



Lovesick Falls

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: This queer take on *As You Like It* features first loves, friend breakups and madcap mix-ups, from award-winning author Julia Drake.

Celia Gilbert is the perfect friend—loyal, trustworthy, and committed to mending her best friends' broken hearts.

She's the reason the trio is spending the summer in Lovesick Falls, the idyllic little town where Touchstone's sort-of-uncle's cabin was waiting to be house-sat by three unsupervised (but totally responsible) teenagers.

After all, Celia, Ros, and Touchstone have been best friends since childhood. Sure, Celia is in love with Ros, and Touchstone was once in love with Celia — but that's the beauty of a place like Lovesick Falls. If you fell in love, you could fall out.

Unless you can change the other person's mind.

They started the summer closer than ever. Will living together tear them apart?

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WELCOME TO THE LILY PAD , or A Brief Introduction to Power Jam

Touchstone warned us a thousand times that the cabin was not very nice. It was old, for one thing, and not terribly spacious, for another. Persistently damp, with sluggish plumbing and a total lack of insulation, though hopefully that would be less of a problem in the summer. There was also the matter of his uncle's 1 unusual taste, plus the temperamental oven—cakes came out soupy in the middle, roasted vegetables blackened. Sometimes, for seemingly no reason at all, the house would lose power for a few days, and everything would have to be done by candlelight.

“Sounds like hell on earth,” said Ros on the drive up there. “I’m so glad I agreed to come.”

“It’s romantic,” I insisted. What did I care about an oven? I was about to spend the summer with my two best friends, just us, and while I enjoyed an occasional bake, I was fairly confident I could survive eleven weeks without making a pie.

“One year, my mom pulled a sock out of the dryer, and it turned out to be a bat,” Touchstone said, leaning between the two of us like a back-seat gargoyle.

We were nearly there by that point—I was driving down a bumpy, pitted, dead-end road that I wouldn’t have trusted as an actual thoroughfare had Touchstone not promised me it was. We were only two and a half hours from home, though the drive had felt longer, the roads through the forested hills twisty and slow going. And the drive seemed even longer now that Touchstone had launched into great detail about the length and girth of the needle required for a rabies shot.

“This is up your alley, Celia! Disaster preparedness!”

“I know, but please don’t say girth,” I said.

“Or anything else vaguely phallic,” Ros said.

“Or anything else to make us regret coming,” I said.

“Look, I’m just trying to manage expectations,” said Touchstone. “I don’t want anyone thinking we’re going somewhere fancy and magical . I don’t want anyone thinking this is some kind of charming picnic or enchanted wonderland . I don’t want anyone thinking—oh, look, we’re here.”

My jaw full-on dropped. Ros snatched me by the forearm before I’d put the car in park.

“Holy shit,” they said.

“It’s a fairy tale,” I agreed.

“What did I just say ?” said Touch—but Ros and I were already out of the car.

The cabin was a darkly shingled A-frame cottage with an overgrown lawn and cinder-block steps, a twisted tree in the front yard with a hollow big enough to hide in.

Ros and I barreled past Touch as he unlocked the front door.

A full tour might’ve taken a normal person three minutes; Ros and I, hopped up on independence and gas-station snacks, saw the whole place in thirty-five seconds flat.

Downstairs, a living room with a picture window that went all the way to the ceiling, with a view of the river; a potbellied pellet stove; a kitchenette.

A bathroom and what would be our room, Ros's and mine, a single tiny room off the kitchenette with matching army cots, the space between the beds narrow enough that our knees would touch if we sat on our beds at the same time.

The place was furiously green, houseplants stashed in every corner, some even taller than we were, some so small they could fit on a fingertip.

We squealed like pigs.

We jumped up and down.

We could hardly believe our luck.

Up the stairs—a spiral staircase, a death trap, especially if you took the stairs two at a time, as we did now—

was Touchstone's room, which was really more like a sleeping nook in a grown-up, rococo tree house than a true bedroom, with a bedspread that looked like Persian rugs and a deep blue velvet headboard and pillows, endless pillows, so many that Ros and I each snatched one for our beds downstairs and there were still enough to build a pillow fort that was more like a castle.

In the kitchenette, Touchstone called his uncle-who-was-not-his-uncle—

Hi, Henry, it's Andrew, we made it, yup, we've found the plant-care dossier —while Ros and I made faces at him and tried our feverish best to remember how his uncle-who-was-not-his-uncle was related to him, which had become our favorite game since we'd found out we'd be staying at the cabin.

“Okay—the cabin belongs to Henry, and Henry isn’t related to Touchstone....”

“Henry is cousins with Freddie!” said Ros.

“No, he was married to Freddie,” I said.

“And Freddie was Touchstone’s second cousin?”

“Or Freddie’s mom was Touchstone’s second cousin?” I said.

“ Yes —the mom—but there’s a divorce in there somewhere!”

“We can’t forget the divorce!”

“Can you two shut up ?” Touchstone hissed.

We cackled and continued to run around gleefully, now noticing details we hadn’t before: the outrageously opulent stained-glass chandelier; the heavy leather high-backed chairs; the antique trunk full of plush blankets we draped around our shoulders like cloaks worn by royalty; the crowded art, the sepia-painted wooded landscapes and prints of peacocks and a quail; and an actual stuffed pheasant standing on a little ledge built into the wall.

“Let’s name him,” I said.

“Angelo,” Ros declared, and it was so.

At some point we started noticing the frogs. Here was a tiny pewter one sharing the ledge with Angelo; here was a pair of brass lamps in the shape of two elongated frogs with twisted legs; here were frog-patterned hand towels in the bathroom, and frog salt-and-pepper shakers on the table, a frog pattern on Ros’s blanket turned robe. By

the time Touchstone had ended his phone call, we'd christened the cabin the Lily Pad. Who cared about the dampness? It was ours for the summer, and it was perfect. It may not have been an actual fairy tale, but it was close enough.

We left our stuff in the car, texted our parents we'd made it, and walked down to the water, a five-minute trek that was slightly steeper than expected and hot, exposed to the sun.

The grassy hill gave way to a sandy, flat beach that was cupped in the palm of the woods, and we stood marveling for a moment, our arms around one another's shoulders.

Straight ahead, the far side of the river met the road and then turned quickly into forest.

To our right, an old bridge spanned the river, once copper but now weathered the perfect teal green—we could walk that bridge to cross into town, according to Touchstone.

To our left, the river continued and then bent, disappearing behind a rise in the land.

Ros pulled off their heavy lace-ups and yanked off their mismatched socks—one pea-green ankle sock, one thicker hiking sock, a sartorial choice I simply could not support no matter how much I loved them—and waded into the water.

The river lapped at their ankles, and I nearly felt the coolness on my own feet, delicious, chilling.

“Can we swim here?” I half spoke, half called, half to Touchstone, half to Ros, who continued to walk deeper into the water. “Ros?”

The water had risen over their ankles by now, their unshaven calves, and then their spiky knees, where it darkened the gray of their cutoffs.

I thought maybe they'd stop there—I yelled their name, but they just kept walking—but the water was up to their ribs now, soaking the baggy forest-green sweater vest they'd found in the men's department of our thrift store, cashmere for ten bucks, with a slight Mr.

Rogers vibe that Ros made cool, though the vest itself was no doubt ruined now with river water—and then the water was up around their ears and their unruly, unwashed hair, and then they were gone, swallowed whole by the water.

Touchstone did an impression of me later that would make my sides split.

He captured my panic perfectly: my bulging eyes, my shrieking voice, like some horrible seabird's.

Ros! Ros! Ros! But what was I supposed to do? I was worried.

We didn't know anything about currents or local sea monsters, and somewhere I'd heard that river otters were highly territorial and a pack of them could work together to drown a human if they perceived them as a threat.

Ros had had a horrible year, and they could be reckless.

Once, at one of our swim meets, they'd gotten out of the pool and they were bleeding; they'd hit the flip turn so hard they'd sliced open their foot, but they kept swimming anyway.

Our meet was canceled, and they'd tracked blood all over the tile; the two of us, me in my bathing suit and Touchstone in his swim-team managerial role, had chased

after their bloody prints with our towels, mopping them up.

When Ros popped back up, they were halfway across the river.

Their hair was slicked back, reminding me of a seal—it was only ever tame when wet—and even in the distance I could tell their golden eyes were sparkling.

They whooped, a shriek of pure joy, and there was that smile that I hadn't seen in months, that smile I'd waited and waited for, that smile with one fanged canine tooth and slight crookedness that—though I'd barely admitted it to myself, let alone anyone else—had started setting my ears on fire a little over a year ago, at the end of tenth grade, when they flashed it at me on a totally regular day in chemistry and my stupid stomach crashed and careened toward my crotch, and I thought, No, please, come on, anyone but them .

“Come on in!” Ros yelled. “Don't be a wuss, Celia; it feels amazing!”

And so—even with all my reservations about the river, disease-carrying algae blooms, currents, shrieking eels, etc., I followed them into the water while Ros cheered me on. The bank fell away from my feet, and I paddled with my arms and legs, feeling like my dogs at home. My clothes billowed out, ballooning, heavy. I'd never jumped in anywhere in all my clothes, and the river felt cool and amazing inside my overalls, and as I swam toward Ros, I couldn't believe this was ours for the summer.

“She's doing it, she's doing it!” Ros cheered. “Touchstone, now you!”

“No, thank you,” called Touch. “Call me crazy, but I'd rather not get giardia!”

Ros laughed and then swam to meet me. We met in a part of the river where neither of us could touch the bottom, and they wrapped their arms around me in a strange

water hug. We both half laughed, half drowned, deliriously happy.

“How deep do you think this is?” I said, paddling to stay afloat.

“Sometimes all you have to know is that it’s too deep to stand,” Ros said, but they humored me. They took a deep breath and plunged down into the green depths.

“Too deep to touch,” they said when they popped back up, and I felt a little flurry of fear. Maybe we would get giardia. Maybe there were snapping turtles or other foes in the water that were waiting for us. Maybe...

“Don’t freak out,” Ros said, noticing the expression on my face. “If some horrible river monster comes to drag you away, I’ll save you. I promise.”

That was all I needed to hear.

Later, Ros washed our clothes (the washing machine was bat-free) and then hung them to dry on the porch railing. We curled up on the outdoor couch, and they collapsed against me in laughter while we made Touchstone do impressions of us and our history teacher, Mr. Greeb, and my big bulldozer black Labs, which I already missed. When the temperature dropped—dramatically, as we started to lose the light—Touchstone pulled on his fleece jacket and made himself comfortable in one of the far chairs, and Ros brought the frog-patterned blanket outside and spread some of it over them and some of it over me too. Even after our showers, we both smelled faintly of river.

“You look so cozy,” Touchstone said, and he snapped a photo of us on his phone.

“Let’s see,” said Ros.

Touchstone passed his phone to Ros, and they held the device between us.

We might have still smelled like river, but we looked, frankly, gorgeous as hell, clean and pink cheeked from our showers with twisty, semidried hair, comfortable in leggings (me) and a soft pair of jeans (Ros), me in my Power Jam T-shirt that Ros had given me for my last birthday, Ros in a navy-blue striped tee that was the exact right amount of loose.

The blanket was draped across us in a perfectly cozy, casual way, and the light from the setting sun made us look resplendent, like Greek gods.

That photo looked like what I'd been envisioning all spring, the sort of image that kept me going through convincing our parents; through the long school days when we'd whisper Lovesick Falls to one another to boost morale, the name alone enough to inspire wild daydreams; through finding our way here on an old road atlas (my parents' rule for driving was that I needed to know how to read a map).

The long and short of it was, we'd done it: Under my leadership, I'd spirited us away to this wondrous, plucked-from-myth place called Lovesick Falls, and we looked beautiful.

I should've felt ecstatic. But what I felt, seeing that photo as the sun went down, was a pang of homesickness.

"What's wrong?" Ros said. I could feel them looking at me, distressingly close, but I kept my eyes glued on the photo.

"Nothing. I'm fine," I said. I didn't want to admit it to them. Homesick on the first night, even though the whole thing had been my idea! My feelings felt like a betrayal. Captain Ahab was never homesick, I thought bitterly. He never told the crew how much he missed life on land: his evening ritual of ice cream in front of the TV with his parents, watching the dogs fall asleep and twitch, chasing rabbits; sleeping in his own bed.

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“You miss home?” Ros said.

“No,” I said. “Just tired.”

“If you’re upset I’m not in the photo, you can admit it,” said Touchstone.

“We should take another one with you in it,” I said, passing him his phone back, and he wedged himself in between us and snapped an unflattering selfie.

“Celia?” said Ros, and their voice was gentle. “It’s normal to be homesick.”

They reached for my hand under the blanket and squeezed.

“Right, Touchstone?” said Ros.

“I couldn’t do sleepovers until the seventh grade,” Touchstone said.

“That’s such a lie, Touchstone. You slept over at Neil Carmichael’s in fifth grade.”

“Do you have to remember absolutely everything?” he said.

“My memory is both a blessing and a curse,” I said, and right at that moment I remembered how Buckets would barge into my room in the middle of the night, even though he wasn’t allowed, because he wanted to sleep in my bed, which also wasn’t allowed, except when I let him. I felt myself go pale with homesickness.

“Do you want to call home?” Ros said.

“I’m worried that will just make it worse,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Okay,” Ros said, and they clapped their hands together. “Enough outside time. As a wise woman once said, we need a change of scene. This is a situation that calls for Power Jam .”

Touchstone looked horrified. “What? No! You promised we’d watch other stuff! We’re not going to seriously spend the summer watching ‘the worst show on television’?”

“You know we don’t give that review any credence,” Ros said. “The guy who wrote it barely even watched the show!”

“He’s an extremely well-respected TV critic,” Touchstone said. “And he clearly struck a nerve, since it went viral....”

“Yeah, because people love to see popular art shredded to pieces! Besides, that critic is a thousand years old, and of course the show is ridiculous—that’s the whole point!”

“The whole point is that it’s bad?”

“The whole point is that it’s fun ,” Ros said. “What’s that word—Celia, you know what I’m thinking of—”

“Campy,” I said. “Over the top.”

“ See? ” Ros said. “Celia has spoken. To the TV. We shan’t delay.”

The TV was small, but it had about seven different remotes, and it took my extremely competent friends an awful long time to figure out how to get Power Jam playing. I

volunteered to help a few times—Lord knows I was good at problem-solving—but Ros insisted that they and Touchstone could figure it out. After about twenty minutes of punching buttons, swearing, and intermittent googling, Ros and an extremely reluctant Touch finally figured out how to play episode three of Power Jam by signing in to one of the nine hundred streaming services using Touchstone’s dad’s password. Episode three, one of the best, was when the story really started to take off, with the introduction of Blade Mendoza, the show’s villain.

“I think this might be my favorite episode,” I said from the couch.

“Duh,” said Ros, tossing Touchstone a bag of gummy bears for them to split. Between the two of them, they could put away an unholy amount of sugar. “That’s why I put it on. Now watch and enjoy.”

I tried to follow their directions.

Power Jam was a British TV show about the cutthroat world of Roller Derby that had made its way to the US in the middle of our sophomore year, whereupon Ros and I started watching it and became obsessed.

It had everything—extremely hot queer characters, convoluted plotlines, a sense of humor, great costumes, incredible montages of the aforementioned extremely hot queer characters roller-skating passionately and dramatically.

The show had been a balm to us after Ros’s dad skipped town, even though the critical reception was not always favorable.

Ros’s favorite character was Kenna, the rough-and-tumble captain of the squad played by the smokin’ Ronnie Ruthless (that was her actual real name).

Touch, who was a reluctant fan, liked both the tough-as-nails coach and Louisa,

Kenna's wisecracking love interest.

But the best character, in my humble opinion, was Blade Mendoza, the villain, played by Oliver Teller.

Blade was a bad boy from the wrong side of the rink who was always getting in trouble for punching someone or checking someone too hard, who'd deigned to join the scrappy Roller Derby team called the Soul Crushers after being kicked off the soccer team for stealing his coach's car and joyriding it into a tree.

On-screen, Blade stumbled from the car.

His forehead was split into a gash.

His light gray eyes glittered like two agates.

He looked back at the wreckage, then down the empty street, then back at the camera, and then he fell into a crouch and grabbed his head in disbelief.

Blade was a villain who on the rarest of occasions seemed to have a heart of gold, and even when he performed nefarious deed after nefarious deed, I couldn't help but love him.

Plus, it helped that he was blisteringly hot.

On the couch, I tried hard not to drool.

"I can't believe you think that guy is attractive," said Touchstone. He'd left the couch for me and Ros and was sprawled on the ground in front of us, propped up on one elbow, in a position that reminded me, not unfavorably, of my dog Tabitha (my other dog, Buckets, preferred the couch).

“I can’t believe you don’t,” Ros said. “I’m not even into guys, and I think he’s good-looking.”

“He looks like a fish,” said Touchstone.

“A fish ,” I yelled. “Are we looking at the same person?”

“It’s his eyes! I can’t believe I’ve never noticed this before. He’s got weird googly eyes, like a fish. They should call him Old Fish Eyes,” said Touchstone.

“If he’s got fish eyes, then sign me up,” I said. As if I even had a shot in my wildest dreams; he and Ronnie were dating in real life.

“We know, Celia; you’re obsessed with him,” said Touchstone.

“I’m not obsessed,” I said. “It’s just that he’s objectively hot.”

“I have to agree,” said Ros.

“Y’all are out of your minds,” said Touchstone, and settled back in to watch the show. He was, for the most part, a good sport about watching episode after episode of Power Jam .

We watched as Blade was punished by having to join the Soul Crushers, much to the dismay of Kenna, the captain. “He’s never skated before in his life!” she said. “In spite of being named Blade!” She thrust her old roller skates at him, and then came the wonderful moment when Blade turns out to be a natural, a roller-skating savant. We sang along to the song that played over the montage of him skating beautifully, and Touchstone plugged his ears, and miraculously, I started to feel a little better.

“Thank you,” I said to both Ros and Touchstone—though Touchstone still had his

ears plugged, so Ros was the only one to hear.

“Anytime,” Ros said, and they wiped an errant piece of river grit from my temple.

We finished episodes three, four, and half of five before we decided, as a group, to turn into a deep, homesick-less sleep.

Footnote

1 He was not technically Touchstone’s uncle.

Henry, as was his name, was technically an ex-cousin by marriage, the particulars of which were so convoluted they might as well have come straight from Power Jam , a British show about the cutthroat world of Roller Derby that Ros and I watched religiously.

We could never remember Touchstone’s exact relationship to Henry, just as we could never remember how all the plot points of Power Jam fit together.

Had the stalker arrived before or after regionals? Had Blade Mendoza, the villain, cut Kenna’s laces before or after he’d discovered that she’d sold her hair to buy him new wheels? But here’s the thing: Never getting it right was part of the fun with Ros.

They remembered some things, I remembered the others, and between us, we cobbled together a story that might not have been right , but it was ours.

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FULL CELIA GILBERT , or the Tragic Fate of My Tennis Racket

Lovesick Falls had been my idea. I'd never been there myself, but I knew about it because Touchstone had been, and because of the theater festival that happened there over the summer, one big enough to attract minor stars and minor enough to discourage a big fuss. The town was a tiny blip beside the Russian River, nestled in a national redwood forest. One especially gray lunch period in February, Touchstone mentioned visiting his uncle-who-was-not-his-uncle at the cabin he owned, and I had an epiphany. If I were the sort of person who believed in visions—in other words, if I were more like my mother, who wrote horoscopes for a living—I would've called it just that. The idea just came to me, like a solution to a problem I didn't know needed solving, one I knew straightaway was the right answer. If my life had been a math test, I would've put a box around my Lovesick Falls idea and moved on to the next problem without double-checking.

"We should go there," I said. "The three of us. To that cabin."

"Were you listening to any part of my story?" Touchstone said. His endless freckles were paler in the winter—Touchstone was the most freckled person I knew, with freckles on his eyelids and freckles on his lips—and with the lack of sunlight, his reddish hair tended more toward brown. He'd recently been diagnosed with a gluten allergy and was picking at a sad salad. He looked—we all looked—like he needed a little fresh air.

"Touchstone. Do you think we could go there?" I said.

"I can ask about staying a weekend. Maybe when it gets a little warmer."

“No, like, for the summer. We go, we get jobs, we live. You don’t have summer plans yet, do you?”

“My mom’s office,” he said slowly, and I could see him, in a matter of seconds, coming around. He worked last summer as a receptionist at his mom’s orthodontist practice, making sure the wicker elephant was stocked with toothbrushes and taking photos for the Wall of Smiles, which he claimed had started giving him nightmares.

“I mean, I’d love not to stare at teeth all summer. You spend enough time looking at them and you start to feel your soul being sucked from your body.”

The idea was halfway built—I could feel it tingling in the soles of my feet. It was called Lovesick Falls, for God’s sake—with a name like that, who knew what sorts of things were possible? We had to go there. “Ros? What about you?”

