like it took forever, and it didn't make any sense. Then I was sitting again and looking up at the clock thinking that it couldn't really be almost eleven. What had happened, I wondered. I didn't even remember my first three classes - not at all. Worse than that, I had no idea where I was supposed to go next. I knew I should know, but I didn't. It was like, months into the school year. How could I not know my schedule by now?

When the bell rang, I figured I'd just let my feet tell me where to go. I went into the hall and started walking, following the crowd of people from the math wing into one of the main hallways. I found my locker, opened it, and suddenly everything became clear again. I remembered first and second periods. I remembered being in homeroom and also that I had English next. So I got out my books and started walking in the right direction, thinking that the whole thing was totally weird. Then everything just went away again for a moment.

Spanish Lion

You might think that it should've been obvious - that someone other than Kristen McGowan should have realized and helped me. But that's the thing people forget about high school. It's like the law of the jungle. Kids just aren't civilized yet. They run in packs and attack each other like wolves when they see a weakness. Wounds are nipped at before they get a chance to heal. And the adults, like Mr. Giorgio, most of the time, they couldn't care less.

The currency in these walls is popularity. It's traded for, bargained over, and stolen - almost all of these things implicitly. Though intangible, make no mistake, this currency is being measured every second of every day, each individual watching their own status, hoping to climb, and carefully tracking the reactions of all the valued players, so as not to fall.

That day, I was plummeting. I was moving from smart, popular, and completely put together toward the total freak end of the spectrum. A cloud had flown over me and stuck upon my mind, and I had no idea it was happening, much less how or why.

As quickly as that moment of clarity about English class had come, I was standing in Mrs. Soo's classroom, floating toward the window, and I say floating because it seemed as though the steps I took were happening independent of my will. I moved as if a passive object, and then she was addressing me.

"Riley? Riley! Riley Basile?"

"Someone needs to know about the lion in the courtyard," I told her, because it seemed a pressing matter. If they didn't do something about it, somebody would most likely get eaten. "Right out there between those two oak trees. I think it's a Spanish lion, but I don't know how it could've gotten there. It must be from the zoo, don't you think?"

"Riley, are you feeling all right?"

"I feel awesome, Mrs. Soo," I said, looking down at my hands. They looked like they were glowing. "I feel like I could fly away. Am I dreaming? I feel like I'm in a dream."

"You know what, Riley, that's amusing. We're all very amused, but if you don't mind, the rest of us were discussing *Twelfth Night*."

"If the Principal is just going to allow lions to run loose, don't blame me when somebody gets eaten. I'm moving to Hawaii anyway."

Her voice seemed to fade into the background, and I couldn't take my eyes off the lawn between our window in the east wing and the auditorium. How the hell did a lion get out there? There shouldn't be lions in New York. I couldn't understand why Mrs. Soo didn't care. It could just as easily eat her as anyone else when she walked to her car that afternoon, I thought. She should've cared. And then there were the poor squirrels. What would happen to them?

"Riley!"

"What?"

I turned my head away from the window, and she was still staring at me, and she looked really angry.

"I asked you a question, young lady."

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear."

"Then perhaps you should go have a chat with Mr. Sucic. My patience is wearing thin this morning."

"No, I don't want to go to Mr. Sucic's office. I promise. I'll be good. I'll just sit down and be quiet, Mrs. Soo."

She gave me a funny look. "Riley, you are sitting," she said.

The stars on the American flag behind her head started to float, and the red stripes were waving into Mrs. Soo's hair.

"Did you take some kind of drugs today?" Mrs. Soo asked.

"Why would I do that? I feel fine. I'm not sick anymore."

“If this is some kind of joke, you need to tell me right now.”

I looked around, and for some reason, everyone was staring at me again, but I didn’t know why. Then I was in the hall talking to Michelle.

“Riley, what the heck is wrong with you?” she asked, and she grabbed me by the wrist.

“Ow!” I said. “You’re hurting me, Michelle. Let go of me! You’re supposed to be my friend.”

I pulled my wrist away and now she was looking at me all funny. And I had this strange sense that it was because of the way I was talking. I could hear the words coming out of my mouth, but I couldn’t control them. Even worse than the things I was saying was the tone of my voice. The pitch was really high, like a three-year-old’s. And I was pouting, almost crying, but I had no idea why.

“Mrs. Soo told me to take you to the nurse’s office, Riley. Why are you acting like such a spaz?”

“Cuz I don’t wanna go to the nurse’s office. I wanna go to the library.”

I started to walk the other way, and Michelle didn’t try to grab me again because I was going to yell at her and maybe even hit her.