Throughout this conversation, Ros had been lightly carving words into the lunch table with my (actually kind of nice) pen I’d lent them. They’d gotten as far as fuck the pat . I knew they didn’t have summer plans. On the contrary: Ros had quit everything in the past six months, first swim team, which we did together, then lit mag, then writing poetry, then choir, then smiling, until Touch and I were the only two things remaining from their life before their dad had left.

It was kind of impressive, actually, this quitting. I’d quit exactly one thing in my life: tennis, in ninth grade. After one especially bad practice, my mom came home and found my tennis racket in the trash can. That was the end of that.

But Ros—who, really, could blame them for the quitting? At the end of our sophomore year, right around the time my feelings for Ros started to change, their dad had split, taken off for Delaware with his physical therapist, smack-dab in the middle of our exam period. I still blamed him both for destroying my best friend’s life and for the B I got on my history final. One day he was there, and then he was

just gone , this man who'd cooked pancakes on Saturday mornings and who'd once lent me a pair of socks when my feet got wet. I still had them, balled in the back of my drawer. I didn't know what to do with them. The socks, I mean. It seemed rude to throw them out, but what was I going to do, ask Ros for his address? I wasn't even sure if they knew it.

On top of all of this, everyone—our teachers, our parents, even this random woman my mom made us stop and talk to when we were walking the dogs—kept telling us that junior year was when everything started to count. Personally, I found this infuriating. What had my life been up until this point: rehearsal for the real thing?

“No plans,” Ros said. They kept their—my—pen moving.

“I hope you're not taking a stand against patisseries,” I said, with a kind of coaxing smile.

They looked at me for a second, their eyes sharp. Their eyebrows were thick and untouched, the left marked by a burst of white hairs where their brow curved and turned toward their nose—a lack of pigment they'd been born with, which we called Ros's snowbrow. For a second, I thought I saw the old Ros lurking there—the one who would joke with me, who might, say, bang the table and shout, The patisseries must go! —but they dipped their head and went back to carving, moving on to the r .

The bell rang. Well. At least they weren't taking a stand against baguettes.

I drew up a proposal during our next class, when I should've been listening to Ms. Wagrowski explain angular acceleration, which I needed to learn not only for my sake but also for Ros's, who'd eschewed note-taking in favor of more carving—lightning bolts this time. That pen would never be the same. I looked up how to write a contract on my phone, and by the end of the period, this is what I'd come up with:

A VERY MODEST PROPOSAL for a VERY MODEST SUMMER of VERY MODEST FUN and VERY SERIOUS FRIENDSHIP

We (Celia Gilbert, Ros Brinkman, and Andrew Touchstone, henceforth referred to as “We” or “The Triumvirate”) propose spending the dates of June 8–August 24 (henceforth to be referred to as “The Summer”) in the town of LOVESICK FALLS, taking up residence at 6 CORBIN LANE (henceforth to be referred to as “the cabin”). The Triumvirate believe we have proved ourselves to be responsible, intelligent individuals and feel spending the summer at the cabin could benefit us on a number of levels, including

I. Personal growth

a. As we prepare for college (after all, junior year is when everything begins to count), it is important that we gain independence by

i. Preparing meals other than instant (gluten-free) mac ’n’ cheese

ii. Finding (and securing) employment

iii. Managing our own schedules

II. Physical health

a. Myriad opportunities for outdoor activities

i. Hiking

ii. Swimming

iii. Canoeing

b. A break from city pollution

i. Even though the Triumvirate reside in what is technically a “suburban” region, pollution levels are much higher in these regions than in Lovesick Falls (see appendix 1)

III. Mental health

a. Trees have been said to promote neuroplasticity (see appendix 2)

b. The Triumvirate could really use a change of scene

I included a breakdown of a budget and printed out a map with all the nearby hospitals circled, and I showed it to Touchstone and Ros that afternoon.

“You spelled independence wrong,” said Touchstone.

“What? No, I didn’t. I-n-d ...”

“Yeah, I know. I just wanted to see you freak out.”

I elbowed him in the chest. He moaned and lamented his weak constitution.

“They’re really going to be gone this summer?” I asked.

“My uncle said they’re going to be traveling in Europe and would love someone there full-time to take care of the cabin. I guess they have a lot of plants that need watering.”

It seemed too good to be true. “Ros? What do you think?”

Ros looked it over. My heart was in my throat.

“You’ve gone full Celia Gilbert,” they said, and passed the proposal. “I mean that in the best way possible.”

We gathered our parents on a Saturday afternoon in late February and made the pitch, clicking through slides I’d assembled. Touchstone and I did most of the talking, though Ros piped up a few times. The adults had some questions about safety and jobs and money and supervision and trust, and while I pointed everyone toward the budget and an article from SFGATE titled “How Did Lovesick Falls Become a Safe Haven for the LGBTQ+ Community?” Ros looked our parents dead in the eyes, steely gazed, snowbrowed, and said, “Please. I need a summer with my friends.”

They said yes almost instantly after that. Mr. and Dr. Touchstone gave me big hugs and told me they could tell I was wearing my retainer, and Ros’s mom told me how grateful she was that Ros had a friend like me. Our parents had some suggestions—that we call to check in weekly, that we treat Henry’s house with the utmost respect, that we pick up the phone when they called us—but they were excited for us. Sure, Ros had quit some things in the past few months, but we were, by and large, good kids with decent grades who made heavy use of their planners (me) and had an impeccably organized pencil case (okay, again, also me) and always showed up to class prepared (with the exception of Touchstone, who for a week last year took notes with a grease pencil from the chem lab because I refused to lend him a pen after he lost too many of mine). In three years of high school, there were two detentions between us (the first when Ros had “accidentally” “spilled” acid from our chem lab on known asshole Bennett Vernon’s baseball cap; the second when Touchstone, like a true goober, had been caught making out with Liz Reynolds in the catwalk above the theater. “You know they can see you up there,” I said. “At least I’m getting some action,” he’d said to me. Touché. The most action I got was in my mind, daydreaming about Blade Mendoza (or Ros).

Still: Before we left, my mother couldn't help but issue me a warning.

"Celia," she said, joining me in my room while I cleaned before leaving, so everything would be just so when I returned. "This is an incredible opportunity for you and your friends. It's immensely kind of Henry to let you use his house, and I know you'll leave the cabin better than when you found it. I love you, and I love your friends. But I do have some reservations that I'd like to talk to you about."

"Uh-huh," I said. We'd already talked about sex—again, not like I was having any—but she loved bringing it up to prove how open and hip she was.

"I'd like to talk to you about triangles."

Okay. That was new.

"The triangle is a curious shape," Mom went on. "In architecture, it's one of the strongest..."

"Mom, can you just say what you mean and not go all sphinx on me?"

"Celia, it continues to be one of the great ironies of my life that I gave birth to a Capricorn."

"Well, sorry I came early."

"Your timeline was your own, and you arrived exactly as you were supposed to. And you know, baby girl, I couldn't have been happier to see you, tiny as you were, five pounds, three ounces...."

"Mom, are you crying?"

“You were just so little once,” she said, wiping her eyes.

Oh, brother.

“Let’s go back to triangles,” I said.

“Let’s,” she agreed. “Three people can be tough to navigate in a friendship.”

I almost laughed. That was what she came to tell me? I, too, had gone through middle school, Mom. My favorite show was Power Jam , which relied heavily on the love triangle between Kenna, Blade, and Louisa to motivate its plot. I knew that three people could be tricky. I also knew my friends.

“Ros, Touch, and I have been friends for forever. I think we’ll be okay.”

“New situations can bring out new things in people. Yes, you’ve known Andrew and Ros forever, but you haven’t lived with them. You certainly have never been on your own with them in such a big way before. Not to mention Ros’s life has gone through some fairly radical shifts in the past year. Just—communicate with us, okay? Keep us in the loop. Be patient with everyone. Be patient with yourself.”

“Okay. I promise to be patient.”

“Celia.”

“What? I promise! I’ll be so patient I’ll make molasses jealous. I’ll be so patient I’ll grow moss.”

My mom hesitated, and for a second, I was worried she was going to say something about the planets. Sometimes, in direct opposition to my wishes, she read my chart and told me things that I did not need to hear, things that became self-fulfilling

prophecies, like when she told me how I could expect challenges in travel and for the next six months of my life I diagnosed my car with a flat tire whenever I drove anywhere, inventing challenges in travel where there were none, seeing as my tires were totally fine.

She had the power to get in your head, unfortunately.

This time, she spared me the planets. Instead she clapped her hands together, stood, and gave me one of her warmest, best hugs. I found myself thinking: I would miss her. I would miss this. I hugged my mom goodbye, and I felt, momentarily, weirdly, like I was going to go off to war, and then I thought that that was probably insensitive to people who did go off to war, and besides, this was hardly war; this was meant to be fun , very modestly so.

“Love you, Mom,” I said into her shoulder. The hug went on for a long, long time. My mom was great at hugs.

“Love you, baby girl,” she said. “I’m trusting you.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

THE CREATION OF THE CHORE WHEEL , or Why You Should Always Travel with a Hammer

Ros's bed was empty our first morning in the Lily Pad. They'd left it unmade, with the sheets kicked down to the bottom and most, if not all, of the contents of their suitcase strewn across their bedspread, like they'd burglarized their own belongings. I reached my hand across the gap and slid it between the sheets—still warm.

I was out of bed quickly. I'd taken the time to unpack and organize last night, so I was dressed in a matter of seconds, in my favorite pair of floral-print overalls, tying a bandanna around my thick, frizzy hair as I went to wake up Touchstone in his upstairs sleeping nook and find Ros, only a little concerned that maybe they'd wandered off into the river again like they had last night. Much to my relief, I found them in the kitchenette, already dressed, holding a mug of coffee.

"It's weak and there's no milk," they said, grinning, "but I made it with extra love."

They passed me a fresh mug, and I took a sip—it tasted like water with a vague coffee essence.

"It's perfect," I said.

"You're such a liar," said Ros.

"Don't drink it all," Touchstone called from upstairs, which was immediately followed by a thwack of his head on the eaves.

The three of us lugged the heavy couch to face the window so we could watch the mist rise off the river. According to my planner it was Monday, June 9, the start of our first full day in Lovesick, and I found myself already nostalgic for this first morning, the thin coffee, Ros's legs stretched out over me and Touch, the goose egg slowly forming on his forehead. We'd left our dishes out last night, so as I finished my coffee I began to make us a chore wheel—an object of true beauty made with construction paper and markers that I'd brought from home. In addition to the construction paper, I'd traveled with all sorts of rainy-day activities: puzzles, beading kits, skeins of yarn, Magic Markers. "When will the rest of the Baby-Sitters Club be arriving?" Touch had asked last night as I unpacked. "I'm into beading," Ros said, rushing to my defense. The joke was ultimately on Touchstone: I'd also brought my floral hammer, which had already come in handy when I banged down a spare nail that'd snagged his sock. I tap-tapped the nail down and felt proud, like, just as my mom had predicted, we'd leave the Lily Pad even better than we found it.

For now, I toiled away happily on my wheel, including such chores as water and dust plants and clean bathroom—or else , while Ros and Touch argued about the quality of the coffee, and my heart soared into my chest. This was everything I had wanted, and I had imagined it into existence: a place I could go with my friends and willingly waste time.

"Dust plants ," said Touch. "Where is that coming from?"

"My mom's plants get super dusty at home," I said.

"The plant-care dossier did say to clean their leaves," said Ros.

"You've read it already?" I said, surprised.

"Henry wrote the whole thing for us. It deserved to be read. Plus, I was up early," said Ros. "Needed something to look at."

“Who takes care of all these plants when they’re not here?” I asked, looking around at all the greenery. I wished I could one day live in a house like this, that seemed to be two parts house and one part jungle.

“I think they pay someone to come take care of them,” Touchstone said. “He told me we were saving him a fortune by being here.”

“Gotcha,” I said. “Well, we can always call that person if we have a plant crisis.”

“We’re not going to have a plant crisis,” said Touch. “Hey, Ros. What’s your plan today?”

“I’m not sure,” Ros said. “I might go into town and see if any place has a help-wanted sign in the window.”

“You don’t have to rush,” I said. “It’s totally fine if you take a day to get acclimated.”

“Yeah, but I want to hold up my end of the contract,” Ros said.

“Baby steps,” I said. “Or maybe today could be a good day to write some poetry?” Before their dad left, Ros was always scribbling away, writing poems in a black notebook.

“Maybe,” they said. “It’s been so long since I’ve written anything, though. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Start with the Lily Pad,” I said. “Or start with the river. Or start with the fact that we’re in this place called Lovesick Falls, a name that’s practically poetry itself...”

“Hey, Shakespeare,” Touchstone said. “We should really get going—”

I looked at my watch. “Oh my God, is that the time? We’ve gotta go! Bye, Ros—text me if you need anything—come on, let’s go, Touch—”

Ros called to us wishing us a good first day as we ran out to the car, and we were off.

On the drive to work I got my first glimpse of town, whose sleepy main street was growing slightly livelier as the mist burned off. It wouldn’t reach peak hum until the theater season started, which wasn’t for another two and a half weeks, with the opening of Into the Woods . For now, its sidewalks were thinly dotted with people: an older couple holding paper cups of coffee and greasy brown bags; some day hikers kitted out in boots and hiking poles; shop owners putting out their signs for the day. We followed a pickup truck with two shaggy dogs in its bed, who barked gleefully at everyone they passed.

“There’s a really nice beach down that way, where my brothers used to pretend to drown to scare me,” Touch said. Touchstone had two much older brothers, ten and eight years his senior, heavily involved in sports, who’d spent a lifetime tormenting their much younger sibling.

“Your brothers are awful,” I said.

“Don’t I know it. And that place makes incredible breakfast sandwiches—and, oh, Henry also mentioned this other place, the Dropped Acorn—it’s a little farther away, but it’s supposed to be incredible....”

“Do we think they’ll be okay?” I asked Touchstone.

“Yeah, that’s the whole point. The food is supposed to be amazing.”

“No—do we think Ros will be okay today?”

“I think Ros would actually appreciate my fabulous tour guiding.”

“Seriously,” I said. “I worry about them all on their own.”

This was the flaw in my plan that I’d been fretting over: In spite of all my best efforts, I hadn’t come up with a way for us to be totally together. Touchstone had been a shoo-in as a member of the Young Company at Arden & Co., the theater festival. I’d had similar luck finding employment there: I’d managed to trick my way into an internship at the costume shop based on a few sketches I’d done, photographs of some old Halloween costumes I’d made, and an interview that I’d more or less blacked out during. Costumes weren’t necessarily my passion—I would’ve preferred making chore wheels or elaborate proposals—but since no such internships existed, costumes would do for the summer. But Ros hadn’t found work yet. They’d applied for a couple of jobs but gotten rejected from all of them—even from working concessions for the theater, which we could hardly believe. “I’m cursed,” said Ros. It did kind of seem that way, though putting stock in curses was more my mother’s bag than my own. Even though getting a job was in our Modest Proposal contract, the three of us decided that maybe Ros would have more luck on the ground. We decided that until they found something, they would be our Hestia, tending the hearth of the Lily Pad and keeping the metaphorical home fires burning. It was a big job, to take care of the house, especially for Ros, who didn’t share my obsession with cleanliness—but Ros assured me and Touch and our parents that they were up to the challenge. The arrangement wasn’t perfect, but it worked: Touch and I had jobs at the theater festival, and we’d have our stay-at-home friend until something changed.

“You worry too much,” Touchstone said.

“Obviously. But the question stands.”

Touchstone sighed. “You can’t babysit them forever.”

“I’m not babysitting . I’m looking out for them. After the year they’ve had, I think that’s the least we can do, don’t you?” He didn’t answer, so I just kept talking—trying to convince him, or me, or maybe both of us that all this worrying was in Ros’s best interest and not evidence of some other feelings that I had for them. “They’re my friend.”

“ I’m your friend,” said Touchstone. “You didn’t do my physics homework for the entire year.”

“It was a handful of times, thank you very much, just the refraction unit and then a few times on oscillations,” I said. “And your dad didn’t leave .”

“He’s been gone over a year at this point,” said Touchstone. “Ros is doing much better. They smile. They laugh. They made us bad coffee. They seem like a version of a person they used to be. And you seem...”

Obsessive. Fixated. Fanatical.

“It didn’t freak you out, watching them walk into the river last night?” I said.

“Not really. Ros is a good swimmer, and you walked in there, too.”

“It was probably stupid in retrospect,” I said. “We’re lucky we didn’t drown. What were they thinking? It could have ended so badly.”

“But it didn’t ,” Touchstone said. “Look at the facts in front of you, Celia. They seemed really good this morning. They were up. They read about the plants. Sure, they don’t have a job, but who cares? It’s summer. Maybe swimming in that river last night was a rebirth. Maybe they really did just need a change of scene, and you gave that to them. Maybe they’ve finally returned to their original form. Maybe you can stop worrying about them so much and start worrying about something—or

someone—else.”

“Maybe,” I said.

I tried, for the rest of the drive, to turn off the worry as he suggested, just enjoy Touchstone’s tour guiding, admire the way the forest came right up to the road, and lose myself in the curve of the river below us. But Ros had been at the forefront of my brain for half a decade, and forgetting them just wasn’t that easy.

Ros was new in fourth grade, and we met because they were seated at my cluster of desks. They had furious, explosive hair, olive skin, and a scowl, and when I first saw them, they were scratching out the latter two-thirds of their name as it had been written on their name tent, pressing with so much force they’d torn a hole in the paper. I was worried that year about not being in a class with Touchstone—they’d split us up for the first time in our lives, into separate classrooms that didn’t even have recess together. My parents kept trying to recast this tragedy as an opportunity to make new friends and take risks, though I saw through all of that. I was alone, and to make matters worse I was quiet. Though I’d come a long way from the days when I used to clam up entirely, my teacher last year had written on my report card: Celia’s written work is excellent, and her reading level is very high, though I’d love to see her speak up more in class. My parents were obsessed with this comment and had urged me that very morning during drop-off to speak up more! But speaking, for whatever reason, was harder than reading and writing, even though I knew the words were the same. Touchstone got me, but other kids laughed, made fun of me for using the big words I liked.

So then I found my name tent next to Ros. I couldn’t tell if they were a boy or a girl. It didn’t matter to me. I was drawn to them at once.

“Hi,” I said. Risk number one.

They grunted.

My own name tent read Cece , which was how I'd been known for the first nine years of my life, a nickname that I wasn't particularly fond of, but one that had just sort of stuck , like spilled pink lemonade, tacky and cloying, bound to attract bees. I watched this person, this Ros, blacken in the latter half of their name, and it occurred to me that I could do the same.

“Excuse me,” I said, “would it be possible, please, if it's not too much trouble, if you might lend me your pencil?”

I had my own, but asking to borrow Ros's was risk number two.

Ros considered me, then handed me their pencil. It was stubby and missing an eraser and covered in teeth marks. I carefully crossed out Cece and wrote Celia above it. There—much more dignified. I sat up straighter.

I handed their pencil back to them. They had dirt under their fingernails.

“Thank you so very much,” I said.

In response, they barked at me. Quite literally: a single, unmistakable woof that sent our teacher's head a-spin and garnered some questioning looks from our desk mates. It was a little weird, I thought, to bark hello, but mostly they sounded like my dog Tabitha during a thunderstorm. She's just scared , my mom would say, and rub her velvety ears. Buckets, unmoved by thunder, would pant solidly beside her, like a big blocky-headed port in the storm.

“Nice Ros,” I said. “Good Ros.”

They blinked at me, stunned. I pulled a clementine from my pocket and began to

unpeel it, trying to keep the peel in one long strip.

“Want some?” I said, holding out a piece.

They took it from me and placed it into their mouth, though I couldn’t tell if they were chewing.

“How is it? My friend Touchstone gave it to me. Sometimes they’re too mealy or tough and I have to spit it out, but sometimes they’re juicy and perfect and I could eat like twelve of them. Once I did eat twelve of them, and then I threw up, and that was atrocious,” I said.

Ros chewed, swallowed.

“Good, then?” I said.

“It’s... orangely bright,” they said finally, and I laughed and they laughed.

“Just so you know,” they said, “I’m not a dog. I’m a wolf.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t care what they were. I just wanted them to be my friend. “I’m not really a student. I’m a princess in disguise.”

“Cool,” said Ros, and the rest was history.

At recess, Ros said, “Come on,” and we raced to the edge of the schoolyard. I wore saddle shoes that year, which I loved—black and white, old-fashioned—and that I’d begged my mother for until she’d caved, finally. Ros wore the shoes that all the boys had, and they ran fast, faster than Touchstone, faster than the fastest kid in the grade.

At the edge of the playground they paused. There was a hole in the fence, and they

started to dip through it now.

“We’re not allowed,” I said.

“You don’t have to come,” Ros said. They looked almost sad, disappointed at the prospect of leaving me here, having come this far.

I had never broken a rule before. But this was a risk, wasn’t it? I followed them.

We were in the far corner of someone’s yard, where a weeping willow stood. Ros ducked beneath the branches of the tree and walked closer to the tree trunk, where they pulled a handful of pebbles from their sweatshirt pocket and began to sort through them. They squatted, placing certain pebbles amid the roots, and that was when I saw it: In the root system of the tree, right by Ros’s feet, stood the start of a tiny village. A few houses had been made with wood chips I recognized from the playground, with moss layered over their roofs. The pebbles Ros had placed formed a path between the houses. It was the beginnings of a fairy world, tiny and perfect and all built by Ros’s hand.

I wouldn’t have told you this if you’d asked me, but I hated recess. Playing felt like a chore, something we had to do in order to get back to the good stuff—worksheets, memorizing, spelling, learning. Make-believe with Touchstone was all right—we were always orphans, and I was usually the eldest—but we were a little old for it now. The girls were interested in monkey bars and acrobatics, jump rope. A few played sports with the boys, but they were always forced to be the goalie. Flipping upside down made me feel seasick, and though I loved to swim and play tennis, I didn’t want to join in the soccer game, which always seemed to end in a skinned knee. Touchstone and I played tetherball sometimes, but you had to race to get there first. We played cards for a while, but then some kid punched another over a specific Pokémon card, so all cards were banned. Sometimes we read books side by side, but I felt self-conscious, the words swimming in front of my eyes, while smiling, well-

meaning teachers were always telling me to go play , like it was such an easy thing to learn how to do.

But I watched Ros get lost in this world at their feet.

I picked up a leaf that had fallen, ripped off a tiny piece, and placed it in front of one of the houses.

“What’s that?” Ros asked.

“A welcome mat,” I said.

A smile spread slowly across Ros’s face. “I think we’re going to need more sticks.”

It was, finally, a kind of play I understood.

From then on, we were Ros and Celia, and we were inseparable. We didn’t make a whole lot of sense when you looked at us—this feral zap of energy and this rule-loving bookworm—but beneath our outward appearance there was a connection between us that was hard to put into words. When I finally had both Ros and Touchstone over for a playdate, Touchstone accepted Ros as quickly as he adapted to Celia , my new name, which was to say, instantly (unlike my parents, who for years still introduced me to people as “their little baby Cece”). They seemed like brothers to me: They raced each other across the length of my backyard (Ros won) and crushed Otter Pops together and chugged the icy, sweet pulp so quickly their tongues turned blue. Between the three of us, we built another small city in my own backyard, and I felt a swelling in my chest watching us build it. I had hoped, in a vague sort of way, that I would make more friends, the kinds I read about in books. It seemed nice to have more than one friend. But I never in a million years had thought to hope for someone like Ros. Until I met them, I wouldn’t have known how.

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GO, SOUL CRUSHERS , or My Mother's Take on Power Jam

Arden dancers in soft leggings and high buns; directors and designers with pencils tucked behind their ears, clipboards clutched importantly. Touchstone went to meet the other members of the Young Company at the black-box theater, while I reported to the costume shop, which was housed in the same building as the main stage. The building was a sweeping spaceship of glass and steel, modern and sleek, totally at odds with the woods. It was so intimidating that I began to wonder if I'd been given the internship by mistake. Sure, I could thread a needle and use it just fine—somebody needed to sew up all the rips in Ros's clothing, patch the knees of their favorite jeans—but I'd never worked on a sewing machine and couldn't tell you what a bobbin was (though I knew it was a thing). I was, quite honestly, shocked I had gotten the job, and more shocked still when I saw that Arden maybe, I thought in my most desperate, painful moments, I could drink from the spring and it would cure me of my feelings for them.

Somehow, we'd emerged back in the costume shop, where Phoebe gave me a brief rundown of its particular spaces and introduced me to the other shop employees. A handful of names went in one ear and out the other—a jumbled mix of Saras and Kiras and Alexes I worried I'd never be able to retain. The shop should've been easier for my brain to manage than the whole theater, but there was still so much, even contained in one room: drawers full of buttons and bobbins and pins, ribbons, strings, muslin cloth, sketches.

"I'm a little overwhelmed," I said to Phoebe.

"Of course you are," she said. "It's overwhelming. Don't worry; I'll teach you how to

do everything, and we'll start small. Like today, I'm going to have you repair scuffs on black shoes. There's no way you can mess it up. It's basically coloring."

I smiled, relieved. Coloring was in my wheelhouse.

"We're happy to have you, Celia," she said, handing me a pair of black shoes and a marker. "Any questions, just ask."

At lunch, I started to worry again about Ros. I'd texted them but gotten no response. I knew that Touchstone was right, that they were probably fine, but I couldn't get that image of them in the river out of my mind: the water closing up over their head, the whole of them disappearing in a gentle gulp.

Phoebe had told me reception was spotty all over campus—most everyone there communicated via walkie-talkie, which would have been very exciting to eight-year-old Celia—but she told me if I followed any of the "scenic trails available to visitors" deeper into the forest, there was a big tree where you could reliably find some bars. She wished me luck, and I set off across campus.

I followed the signs past Café Trapdoor and the black-box theater to the campus's edge, where the paved walkways gave way to trails that led into the redwood forest. Even for someone who grew up in California, the forest trails were incredible—once you walked into the trees it was about ten degrees cooler than it was on campus. The path wove through giant, moss-covered trees that stood as tall and majestic as pillars in a temple. Everything smelled clean and vaguely of lemons, and it was so peaceful that I began to think that maybe all those studies I'd cited about neuroplasticity were actually true.

The longer I walked in the forest, the more it seemed like a fairy tale, like an enchanted place where anything was possible—the sort of place you might run into fairy spirits or gnomes. A ways off the trail there was a tree with a hollow big enough

for two, exactly the sort of place that Ros and I would've loved as kids. I made my way to it and ducked inside, running my hands over the smooth black insides, marveling at the sheer size of the tree. I couldn't believe it. Not twenty-four hours ago, I'd been in my bedroom, listening to Buckets snore himself awake. We'd done it. We'd found our way to another world.

And the real magic? The real magic was that here, standing in this tree, there was cell service. I took a selfie and had just sent it to Ros when I heard the yelling.

“Fools, I'm telling you, fools. This was supposed to be different; that was the whole point—but the script is horrible, unrivaled rubbish—I can't even begin to tell you how stupid it is, incomprehensible, and long, audiences are going to revolt—”

That voice. It was British. And weirdly familiar.

“—not even honest, at least our show is honest, and the director, don't even get me started on the director—I'm meant to be here as a favor to them, but so far they're totally preoccupied with their own mess—”

I peeped around the corner of the tree, doing my best to be covert. Whoever it was, it seemed best not to interrupt them, since it seemed highly likely that they might throttle the next person they saw.

“And the title keeps changing; did I mention that?”

It's lucky I didn't gasp out loud. Because there in the woods, yelling into his phone and looking like he was about to punch someone in the face, was Oliver Teller, aka Blade Mendoza, the sexiest Rollerblading villain of all time and the smokingly hot, maybe fish-eyed, star of the greatest show ever made, Power Jam.

Oh.

My.

God.

This was why you shouldn't neglect discussion boards 2 —because then maybe I would have known that Oliver had landed an acting role at a local theater festival. I could have prepared myself for the possibility that I might run into him. While I was inside a tree. You know how it goes.

“Ronnie was right; this is a waste of time, and I can't get out of here quickly enough—”

Honestly, he looked like a villain: storm-darkened eyes; a muscle in his jaw that twitched with anger; arms cut from daily skating workouts. His skin was deep olive and practically glowing—I knew they had to hydrate a lot on Power Jam , but this seemed like a whole 'nother level. And he was my age! Oliver was the sole teenager in a group of actors who were playing teenagers but were actually in their twenties. 3 The fact of the matter was, it was hard to look sexy and scary in a helmet and elbow pads, but Oliver somehow pulled it off, gave his character this gritty, rough-and-tumble vibe that you couldn't look away from when he was on-screen, even when he did horrible thing after horrible thing.

“—and someone was outside my window this morning trying to get my autograph. I thought no one would know me here. Do you know where I am right now? I'm in the middle of the woods , like some godforsaken hellhole, and I'm not even sure that's safe enough—”

Ah. Ah. This was very bad. I ducked back into the tree, tried to make myself as small as possible.

“Hold on—I'm losing you—”

I heard him walking around, his footsteps growing closer, the do-you-hear-mes getting more and more agitated the closer he got. I flashed briefly on a scene where Oliver's character threatens to strangle someone—obliquely, but still—with a pair of laces. Sure, it was a TV show, but he was physically strong and angry. I'd heard he was actually very nice in real life, but I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of being discovered, especially when he'd already encountered one stalker today.

Mercifully, though, he passed right by the opening of the tree, and I shrank back into the darkness. I couldn't believe how close I was to him, this character that I'd loved to hate for a year and a half of my life, this character who'd prevented the jammers from falling in love, who bullied the fresh meat and said things like, "If you're not here to get hurt, get out of my rink." I could see the acne scars on his cheeks and the brow I'd watched sweat drip down so many times—and then he was gone, past the tree, still trying to make sure the person on the other end of the line could hear him. He was far enough away that my body relaxed.

And then. And then. And then.

A text came through.

Later, I'd marvel at the precision of it, the just-rightness of the timing. The writers of Power Jam couldn't have scripted it any better. I think about how much hinged on that text that came in at just the right second, just the right place, for a very furious Oliver Teller to hear it and return and find me crouched in a tree like some deranged superfan, which was admittedly half true, and we could argue over which half. Ros would've called it fate, but I knew the truth: The sound of the text arriving was nothing more than impossibly bad timing.

Oliver Teller whirled back around.

And I—stunned by that camera-ready face, by the shock of seeing my first celebrity

up close, disturbed by the piercing light gray of his eyes—I cried, “ Go, Soul Crushers! ”

Oliver’s face contorted into disgust and hatred, which was a look I knew all too well, but I had to say, it felt different to have it directed at you rather than observing it on a screen.

“Un-fucking-believable,” he said.

Then he stalked off into the woods, leaving all the cell reception for me.

Footnotes

2 I had taken a break from them while preparing for our trip out here, but the general thrust was this: The show had just finished its second season and, due to low, if passionate, viewership, there was some question as to whether there would even be a third. WHICH SUCKED, because last season alone, Blade Mendoza and Kenna had had a pregnancy scare; he’d gotten his nemesis addicted to drugs; he’d thrown a Rollerblade through a storefront window; and he’d conspired to kill his brother (though fans were convinced that was a dream sequence). Needless to say, we JAMMERS HAD QUESTIONS THAT NEEDED TO BE ANSWERED.

3 “I feel uncomfortable watching this show,” my mother said. It didn’t help that Oliver was often shirtless.

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A PARTY , or Why I Don't Eat Tuna in Front of Touchstone

The text—the text that blew up my spot, that made Oliver Teller hate me, that was indirectly responsible for the single most embarrassing moment of my entire life—wasn't even from Ros. It was from Touchstone and read:

A girl invited me to see her goats

Is this code

The answer, we learned later, was no. Audrey, who was studying in the Young Company alongside Touchstone, was a local whose family kept goats, and she was having a party Friday night at her house, and we were all invited.

However, when Friday arrived, I decided I was sadly unable to attend, as I still was dead from humiliation from when I'd screamed "Go, Soul Crushers!" at Oliver Teller. Attending the party as a ghost might have been an off-putting vibe.

"I'm sure you're not the most deranged fan he's ever seen," said Touchstone as he fussed with his hair in the mirror. It'd been days, and I was still replaying the memory in my head. Ruminating was the technical term. I was really good at it.

"I just wish you'd asked him about the cliff-hanger," Ros said, who was sitting beside me on the couch. Ros, it seemed, had had an okay week in their role as Hestia. Though they still didn't have a job, Henry's plants were all still alive, and they'd made us a few bare-bones meals: (gluten-free) macaroni and cheese, eggs on (gluten-free) toast, chickpeas frizzled in (gluten-free) olive oil. Both Ros and Touchstone

were into food, and Ros was a pretty good cook, though cooking was one of the many hobbies they'd quit since their dad had left. Though they'd sort of been forced back into it—and though they'd also burned their hand—it was nice to see a side of their old self come through. Especially if it meant we went to bed with full bellies.

“Do you think the murder attempt on his brother was a dream sequence?” Ros asked. “Do you think he’s going to survive?”

“How am I going to survive with this memory in my head? I literally pumped my fist!” I cried.

“Oliver Teller’s the one with the fish eyes that you think is really good-looking, right?” said Touchstone.

“You don’t need to make this worse ,” I told him. I pulled a blanket over my head, disappearing into the darkness.

“Celia, stop your moaning and put on your fanciest overalls,” Touchstone said. “We’re going out. All of us.”

“Are you going?” I asked Ros.

Ros considered this. They’d accidentally run their sweater vest through the dryer, but somehow, it’d improved the fit: It was shorter now, cropped, and hit them right at the smallest part of their waist. The effect was hard to look away from.

“I don’t think so,” they said. “I’m not really in a party mood.”

“If Ros isn’t going, I’m not going,” I said.

“Oh no. Absolutely not. Attendance is mandatory. I need backup for talking to this

goat girl. Celia, don't be a drama queen," Touchstone said.

"Yeah, you know that's Touch's job," said Ros, and Touch laughed good-naturedly, and Ros's eyes sparkled, and they fussed with the burn on their hand and asked me if I had any gauze (I did) and began to wrap their oozing palm, and then Touch helped them cover the gauze with one of my bandannas and told Ros they looked like a sexy injured Boy Scout (they did), and I loved my friends so much it hurt.

"Come on," Ros said, extending me their nonbandaged hand. "If I'm going, you're going."

"Maybe something exciting will happen," said Touch.

"If nothing exciting happens for the rest of my life, I will be totally satisfied," I said.

"Liar," said Touch.

"There's a difference between lying and hyperbole," I said.

"Don't worry about Oliver Teller," said Ros. "I'm sure he's already forgotten about you."

Which, as everyone knows, is exactly the sort of thing you hope to hear from the object of your affection: that you are, at your core, forgettable.

The party was at Audrey's house, a sweet little bungalow on the other side of the woods with a chicken coop in the backyard and a tree house with a fraying rope ladder that Audrey told us we were welcome to go up in and a pen holding three square-eyed goats. In the backyard, Touchstone was immediately welcomed by a small pocket of Young Company people—I recognized some costumers, but not the actors that Touch worked with—and I gritted my teeth through my Oliver Teller

PTSD flashbacks so I could meet everyone.

Audrey had leading-lady energy, with big, curly blond hair that she held back with a crocheted handkerchief and a copy of a Pinter play tucked into the back pocket of her jeans—our first interaction was brief, but she seemed smart and passionate about theater, just the sort of person that might be a good fit for Touchstone; then there was Sil, who had a tattoo of a cow skull on his arm and, from what I could tell, a terrible crush on Phoebe, who was in attendance as well—she and Audrey were friends from school, it turned out. I was happy to see her, especially because she offered me a LaCroix from her own personal case, which she had labeled PHOEBE’S—U DRINK, U DIE . We all stood around and partook in the ritualistic consumption of poison, also known as beer (pamplemousse seltzer, in my case), and it was kind of fun, kind of awkward, but it was a thing to do, so we did it.

Throughout all of this, I watched Ros. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say: I watched other people watch Ros and watched Ros fail to notice them watching. I watched Phoebe steal glances while she sipped on her seltzer; I watched Sil make a joke and check to see if Ros laughed. I watched Audrey explain something about theatrical clowning to Ros, making sure that they were looped in on all the lingo everyone was using. None of this was surprising to me. In fact, it was the opposite of surprising—sort of like watching order being restored to the universe. Of course people watched Ros. They had a snowbrow, and have you seen how they looked in that cropped sweater vest?

At one point, Phoebe offered me a second can of seltzer and asked me if I wanted to go pet the goats. While we were there, remarking on the softness of their coats, chatting idly about costume-shop life, admiring Benna’s commitment to monochrome dressing and complaining about one of the Saras eating leftover fish in the shop, Phoebe lobbed a very casual, “So what’s their deal?” my way. The subtext was clear: Who is this intriguing, beguiling, gender-bending person, and how—sweet Jesus, how—do I get them to love me?

I sighed, taking a sip of my seltzer. There were so many places to go from here. I could play dumb—pretend that I’d never noticed that sparkly quality of Ros’s. Another option was the slightly patronizing “Oh, you too?” And then finally, if I wanted to be extremely direct, there was the even more dismissive “They’re not interested—trust me.”

Because Ros really wasn’t interested. It’s not like they’d drawn a hard line in the sand or anything. They’d gone out with a handful of people, and in the winter of tenth grade, they’d even briefly been courted by Leandra Maria Alma-Garcia, a senior two years above us. She was an incredible painter with a tattoo of a watch where all the numbers were scrambled, and the sort of person who everyone, even the teachers, was in love with. Ros broke it off with her—a shock to literally everyone but me.

“She was cool,” Ros had said after the breakup, when we were sprawled on my bed, a bag of sour peach rings between us. Touch was seated in my desk chair, which he wheeled to the edge of the bed to have closer access to the candy. “And like—obviously hot. All we did was kiss, but still.”

I tried to nod along, though I had the feeling we were going somewhere out of my depth.

“But like—the whole time we were together I just kept thinking that I’d rather be hanging out with you and Touch watching Power Jam . You know?”

“No, I don’t know! I would not want to be watching Power Jam ,” Touchstone said.

Even I struggled to see how Power Jam could be preferable to hanging with Leandra Maria Alma-Garcia, but I took the compliment. I wanted to say more—that I was jealous of their apathy, that nothing sucked more than having a crush. Mine on Ros was fresh, and it stung every second of every day.

“She was okay,” Ros said. “I don’t know. She did a lot of little things that were nice. Her mom always called me she , and even though they / she is fine, Leandra was always correcting her mom about it, encouraging her to use they . It was nice to have someone stick up for me that way; you know what I mean?”

“That does sound nice.” I nodded. “Though I still think her watch tattoo is pretentious.”

“It is a little bit pretentious,” Ros admitted. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Maybe it just wasn’t a good match,” Touchstone said, motioning for the peach rings. “You can’t force it.”

“No. I guess you can’t,” Ros said, passing him the bag of candy.

“I suspect one day someone is going to come along and knock you flat,” I said.

As I said it, I realized that of course I hoped that someone was me.

Still, this was a lot to get into with Phoebe, who was new to me as of that week.

“They’re single,” I started.

A casual smile broke over Phoebe’s face. “Cool,” she said. “Cool. And they’re...”

“Into women. At least so far.”

“Cool, cool,” Phoebe said, as though that was suddenly the only word at her disposal.

I thought of what it must be like to be Phoebe. All of this was going her way so far. Single, check, into women, check—in Phoebe’s mind, surely it was only a matter of

time before she and Ros were shackled up somewhere in a country cottage, watering their tomato plants and harvesting kale for salads.

“The thing is,” I said, “I’m not sure they’re looking for anything serious. They’re kind of a... lone wolf.”

“Who’s a lone wolf?” said Touchstone. He’d appeared at our side, on his second can of poison.

“Ros,” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, good, something new and different.”

“I’m sorry,” said Phoebe, furrowing her brow. “Who are you?”

“Andrew Touchstone, at your service,” he said, and gave a little bow. “I’m Celia’s first husband.”

“Touch and I got married on the kindergarten playground,” I said. “It didn’t last long.” 4

“Got it,” Phoebe said. “Thanks for telling me, Celia. About the lone wolf. I shouldn’t be surprised, anyway. I have horrible taste in people.”

“Same,” I said, and we both sighed heavily, looking off into Ros’s direction.

“I mean, it doesn’t have to be serious,” Phoebe said finally.

“Totally!” I said, as though I, too, were a person who was totally capable of being casual and light instead of a person who drew up contracts and pinned up a chore wheel.

“Celia, do you want me to introduce you to anyone? Or Andrew? There are some single guys here....”

“That’s okay,” said Touch. “I’m straight, actually.”

“Oh! I’m sorry—I don’t know why I assumed....”

“Trust me, you’re not the first,” said Touch. “That honor would go to my brothers, who believe that anyone involved in theater must be queer.”

“They sound charming,” said Phoebe.

“You don’t know the half of it,” said Touch.

“I’m good on intros,” I said. “Good luck.”

Phoebe took a fortifying gulp of seltzer and headed across the way to Ros.

“Ah, l’amour .” Touch sighed. “Young love. Exquisitely, violently painful.”

“Touchstone. I’m going to kill you.”

“They always come looking for the ex-wife first.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go up in the tree house.”

“Ooh, spicy,” he said.