All of this was cloudy. I remember walking in the other direction, away from the office and the clinic. Then I remember Michelle telling me that I wasn’t even going toward the library. Then I remember Mrs. Holley pinching me really hard on the fingernail of my left pinky finger, which was funny, because Nurse Holley was always so nice. I didn’t think she could be that mean.

Friday

“Ow!” I heard a whiny voice shout up to Nurse Holley.

When she said, “Quit whining, Riley,” I didn’t answer. I even looked around to see if there was someone else there named Riley, because I couldn’t fathom that the voice I heard was my own.

“Why did you do that to me,” I heard the same voice say, and this time I could hear it was mine, but it was still shocking – as high pitched as a kindergartener. I sat up fast, shaking my head, embarrassed that anybody had heard me talk like that.

“Quit talking like a baby,” Nurse Holley said. “Did you get any sleep last night, Riley?”

“Yes. I slept. I almost missed the bus because I slept through my alarm.”

“Then why did you skip your classes to sleep in the library?”

“I haven’t been in the library today.”

“You were,” she said. “Mr. Kearns found you sleeping on the floor between the H’s and I’s in the non-fiction section. We had to lift you into a wheelchair to get you down here. Do you remember me waking you up earlier?”

“You wheeled me down here in a wheelchair?”

She nodded.

“Oh my God. Did anybody see me?”

“It was in the middle of fourth period, Riley. There wasn’t anyone in the hall.”

“Thank God.”

“You don’t remember it?”

I didn’t answer at first. I was looking out the window toward the field in front of the school, realizing that there were a lot of kids outside for the middle of the school day.

“What time is it, Nurse Holley?”

"So you don't remember me waking you up in the library?"

"No."

"Or in here a few hours ago?"

I shook my head no.

"It's two thirty, Riley," she said.

That didn't make sense. I'd slept through the entire day.

"Can you tell me what day it is, Riley?"

"Of course I can."

"Then tell me what day it is, please."

"It's Friday."

"And, tell me where you are right now."

"I'm in school, at the clinic. Why are you asking me such stupid questions?"

"Tell me your name, how old you are, and who the president is."

"I'm Riley Basile, I'm fifteen years old, and Bill Clinton's the president."

"Are you feeling all right, Riley? Do you feel sick? Dizzy? Lightheaded?"

"No. I feel a little tired is all."

"Have you ever fallen asleep in school before?"

"No, never."

"I noticed you missed almost a week of school two weeks ago."

"I had the flu."

"I'd like you to see your doctor to get tested for mono, Riley. I'm going to call your parents about it too. Can one of them pick you up today?"

"No, actually, um - they went away for the weekend. You can call them on Monday."

"Do you have a ride home today?"

"I have rehearsal for the play. I usually get a ride home with Diana Forsberg."

"Are you feeling up to rehearsal right now?"

"Honestly? No, not really. I'd just like to go home and go to sleep."

"Then you've got about ten minutes to catch your bus, Riley."

I got up and stood still. Little stars appeared in the corner of my eyes and everything went red for a few seconds, and I got a taste in my mouth like grapefruit, but my mouth was totally dry.

"Do me a favor and eat something when you get home, Riley," Nurse Holley said. "You slept right through lunch, and if you're like every other kid I know, I bet you didn't exactly have a healthy breakfast."

"I had a pop tart."

"I rest my case. A meal, Riley; eat a meal before you lie down."

I nodded and somehow managed to find my way out of the school and onto the right bus, probably because I recognized Marcus my bus driver. I vaguely remember him asking me about play practice.

Trees floated past the window - shades of brown from the leaves still hanging on the oaks, and grays from the sprawling trunks and limbs. Mailboxes. A rocking, rumbling, humming cloud floating me home to my bed. A man's voice: "Your stop, Riley. Last one off."

Is this my driveway? My house?

I ate, and I ate. I drank a two-liter bottle of orange soda. I thought it was hot, so I went up to my bedroom and got undressed. I was sure it was my room. I knew from the vertical pink lines on the wallpaper. Then I wasn't there anymore.

That was Friday.

Bears

By the pond near the high school, you know, where the hill slopes down toward the water and the ground is covered in old brown pine needles that make you slip if you're not careful - I was there.

It seemed like it was evening, because the light wasn't quite bright enough to make me think the sun was still out. But I could still see. The sky must've been gray, but the water was black, only broken by a few ripples on the surface, and certainly there was no sound as the calm water touched the thin layer of reddish New York shore. In the leaves behind a low green layer of undergrowth, I heard a rustling sound. When I turned at the start it had given me, I almost lost my footing and tumbled into the water. As I was catching my balance, I heard a snicker from the bushes, high and fast, cackling a bit like a squirrel, or how I thought a squirrel might sound snickering.

"You almost bit it, lady," a high-pitched voice followed. "You people are so awkward. How do you even survive?"

"Well enough," I answered back. "Who are you? Why don't you come out of there?"

"One of you ate my cousin Allmore, that's why. How they ever got hold of him, I'll never know. He was fast, clever, and skittish - you've never seen the like. The slightest scent of predator and he was a cloud of dust. He'd probably scold me for even talking to you."

"I'm really sorry about your cousin, little friend, but I don't know anything about that. I'm looking for - I'm not really - well I guess I'm not really sure what I'm looking for."

There was no response from the bushes, and I felt like an idiot suddenly, holding a conversation with some unknown voice behind a shrub. I started thinking about alternatives, and it was

terrible, because I could tell that there were none. So many confusing things had been happening to me that for all I knew, the voice wasn't even there.

"Could you help me?" I asked.

"Help you what?" the voice came back.

"I don't know. Maybe if I could see you, then I'd know what I was looking for."

"Oh no. I bet that's how they got poor Allmore. Some fools get drawn in by a carrot, others by the sheer goodness of their hearts. Not me, lady. I've got no pity for you, and good God, how you stink!"

I put my nose to my shoulder and sniffed. "I don't smell anything," I said, turning my head and sniffing the other shoulder. "Nothing at all."

"Lucky you, lady. You stink - not quite as bad as those black-and-white colored fellows, but near as bad."

"Skunks?"

"Well, aren't you the judgmental one? If I smelled as bad as you, I wouldn't go around calling anyone names."

"Listen," I said, growing tired of the little voice's snide comments. "How about I take a few steps back, then would you at least show yourself? Maybe that'll help me remember what I came here for."

"Fine," the little voice said. "But you better step way the hell back or I'm not budging."

"That's fine," I said, sliding back - and it was funny because I seemed to move without even thinking about it, just sorta floating away without a single step. Then this little brown head appeared from the bushes, stepping forward with trepidation, then standing on its little rabbit haunches, its ears all pricked up in extreme caution.

"You're a rabbit?"

"And you're a girl, what of it?"

"Well, what am I doing here, rabbit? And by the way, you wouldn't happen to have the time, would you?"

"What do I care what time it is, lady? I'm a rabbit. That means it's either grazing time, sleeping time, or making new rabbits time. And there's almost never talking to people time. I don't know what's with you people, always worrying about things no rabbit cares about - like time."

"You're a rude little bunny."

"And you're a smelly little girl. Why don't you go away?"

"I would, but I'm not sure what to do."

"Ah, an existential crisis," the rabbit said. "How typical. I've just the thing for you. About a hundred yards up the shore, there's an ancient oak that looks like it's been growing for a thousand years, maybe more. There's a hole at the bottom of it - looks like a rabbit hole."

"Your rabbit hole?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" he answered. "So you're going to go up there and stick your nose right down in there, as deep as you can go. It doesn't matter if it seems like it's too tight, keep squeezing your way through. The answers to all the questions you have are at the bottom of that little hole, cross my crooked little bunny nose and hope to die."

"Really?" I asked it.

"I said cross my bunny nose, didn't I? It's amazing you can even hear me with those tiny little ears. You try to do a girl a favor and she doesn't even have the decency to say thank you. Instead she questions your intentions."

The little rabbit dashed back into the undergrowth. The sound of its little hops disappeared into the distant woods beyond the scope of my consciousness, then I was left to seek out the thing he'd told me about, though I'd already sorta forgotten what it was anyway.

I walked away from the rabbit, figuring he deserved his distance – if he was a he at all. He didn't seem like a girl bunny though.

The light hadn't changed, which I thought was odd. I also thought it was strange that I couldn't tell whether I was wearing shoes, like I'd lost touch with my feet somehow. If I was barefoot, I certainly couldn't feel the pine needles under my feet. And where was I?

Then I saw this hole in the ground at the foot of an enormous oak. The tree was monstrous, maybe the biggest tree I'd ever seen. I could hear laughter floating out the little black hole where the gigantic roots forked and dove beneath the soil. It was a deep, jolly laughter that made me want to approach – and not just one laugh, but many, a whole party of loud, boisterous, dreamlike laughs. I wanted to touch the noise and hear it louder, so I got down on my knees, crouching until my head was at the entrance to the hole. I still couldn't hear exactly what the voices were saying, but they sure sounded like they were having fun, so I stuck my head in further. I squeezed and I squeezed, deeper into the hole, the light from the outside world vanishing as I scrunched further into the tiny opening. There was no way I should have fit, but I felt myself inching deeper with each passing second. Miraculously, I felt free and open, not the least bit claustrophobic. The voices got louder and louder, until I slipped. My feet fell into the hole, and I landed face-first in the center of a dark room that seemed to close around me. I sensed a great presence surrounding me in all directions, but the complete darkness of the room obscured the owners of the voices I'd heard from above.