We climbed. The tree house had a balcony from which we could observe the party. More people had arrived, though I didn’t understand just how many until we saw it from above: The crowd was a raucous sea of unknown faces. At the edge of the lawn,

people were throwing empty bottles against a tree; two boys were wrestling; at some point, someone had started a bonfire, and now kids were taking turns leaping over it while Audrey was screaming at them to stop. And off to the side: Ros and Phoebe, who'd very easily done the thing I could not, which was reveal that she was interested.

"You know what your problem is?" Touchstone said.

"Enlighten me, Andrew."

"I think sometimes you like moping. That it feels good. That hurt. It feels like work . Like you're doing something, when you're not."

"I'm not moping," I said.

"You climbed the ladder to the tree house and are looking off plaintively into the distance," he said. "Maybe moping 's the wrong word. Maybe pining ."

I said nothing. It wasn't that I was moping . It was just that sometimes I felt weirdly like the ball boy in my own life—I was essential to keeping the game running, but only so long as I remained invisible.

"Come on, man. Pining sucks. It suuuuuuucks. You know that's, like, this town's whole thing, right? Like, people came here because there was a spring that made you fall out of love. You can hike up into the woods and see it. We can go. You can even drink from it."

"Sounds germy," I said, playing down my desire to drink from the spring. "It would be convenient, though."

"Celia, why won't you just tell them?"

“Besides not wanting to destroy my relationship with the only person who’s ever understood me?”

“Thanks a lot,” Touchstone said.

“Only one of two people who’s ever understood me,” I said, correcting myself.

“You and I had a relationship, and we’re fine.”

“Yeah, the kindergarten divorce was really hard to get over.”

“No. I mean, after.”

“ Oh ,” I said, embarrassed to have temporarily forgotten. Touchstone and I dated for all of eleven days during the winter of ninth grade, during which time he suddenly wanted to talk on the phone all the time even though we’d spent the whole day together and we had literally nothing more to say to each other. We made out a few times, which was fine, but otherwise, the whole relationship was kind of forgettable. We went back to being friends—so easily that I forgot it even happened, evidently.

He frowned at me. “Am I really that forgettable?”

“No! Of course not.”

“Because I didn’t forget you ,” he said. “Do you want me to remind you of our first date? How we went to Target?”

“It was a momentary lapse. I assure you I recall.”

“Whatever,” said Touch. “So it seems like you’ll have no trouble moving on if things go south.”

“I mean—point taken. But there’s the stuff with their dad....”

“You’re more hung up on their dad leaving than Ros is at this point. That excuse made sense last year, but it doesn’t make any sense now,” he said. “You said on the proposal that change was exactly what we needed. Isn’t it better to know ?”

“Why are you pushing this?”

He shrugged, turned back to the party.

“I just think it’s better sometimes to have answers,” he said. “That way you can move on with your life.”

My voice cracked. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“You’re telling me that you, Miss Color-Coded Pencil Case, haven’t thought exactly of what you’d say to them?”

Okay. So maybe I had some idea of what I would say to them. Lately, I’d taken to studying the speeches in Power Jam as a starting place. It was ridiculous, I knew—and, like, how often were Ros and I going to find ourselves caught in a rainstorm on roller skates—but it was a starting place, a container for all the things I wanted to say. I still didn’t know what the words were, exactly, but I could feel them, at the base of my throat, and I pictured them like a jumble of letters that would somehow magically organize themselves on the way out of my mouth and arrive in the right way, and Ros would hear them and know we were meant to be, and we’d kiss in the rain on our roller skates.

“The right words are never just going to come ,” Touch said.

“Yeah,” I said. “But—”

I didn't get to finish my sentence, though, because someone below us yelled out, "STOP!"

We had the best seats in the house to watch the fight. If you could even call it that.

It went like this: An ogre-like dude rushed toward a girl half his size, windmilling his arms wildly; someone tried to hold him back, but he broke free; she sidestepped him, looking so bored that in my memory she actually yawned, though that can't possibly be true. Her left fist cut through the air—the speed! The control!—and cracked the guy on the nose. He cried out and hit the ground, clutching his face.

"My nose is broken!" the ogre cried out.

"It's not," she said. "Trust me."

She shook out her hand once—and then it was over.

Someone cheered, but it was more like a question than a celebration, like a wooo? that hovered in the air like, We all think that was meant to happen, right? But by and large, the reaction was confused and chaotic. There was some awkward laughter, and then a lot of quiet, followed by gentle murmuring. One goat bleated very loudly. The girl had disappeared in the crowd. Someone helped the ogre to his feet, and he was checking his nose for blood. There was none.

"You're still an ugly bitch, Jess Orlando," he yelled at the girl, the hate in his voice almost more upsetting to me than the fact that he'd just gotten decked.

"I think it's time for us to get out of here," I said to Touch.

I looked in the crowd for Ros, but they were already gone.

I didn't know it yet, but their story was starting. For them, it was love at first fight.

Footnote

4 We ate lunch together for two days before I decided I didn't like the smell of his tuna sandwiches, told him so, and went off to play with Emily Hibbert. He and I found our way back to each other, but to this day, I cannot eat or even mention tuna in front of Touchstone without enduring some remark about how I broke his young heart.

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I've never seen a proper fight before.

It's awesome, in the most religious sense of the word.

Sure, someone gets punched on nearly every episode of Power Jam , and okay, I've gotten into a few minor skirmishes when I pretended to be a wolf—a nip here, a scratch there. But a legit punch, thrown by a tiny girl with strawberry-blond hair?

I feel like I've been punched: a blow to the ribs that sends my heart hurtling up and out of my throat. The organ drops at her feet. Beats be mine . Can hardly wait for a response.

Where has this Jess Orlando been all my life?

After losing my heart, I move faster than I have in months. Sprint to the kitchen of a house I don't know. Yank open the freezer door. Search through Tupperwares and cartons of ice cream and objects wrapped in tinfoil. There's cold, but I barely feel it, just the heat spreading through my chest.

I grab the next best thing to an ice pack and vamoose.

Outside, this fighter, this Jess Orlando, stands by the rope swing. She's less girl and more magnet, pulling me toward her with remarkable force.

"Hi," I say, then: "That was amazing."

"It was stupid," Jess Orlando says, her voice both lower and gentler than I'd have

guessed. She continues: “I shouldn’t have let him get to me.”

She takes another look at me, a full un-self-conscious up-down. If I wasn’t feverish before, I certainly am now. My heart beats loudly from the grass below us.

She asks: “Why are you holding a bag of shrimp?”

“For your hand,” I say.

Her expression is complicated: bemused, curious, maybe even a little intrigued.

“Well,” she says, “are you going to give it to me or what?”

I swing the bag out to her, and her hand closes around it.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

But of course I can’t answer, because Celia and Touchstone show up right then. Celia is wringing her hands, fretting over nothing.

“I think it’s time to get out of here,” says Celia. She tugs on my elbow and asks, “You ready?”

No, I don’t say. I’m staying with Jess Orlando forever.

“Come on,” said Celia.

I walk away with my friends, but it feels like half of my body stays behind, under the tree with this new person, this Jess Orlando. Her newness sparkles, gives off light in the dark. It’s what I want: a whole new life, with someone who doesn’t know a thing about my dad, or the year I’ve had, or my whole story. I want someone who just

knows me as Ros, without all the associations. Not Ros Whose Dad Left, just Ros. They have no idea who I am, and I love that.

“Hold on,” I say. “I think they’re calling for me.”

I run back and look to Jess, searching for words.

“Did you call?” I ask.

“No,” she says, and a slow smile creeps over her face.

“You fight good,” I say finally, and I scuttle back to my friends, embarrassed and hopeful and feeling like my limbs are on fire.

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A TRIP TO THE TOWN , or the Victor of the Great Flamingo Debate

The next morning, Ros was out of bed before me again. This time, they'd made pancakes.

"Finally, you're up," they said. This was perplexing: It was only nine thirty. What the hell did they mean by finally ?

"Your options are blueberry, raspberry, chocolate chip, plain, and every permutation you can think of. Or is it combination?"

"Um. Combination, I think," I said. It smelled like fifth grade, Saturday mornings at their house, only instead of their dad wielding the spatula, it was Ros. They looked just like him: a towel slung over their shoulder, whistling as they worked; Ros would probably pretend to bop me on the head with the spatula the same way their dad used to. Berries were sitting on the counter in green cardboard shells, berries that hadn't been there when I'd gone to sleep. "Where did these come from?"

"I went out," Ros said. "Turns out there's a farmers' market in town on Saturday mornings. That's where I got these. Try them; they're incredible."

I popped a blueberry into my mouth. It was delicious.

"I would have gone with you," I said.

"I was up super early, and I didn't want to wake you," they said, their voice oddly upbeat. "Let's go back into town after we eat! It's like a ten-minute walk, and there

are some cool-looking places to check out. The bookstore should be open by then. What kind of pancake you want? Pick your poison.”

“Ummm,” I said. “One of each, I guess.”

They set about making me a plate while I replayed last night’s fight in my mind. I was floored, mostly, by the briefness of it: The whole episode had had a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it hallucinatory quality, and on top of that, there was this element that seemed staged—like I was watching an elaborate joke playing out, some sort of experimental stage-combat guerrilla theater. I’ll admit, I half expected people to burst into applause when it was all over.

And it wasn’t just the fight that was weird, but the after , too. Ros had disappeared. I looked for them inside and out. I finally found them tucked away by the rope swing, talking to Jess Orlando. It was just a conversation—they weren’t even doing anything—but still, I felt like I’d interrupted. Jess Orlando had her hand in a bag of frozen shrimp. They’d both stared at me with such intensity I felt like I’d startled wild animals: like the best thing to do was back away slowly.

“It’s funny,” I said. “I feel like on Power Jam there’s a fight every episode but, like, it was different, seeing it in real life.”

“I had the same thought,” said Ros. “It was kind of incredible.”

“Was it? It kind of freaked me out,” I said. “What was with the shrimp?”

“I found them in the freezer. I thought it might feel good on her hand,” Ros said.

“That was nice of you,” I said.

They shrugged. “It looked like it hurt.”

“Yeah, I imagine punching someone in the face is painful,” I said.

“You heard what he said. What he called her,” Ros said.

They handed me a stack of pancakes and a frog-patterned cloth napkin. They looked beautiful. Both the pancakes and Ros.

“This reminds me of your dad,” I said, looking at my plate.

“A bit,” Ros said.

“I know it’s been a while now, but I’m still here if you ever want to talk about it,” I said.

I watched their face darken.

“Or not,” I said.

“Sorry—it’s just, I feel like we’ve talked ourselves into oblivion about my dad. I’m more than ready to move on,” said Ros. “Let’s go sit.”

We brought our plates to the couch and cut into our pancakes, staring out the picture window. Someone had set up a tent on the far side of the river, a separate life running corollary to the Lily Pad. I resisted the urge to ask Ros if they were okay. Touchstone had been right that I needed to trust that they were doing better, and by all accounts they were: They were awake. They’d gone out to the farmers’ market. They’d made pancakes. There was no real reason for me to be worried about them.

“You know I got in trouble for fighting at my old school,” Ros said as we worked our way through our pancakes.

“No,” I said. “Really?”

“Yeah. That’s why I switched schools. I pushed someone. Harder than I meant to. This guy was kind of hassling me at recess. Like, what are you kinda thing.”

“Fuck that guy,” I said—our standard response for people who’d done us wrong.

“Yeah. Obviously. But I pushed him, he fell, and he hit his head. It was more instinctive than anything else. The pushing, I mean. He was so much bigger than me, and I was afraid. And he was okay but, like—it was scary. To know that I could do that.”

“I can’t believe you’ve never told me that before,” I said.

“Not the sort of thing you want to tell people, is it?” They bit off a piece of their nail. “The scary part was that even though it felt bad, it also felt good. Like, to know I could do that. Protect myself. Maybe it even felt good to hurt him; I don’t know.”

The pancakes were sticking in my molars. What was Ros trying to say? That they were like Jess Orlando, maybe—that they understood not only the impulse to protect oneself, but also the impulse to hurt. That they were both fighters—and I was a softy who couldn’t possibly understand the appeal of a well-thrown left hook.

“I bit Touchstone once,” I said.

“What? Really?!” Ros was giggling.

“Yeah, I mean. We were little. I didn’t draw blood or anything. But I chomped down fairly hard. According to my mom.”

“Damn, Celia. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“He stole my My Little Pony, and he wouldn’t give it back.”

“That is so not what happened,” Touchstone yelled.

“It moves!” cried Ros.

“Yeah, because you two won’t shut up, and Celia won’t stop telling lies !”

“We’re not relitigating this, Andrew!” I yelled upstairs. “The really funny part,” I said to Ros, “is that then my mom bit me .”

“Wait,” Ros said. “Clare bit you?”

“Clare bit me,” I confirmed. “Lightly. But yeah. I mean—I never bit anyone ever again, so.”

It had been so completely, utterly ridiculous to both of us—my mom, who would cup her hand around spiders to release them outside—that we were quickly convulsing with laughter.

“I guess everyone has it in them,” Ros said.

“Maybe so,” I said, though I didn’t like the idea of that one bit, no pun intended. I didn’t need any more disruptions this summer, certainly not in the form of kicks and bites and punches that lay dormant within us. I wanted a soft, gentle summer, but after last night, I was already worried the texture of it was changing—to something scratchy and harsh and suffocating, uncomfortable and hard to throw off.

The day was beautiful, and the town was so painfully charming it made my teeth hurt. Though Touchstone and I had driven through it, taking a closer look felt like injecting dopamine straight into my eyeballs: a baby being fed a biscuit outside a breakfast

place; handsome, bandanna-necked dogs tied up and waiting patiently for their owners who were grabbing coffee. There were pride flags hung on nearly every storefront, and a handful of queer couples, and posters for Arden's upcoming shows, the first of which, *Into the Woods*, premiered Thursday, June 26, in just under two weeks. On the side of the grocery store, someone had painted a map of the surrounding trails in the woods and local sites of interest, including the Lovesick Falls spring, for which guided tours left hourly, for an exorbitant fee.

"We should do one of those tours," I said. "The next one leaves in an hour, which should work...."

"Do you actually have to drink the spring water?" Touchstone said.

"If you want to fall out of love you do," I said.

"Oooh, can we go in here?" said Ros, tugging us into a thrift store.

I let myself be dragged inside, even though in my opinion, we didn't need the thrift store: Our outfits were already fire. I'd debuted my denim shortalls that I'd bought specifically for the trip, with my glitter socks and my boots. Touchstone had on his customary, but still very respectable, solid-color T-shirt and shorts combination, this time pale blue on top and olive on the bottom, muted tones that brought out the penny-red shades in his messy hair and ensured that endless freckles were the stars of the show. Ros had on their tie-dyed PIZZA ROLLS, NOT GENDER ROLES T-shirt, and their signature gold chain, which they always wore. I'd been there when they bought it years ago, and to this day I found its omnipresence comforting: It was almost liquid, serpentine, and when Ros had put it on that first time, they'd studied themselves in the mirror for a long time, longer than I'd ever seen. Typically, they avoided their reflection—at some point in middle school, they'd taken their mirror off the wall and turned it around—but when they put that necklace on, they actually liked the way they looked. I remember standing in the store with them, watching them look

at themselves, turning this way and that, admiring the angles of their jaw, their collarbone. They never took it off: swimming, showering, if they layered on other necklaces. We'd actually bickered about it when we went as flamingos for Halloween: I said the necklace distracted from the authenticity of the costume, and Ros said it was a fucking flamingo Halloween costume and no one was going to be thinking about it that hard anyway. 5 Flamingos aside, I loved that chain on Ros—it reminded me that they were still them, in spite of all the changes they, and we, had gone through.

In the thrift store, Ros found a pair of trousers they liked: a kind of plaid mustard check that would've looked hideous on anyone else, but on Ros they looked slouchy and effortless, a throwback to the '70s.

"Very used-car-salesman chic," said Touchstone.

"They're kinda long," Ros said, kicking up fabric where it puddled around their feet.

"I can hem them for you," I said.

"I can just—" Their lace-up caught in a rip in the fabric, and they stepped and pulled. They repeated the same thing on the other side in spite of my loud protests that we hadn't paid for them yet, that we couldn't alter clothing we didn't own. To get me to shut up, they launched themselves at me in more of a tackle than a hug, and Touchstone wrapped his arms around both of us and squeezed.

They liked the trousers so much they wore them out of the store after we paid, ragged bottoms and all.

"Let's go to the bookstore before we do the tour," Ros said, linking their arm with mine. "I'm betting you'll like it."

Ros was right: I loved the bookstore.

In the first place, there was a literal tree in it. In the second place, it was small, but their selection was incredible, the best combination. So many good books by authors I hadn't heard of, and then the books by authors I knew but hadn't realized they'd written other stuff, and as my stack grew, a bookseller noticed me and gave me a few different recommendations based on what I was reading, and I just about died of happiness.

"I want to live in this place," I said.

"Same here," said Touchstone, who loved to read as much as I did.

"I knew you'd like it," said Ros.

"You should ask if they're hiring!" I said. "And then I can use your discount."

"This would be a good job for you, not for me," Ros said with a smile.

Touch and I hunted feverishly for books in the twenty minutes before the next Lovesick Falls tour began. Though I truly could have stayed in the bookstore forever, I eventually crammed the books into my mini backpack, and we walked out into the sunshine to catch the tour, only to run into Phoebe and Audrey. Audrey held an iced coffee in one hand and was walking a unicycle beside her, her curls swept up into a messy bun; Phoebe was wearing a black denim jacket that had faded to the perfect shade of gray, the kind that came only with consistent, ritualistic wear.

"Oh, hi!" Audrey said, and she seemed excited to see us, or at least to see Touchstone. "You guys left so quickly last night. I'm so sorry. Things got totally out of hand."

“Jess Orlando,” Phoebe said, rolling her eyes. “Classic.”

“What are you talking about?” Audrey said. “Jess did nothing wrong. Dennis started it. Called her a dyke.”

“Yeah, did he also start the bazillion other fights she’s gotten into over the past few years?” Phoebe shook her head. “Dennis is a dick, but Jess is pugilistic at best and an asshole at worst.”

“Good word,” I said.

“Asshole, or pugilistic?” said Phoebe.

“The latter,” I said.

“I’m on Jess’s side,” said Audrey. “And Jess’s brother is the asshole.”

“A whole family of assholes, then,” said Phoebe.

“Their Christmas card must be quite something,” said Touch.

“Ros was talking to her,” I said.

Everyone turned and looked at me then. Then they looked at Ros, and back at me, like they were waiting for me to say more. Only I didn’t have anything more to say. In my head, the fact that Ros had been talking to Jess had sounded helpful, like pertinent information that might be useful to the conversation; out loud, it sounded like tattling and had brought the conversation to a screeching halt. I could feel Ros staring at me, and my face felt hot.

“I just meant that maybe you knew something we didn’t. About the fight. Or

assholes,” I joked. No one laughed.

“We only talked for a second,” said Ros.

“It looked important,” I said. “Whatever it was.”

“It wasn’t,” Ros insisted.

There was a long pause where I became extremely aware of how heavy the books were in my backpack, more like stones than literature. Someone pushed by us on the sidewalk; Ros stepped out into the road. I resisted the urge to tell them to be careful.

“What are you all up to?” said Audrey, and I was grateful to her for changing the subject.

“We’re thinking about going on a tour of the spring,” said Touchstone.

Both Audrey and Phoebe groaned.

“Oh no, is it bad?” said Touchstone.

“It’s fine,” said Phoebe, drawing out the i in fine . “It’s just cheesy. We’ve been on it a million times for school field trips.”

““ At the height of the gold rush, miners passed through our town pining for their beloveds back home, and they found the cure to their lovesickness deep in our woods ,”” Audrey said, with pitch-perfect tour-guide intonation.

“Wait,” I said. “The cure to their lovesickness was just to forget about the people back home? Why couldn’t they just wait to go home and be reunited?”

“The miners weren’t very patient people,” Audrey said. “Honestly, I’d skip the tour if I were you. It’s kind of dull. Sort of a waste of time and money.”

“It’s kind of interesting,” Phoebe said. “You learn that they used Lovesick Falls as a measuring stick for things in the woods. It was an important landmark for them as they tried to cross through the forest—everything was some number of miles from the spring.”

“What was I saying about it being dull?” said Audrey, and Phoebe laughed good-naturedly. “And it’s expensive to take the tour. You can hike it on your own for free if you take the steeper route; that’s the best advice I can give you. The hike is pretty, and the spring is, too, though Lovers’ Lagoon is better for swimming.”

“There’s also a gift shop where you can buy Lovesick Falls water for like five bucks a pop if you’re feeling desperate,” said Phoebe, and though she sounded disparaging, like Who on earth would buy that water? , I confess I would have paid quadruple that if it meant my feelings about Ros would just go away. Ros, for the record, was still standing in the street, looking at their feet, inspecting the ragged hems of their new pants.

“Where are you guys off to?” Touchstone said.

“I’m headed home,” said Phoebe.

“And I’m going to go practice,” said Audrey, indicating her unicycle. “You’re welcome to come if you want, Andrew. We’ve got a clown unit coming up in Young People’s Workshop.”

At this offer, Touchstone shot a glance at me and Ros.

“We take a rain check on the spring?” he asked.

“Fine with me,” I said, though part of me was still hoping I might be able, at some point, to take a drink from the spring and solve my Ros problem. “Ros?”

They nodded, and so Touchstone bid us farewell and walked off with Audrey and Phoebe.

“Well, good for Touchstone,” I said. “Honestly it seems like a match made in clown heaven. Clown heaven. Cleaven. ”

“Why did you say that?” Ros said.

“Why, you think hown is better? Hown is definitely better.”

“Celia. Why did you tell everyone that I was talking to Jess Orlando?”

“Because you were talking to Jess Orlando,” I said.

It was so odd saying her name: like it was someone we already knew, someone we were intimately acquainted with. Someone we’d already been arguing about for months.

“Yeah,” Ros said. “But it was, like... the way you said it. Like you were mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I said, readjusting the straps on my backpack. “Why would I be mad?”

This was, of course, the very question I’d been asking myself the second I started feeling mad. Because of course I was mad that Ros had been talking to Jess Orlando. I didn’t like that I was mad, and it didn’t feel right, and I wasn’t about to tell Ros that I was mad, but that didn’t stop me from being mad. I was mad, and I didn’t know what to do with it. So I’d eaten some pancakes and bought a whole bunch of books

and waited for the feeling to go away, which I was still waiting for it to do.

“I don’t know,” Ros said slowly. “You tell me.”

“Not mad,” I said. “Should we get ice cream or something?”

They put a hand to their stomach. They looked so cool in their new pants. “I feel like we just had pancakes,” they said.

We had just had pancakes. “Yeah,” I agreed. My backpack was heavy, and I sort of wanted to go home, but somehow that felt like it would be quitting. I wanted to get the joy back that we’d felt earlier in the day. I couldn’t get the tackling hug out of my mind. I wondered if there was a way I could get another one, or even something better.

“Let’s do one more store, maybe?”

“Sure,” they said. “How ’bout that?” They nodded across the street to a place called the Hidden Fern—a plant store by the looks of it, with lots of big green plants towering in the window, some varieties of which I recognized from the Lily Pad. As a place to visit, it wasn’t necessarily my first choice—we had enough plant life back where we were staying, and I did sort of want ice cream, in spite of what we’d just said about pancakes—but it didn’t matter to me that much. What I really wanted was to go wherever Ros went.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Whatever you like.”

The Hidden Fern turned out to be pretty beautiful. A bell rigged to the door rang when we walked inside, and we were instantly plunged into a miniature indoor jungle. From the green depths, a voice of an employee called “Hello” and asked if we needed any help; Ros assured them we were okay, just looking. They slowly began a

loop through the store, reverently touching the plants' green leaves while I followed behind, trying not to feel antsy. Plants were pretty, but they weren't exactly my thing.

"This is the same one that Henry has," Ros said, touching a leaf. "Theirs looks like it's in much better shape."

"We're already killing his plants? Perfect. We'll be kicked out by July."

"I'll double-check how much watering we're supposed to do," Ros said. "We'll come up with a way to fix it, don't fret."

In spite of the plant's troubled health, I was thrilled to hear Ros reassure me that it would all be okay—it sounded like they were already feeling better, my Jess Orlando-shaped gaffe on the sidewalk already forgotten. We passed through the green to a back patio, where all sorts of different planters were grouped. There seemed to be millions of terra-cotta pots heaped together, and cheaper white plastic ones, and some beautiful, enormous ceramic ones, which Ros tried to lift just for the hell of it and found they could not.

"I had no idea houseplants were such a heavy business," they said. "I'm feeling bad about how weak I am."

"We can start doing push-ups before bed," I said. I myself could do only one before my body collapsed and I fell onto the floor. "Touchstone can be our coach. He's actually weirdly strong." One time he'd helped me and Ros rearrange their bedroom and shocked us all with how easy it was for him to move heavy objects.

"Perfect," they said.

They paused to study a handwritten sign that was taped to the back door. Someone had taken a Sharpie to cardboard and written:

THIS WAY TO THE FERNERY –

“Should we go? Or do we think it’s an elaborate hoax?”

“Only one way to find out,” I said.

We followed the hand-drawn arrow. Up the hill was a small greenhouse, which we guessed was the Fernery in question. We made our way up the slope in the land to the greenhouse’s front door. I wondered whether we were really allowed to open it—the sign marking its existence had been a little suspicious—but Ros swung it open, and we were swallowed by a hot, humid world of green, and I forgot my worries entirely.

If I wanted to spend more time in the bookstore, I wanted to spend my whole life in the Fernery. It was the kind of place you found only in storybooks: a life-size jewel box with ferns carpeting nearly every surface except the path we were on. We started on a small balcony from which we could see nearly everything: the waterfall in the back that tumbled into a reflecting pool, a wooden footbridge that spanned its length, the koi ponds on either side of us, a little grotto scenario that you could walk through. All around us, a multitude of ferns spilled from the walls and sprang up from the beds. It felt like the sort of place that asked you to believe in magic.

“I feel like I’m in one of our fairy houses,” I said.

“Ours were better,” Ros said, and with that, all the awkwardness from earlier seemed to disappear. They looked at me and smiled, and for one measly second, both of us haloed by green, safe in this jewel box of prehistoric plants, I thought that they might take my hand, or—I’m almost embarrassed to admit—I thought that they might kiss me right then and there, on the balcony of the Fernery. That everything I dreamed would come true; it had just been a matter of finding the right place.

“C’mon,” said Ros, “let’s look at these ferns.”

I followed them, reading the names of ferns aloud to them. I had no idea there were so many different kinds: bird's-nest fern, which grew even taller than we were. Bear paw fern. Tasmanian tree fern. I never spent much time thinking about ferns, but the Fernery seemed to suggest we do just that: to study the different kinds of leaves and fern structures, to ask why some of them were as flimsy and delicate as watercolor and why some of them were as robust and strong as marble sculpture.

We stayed as long as we could before we overheated—me before Ros. We made the full loop three separate times and took pictures of both of us coming through the stone tunnel, shrouded in ferns. Eventually we passed through the door again—outside now felt lusciously cool compared with the heat in the greenhouse—and went back into the store.

“That was gorgeous,” I said.

“It was beautiful,” said Ros as we weaved through the greenery inside, making our way toward the door.

“You could write a poem about that,” I said gently.

“Maybe,” Ros said, which I took as a small victory. Normally when I suggested material for a poem, they shrugged and told me they'd think about it. “Are you ready for some ice cream?”

“Definitely,” I said, at which point Jess Orlando emerged from behind some hidden shrub and ruined everything.

She was shorter than I remembered—she barely came up to Ros's shoulder. She had glossy strawberry-blond hair that was held up in a ponytail, and ears that stuck out slightly, and snow-pale skin with a wash of freckles across her face. She was dressed plainly, in a navy-blue HIDDEN FERN T-shirt that she'd half tucked into cuffed jean

shorts that I couldn't help but covet (I was always on a mission to find the perfect jean shorts, which, so far, had eluded me) and a pair of lace-up work boots. She was holding a medium-size cactus with a bright poppy-red desert bloom on top. I could only assume she was going to use it as a weapon.

"Are you finding everything all—oh—it's you."

She was looking right at Ros, happily, I might add, though Ros seemed too stunned to speak.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey," said Ros, with a kind of new softness in their voice. "You work here?"

"When I'm not punching people in the nose," Jess said. "Sorry, too much?"

It didn't look like too much to Ros. Their face wore a crooked grin I'd never seen before. What. Was. Happening.

"It seemed like he deserved it," Ros said.

"That's the story I keep telling myself," said Jess.

"We went to the Fernery," I said, piping up.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?" said Jess, though it seemed like she was speaking to Ros rather than to me. I should never have let them buy those cool pants.

"I've never seen anything like it," Ros said.

Jess smiled. "It's the only one like it in the country. It was built right around the turn

of the twentieth century. The woman who built it was obsessed with ferns because they're one of the only plants that don't flower. Sorry," said Jess. "Am I boring you?"

"Not at all," said Ros.

I racked my brain for facts about ferns but came up short.

"What do you mean, ferns don't flower?" I asked.

"Most plants reproduce by creating blooms that then attract bees or other pollinators. But ferns don't produce flowers, or seeds. They reproduce by spreading spores, which are usually on the underside of their leaves."

It seemed incompatible that the girl we saw deck someone last night would know so much about the sex lives of ferns. Who was this plant sorceress? And how had she so obviously enchanted Ros?

"Weird question," said Ros. "You're not hiring, are you?"

"Not officially," said Jess. "But we tend to bring on another person as the theater festival really kicks into high gear. Have you ever made bouquets before?"

"No," Ros said, sounding already disappointed to have not gotten the job.

"It's not a huge deal," Jess said. "I'm a pretty good teacher, actually. I can put in a good word for you. And I can give you an application."

"I can fill it out right now," Ros said.

"You don't have to," I said. This was all happening far too quickly for my liking. "You could take your time...."

“Celia, you don’t mind waiting, do you?”

“Oh—I guess not,” I said.

While Ros filled out the application on the desk by the checkout and Jess started putting together a bouquet from the flowers kept in the freezer, I wandered around the store, pretending not to be distressed about the potential change that was afoot. So Ros wanted a job here. Big deal. They needed a job; that had been part of the contract. And so what if Jess Orlando also worked here? So what if she knew about ferns? So what if she could reach into the freezer behind the desk and make a bouquet that moved someone to tears (I was speculating wildly at this point)? In the first place, the Hidden Fern didn’t seem to be hiring officially, whatever that meant; in the second place, Ros had no history working with plants, unless you counted using moss and stones to build little fairy villages in someone’s backyard. There was no guarantee they’d get this job.

I came upon a display of terrariums and stopped to study them. Though I’d made up my mind that I now disliked the Hidden Fern, they were actually kind of beautiful: gorgeous little antique-looking glass boxes, like miniature ferneries, filled with plants that made me feel like I was in *The Secret Garden*. No two were the same: some tiny, others larger; some were paneled with pieces of colored glass; some featured distinctive ironwork—a metal bird that roosted on top. One had a stained-glass window, with a green so beautiful it made my heart burst.

They were like little works of art, just like our fairy gardens.

I brought the one with the green stained-glass window up to the front, where Ros was still scribbling.

“I’m almost done,” they said.

“Look at this,” I said. “It’s cool, isn’t it?”

I was downplaying how attached to it I was: It was so beautiful, I felt it in nearly every part of my body, even the parts I didn’t think about, like the curves of my ears or the backs of my knees. The terrarium itself was simple—a rectangle with a steepled roof, and a clever latch that meant you could prop the roof open, creating a kind of escape hatch you could peer into, without anything separating you from the plants within. The inside was even more beautiful: The back side was covered entirely in moss that looked so soft I wanted to lay my head against it. The plants that flourished within were a deep green, their leaves ribbed with white. I didn’t just love that terrarium; I wanted to zap myself with a shrink ray and live inside that terrarium.

“Those are beautiful, aren’t they?” Jess Orlando piped up. “A local artist makes them....”

Ros finally put their pen down and looked at the terrarium.

“That one’s actually one of my favorites,” said Jess.

But it wasn’t her validation that I wanted.

“Should we get it?” I said.

“For who?” asked Ros.

“For us,” I said. Who else did they think it would be for? “For the Lily Pad.”

“We have enough plants at the Lily Pad,” said Ros. “And I’m sure it’s expensive.”

“At least with these ones you don’t have to take care of them,” said Jess. Why was she suddenly on my side? Was she just trying to make a sale, or was she being

sincere? It was distressing how nice she was.

“Get it if you want,” said Ros. They put their pen down and handed their completed application over to Jess. “Hey, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Jess said back. “What do you think about the terrarium? Should I ring you up?”

I considered the terrarium. I still loved it, but Ros was right; it was expensive. I had a little money—my parents had given me some before I left—but it wasn’t like I was making bank at the internship. Even so, I would have willingly handed over all my money if it meant I could look into that terrarium every night. But Ros’s indifference had poked a hole in my enthusiasm. When they looked at the green of the stained-glass window, they didn’t see the same wondrous thing that I saw.

“I’ll think about it,” I said to Jess.

“No problem,” Jess said. The bouquet she was working on was stupidly gorgeous, a brilliant array of hot oranges and pinks. “I can put it back for you. Don’t worry about it.”

We left the store empty-handed, strolling slowly down the sidewalk.

“I hope I get that job,” Ros said.

“Don’t be disappointed if you don’t,” I said.

“Why would you say that?” Ros said, stopping suddenly in their tracks. “Don’t you want me to get it?”

“Of course I want you to get it,” I lied, and my voice sounded stringy and thin.

“It sounds like you’re rooting against me,” Ros said.

“I’m not,” I said, even though of course I was rooting against them. I didn’t want them to get the job. I didn’t want them to spend more time with Jess Orlando. My crush on Ros often made me a bad friend, and the ugly truth was I was so afraid of losing them—to Jess, or to anyone—that I wasn’t being the sort of friend Ros needed.

“Should we get ice cream, or...?”

“Sure.” Ros shrugged. “Ice cream sounds fine. Maybe we’ll run into Oliver Teller.”

We walked up the street, and I babbled on and on about how good this ice cream place was supposed to be—I’d read all about it back home—how they partnered with a local dairy, how they’d gotten written up in so many magazines, how their waffle cones were not to be missed. Ros nodded, half listening to my ice cream spiel, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to sense that they were elsewhere. They’d left a piece of themselves in the Hidden Fern, with Jess Orlando and her fern spores, and there was nothing I could do or say to bring them back to me.

After they were hired—because of course they were hired, how else was this going to go?—periodically throughout the summer I would pop in to say hi to Ros, and I would just check to see if that terrarium was still there. Ros taught me the name of the plants that grew within, like the nerve plant that grew amid the moss, its green leaves latticed with tiny white tracteries. I greeted each new leaf with excitement—a tiny new bud would send me over the moon. It wasn’t just that I thought of it as mine, so much as it was mine. It was so deeply for me that it seemed impossible that it could be anyone else’s, until the day that it was gone.

Footnote

5 They won.

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TAKING MEASUREMENTS , or the Tale of Oliver Teller's Sprained Wrist

On Monday, the costume shop started taking measurements.

It was a necessary evil of costuming, but it was still sort of horrible, to see bodies reduced to a series of numbers. There was a lot of anxiety on the actors' parts, and on our parts, too—it was an act of intimacy to get that close to someone, to wrap a measuring tape around their hips and write the number down. Benna divided us all into pairs and told us her three rules for the actors and us: You weren't allowed to say anything negative about yourself; you weren't allowed to talk about things you should do , e.g., I should eat less chocolate cake ; and both you and the costumer had to thank every part of your body that was measured.

“Thank you, elbow.”

“Thank you, thigh.”

“Thank you, inseam. That's the ball game. Thanks for coming!”

I was partnered with Phoebe, who worked quickly and efficiently. She made people trust her. She made me trust her. She wielded the tape and announced the numbers, and I wrote them down on the charts we were given. Monday and Tuesday passed by in a blur of numbers and brief introductions to actors—I met the actor playing Jack from *Into the Woods* , who complimented me on my railroad-stripe overalls, as well as a handful of the Trojan women, all of them shockingly beautiful, each in their own way.

On Wednesday, the measurements nearly all taken except for a few stragglers, Phoebe and I walked over to Café Trapdoor and treated ourselves to a late lunch. With *Into the Woods* opening in a week, the pulse of the campus seemed to be quickening. All around us came the staticky crinkle of people talking on their walkie-talkies, including the director of *Abominable*, who could be observed in the far corner of the café talking heatedly on her walkie—whether to her assistant director or her divorce lawyer was anyone’s guess.

“Do you feel like you’re getting more of a handle on things?” Phoebe asked, sitting down with our food—BLTs for both of us, with sparkling lemonade.

“Yeah. I do,” I said. It had been only a week and a half, though in some ways, it felt like an entire season had passed. “At least I know not to try to pet Jacques.”

“You’re doing really great,” Phoebe said.

“I mean, it’s not exactly a challenge to color in shoes,” I said. Phoebe and the other costume-shop employees, meanwhile, were sewing up a storm, making last-minute changes to the *Into the Woods* costumes. It was hard not to feel useless sometimes—that I didn’t know half of what the other costumers knew, and that there was no way I’d catch up in time to be a helpful colleague.

“No, but it does take patience,” Phoebe said, which made me think of my mom, the promise I’d made to her at the start of the summer. I took a deep breath and told myself to slow down, that I could beat myself up for not contributing enough later.

“How did you get into costuming?” I asked Phoebe.

“Godzilla,” came her immediate response.

I nearly spit out my lemonade.

“Come again?”

“I was obsessed with him as a kid. My dad showed me the movies, and I was so amazed by the suit. Have you ever seen it?”

I shook my head no.

“We’ll fix this,” she said, and pulled it up on her phone: The monster loomed over a cityscape, his skin rough and scarred seeming, his snout like a shortened crocodile’s, his eyes surprisingly expressive. There were three rows of stegosaurus spikes down his back that gave way to a long, powerful tail; his short arms reminded me of a Tyrannosaurus rex .

“Remember, this was 1954—no CGI, no animation. There’s a man in there, wearing the costume,” Phoebe said. “The first suit they made was too heavy to perform in, and the second one weighed over two hundred pounds. The poor actor. Later one of the other actors got shocked by lights in the fins. But the suit is also incredible. They used so many different techniques to build it—the fins, for example, were papier-maché and then covered with rubber on top of that. The eyes and mouth were controlled by a brake wire from a motorcycle that ran out through the back of the tail. It’s this work of art. It changed how we think about costumes. It changed how we think about designing monsters. It made me want to work in the field.”

She was so good at talking about all of this. I squirmed, feeling once more like I knew nothing.

“Can I ask you something? Honestly, sometimes I still kind of can’t believe that Benna hired me.”

“Oh,” said Phoebe, sliding her phone back into her pocket. “She hired you because of me. Benna sent the internship offer, and of course she’s the one who had final say.

But she's been trying to give me more responsibility this year—it'll look good on college applications—and one of the things she let me do was look over the other internship applications. I made my recommendation on who I thought would be the best fit for the position."

"Why me?"

"Because you seemed qualified and like you'd be invested in the work," Phoebe said. "I'm not trying to burst your bubble, Celia, but this isn't exactly the West End. It wasn't like it was the most competitive applicant pool."

"But I can't even sew," I said. "My portfolio was like... feeble."

"Strong disagree. Those flamingo Halloween costumes had heart," Phoebe said. "Besides, I can teach people to use a sewing machine. But you can't teach people to care."

I felt myself blush with pride. It was the sort of compliment I wanted to text to Touch and Ros right away—though, as soon as I thought of Ros, I thought of Jess Orlando in her plant kingdom, punching all the customers she didn't like. It occurred to me then that Phoebe, as a local, might be a useful resource in the Jess Orlando department. I took a sip of my sparkling lemonade and worked up the courage to do some digging.

"Uh, Phoebe," I said. "Can I ask you something totally unrelated to costumes?"

"Is this about Ros? I'm still disappointed it didn't go my way."

"I'm sorry," I said. "They tend to have that effect on people."

"It's fine." Phoebe sighed and flipped her hair dramatically, which made me laugh, as

was her intention.

“It’s actually not about Ros,” I said. “I was just wondering—what did you mean the other day when you said Jess Orlando was an asshole?”

Phoebe’s face fell. “Ah, man. I feel bad for saying that.”

“She’s not an asshole?” Already, I didn’t like where this was headed. I wanted to hear that Jess was a monster worse than Godzilla, and under no circumstances should she be dating my friend. But Phoebe was taking a different tack than she had that day in the street.

“No, she’s really not. Audrey’s right—I can be a little harsh sometimes. It really was Dennis’s fault that that fight broke out; Jess was just defending herself. I don’t know Jess super well. That’s the truth. The reason I said that... she was dating this girl in my art class and was just, like, cheating on her a lot. I don’t actually know either of them that well, and I have only, like, tangential information. I think she’s done things that an asshole would do. But lots of people love Jess. It’s her brother that was the real problem. He was older and kind of a bully—picking on queer kids, Jess included. And maybe Jess has reformed; I don’t know. As far as I know, she hasn’t dated anyone since that girl in my art class. So maybe she’s changed.”

“Now she just punches people at parties.”

“I mean, I think we can all agree that Dennis was the problem in that scenario—he started the whole thing and called her a slur. And look, I’m more of an indoor kid, but I wish I knew how to fight. It seems like a useful skill to have. Maybe we should all get Jess to teach us.”

“Fighting stresses me out,” I said. “I don’t mean fighting like Jess was fighting. I just mean, like, regular fighting. I try to avoid it at all costs.”