I sat up, or at least I think I sat up; the darkness had left me so disoriented I wasn't quite sure I was upright for a moment. Then I heard this deep gravelly voice.

“Waaah! A people!”

“Oaah! ROooh! Humph!” and all manner of loud growls and grunts surrounded me. It was crazy.

Then the blackness of the room began to grow brighter as my eyes adjusted. In the orange-yellow glow of the damp cavern, I could see I was surrounded by the faces of at least ten enormous grizzly bears.

One of the smaller ones growled out, “I call it. It’s mine! I saw it first.”

Then they all started growling at each other.

“I get the people,” one of the bigger bears shouted. “You couldn’t even eat half of it, Baldy. I get it, and if you’re lucky, I’ll let you Bodie and Bard have a whole arm-bone each when I’m done.”

“It’s only got two arms,” one of the littler bears protested.

“Do I have a say in the matter?” I asked. “Seeing as they’re my arm-bones.”

“No,” one of the bigger bears said. “I’m keeping this people. It’s mine – all of it.”

“That’s not fair, Barron. We should split her at least.”

“It stays in one piece,” he said. “And it’s mine. Nobear’s eating this people. I’ve always wanted a people, and now this one’s mine. If anybear’s got a problem with that, we’ll settle it like bears.”

There was silence in the dim cavern for a moment as the bears all seemed to be looking to see if anyone would accept the challenge. It was one of the little ones who spoke up.

“You better tell Browner. If he finds out you kept a people and didn’t tell him about it, he’s gonna be pissed.”

“You let me worry about Browner, Bodie. You mind your business and don’t worry about the people. It’s mine.”

“Um, she,” I said. “I’m not an it, I’m a she.”

“It says it’s a she, Barron. I think she’s right too. I mean, she smells awful, but she does kinda smell like a she.”

"You're a she?" the bear called Barron asked me.

"Of course I'm a she. I'm a girl. My name's Riley."

"Riley the people," he said smiling a broad smile. "I've always wanted a people, and now I have one. I promise I'll take good care of you, Riley. In fact - "

"So you're not even going to eat her, Barron?"

"Shut up, Baldy. You're going to scare the poor thing," he growled back. "Now where were we? Right. We should be showing her a little hospitality here. Beers and barrels - right? Let's get the cubs in here!"

The rest of the bears roared in delight and started rumbling around, all busy as though each had a job to do. Some went off this way, and others that way, and finally a door opened to another room in the back.

"Can I just ask one question before we do - what are we doing?" I asked.

"Beers and barrels, kid. You're gonna love it."

"Yeah, I wanted to ask two questions actually."

"Oh, oh! Now it's two questions. I see how this is going to go." Barron put his giant front leg over my shoulder and smiled. "I'm just kidding around, lady. You'll learn that about me. Go ahead. Shoot."

"So you all have names? And you talk?"

"Sure, you can see that much," he said. "As for names, Riley, I'm Barron." And he said it with the sort of unabashed innocent pride that a three year old boy might announce his presence to a room full of adults. "As for the rest of them, well that's Bodie, Baldy, Bard, Beardo, the little one over there is Brian, the other little guy in the tavern is Blondie; there's Burt, Benny, and last but not least Boobie."

"Boobie?" I asked the little bear running past us; he stopped, grinned, shrugged his shoulders, and then hustled into the tavern.

"So what was your other question, lady?" Barron asked.

"Oh, yeah. I was going to ask what all of you bears were doing down here?"

"You'll have to promise to keep that secret, otherwise we will have to eat you. I mean, I don't want to, but we're kinda breaking the rules here."

"You guys have rules?"

"We bears have rules, yeah. What about you? Do people?"

"Oh my God. So many rules. I can't even remember them all. It's exhausting."

"Well, we only have a few, and one of the big ones is that male bears, you know, like us, we're not really allowed to hang out together once we're not cubs anymore. But you know, where's the fun in that?"

"Why aren't you allowed to hang out together?" I asked.

"Because Browner says so. That's really the only reason."

"Who's Browner?"

"He's the bear you don't want to mess with. He's the biggest."

"So you're kinda hiding down here - meeting in secret."

"Yeah, Brian found this place. It's awesome, huh? It'd be a great spot to den up - maybe this winter, we'll see. Most caves don't have a tavern in the back either. You want to see it?"

"I guess," I said. "But what happens if you guys get caught? You said it was a big rule."

"I don't know. I guess that's up to Browner if we get caught. Let's hope we never find out. Anyway, it's a stupid rule. I've been palling around with Brian and Burt since we were all cubs, so who says that one day we have to stop being friends? It sucks, so we decided we'd get together whenever we could. It's pretty lonely out there all by yourself."

"Anyway - beers and barrels!"

Barron patted me on the back and led me through the tavern's large wooden door. All the bears were sitting on benches lining

the walls at floor level, resting their front legs on the tables circumscribing the vast round tavern. An orange glow emanated from the stained-glass windows hovering over the tables and illuminated the circular wooden floor. The little bears, Bodie, Baldie, and Boobie, they came round carrying giant trays of beer mugs the size of Big Gulps, placing seven or eight towering glasses at the center of each table. When they were all seated, the barrels came cascading into the center of the floor, almost knocking me down and rolling over me.

“Careful there, kiddo,” Barron said. “It’s going to get pretty crazy over there. I don’t think you want to be on that side of the table.”

“Well where am I supposed to sit?” I said, looking around to see every seat along the wall occupied by a big, smiling, beer-swilling bear.

“On my lap. Where else?” Barron said.

I gave him a skeptical look.

“What? Don’t be weird about it, Riley. You’re my people now. You have to do what I say. Get over here. It’ll be fun. Trust me.”

I knelt down and crawled under the table, and after the first few seconds of feeling like I was in a weird, regressive childhood memory about a mall Santa, Barron’s lap was actually quite soft and comfortable, and his fur kept me warm when he wasn’t dripping beer on me.

“Okay, okay,” he started, all excited. “So this is how it works. The cubs come and dance on the barrels and whenever our cub lets his hat hit the ground we have to drink a beer.”

“But I don’t drink beer, Barron.”

“Why not?”

“Because, I’m only fifteen.”

“That’s funny,” he said. “I’m five and I’ve been drinking since I was a cub. Just give it a try.”

"I don't think I can drink that much," I told him. "Look at how little I am."

"You can help me, anyway," he said.

The door swung open, and in came the cubs, wearing these strange, red, cylindrical hats. Music started playing as the funny little cubs leapt onto the barrels, struggling to balance their hats as they rolled back and forth on the barrels.

"Where does the music come from?" I asked.

"Geeze, Riley. Now I know why these guys wanted to eat you. Do all people ask a million questions?"

"Sorry. I was just curious how you bears can play music."

"It just happens here. Go with it. I'm not sure where we get the beer either, but it sure tastes good."

The music was just as playful as the little cubs, who rolled their barrels with incredible skill, their deft little feet rocking each barrel through a pattern across the floor. They weaved and turned, hardly ever bumping into one another, but when they did crash, and a cub went tumbling to the floor, so too went the hat, and a bear along the wall would call out the cub's name, "Kevin! Colby! Cordie! Kibbie!" and down would go a beer with one huge gulp. Barron had Kimbo, and he'd always leave me to finish the final sip at the bottom of the glass, putting it in front of me as if it were a great honor he was bestowing. I gulped it down but couldn't taste a thing. I couldn't tell how long we'd been there, but it must've been a long time. I was wondering why all the bears had names that started with B while the cubs had C names and K names, but I didn't ask because of what Barron had said about all the questions.

Now, there was hardly any beer left, and to finish off the game, the cubs were on their hind legs, struggling to keep their balance as the barrels rolled under their feet. The last few beers started to go fast, and everyone was having such a laughing good time that no bear paid attention to the knocking at the door. It

turned into a pounding. A few of the cubs started to look over at the door. They all fell when the music stopped.

I could hear a loud, lumbering rumble on the other side of the door. Every last bear was silent. An incredible roar came through the door, which somehow didn't fall off the hinges. The bears stood up at the tables.

Barron looked down at me. "You should get behind me now."

I didn't have to ask who was on the other side of the door. The energy in the room told me. I dove behind Barron just as Browner's two enormous paws blasted down the tavern door. There was only the sound of his breathing, a rumble like nothing I'd ever heard. I held onto Barron's back, gripping his fur so tight I could nearly count the individual hairs clenched between each of my fingers. Barron stood there, frozen in fear, never moving a muscle. This agony seemed to last as long as the barrel game had.