“Well, that sounds healthy, Celia.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll probably just explode one day, go Godzilla on everything.”

Phoebe laughed. “Why are you asking about Jess Orlando, anyway?”

“No reason,” I said. I was a little disappointed with Phoebe’s description of Jess, to be honest—I wanted Jess to be an asshole, so I could have some legitimate reason to warn Ros to stay away from her. But instead of a damning review from Phoebe, some elaborate description of why Jess was to be avoided, she just wound up sounding... normal, verging on sympathetic.

“Hmm, okay,” said Phoebe, looking a little suspicious. She checked her watch and looked back to me. “Are you okay to get the rest of these measurements on your own? Benna invited me to sit in on the production meeting.”

“Sure,” I said, with a little twinge of nervousness in my stomach. I didn’t want to let Phoebe down. “I can handle that.”

My last measurement appointment was late. I told Phoebe I didn’t mind sticking around. Then, alone in the costume shop with only a melancholy cat to keep me company, and against my better judgment, I typed Jess Orlando’s name into the Google search bar on my phone.

I wasn’t sure what I was looking for. It wasn’t like Jess was famous—best-case scenario, I’d find something like her Instagram page or a bio on the Hidden Fern website. And even then, what was I hoping for? I wanted confirmation from the outside world that Jess really was the villain I was making her out to be in my head. I wanted something along the lines of Jess’s favorite plants are lilies and succulents, and, oh yeah, your friend should definitely steer clear .

I had to wade through a bunch of results—Jess Orlando the marketing executive, Jess Orlando with the vegetarian blog—in order to actually get to anything on the actual Jess Orlando in question, and even then, there wasn't the definitive answer I was looking for. As a child participating in a youth boxing tournament, she'd defeated someone 3–0 in Ring B. When she was in sixth grade, she won honorable mention for a local middle school poetry contest for a poem entitled “My Fists.” 6 (Great , I thought. Poetry—another thing in common with Ros.) The juiciest bit of information was a small featurette in the Lovesick Falls Gazette about her being the only girl on the boys' wrestling team. “I'd tell other girls to try for things they want,” Jess was quoted as saying in the article. “There's nothing that says girls can't fight.”

Well, plenty of people did say that, but I saw her point.

There was no social media I could find.

There was no bio on the Hidden Fern website.

There were no news stories about violent behavior at wrestling matches; no criminal record, either.

Nothing about her—or her brother—being a well-known asshole.

Nothing about her being personally responsible for climate change or drinking the blood of innocents.

I put my head down on the desk, feeling more depressed than Jacques. Jess just seemed like a normal person. There was, tragic though it may have been, no reason for Ros not to be with her.

In an effort to cheer myself up, I put on one of my favorite episodes of Power Jam on one of the big shop computers, where the jammer and the blocker you've been

rooting for the whole time finally kiss in this madly passionate, perfect way at the team's away match at regionals. The episode is extremely idealized and unrealistic, and even though they lose the match, you feel like they won because these two finally, finally got together.

Regrettably, I'd also forgotten—or somehow blocked out—that this episode was big important character development for Blade Mendoza, who finally confronts his manipulative father and then skates away angrily (everyone is always skating everywhere; in an interview I read with him, he said that since joining the show, he'd felt as though his calves had been Frankensteined from another person's body) and then at a park meets a girl from the rival team known as the Enemy, and they have sex on the merry-go-round ⁷ while leaving their roller skates on. ⁸

Double regrettably, this was exactly when the real-life Blade Mendoza, also known as Oliver Teller, walked in.

Triple regrettably—and contrary to what Ros had assured me—he 100 percent remembered me.

“Oh, Jesus” is what he said when he saw me—just how everyone longs to be greeted. As if that weren't bad enough, his expression of exasperation quickly morphed into one of shock and horror as he realized what was playing on the monitor. The volume was up tragically high, blasting some extremely embarrassing knockoff Rihanna song that went something like “It's good to be bad, yeah, yeah, yeah” while Blade and the Enemy made out. I managed to turn off the monitor, but the sound still persisted, which meant that I banged at the computer like a full-on ape for another minute or two before finally finding the switch to the speakers that were hooked up to the computer.

“Seriously?” he said. There may have been a trace of a smile on his face, but I was busy figuring out how to draw the blood down from my face, because if I blushed any

harder my skin would probably melt off.

I remembered an interview Oliver had given in which someone asked him what quality he found most attractive, and Oliver had replied, “Confidence.” I’d rolled my eyes at it then—next you’d tell me you loved women who took risks and who weren’t afraid to be vulnerable with you—but although it was unoriginal, it seemed actually helpful now.

I tried to straighten my spine and pull my shoulders back, make my body project confidence I didn’t feel. “Fittings ended at four,” I said crisply, like a woman who was utterly in control of her life, not someone who’d just been caught watching soft-core roller porn by the star himself.

“Sorry,” he said. “There was—I had to—”

He was stammering now. I sort of liked it, honestly.

“I forgot,” he said finally.

I sighed dramatically and picked up a spare measuring tape from the table. I’d once heard Touchstone say that sometimes all it took for him to unlock a character was the right piece of clothing—a heavy watch, or stiff shoes, or a flashy hat—and so I draped the measuring tape around my neck the way I’d seen people in the costume shop do, and I swore I felt myself stand up straighter. I was no longer Celia Gilbert, Deranged Superfan; I was Celia Gilbert, Extremely Competent Costume Apprentice.

“Wait,” he said. “You’re going to measure me?”

“Is there a problem,” I said—just like that, a statement, not a question.

“I mean, I prefer not to be touched by people who were last seen spying on me from

inside a tree.”

“I wasn’t spying .”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” he said, and there it was: his trademark Power Jam arrogance. I was beginning to find him annoying, which, honestly, set me off. It was one thing for him to think I was nuts, but I really didn’t want him to ruin the show for me. Blade Mendoza needed to remain sacred.

“Look,” I said. “I was looking for cell service, just like you. Believe it or not, we—what did you call us? Fools?— also have lives in this—what was it? Godforsaken hellhole ?—and as such, occasionally we have to make phone calls during the day.”

Oliver looked shocked. I was kind of shocked myself. Where had this assertiveness been my whole life? I needed to start wearing a measuring tape everywhere.

“You’re right,” Oliver said finally. “I shouldn’t have assumed.”

He stepped onto the pedestal. Unfortunately, I hadn’t fully prepared myself for the effect of Oliver standing in front of a triptych mirror. It’s not like he was wearing anything remarkable—worn black jeans and a gray T-shirt, a few bracelets on his wrist, like an upscale version of what Ros and I used to make at summer camp. But thanks to the mirror, His Beauty was multiplied by three, and there was a whole new series of angles from which to behold him, and all of them seemed just right . The sharpness of his nose was more visible in profile; he was leaner and shorter than he appeared on camera, exactly my height. I suppose the roller skates added a couple inches.

I measured him quickly, in silence, making notes on the sheet that Phoebe had left behind. I tried to stay professional, but I confess, at one moment I broke out in a cold

sweat while measuring him. One can stay only so calm when looping a measuring tape around the hips of your celebrity crush.

“All done,” I said after a few minutes of quick work. “Thanks for coming by.”

I waited for him to leave, but he lingered.

“I’m really sorry for what I said that day,” he said.

“It’s fine,” I said stiffly.

“The other day—you caught me—or I caught you—it was strange,” he said.

“It’s really not a big deal,” I said. I really didn’t expect an explanation from him, though now that he’d nudged the door open, he seemed intent on barging through.

“The thing is, I’d just flown in from Australia. I was scrambled. I was mostly ranting to my agent. I’m doing this theater festival mostly as a favor to him—the festival’s artistic director is a friend of his—and I was feeling taken advantage of. I thought I was alone. I’m sorry I was rude to you. I’m sorry I was late today—I fell asleep. And I’m glad you watch the show; I’m really glad that people watch the show. I’m really—sorry, it’s just been a hard first week here. I’m not really this way. I don’t think.”

I felt myself soften. Weirdly, it was the I don’t think that did it for me—a hedging over his own self-assessment, the slightest moment of self-doubt that struck me as extremely human and made me more inclined to believe him.

“I don’t know your name,” he said. “What is it?”

“Celia Gilbert,” I said.

“Hi, Celia Gilbert,” he said. “I’m Oliver Teller.”

“I know,” I said. “Remind me which play you’re in?”

I was relieved to find that I had actually forgotten this piece of information, which helped assuage any lingering fears that maybe I had been stalking him or I was a deranged superfan. Sure, I knew that he’d sprained his wrist while filming a sex scene on roller skates, and I could now tell you the exact measurement from his knee to his ankle in both inches and centimeters, but I didn’t know everything about him.

“The new play,” he said cautiously.

“Oh, right. Abominable ? What’s that one about? I haven’t heard very much about it. Besides, um... what you said. That day.” And that the director was in the middle of a divorce with its star.

“It’s about scientists,” he said. He was clearly trying to be diplomatic, to speak cautiously and generously this time around, especially having just asserted that he wasn’t an asshole. “In search of the yeti. It takes place in the Himalayas.”

“Oh,” I said again. Oliver obviously had opinions about the play—I’d heard them loud and clear while I was hiding in the tree, and I could see them bubbling now just below the surface—though I didn’t quite see what the problem was yet. “I mean, that doesn’t sound like”—what was the phrase he’d used?—“horrible, unrivaled rubbish. What’s your role?”

At this he put his head in his hands.

“That’s just it,” he said miserably. “I’m the yeti.”

I tried hard not to laugh. Really, I did. We’d already gotten off on the wrong foot and

then kept walking on it for a while, but in spite of all of that he actually did seem sort of nice, sort of normal, almost, and the last thing I needed was to upset the delicate, tenuous balance that existed between us—

But I just couldn't help it. I collapsed into a fit of giggles.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"That's okay," he said miserably.

"You're not the yeti! You're not."

"Oh, I am," he said. "It is funny. You know, originally, I wanted to play a different kind of role this summer. I'm always the villain. I wanted to prove I could do something other than brood and punch people, and then instead I do this favor for my agent, and I get cast as a literal monster. I don't even have any lines. At least not in English..."

I was laughing harder. "Stop."

"It's true," he said, and he chuckled a little bit, too, surprised at himself. "Like, it's a big part, I'm onstage the whole time, but everything written in the play is either like, ooh , or a grunt"

I wiped a tear from the corner of my eye.

"And the director keeps telling me I have to find my 'inner beast.' She's said it now like six times...."

I was totally gone now, the world a watery blur, and much to my surprise and delight, Oliver was laughing right along with me. His laugh was different than it was on

TV—on the show, he had kind of a villainous huh-HA , a laugh that always sounded like a victory lap, like he'd won something and was rubbing your face in it. Now, though, he was just straight-up giggling—the sound was so goofy, so bouncing , and it made me think of curlicues and ringlets, twisty rainbow lollipops, bags of shoestring licorice I used to drool over at the farmers' market. This laugh—his actual laugh—suited him so much better.

There was a horrible yell at the door that startled me back to myself. Jacques the cat had emerged from his Cave of Melancholy, no doubt disturbed by all the levity, and was now sitting a few feet from us, screaming at us in disapproval. His teeth seemed sharper than they had at the start of the week.

“Who's this?” Oliver asked.

“Don't touch him—he'll bite your face off—”

But Oliver was already crouched on the ground with an extended fist, clicking his tongue softly at Jacques. My hands flew to my face; I saw the headlines take shape in my mind's eye— YOUNG STAR MEETS TRAGIC DEATH AT THE CLAWS OF JOY-HATING FELINE; COSTUME APPRENTICE BARELY ESCAPES WITH HER LIFE —but a strange thing happened: Jacques actually rubbed his head against Oliver's fist.

“Hey, sweet one,” Oliver said, to which Jacques actually raised his chin , exposing his neck for more pets. “Good boy. Such a good boy.”

He pet him for a moment longer and then stood, brushing Jacques's loose fur from his jeans.

“I don't think you realize this, but you just tamed a lion.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Talk about finding your inner beast. That cat might be a good model.”

“I miss my cats,” he said.

“You have cats?”

“My parents do,” he said. “Here.”

He pulled his phone from his back pocket, and I brushed off the all-too-recent memory of my tape measure lassoed around his hips.

“That’s Edna, with the sort of messed-up tail—she loves a lap—and that’s Benny, who’s essentially this ghost who just shows up in places—wait, there’s a better picture that really captures his essence....”

He flicked over to his favorites and through a series of photos featuring a long-haired cat in increasingly unlikely locations: perched on the top edge of a swung-open door, head peeking through the slats of blinds. The photos were poorly lit and unmanicured—I could see the edge of a socked foot in one—and it occurred to me that these were not bits of information one could gather from the internet or from interviews. This was a piece of him that he was sharing with me, specifically. I was seeing a slice of Oliver Teller’s real life.

And then he flicked too far. Benny was replaced—just for a split second, before Oliver flicked the screen off—with a photo of two smiling faces. Well, one smiling face. Oliver’s. The other face, which belonged to his costar Ronnie, was smooshed up against his cheek in a gleeful kiss, like she couldn’t get close enough.

Oliver cleared his throat, shoved his phone back into his pocket.

“Anyway,” he said.

He was suddenly awkward. Embarrassed. I mean, I guess it was a little awkward, to have accidentally flashed this private moment with his girlfriend in front of my face. But more than feeling awkward, I actually felt grateful: Maybe Oliver had a candy-store laugh and some normie cat photos, but he was still Oliver Teller, star of Power Jam and boyfriend to the very hot Ronnie Ruthless, and I was still Celia Gilbert, future founder and CEO of Planners-R-Us. What did I think—that he was going to show me a picture of his cats, and suddenly we were going to be friends? I needed to remember that we led different lives, and mine was much, much smaller than his.

“What’s next?” he said.

I slung the measuring tape over my neck again, imitating Benna and Phoebe. Professionalism restored.

“Nothing else,” I said. “We’re all done. Thank you for coming by. Best of luck with the show.”

“Okay—really?”

“Really. We’re all done here.”

“All right,” he said. “Thanks.”

“No problem at all.”

With that, he took his leave.

Footnotes

6 Though I did scour the internet, I was sadly unable to find a copy of this poem.

7 While hot and spontaneous in the moment, this backfires wildly: She turns out to be a spy for the other team, which threatens Blade's new, cautious standing in the group. Naturally everyone blames Blade when their coach's playbook is stolen and winds up in the hands of the Enemy—only it turns out it's not Blade's fault at all, but his father's, whose arc at the end of the second season goes from manipulative to straight-up diabolical.

8 Oliver actually sustained a wrist injury during this scene. It still clicked when he twirled his wrist.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

THE LAST SUPPER , or the Structural Unsoundness of Veggie Burgers

The Lily Pad smelled amazing that night when I got home around six—like fresh cilantro and feta cheese and just the faintest hint of smoke, smells that indicated dinner was going to be a real step up from the meals we’d been having—no offense to Ros, who was responsible for most of the cooking. Also a step up: our dinner conversation. I was excited to have juicy Oliver Teller gossip to report. Ros and I had been hungry for it since my first run-in with him.

“Hey!” called Ros. Their voice was bright and happy. They were in the kitchenette with Touchstone (who’d gotten a ride home with Audrey), tending to something smoking in a frying pan. “Can you pass me the pepper?” they called.

“What are we making?” I asked.

“Black-bean burgers and roasted potatoes,” Touch said, passing Ros the pepper.

“Where’s the recipe?” I said, eager to help pitch in.

“No recipe,” Ros said. “We’re winging it.”

The kitchen looked like they’d been winging it—it seemed as if every single utensil and every single piece of dishware had been recruited to make this dinner. Even so, it was fun to see them cooking together. While I was an okay baker, both Ros and Touchstone had a deep appreciation for food—gourmands, you might have called them—and would occasionally cook us elaborate feasts back home: buttermilk-brined chicken, gluten-free pasta with feta cheese and cherry tomatoes. I was glad to see

them together now in the kitchen—it felt like some order had been restored.

“I bought sparkling apple cider,” Ros said. “It’s in the fridge.”

“Sign me up,” said Touchstone. He pulled the bottle from the fridge and cracked it open, filling Henry’s champagne flutes with three healthy pours. Henry not only had a frog for every occasion, but he also had glasses for every occasion in all different shapes and sizes, from skinny champagne flutes to heavy-bottomed glasses that practically required the drinker to wear a velvet smoking jacket. My favorites were wide-brimmed coupes made of pink glass and etched with flowers. I wanted to use them for everything and was simultaneously terrified of breaking them.

“I have news,” I said, lifting my glass slightly.

“So do I,” said Ros. “I got a job!”

I nearly choked on my sparkling cider.

“What? Really? At the Hidden Fern?” I said.

“At the Hidden Fern!” said Ros, and a pit formed in my stomach, remembering Jess Orlando among the plants. “Celia and I went there the other day when you went off to unicycle, Touch. It’s beautiful. They do arrangements for the theater festival.”

“Do you get a discount?” Touchstone asked.

“What do you need plants for?” I said.

“I’m thinking flowers,” Touch said. “It’s going well with Audrey.”

“When did you hear about the job?” I asked Ros.

“Wait, say more about Audrey,” said Ros.

“Not only did she give me a ride home, but we worked together in a clowning exercise. We had to make each other laugh. She was really good at it. I kept cracking up, and she was, like, stone-faced.”

“You like her? She seemed really nice the other night,” said Ros.

“I think so,” said Touch. “Though another person in the workshop said they thought I was gay when I said I was going out with her.”

“Back to Ros’s job...,” I said.

Ros shook their head. “It’s so rude of other people to keep assuming things about you. Don’t let it bother you.”

“It’s one thing to get it from my brothers. It’s another to get it from strangers.”

“Your brothers are cretins,” Ros said.

“You barely know them,” said Touch, which was true.

“Am I wrong?” said Ros.

“No, you’re not wrong,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Ros. “Okay, these are ready.”

They ferried burgers onto three plates heaped with potatoes, and we took our seats around the table. Ros had thought to light two candles, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were in some sort of rehearsal for future dates they were planning.

“How did you hear about the job?” I asked.

“Jess called,” said Ros.

“Jess Orlando?” I said.

“You don’t have to call her by her first name and last name every time,” said Ros.

“Her name does have a nice ring to it, though,” said Touchstone.

“Doesn’t it?” said Ros, and they seemed so unlike themselves, almost dreamy, that I nearly dropped my flute of sparkling cider.

“I’m so happy for you,” I said, in spite of my impending sense of dread. “You seemed like you really liked that place.”

“Yeah,” Ros said. Their smile was enormous, and I knew they were thinking about not just the place but the person who worked there. “I did.”

“Then that’s fucking great,” said Touchstone. He raised his champagne flute in one hand and his veggie burger in the other. “Cheers to Ros, for the millionth time!”

“Thanks, dude!” said Ros. “Cheers to us for making dinner. These turned out great.”

“When do you start?” I asked.

“Tomorrow!” said Ros. “I’m starting out at four days a week, but it’s probably going to be more like five—”

Five days a week with Jess Orlando?! And it started tomorrow ? Suddenly the tenor of the dinner changed: It was no longer a rehearsal, nor was it even a celebration—it

was a farewell. Ros was going to start at the Hidden Fern, and we were never going to see them again.

“What about the Hestia-ing?” I said.

Ros made a face, and I kicked myself for being who I was: pushy, stubborn, in love with the wrong person. Why couldn’t I just let things run their course? Why did I always need to jump in and remind everyone of the plan, when it was clear that the plan was going to pieces?

“Ros isn’t our maid,” said Touch. “We can take turns with the Hestia-ing. Honestly, I kind of think it was unfair for Ros to do all the Lily Pad upkeep in the first place.”

“There is a lot of weird shit to dust,” Ros agreed.

“As long as I’m not in charge of the plants,” I said, thinking of my mother, who’d killed every plant she’d ever owned. “I’ll fix the chore wheel later tonight.”

“We can just play it by ear,” Ros said. “We don’t have to be so rigid, you know?”

“Are you anti-chore wheel now?”

“I wouldn’t say I was ever pro -chore wheel,” said Ros.

“We’ll work it out,” said Touchstone, taking a huge bite of his veggie burger. “We’re smart,” he said through his mouthful.

“What’s your news, Celia?” Ros said.

“Oh—it’s nothing. I saw Oliver Teller again, that’s all.”

“You saw Oliver Teller again ? And you didn’t bring this up immediately ?” said Ros.

“The guy from Power Jam who’s got those googly fish eyes?” said Touch.

“Way to bury the lede! Spill, spill, spill!” Ros said, gesturing feverishly with their hands.

It was exactly the sort of reaction I’d been hoping for, but in the aftermath of Ros’s Hidden Fern news, their enthusiasm didn’t hit me nearly as hard as it should have.

“We spoke this time,” I said. “Like, actually.”

“What was he like? Did he give up anything about whether there’ll be a season three? Tell me everything,” said Ros.