Finally, I heard Browner's terrible voice echo through the tavern. "Bodie, get these cubs outta here, and then head straight to the Grotto. You wait for me there."

I heard the cubs filing out, rolling the barrels with them as they left. Then I heard his voice again.

"Burt, Brian, and Barron, I know this is your doing. It's not that difficult. I only have a few rules, and you all know them. This is what I get for being so lenient," he paused for a moment, and I heard two very loud sniffs and felt Barron's back grow even more rigid. "Is that God-awful smell what I think it is, Barron?"

"It's a people, Browner," he answered.

"Obviously, I can smell that, but what is it doing hiding behind you?"

"It fell into the cave outside, and I wanted to keep it. I told it to hide behind me."

"Why would you ever want to keep such a thing?"

"I guess I felt sorry for it, Browner. I figured such a helpless little thing might need some taking care of."

“Like a cub, Barron? You’ll make a good she-bear one day.”

I heard a few of the other bears chuckle, and then an enormous roar from the center of the room to silence them.

“Let me see it.”

I began to shake as Barron looked over his shoulder, “You’re supposed to protect me,” I said.

“I can’t protect you from Browner,” he whispered. “Best do as he says.”

Barron pulled me away, wrenching my hands from his long, shaggy fur. I held my eyes shut in terror. Then I felt Barron give me a push toward the center of the room. My legs shook, and all I could think about was getting my hands on that sneaky little rabbit who’d tricked me into coming down here.

“Open your eyes, people!” I heard Browner’s deep voice bellow, and I felt the warm rush of his breath steaming across my face.

When I opened my eyes, I gasped at the sight of Browner. I started crying and fell to the ground in a heap, clutching my knees and moaning in terror. He was a monster, twice the size of Barron, his giant yellow eyes piercing straight through me as I lay there helpless on the floor.

“What’s it doing, Barron?” Browner asked, scowling at the smaller bear.

“I don’t know,” Burt answered from behind him. “But it kinda looks like a sad, smelly armadillo all balled up like that.”

As they all started laughing, Browner lurched up on his hind legs, letting out a roar that shook the ground, and when he was done there was silence, and fear. I’d never been so terrified in my life.

“I should kill you, Barron,” he said, coming down on all fours with a thud, “and this pathetic little creature you wanted to keep too. Maybe you deserve each other. Maybe that. You can take it with you on your banishment.”

"You're banishing me?" Barron asked. "To where?"

"The other side of the Sloos. And if I so much as smell you on this side before it's spring again, Barron, I'll kill you."

"Thank you, Browner. Thank you," he said, and I could hear his footsteps rushing to the doorway.

"Barron," Browner said. "Forgetting something? I thought I told you to take this smelly little thing with you."

"Of course, of course," he said.

I heard his footsteps creep up behind me, and there was a pinching sensation in my neck as Barron lifted me with his teeth like a mother cat.

"Hang on," Browner said, and Barron stopped dead in his tracks, leaving me dangling there in front of Browner. The great bear was so close I could feel the moisture from each breath settling on my cheeks. "Open your eyes and look at me, little creature."

I couldn't. "Please, no," I managed to say, continuing to squeeze my eyes shut. I couldn't even stand. Barron's teeth propped me up, with my feet merely sweeping the ground as he held me there in terror.

"Look at me!"

Barron prodded my back gently with his claws, and then he pinched me with them to encourage me further.

When I opened my eyes, Browner was on all fours, he lifted up his neck to look me in the eyes, glaring at me, then he snarled, "If you ever cross me, tiny people -" then he stood and bellowed a tremendous roar onto my face from above, locking eyes with me as he showed his power and his terrifying fangs.

All I could do was scream so fiercely my ribs ached from the pain. Suddenly, Browner was gone.

Intruder

That was a long time ago. It seemed so at the time too, but I still had the pinch in my neck from Barron's teeth when I awoke in a place that seemed greatly familiar. I strained to remember what had happened to me. The dream was what seemed real, even more than the foggy bus ride home the day before. I sat up in my bed and I noticed right away that the sheets were different than when I'd crawled into bed the night before. Somehow, these thick square sheets had appeared under me. That was the first thing I noticed. Then I realized I was wearing a nightgown that I hadn't put on, and, even stranger than that, an adult diaper. *This* had to be a nightmare. I managed to swing my legs to the side of the bed, but everything was sore, aching like my bones had grown old overnight. The sunlight peeking around the edges of the curtains sliced into the dim shade of my room, and when the shine hit my eyes - even indirectly - it was painful. My head was so foggy I thought I must be having another strange dream, but then I smelled the lavender from the candle on my desk - someone had been burning it. I rocked forward and managed to come to my feet, and for a few moments, I saw stars and felt heat rushing to my head. I heard a car drive past the house. The sound of the wheels on the pavement was raw, and it was the first thing I knew to be real. I was awake, and now I noticed that I was starving.

Everything was so bright. I got dressed and put on sun-glasses so I could leave my room. As I was dressing, I took inventory. Things seemed to be where I'd left them - diary, schoolbooks, magazines, all the posters on the walls - Leo, Nick Carter, and Buffy. Everything seemed right except me.

It took me a few steps before my legs were in working order again. I was awkward and rangy, like a toddler is, unable to keep

to a straight path while stepping forward. When I got to the stairs, I figured I should grab the railing.

I heard the TV from all the way up here – that too was strange, because Mom would never spend a precious Saturday morning watching television. Then I remembered that they were supposed to be in Florida. So who the hell could be in the house? I stopped halfway down the stairs. Who would break into somebody's house and sit there and watch TV? Then I had this other thought, like what the hell was with the diaper, and maybe whoever was responsible for that was sitting there watching TV. Maybe it was some creep who'd drugged me or something. So many weird things were happening. If I'd been in my right mind I'd have stopped right there and gone back upstairs to Mom and Dad's room and called 911. But I was starving. I had this definite conflict between fear of bodily harm and ravaging hunger. And hunger won. I decided I would sneak into the refrigerator, get as much food as I could carry, sneak back upstairs, and then call Mom at work.

I crept through the kitchen and opened the fridge as quietly as I could, taking out bread, sandwich meat, cheese, yogurt, and a bunch of other stuff. Before I realized it, I'd piled half the contents of the fridge onto the counter and had no way to carry it all.

"Aah!" I heard a woman shriek behind me. "You scared the shit out of me, Riley!"

I whipped around at her, even more startled than she was, my back up against the counter. I heard my voice tremor like my shaky legs when I tried to speak, "Wh – " it sounded like a bark, and I had to clear my throat, because my tongue didn't seem to want to work right. I almost fell over. "Who are you? And what are you doing in my house?"

I realized she didn't look like a burglar. She was in her late twenties maybe, and was dressed like a nurse, wearing those loose-fitting pajamas that nurses always wore.

"My name's Jacqueline," she said. "You don't remember me?"

"You're not going to hurt me, are you?"

"No. Of course not, Riley. I'm here to help you. Your parents hired me to take care of you. Don't you remember meeting me?"

"I've never seen you before in my life. Where are my parents? Are they still in Florida?"

"In Florida?" she said.

At that moment I wasn't sure who was more confused, because she sure looked confused. All I knew was that I fell asleep after school and woke up with this strange woman in my house telling me things I knew couldn't be true.

"You don't remember last night?" she asked me, and I shook my head no. "Well, you bit me when I got you up to use the bathroom, and I'm pretty sure you thought you were four years old, because you were acting like it. You seemed to know my name then."

"I'm really really hungry right now. I feel like I'm going to starve to death if I don't eat something."

"I can see," she said, looking at all the food on the counter and smiling at me like she knew me. I didn't smile back.

"Do you know where Mom and Dad are?"

"Your dad's at work, and your mom's probably on her way home right now. The ambulance was going to be here at two to pick you up for the MRI, and your mom was going to ride with you."

"If you are who you say you are, you should be able to tell me what my parents' names are."

The alarm on the refrigerator door started to beep because I'd been standing there with the door open the whole time. The

woman started to inch closer; I thought perhaps to shut the refrigerator door.

"No!" I said, trying to back up even further, but I couldn't because my back was already to the counter.

"Their names are Paul and Carol Basile. You're Riley Kate Basile. Your birthday is January 28, 1982. You're fifteen years old and a sophomore at Alexander Hamilton High School. You play the french horn in the band. You're in the school play. Your mother also told me you were going to go out for the basketball cheer team this month. I've been caring for you while your parents are at work this past week, Riley. You really don't remember anything?"

"I'm not dreaming this too, am I?"

"No, Riley, this is really happening."

The refrigerator kept beeping – so loud.

"What day is it today?"

"It's Tuesday."

"No that's impossible. You're lying to me."

"Could you just shut that," she said, pointing to the refrigerator door that was still beeping. "I can see you're upset and you don't want me to come any closer, Riley. I won't come near you if you just shut the door. The beeping is really annoying."

I took a step forward and shut the door. It was killing me too, but I was scared of her.

"I don't believe you. You're not really a nurse."

"I'll show you," she said, and she disappeared into the TV room, returning with her purse. "Here's my ID."