“He was nice,” I said. “He showed me pictures of his cats.”

There was quiet. I’d thought I had more to say on the subject when I arrived at the Lily Pad, though now, hearing Ros’s news, I couldn’t think of anything more. I felt weirdly like I was moving through glue: It was hard to remember and recap our interaction when I was so fixated on Ros’s working with Jess Orlando.

“That’s all that happened?” said Ros. “You’re so quiet. Did something weird happen with you guys again?”

I laughed, trying to defuse the awkwardness. “Nope, no. Nothing like that.”

“Are you going to eat?” said Touch.

He was right: I’d been so preoccupied and feeling so ill over the Hidden Fern news

that I hadn't even taken a bite of my burger. This delicious Ros-and-Touch-made concoction had been growing cold on my plate while I quibbled over plants and chore wheels.

"Cheers," I said, and raised it to my mouth.

It was delicious, but as a burger, it completely fell apart. It crumbled the second I took a bite, and as I watched the breakdown all across my plate, I couldn't help it: I gave a little wail of distress.

"Hey," said Ros. "What's the matter? Are you homesick again?"

"No," I said miserably. "I'm just worried that we'll all get so busy we'll never see each other again."

"Celia, I think you're being a little dramatic," said Ros.

"We live together," said Touchstone.

"Agree," said Ros. "That'll never happen."

But in spite of everyone's reassurances, I could already feel Ros drifting away into a different world, one made of plants and punches and poems.

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On my first day, Jess teaches me the names of things. The flowers: ranunculus, calla lily, hydrangea. The plants: monstera, calathea, pothos. Me: totally and completely in love, unable to recall anything she's just taught me. It's the kind of crush that feels like being devoured. She looks at me and gobbles up my limbs, leaves me half-eaten and wanting more.

On my second day, Jess compliments me on my chain. Thank you, I say, and one more time, my body erupts in flames. I am a pile of ashes on the floor. At the end of the day, I'll be swept up and tossed out with the dirt.

On my third day, Jess tells me the story of the Fernery: how a rich woman who studied botany built it, a woman who came all the way from the East Coast. How she didn't believe in the spring, but she did believe this place, Lovesick Falls, could be healing. How she thought it was more important to stay in love than fall out of it. I miss all the important details because I am drooling over the way Jess's blond ponytail falls across her shoulder, like some fancy woman's ermine stole. She looks like royalty and deserves as much as a queen.

On my fourth day, we touch. Hand to hand, while building bouquets. It's accidental, and it takes me hours to recover.

At the end of that shift, Jess asks me if I want to see something cool.

I will follow you to the ends of the earth , I think about saying, but settle for "okay."

"It's kind of a tough walk," says Jess.

“I can handle it,” I say.

Jess leads us into the woods behind the Fernery, on a trail that maybe isn’t a real trail, just a light tattoo that has emerged where other people have walked before us. Jess walks confidently, even in the places where the trail disappears. The ground practically shines where she takes her steps, like she’s so sparkly her footprints are made of glitter. The trees tower over us. The air smells slightly of lemons. She talks about the redwood canopy, how scientists discovered an entire ecosystem up there, full of water, animals, and life.

“This way,” says Jess, and veers from the path. Briefly, I hear Celia— Where’s the map? The compass? The emergency trail mix? —but Jess seems to know the way in her body. I leave Celia on the trail and follow Jess to I-don’t-know-where.

We cross a gully where a great tree has fallen, where the earth is so soft it can suck the shoes from your feet. Jess climbs over the tree, as confident as a squirrel monkey. She lends me a hand—her hand! In mine! The world stops!—and no sooner have I contemplated holding it, interlacing her fingers with mine, than Jess pulls away and points.

“There,” she says.

Across the gully, rising from a bed of ferns, is a tree with needles that are as white as bone. It’s a witchy ghost tree that stands out in the muted palette of the forest, the greens and browns and ochers. But there’s something stunning about it—as if snow fell over this one particular tree, settled lovingly over its branches, and ignored the rest of the forest.

It’s smaller than the neighboring trees, though still twice my height when we get up next to it.

“Is it sick?” I ask. I touch the branches, expecting them to be dry and brittle, but the needles feel healthy.

“No,” says Jess, “it’s just this way.”

We stand beneath this white tree and consider it, this tree that feels like it’s been set on the planet for us and us alone. This is our tree, I understand. Jess is sharing it with me, and so it’s ours.

Jess speaks: “The first time I saw you—at the party—you reminded me of it.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say.

“I know,” Jess says. “That’s why I said you reminded me of it.”

Jess touches her own eyebrow where mine has the white patch. Then she reaches out and slowly touches mine. I need no further invitation. I take Jess by the hand, the same hand that helped me over the fallen log, and kiss her.

The kiss feels like passing through a portal: Our lips touch, and we leave someplace ordinary and pass through to somewhere new, someplace that feels like magic.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

VOYAGE TO THE TOGSHOP , or a Brief History of the Doublet

That Sunday, a little less than a week before the opening of *Into the Woods* , the shop went into a tizzy and we were called in for an emergency. Cinderella—or, rather, the actor who played Cinderella in *Into the Woods* —was being a real pain in the neck. At the eleventh hour, she'd decided that she didn't like the dress that she was going to wear, and she was demanding an entirely new costume.

“Evidently it didn't make her feel princessy enough,” Phoebe said, rolling her eyes. “Bet she felt princessy pitching a fit. Anyway—are you comfortable running to the Togshop to pull some new dresses for her? It's on the other side of town, and it's where we store most of our costumes when they're not in use. I wrote directions down for you; I'd go with you if I could, but I've got so much to do here. Don't follow Google Maps or else you'll wind up in a lake. One more thing—can you take Oliver with you?”

“Oliver? As in... Teller?”

“Yeah,” Phoebe said. “Oh, wait—I haven't even told you the best part! The reason they had me at the last production meeting. Benna needs a special assistant for Oliver's costume. She's letting me submit some designs.”

“What? Really? That's amazing!”

“Yeah—I mean, I know I just told you we're not the West End,” Phoebe said. “And it's going to be a lot of work. Like, the show opens in seven weeks.”

“You can do it,” I said.

“You think?”

“Of course,” I said. And I meant it, too. If anyone could pull that off, it was Phoebe. “This is so cool. To have a big name like Oliver in your design?”

“I mean, does anyone actually watch that show?” said Phoebe. “What did they call it? ‘The worst show on television’?”

My face burned red, and Phoebe knew instantly. It was worse than the time Touchstone—in fifth grade!—had pityingly informed me the tooth fairy wasn’t real.

“Oh! I’m sorry—I didn’t—”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“Sorry, that’s me putting my foot in my mouth.”

“I know Power Jam is ridiculous,” I said. “That’s part of its charm.”

“Maybe I’ll give it another shot,” said Phoebe. “I shouldn’t be so dismissive. I’ve barely given it a try. Maybe it would help me understand Oliver’s acting more if I watched an episode.”

“Skip the first one,” I said. “Maybe the second one, too, honestly. Start with three. You’ll figure it all out, and the third episode is really where they find their groove.”

“Okay,” said Phoebe. “Thanks. Research! Anyway—what was I saying? He’s going to go with you. I had this plan that Oliver and I would go over together and see what spoke to him. But now with the Cinderella, Benna’s asked me to do some

alterations....”

“No, no. It’s great,” I said. Besides the fact that every time I saw Oliver Teller, I seemed to find some new and interesting way to humiliate myself.

“Thanks so much,” said Phoebe.

“Of course,” I said.

Oliver was waiting for me in the foyer.

“We meet again, Celia Gilbert,” he said.

“Hello, Oliver Teller,” I said. In an effort to be Celia Gilbert, Star Costume Assistant, I’d worn my measuring tape again and fussed with it around my neck. We walked to my car chatting idly about the weather. Normal. Good. Yes. I was a Young Career Woman; he was a Young Actor; we were both in control and could be Professional together.

Of course, that illusion was totally shattered when he saw my car.

While I tended to run a pretty tight ship in every other area of my life, my car—for all that I loved it—was continually in a state of complete disarray. It was actually strategic, to contain all my mess to my very old car. While I hadn’t done anything overtly embarrassing like leave out the special collector’s edition of Power Jam magazine 9 that Ros had bought me for my birthday, there were still plenty of other minor things to fret over: a Porky Pig mask Touchstone had left in the car, along with several red noses; bits and pieces of old Halloween costumes that just lived in the back seat now; swimming goggles that Buckets had chewed on but that still kind of worked if you didn’t mind a slight leak in the left eye; the empty In-N-Out bags, the sticky coffee rings around the cupholder. Surely this wasn’t the situation my parents

were referring to when they insisted I keep my car clean, but maybe I would have listened to them if they'd dangled the ultimate threat: One day, a handsome television star is going to be in your passenger seat, and you know he's going to judge the state of your cupholders .

"I know you're probably used to limos, or whatever," I said.

"Is that... a plastic cutlass?"

"We were pirates for Halloween," I said, as though Halloween were last week and not eight months ago. The cutlasses I'd left in the back seat for impromptu sword fights with Ros and Touch, but the rest of the pirate costumes were hanging in my closet, along with the flamingo costumes and the ones from the year we'd gone as an avocado (Ros and I were the halves, and Touch was the pit). I couldn't get rid of any of them; I was too proud.

"Who's 'we'?" he asked.

"Oh. Me and my friends." I could've left it there, but something compelled me to keep talking. "They're actually here with me this summer. Touchstone—his name's Andrew—he's part of the Young People's Company. Ros works at the Hidden Fern, the plant store in town. Sorry—is this—this must be totally uninteresting to you."

"What? No, the opposite. They're here with you? I'm jealous."

"You're jealous of me?"

"The summer with your two best friends? Totally. There's no one in my life like that. Take a left up at that weird-looking tree."

"You don't have friends? What about the cast? What about you and Ronnie?"

“Ronnie and I broke up.”

“ Oh. Shit. I’m sorry.”

“We haven’t announced it yet. Don’t tell anyone, please.”

“I won’t,” I said. “Is it awkward on the show?”

“With her? Not so much. We’re good. It’s awkward because... everyone on the show is older than me. Ronnie’s only two years older than me, but sometimes I just feel like a baby. I’m really lucky, I know. I get to be doing this thing that so many people want to do. But it’s a lot of work, and it’s not always fun. Sometimes I’d rather be... going to In-N-Out,” he said, eyeing an empty bag.

“That’s easy to do. I can take you there.”

“Excellent,” he said. “You’re supposed to take a right up here.”

He turned around to investigate the back seat again, and this time came up with my tennis racket—the same one that I had eventually pulled out of the garbage can after quitting ninth-grade tennis.

“You play?” he asked, fussing with the strings.

“Just for fun,” I said. “I used to play on a team, but I quit a few years ago. My dad’s still mad about it. He says I could have been great.”

“Is he right?”

“Maybe. I loved it, but the problem was I got too in my head. Now I’m just on the swim team with my friend Ros. Or Ros used to be on it. Then they quit.”

“Would you ever go back to it?”

“Tennis? No, I don’t think so. I’m not that into it.”

“You’re driving around with a racket in your car, in case there’s an emergency game of tennis you need to play.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Tennis left a mark on me, I guess. I still hear my coach’s voice in my head sometimes. But I don’t want to go back to playing competitively. Now it’s enough to just play for fun with my dad or with my friends.”

There was a beat, and then Oliver asked, “What are your friends like?”

I thought of how best to answer this. “You know how you were saying the other day, about how you wanted to play a different kind of character? That you have your role you play? I guess it’s like that. We’ve all got our roles we play.”

“So what are they?”

“What are what?”

“The roles.”

“Oh.” I stopped short, drawing a sudden blank. I’d never had to explain my friends to anyone; they’d always just been my friends. It was almost like I knew them too well to break them down into their component parts—it felt like having to describe breathing, or why it felt better to fall asleep on my stomach. “Touchstone is, like... a people person. He’s a schmoozer, almost. He loves theater, but I think he’d be a good therapist, too. He’s, like, good with people. He gives good advice. And Ros...”

Everything that came to mind felt way too grandiose. They were like my limb. They

were my heartbeat. They were my voice, and I was theirs.

“Well, Ros... Ros and I are very different, I guess. They’re more outgoing. Wilder. Not like they’ve ever done anything too nuts, but, like, they were always the one who was buying hair dye at the drugstore and misreading the directions and winding up with a black scalp. Last year, they got in trouble for pouring acid on this kid’s hat.”

“Sounds... dangerous.”

“It’s not like he was wearing it. And this kid was a certifiable asshole—always misgendering Ros on purpose.” I paused. “Ros is also the one that people fall in love with.”

“Okay,” he said. “What about you?”

“No one falls in love with me.”

“No—your role .”

“Oh. I’m...”

The ball boy. The chore-wheel designer.

“... the planner.”

“An important role,” Oliver said. “You’re just going straight for a while.”

“It’s boring,” I said. The truth was I wasn’t as objectively interesting as my friends. I didn’t really offer anything the way they did. Touchstone and Ros were both sparkly ; they commanded attention, were so clearly the stars of their own shows. In my darkest moments, I worried I was a footnote: the part people skipped over.

“Crucial, though,” said Oliver. “And I know we just met, but I don’t think you’re boring.”

I thought about this for another moment.

“You know who I am? I’m the seam,” I said. “I was friends with Ros, and I was friends with Touch, and I kind of stitched us all up. But most of the time, if I’m doing my job, you’re not really thinking about me. You just kind of forget I’m there.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Why, you spend a lot of time thinking about seams?”

“No, I find it hard to believe that anyone could forget you. Turn left here.”

I pictured the Togshop as a humble shack, not unlike the Lily Pad—a few extra clothing racks, a few bins full of mismatched shoes that sweet elfin cobblers would help us repair. But the Togshop was an operation. The racks swept toward the ceiling, three tiers high—you needed a ladder to reach the top. Oliver and I wandered through the aisles and tried to get our bearings, though the sheer number of costumes was overwhelming. Here were costumes specific to the 1500s. The 1910s. The 1950s. An entire wall of petticoats, of cowboy hats, of red kimonos. The volume and breadth were dizzying.

“Okay,” I said, slowly trying to orient myself. “I have a list from Benna, and...”

I looked back to make sure Oliver was following me. He was halfway down the aisle. He was also shirtless as in, without a shirt, not wearing a shirt, bare chested, nude from the waist up.

It was a chest I had seen numerous times before, though never in person—the

producers of Power Jam seemed to find every possible excuse to shoot him shirtless, perhaps because they thought it contributed to his character's villainy . After all, who eats breakfast shirtless but a villain? He was more often without a shirt than with, a strategy my mother referred to as "creepy" while I personally thought of it as "awesome."

His chest, it bears mentioning, like his laugh, was even better in person than it was on TV. It didn't have the high-contrast shadows or whatever shading they did to his abs to make them look fuller and more 'roided out. Maybe he'd stopped working out altogether since they'd wrapped filming. His stomach looked fuller and softer than it did on TV; his arms leaner. I had been unaware, before this very moment, that the back was something that one could be sexually attracted to. Like, wasn't it just a back ? But Oliver Teller had the sort of back that I wanted to touch.

"Dude!" I cried, remembering myself. "What are you doing ?"

"Trying stuff on!" he said. He was holding some kind of elaborately embroidered velvet jacket in his hand, the name of which I'd momentarily forgotten, but later I would place it as the doublet . 10

"You can't just try stuff on ," I hissed.

"One, why are you whispering, and two, why not?"

"Because this isn't a Marshalls ! There's all sorts of damage you can do to the clothes."

"I'll be careful."

"It's not about being careful! It's about... your, like... oils ." 11

“My oils?” Oliver said. “Celia, Benna Bloom has a literal cat that lives in the costume shop. I doubt I’m going to do any more damage to these clothes than Jacques would.”

Mercifully, he shrugged the jacket on. I waited for my composure to, you know, recompose. But somehow he looked... like... even... better?

Like. He looked good in that doublet.

Like, really, really stupid good.

Like. So good that it wasn’t just that the synapses in my brain seemed to misfire, but the whole brain itself went dark. It was as though some magic trick had been played on me, and the organ was gone completely, momentarily swapped with a rock. Ook. Ook. Man. Hot.

“How’s it look?” he asked.

Ook. Good. Eat.

“Unprofessional,” I managed.

“Come on,” he said. He pulled another doublet loose from the rack—this one was a deep, rich burgundy that reminded me of the best, sweetest cherries. “You know you want to.”

“I have to find these dresses,” I said, waving Benna’s list at him. “And you should be focusing on whatever makes you find your inner beast.”

“You’re a no-fun-haver,” he called after me.

Thankfully the next aisle over was chock-full of various religious costumes, so I

managed to cool off amid the miters and the nun habits long enough to focus on my job. The list was supposed to address last-minute costuming for the *Into the Woods* cast: several different lace-up shoe options for the actor playing the Baker (he evidently had a sixth toe that needed a wider toe box); various grungy-looking linen shirts for the actor playing Jack (which were actually quite cool—I thought Ros would’ve liked one); and then, of course, three new dresses for the actor playing Cinderella.

The first dress was pretty standard princess fare: cream colored and poofy sleeved, heavily bejeweled, a skirt so huge I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to get the trunk of my car closed.

The second dress was even bigger and shinier.

But the third dress—

I’ll start by saying that I don’t normally go for dresses. People claim they’re comfortable and easy—one and done!—but whenever I put one on I just feel overdressed, like I’m trying too hard. Ros and I called my wardrobe sheep-farmer chic —slip-on boots, thick woolen sweaters, lots of overalls, long in the winter and short in the summer, and the occasional jumper thrown over a T-shirt (as Touchstone once said to me, “Do you own anything that doesn’t have some sort of bib?”). On the rare occasion when I had to get dressed up, I owned a few floor-length floral-print dresses with a row of buttons down the front that weren’t horribly offensive to my sensibility. I still wore my boots with them, and sometimes I even managed to think that I looked cute.

This dress in my arms was like nothing I’d ever owned, and yet.

It caused something inside me to shift.

I could tell right away that it would be too big for the actor who played Cinderella. It was cut completely different than the other princess dresses: This was a stretchy gown straight up and down like a column, with a high neckline and long sleeves. It was heavily beaded but somehow managed to be light, almost liquid in my arms. The most stunning thing about it was its color: a fiery-orange-red beaded base sprinkled through with yellow and gold and hot-pink beads. The best approximation of a sunset in a dress that I had ever seen.

As soon as I saw it, I knew I had to have it. It was more than a dress. It felt like a sartorial embodiment of a plot twist, like the sort of dress that could make things happen.

“Whoa,” Oliver said. He’d reappeared wearing a floor-length white fur coat, a pink 1950s poodle skirt, and a loose-fitting, blousy pirate shirt. Somehow he managed to pull off this wild mishmash—just another unfair advantage of the extremely attractive. “You have to try that on.”

“I’m not going to,” I said, furious that he’d read my mind.

“I want to try it on.”

“I’ve measured your shoulders. You’d rip the seams out.”

He tugged the dress off the hanger, and I cried out a little bit, as though I’d been physically harmed.

“You good?” he said.

“Fine,” I said, and I was fine, really—just a little embarrassed over having developed an emotional connection to something so silly as a dress so quickly. “Just—be gentle with it, okay?”

Oliver helped me load all the costumes into the back of my car, plus the white fur coat he'd been wearing ("Phoebe might dig it, though I doubt the director will go for it," he said). The dress, the dress that I had already started thinking of as my dress, we draped gently across the back seat, moving the leftover Halloween costumes out of the way.

"All right—let's get back to campus," I said. I threw the car into reverse and glanced in my rearview. "God, those skirts are so fucking big I can't even SEE out the back—"

Oliver was giving me a strange look.

"What?" I said.

"It's just—hold on—may I?—you have something—"

He moved his hand toward my face. The pace was glacial, as though I were a dog that might bite, but then once it became clear that I wasn't going to move away, his touch was gentle and firm: two fingers below my right eye, on the curve of my cheekbone, the crest where tears gathered speed, if they made it that far. He turned his hand over to show me: An errant sequin from the dress—my dress—now clung to Oliver's fingertip.

"Make a wish," he said.

And even though I was not the sort of person who believed in wishes—even if I were, it seemed to me that wishes always came with a cost—I blew onto his fingertip and watched the sequin disappear somewhere into the mess of my car.

Footnotes

9 The magazine was filled with gems: glossy photo shoots of the cast, deep dives into the filming of certain episodes, even tips and tricks on how to become a better roller skater (Find your stance! Engage your core!). There was a featurette on important props, like the scissors Blade Mendoza used to cut Kenna's laces, and the spare hot-pink wheels the costumers kept on hand for when the wheels needed replacing. There was also one photo of Oliver Teller that I often found myself turning to—him, tank topped and pouty lipped, pushing his hair back with one hand, another in the pocket of his jeans. Let's just say the magazine pretty much fell open to that photo, and upon remembering this, I was doubly relieved the magazine had left my car.