She slid it across the kitchen table and stepped back. I inched forward and picked it up. It read: Jacqueline Everett LPN, Hillcrest Home Health Services. It had her picture and it looked really real.

"What does LPN mean?"

"It means that I'm a nurse. It's the same as RN except the things they allow me to do are different. It's like a different rank of nurse, but I'm still a nurse."

"You're telling me I've been asleep since Friday - so five days?"

"When you woke up just now, Riley, what day did you think it was?"

"I thought it was Saturday."

"What date?"

"Yesterday was the seventh, so the eighth."

"It's the eighteenth today, Riley."

"No, no, no. You're lying. That's impossible. I don't believe you. I want to talk to my mother right now, lady. You get her on the phone for me or I'll call the cops."

"That's a good idea, sweetie, but like I said, she's on her way home right now, so she won't be in her office. Can I call your dad? Would you like to talk to him instead?"

I nodded, and I was starting to cry, because I wasn't quite ready to believe it, but I knew something was wrong. It was impossible. Eleven days!

She picked up the cordless phone in the kitchen and dialed the number without looking it up, like she knew it by heart. She asked for Dad's extension like she'd called him a hundred times before.

"Riley, honey, why don't you sit down at the kitchen table, you're making me nervous hanging onto the counter like that. You look like you're going to fall over."

"Where's Dad?" I said, stepping toward table and sitting; she was right, I felt like I was going to fall over.

"The secretary just put me through," she said. "It's ringing now."

Then she started talking to him. She was laughing, saying things like, "No, Paul, she seems lucid, but she doesn't remember

anything. Yeah. Yeah. No, she's really scared. She doesn't remember me at all. No. No. Hang on. I'll put her on."

She handed me the phone and I heard Dad's voice, but I wasn't sure at first if it was really him. Then he called me cupcake and I knew.

"Is it really true, Daddy? How could I sleep for that long?"

Then he told me the same thing Jacqueline had. I'd been asleep for eleven days. He told me that I'd been in the hospital for two days before they discharged me; that they'd woken me up several times, but I wasn't acting like myself; that what Jacqueline had told me about biting her was true. The last thing that he told me scared me.

"How can they not know what it is? That doesn't just happen to people, Dad. They don't sleep for over a week for no reason."

"That's why you're going to the neurologist with Mom, cupcake. They're going to take a look at your brain and see what they can find out. He's one of the top brain specialists in the world, and he's going to find out what's wrong. How do you feel right now, honey?"

"I'm really hungry. And scared. I didn't know who this lady was, Dad."

"She's your nurse, Riley. It's okay. She's very nice. Everything's going to be all right. Your mom's on her way home right now. Why don't you have something to eat."

"I'm starving," I said.

I crossed my arms on the table and put my head down on them. It all started to sink in. I'd missed a full week of practice for the play, another week of classes, at least three tests - cheerleading tryouts. It was a disaster! He could hear me crying now, and he was saying something, but I couldn't hear the words. All I could think about was everything I'd missed, and how even Dad couldn't explain what had happened to me. And the Homecoming dance! That was this week. Justin Bierman had

probably already asked someone else. I dropped the phone on the table and Jacqueline picked it up. She talked with Dad for another minute or so before hanging up.

“What kind of sandwich would you like, Riley?” she said.

“Anything,” I said, sniffing and crying. “I’ll eat anything.”

“I see you got yourself dressed,” Jacqueline said as she was fixing the sandwich. “You look really cute. Maybe after you finish lunch we can clean you up and wash your hair.”

“I really smell that bad?”

“No, sweetie, you smell fine. I just thought you might like me to do your hair before you went out to the doctor’s – make you look pretty.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to lie. I know I stink.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I just know it’s true.”

“How do you know that, Riley?”

“The bears told me. They all said it. I stink.”

Jacqueline looked at me like she thought I was crazy for a second, but then she smiled to hide it. She put the sandwich down and I started to eat like a starved animal. I put half the sandwich in my mouth in one bite.

“Careful now,” she said; she sounded like a kindergarten teacher. “Eat slow or you’re going to choke.”

I did almost choke at first, but I couldn’t help it. I savaged that first sandwich and was ready to lick the tiny little smear of mayonnaise left on the plate.

“I’ll make you another,” Jacqueline said.

This time she cut the sandwich into tiny bite-sized squares and fed them to me one by one like doggy treats. I was too hungry to protest. I couldn’t waste a breath on that. I needed to be eating food. And I felt it. Even though I felt like I was okay in that moment, somehow I knew how wrong my life had just gone. I felt like a baby, getting fed by a nurse bite by bite.