10 This garment was popularized in Spain and worn in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. I actually knew this word, even though I'd temporarily blanked on it, blinded by/focused as I was on Oliver Teller's bare chest.

11 Yes. Oils. I said this.

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LOVE SONG FOR A COPEPOD , or My Mom's Take on My Tennis Coach

Once again, I was excited to get home to the Lily Pad to tell Ros and Touch about my brush with fame.

I mean—he'd touched me on the cheek! There had been a lingering glance! Come on!

I was happy to have something newsy to report. I liked my job, but honestly, the ins and outs of what I did every day were not always the most interesting. I painted over black scuffs in shoes. I restrung pearls on a broken necklace. Meanwhile, both my friends seemed to be having romantic luck outside the Lily Pad, while I was being left behind.

But this —this afternoon with Oliver Teller—this was news.

Unfortunately, no one was there when I got home. I beat back my creeping feeling that this was the new normal—that my Veggie Burger Prophecy was coming true—and tried to look on the bright side. Maybe it'd be nice to have the place to myself. *A Tale of Two Cities* , my summer reading, was practically rotting from where I'd left it in my suitcase, as were the other books I'd bought at the bookstore on our first day in town. But as I contemplated reading, I took one half look around the Lily Pad and was suddenly struck by the mess of the place. There were errant cans of seltzer everywhere, the half-finished bag of sour candy on the coffee table—definitely Touch and Ros's handiwork. Shoes had piled up in random places; laundry hung on the line that I hadn't quite gotten to putting away. When we'd arrived, the space had felt snug, but now it felt cramped, overtaken by the onslaught of our stuff . I was suddenly distressed: Had I been the only one following the chore

wheel? We'd been here, what, two weeks? How did the place already look this bad?

I set about gathering the seltzer cans, as well as the loitering cereal bowls and yogurt and granola dishes (even I was contributing to the mess). I set them onto the small island counter, a staging area before I would move them to the recycling or the dishwasher, and that was when I saw it.

A poem.

Ros had written a poem.

They'd written a poem on the back of the chore wheel, but okay, they'd written a poem.

I tried not to read it—Ros didn't like when people read their work without permission—but their handwriting was big and loopy, and I was able to make out certain words even as I tried to avert my eyes: desert. Gills. Lush.

Unfortunately, those certain words only made me want to read it more.

I covered my eyes with my hand and cheated through my fingers.

Desert. Gills. Love song.

Ros had written... a love poem?

For someone.

Maybe...

Just maybe...

They'd written a love poem...

For me? thought some tiny, pathetic voice inside me—like a desperate little mouse who lived in the back of my head.

Of course it's not for you, I told myself.

(For me? that voice thought again.)

It had been written on the chore wheel....

At that moment, right when I was telling myself not to believe in impossibilities, I heard someone stirring from our room. For a brief second, I theorized we were being robbed, before Ros emerged from our bedroom, rubbing sleep from their eyes. They'd been there the whole time.

They'd barely been at their new job—they'd just finished their first few days—but already, the way they looked was changing. Their freckles were emerging with more time in the sunlight, and their shoes were always coated in mud, which they tracked into our bedroom and left on the ground for someone else to deal with. One day I came home to find their upper arm scraped up—they'd gotten into a fight with a particularly ferocious viburnum, they said, no big deal. Still—they looked healthier. They seemed healthier. They seemed more like their old self.

I just wished that I had been the one to help get them there.

“Hey,” they said. “What time is it?”

“It's almost six,” I said, keeping my voice soft. “You wrote a poem.”

“Oh,” they said, almost embarrassed. “Yeah.”

“You wrote it on the chore wheel.”

“Sorry about that,” they said. “I just needed paper, and it was the first thing I saw. Did I mess it up? I can help you make another one....”

“Can I read it?” I asked.

“Do you want to read it?” Ros said.

It was a good question: Did I want to read this poem that featured the word love , this poem that most likely was not written for me? Couldn't I let Ros share this poem with its intended audience and look the other way, like a good friend should? How badly did I really need to rub salt in the wound?

Very badly, it turned out.

“Of course I want to read it,” I said.

They looked at me for a long time, like they couldn't trust my answer.

“You can read it,” they said finally. “But just know that it's not very good.”

I took a deep breath and reached for the chore wheel. I looked at the poem, the poem written in Ros's handwriting, handwriting that I loved so much I'd copied it, adding roofs to my a 's, a habit that stuck, so that even when Ros stopped writing their a 's that way, I kept on, little traces of them on everything I wrote. I read:

Love Song for a Copepod

For years, the tops of these trees were thought to be a desert.

Nothing grew. Nothing lived. Up that high—how could there be life?

Eventually someone climbed.

And what she found was lush gardens of ferns, and moss growing a foot thick on branches, and furred flying squirrels that didn't know how to be afraid of people. A wandering salamander—no lungs, no gills. Up there, a tree makes her own water, dense enough that creatures breathe through their skin.

In certain basal hollows, there are copepods: tiny, near-invisible shrimp meant to live only in the ocean. Impossible. And yet—

They're here. I cup one in the palm of my hand.

"It's beautiful," I said, and as I said it, the tiny part of me that still hoped this poem was for me just up and died. This poem wasn't for me. I didn't even get it, this love poem that was supposed to move someone—move guess who —into falling in love with Ros. I couldn't quite parse what it was trying to say, and I was sort of hung up on the copepod part—how could "tiny, near-invisible shrimp" be romantic? But I guess that's why it wasn't meant for me.

"So you like it," said Ros, looking relieved.

"It's different from what you usually write," I said. Ros was a good writer, though normally, their poems made me laugh. They'd written one I particularly enjoyed about how bad the month of February was: "O February, Thou Deepest Pit of Suck..."

"You sound nervous," I said.

"Well, I don't usually write love poems," said Ros.

“Right,” I said again, and I felt regret over having read it in the first place.

“Do you think she’ll like it?”

“She ,” I repeated, playing dumb. I wanted Ros to say her name.

“Jess,” said Ros. “It’s for her. Well. It’s about her.”

Of course it was for her. My heart sank. I felt like Ros and I were on two separate conveyor belts, pushing us toward some inevitable future that wasn’t shared, and what I wanted to do was make mine run backward, to get us back to the point in time when we’d been on the same one.

“I know you don’t like her,” Ros said.

“I like her fine,” I said. This was a lie, but it wasn’t that I disliked her. I was just hoping that she would fade into the background, disappear like that character they’d introduced in the season two premiere of *Power* as Blade Mendoza’s love interest, only they never brought her up again. 12

“That’s a ringing endorsement,” Ros said.

“What I mean is I don’t really know her. I like her about as much as I like someone who I watched punch someone at a party.”

“We kissed,” said Ros.

They kissed! They kissed? Oh my God, they’d kissed.

“Really? When!?”

“This afternoon,” they said. “She took me to see this all-white redwood tree. It was incredible.”

“This kiss, or the tree?”

“Both,” said Ros.

I thought for a second I might vomit, which would be especially unpleasant in our tiny bathroom, but I was distracted by Touchstone waltzing through the door, reciting lines from a monologue he’d had to memorize as part of an exercise for Young People’s Company.

“‘O, that this too too solid flesh would melt

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew’—what’s going on, everyone?”

“Ros kissed Jess Orlando and wrote her a love poem,” I said.

“Thanks a lot, Celia,” Ros said.

“The walls are thin! He’s going to find out soon enough!”

“Damn, Ros. Well played.” Touchstone grabbed my bag of (gluten-free) granola and starting eating fistfuls straight from the bag, sending bits of oat and nut skittering across the kitchen floor.

“Thanks, dude,” said Ros.

“Audrey and I kissed today, too.” More granola fell to the ground.

“You’re making this place a mess!” I said.

“Celia, you kiss anyone today?” said Touchstone. “It might chill you out.”

“ Mean , Andrew!” said Ros.

“Believe it or not, I actually worked today, thank you very much. And I’ll remind you that the whole point of this place is that you’re supposed to fall out of love. And furthermore, the contract said we were supposed to have a summer of VERY MODEST FUN and VERY SERIOUS FRIENDSHIP, not half-hearted friendship while everyone pursues their own romantic interests.”

“Celia, you a little jealous?” asked Touchstone rather annoyingly. Of course I was jealous! Of course I wanted to make out with someone! The only person I’d ever made out with, besides Touchstone, was Garrett Watkins on the swim-team trip, and he’d burped into my mouth. 13

“What I want,” I said, “is for this place to be clean.”

“Let me see this poem,” Touch said. “We can do some workshopping if you want.”

“Here,” said Ros, passing him the chore wheel. “I haven’t shown it to her yet. I wanted to get your opinion on it. Celia’s, too.”

“You know what we should do , now that we’re all here?” I said. “Is clean up the Lily Pad .”

“What’s a copepod?” said Touch.

“The poem answers it if you read.”

“Yeah, but do you want people to get stuck on not knowing what something is right away?”

“Ros, can you not leave crusted-on oatmeal dishes around the house? This is how we get ants.”

“What if I change that part to ‘tiny shrimp’? Is that too redundant?” Ros asked.

“I mean, ‘tiny shrimp’ isn’t very erotic. Do you want it to be erotic?” Touchstone said.

“Touchstone, is this flannel yours, or Ros’s? You know what, I’m just going to divide everything into piles according to person, and everyone can then deal with their own pile.”

“I wanted it to feel, like, miraculous,” Ros said. “Like, there’s this whole world up there that you didn’t even know existed. Does it feel that way to you?”

“I guess I feel that way. I’m just sort of hung up on the opening line,” Touchstone said. “I like the part about basal hollows.”

(I liked that part, too.)

I turned the sink on and started furiously scrubbing the dishes.

“Celia, what do you think?” said Ros, and I pretended I couldn’t hear them over the running water.

“Celia,” said Touchstone, louder.

“Celia!” said Ros, and I turned off the sink. “Do you really need to flip out about the state of the house right this very second?”

“I’m not flipping out ,” I said. 14 “We just... promised Henry we’d take care of his

house, and the summer's not even a third of the way through. I don't want him to come back and see that we destroyed it. Ros, have you been watering the plants?"

Silence. I filled up a pitcher.

"We won't wreck the house," Ros said. "We can clean up all the rest of the night, I promise. Just. Can you please come here and take a look at this?"

"Fine."

I approached the counter. I read through "Love Song" again. I liked it more this time. I still liked the part about basal hollows. I liked the opening line about the desert. I liked the part about furred flying squirrels. I agreed with what Ros said, that there was something about it that felt miraculous. But as I read, there were things I didn't like, too.

I didn't like that I couldn't write poetry.

I didn't like that I didn't know the names of plants, including the dramatically wilting one I'd just watered.

I didn't like that this poem was for Jess Orlando, and not for me.

I didn't like that I felt devastated by this love poem, and also jealous, and petty. I didn't like that I couldn't just be happy for Ros, who seemed much more alive than they had in a long time. I didn't like that my feelings for them were getting in the way of my being a good friend.

And I really didn't like that I felt like I was losing. No—I felt like I had already lost. That Jess Orlando and Ros would be together, and there was nothing to do now but slink into my room, find *A Tale of Two Cities*, and prepare for twelfth-grade history.

“Celia? What do you think?” Ros said expectantly.

“Yeah, Celia,” said Touchstone, with an expression that looked almost like a smirk. He was loving this, my heartbreak. “You’re the brains of the operation. What do you think?”

He passed me the poem/chore wheel, and my wet hands made the paper thin, quick to tear. I could cry on this, I thought. I could cry on this poem and drench it, and then rip it apart.

And then I had a thought.

Sometimes, in a tennis match, if I was already losing by a few games, I would think to myself, If I lose now, I can go home faster . My coach had told me once I needed more fight—not frustration, not anger, not rage, because I had plenty of that. What I needed, she said, was to dig deep and find the place that wanted to win, very, very badly, and tap into that place, and give myself over to it. 15

So what if I was losing? I didn’t need to cry now. I needed to fight .

“Okay, not to repeat questions, but what even is a copepod?” I said, passing the poem back to Ros. “Have you seen what they look like?”

I looked it up on my phone, and my heart soared a little. They were disgusting: horrible, translucent sea lice, with little legs like hairs and gnarly antennae. Some of them looked like literal tiny penises.

“Oh dear,” said Touchstone.

“Not the most flattering comparison,” I agreed.

“So what?” Ros said. “It’s not about how they look . The poem is about how they’re, like... this unexpected tiny life-form living where they shouldn’t.”

“I dunno, Ros,” I said. “It’s not a very flattering comparison.”

“So you think I shouldn’t give it to her.”

“I think you need to think about whether it needs revision,” I said. “I’m not sure handing her a poem that compares her to a shrimp is the most romantic thing. Even if you have already kissed.”

They looked so downtrodden that I couldn’t help but feel guilty. I should have stopped there. But I just kept on.

“And furthermore, criticisms about copepods aside, what’s the rush?”

“The rush,” Ros repeated, like they’d never heard the word before in their life. Like they weren’t made of rush. But while Ros was the sprinter on the swim team, I was the long-hauler. I did long-distance swims, the 400 IM, slow and steady. If I wanted Ros to decide they wanted to be with me—and I definitely wanted that—I needed to convince them that their relationship with Jess Orlando was a 400 IM situation. I needed them to pump the brakes so I could buy myself some time and figure out my next move.

“I don’t think there’s any harm, waiting on giving it to her,” I said.

“Maybe not,” said Ros.

“And also—not that you asked me but—I just think, outside of the poem, I do think you should proceed with caution. With Jess, I mean. I’ve heard some bad things about her from Phoebe.” This was what we called in school unethical treatment of

sources , but I barreled fearlessly onward.

“Oh, come on, Celia,” said Touchstone, almost as if he sensed that I was stretching the truth.

“Bad things, how?” said Ros.

“That they’re trouble,” I said. Even as I said it, I couldn’t believe I would go so far as to twist Phoebe’s words to better serve my purpose. What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I just let Ros be happy with Jess?

“What does ‘trouble’ even mean?” said Touchstone.

“We didn’t really get into specifics,” I said, glaring at Touchstone. “Phoebe is very circumspect.”

“Don’t listen to her, Ros. It’s just gossip.”

I snatched my (nearly empty) bag of granola from Touch. “Look, I just don’t want you to get hurt. You’ve been through so much this past year... maybe just hold off giving it to her? And just tell her you want to be colleagues?”

“Colleagues,” Ros said, turning the word over in their mouth like they were practicing a word on our Spanish vocabulary list. They let their poem fall to the counter, chore-wheel side up. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. They looked miserable, and I was sorrier than they knew. Was this what winning felt like? Why hadn’t anyone told me that victory was going to feel so awful?

“It’s funny,” Ros said. “I know the copepod part is weird, or whatever, but I felt more

like myself writing this poem than I had all year.”

At that, my stomach turned. It was one thing to persuade Ros to stay away from Jess Orlando; it was another to keep them from doing something they loved.

“You should keep writing,” I said. “Or maybe we should watch Power Jam or something? Or maybe we should go out to dinner... Touchstone wants to try the Dropped Acorn, I know....”

“I’m pretty full from your granola,” he said.

Ros shrugged. “I’m not really in the mood,” they said. “I’m gonna go lie down for a while or something.”

They beat a retreat to our room, and no sooner had they closed the door than Touchstone looked at me and said, “ Woowwwwwww .” I furiously hushed him. Sound traveled all too easily in the Lily Pad. He rolled his eyes and wrote on the back of the chore wheel beneath Ros’s poem.

That was messed , he wrote.

Oh, shut up , I mouthed.

Is that stuff about Jess even true?

It could be , I wrote.

He took the pen from me and wrote, Celia Gilbert = next Machiavelli?

I shoved him off the barstool, and he landed with a yelp.

Talking Ros out of things with Jess wasn't Machiavellian. I didn't think so, at least. I really didn't want Ros to get hurt. But I kept thinking about that, even long after we'd left Lovesick. What does that even mean, not wanting someone to get hurt? It was so hollow. Meaningless. Completely out of touch with reality. People get hurt all the time. Even in fairy tales, people bleed: They cut off their heels to fit into shoes and get their eyes pecked out by birds. Hurt is inevitable—if it wasn't Jess, it would've been someone or something else. What was I saying? That I didn't want Ros to experience life?

And besides: I may have been worried about Ros, but what I was really worried about was myself. I was worried, not even three weeks into our summer, whether our friendship would survive this, this Jess Orlando, and what this summer would mean for us. Maybe it would've been better if I'd just said, I love you, and I'm glad you're my friend. Maybe it would've been better if I'd just said, I'm worried we're growing apart. Or perhaps: I'm worried you're going to leave me behind.

Maybe I should've been less worried about who might hurt Ros, and who might hurt me, and more worried about who I might hurt.

I scratched out what Touchstone had written and rehung the chore wheel. I'd pressed so hard with the pen that it puckered through on the reverse side, like something living that was trapped inside and trying to get out.

Footnotes

12 Fans had all kinds of theories that this girl, whose character was called Eva, was going to come back in season three, if the show ever got renewed for a third season, and complicate the love triangle between Blade, Kenna, and Louisa. Eva was a rugby player whose team shared the weight room with the Soul Crushers and who had a flirty verbal sparring match with Blade over who could lift more weight (the answer was Eva, by quite a lot).

13 Regrettably, for both of us, he'd eaten stromboli. The kiss was memorable, and not in a good way.

14 I was definitely flipping out.

15 My mom hated this coach. "I'm sorry," she said, "am I the only one who remembers this is MIDDLE SCHOOL TENNIS?"

“Colleagues.”

When I say the word to Jess, she looks almost amused.

“Colleagues?” she repeats.

“Colleagues,” I confirm, as in, I think we should be just.

The word sounded more convincing coming from Celia’s mouth. Jess catches the dissonance, too, and grins a cocky smile from ear to ear. It’s a smile that feels like a secret, or a plan—like the wolf pretending to be friends with Little Red Riding Hood. It sends my heart through my stomach. If anyone recognizes a smile like that, it’s me.

“Colleagues,” Jess repeats for the fourth time, and this time it’s almost taunting, like she knows it’s not what I want. “Okay. Let’s be colleagues.”

So we’re colleagues for a few days. We might as well wear power suits, ties with Windsor knots, make small talk by the water cooler. I say things like, Boy, it’s hot today and Wow, that’s a big bouquet order. I keep a list of things that colleagues wouldn’t notice: how Jess’s arm muscles flex when she moves a heavy bird-of-paradise that isn’t getting enough sunlight. The length of her legs when she reaches on tiptoe to pull down a bag of soil for a customer. That smile she occasionally flashes in my direction when she catches me staring. This whole time: colleagues, colleagues, colleagues.

And even though Celia’s right—at least I think she’s right—I start to feel a little resentful of her. Why am I listening to her? Why am I letting her make my decisions

for me? Why is she telling me not to follow my heart? It's true, I can be reckless, I can rush, I can get hurt—but why am I ignoring this feeling in my body, this feeling like a curled new leaf, ready to spring open? Why would she tell me to do so?

And then, in the middle of the week, the day before *Into the Woods* starts, a million bouquets to build, a customer approaches the checkout holding the terrarium that Celia loves.

“This is beautiful,” I say, as if I’m seeing it for the first time. I lay my hand on the glass roof and can practically feel Celia’s love for it, as though it’s a drink she spilled all over the roof.

“It’s for my daughter,” the man says.

I nod and begin to ring him up. Am I really going to sell the thing that Celia loves? If the roles were reversed, she wouldn’t let the terrarium go. She would make up an elaborate excuse about how it wasn’t actually for sale, move it to the side, persuade him to buy a different thing.

I look across the store at Jess, my colleague. Why am I always listening to Celia?

“That’s sixty-five even,” I say, and swipe the man’s credit card with a twinge of guilt.

I watch him go. I’m slightly horrified at how easy it is, to sell the thing my friend loves. Celia is a much better friend than I am, no doubt about that. Though lately I’ve been wondering if there’s such a thing as too good a friend. Or if maybe there’s another reason Celia told me not to share the poem. If Celia’s kindness isn’t just about friendship, but something more, something I can’t give her.

Jess is rummaging around in the freezer behind me.

“How are we on orchids?” she asks.

Selling the terrarium was easy. You know what else is easy?

Rushing.

“I wrote a poem about you,” I say.

“Of course you did,” says Jess, into the freezer.

Then she turns and does a strange thing. With two fingers and her thumb, she plucks at my chain, a liquid gold thing I always wear, sleep in, shower in, swim in. No one has ever touched my chain this way. I feel like an instrument, and she is the only one who knows how to play.

Later, when darkness falls, when we are exhausted from kissing, rushed, intense kisses in Jess’s bedroom while her mom putters around downstairs, oblivious, I unfasten the chain from my neck and drop it in the outstretched palm of Jess’s hand.

“I miss you already,” Jess says, and she fastens the chain around her own neck.

I can’t believe I’ve met someone like this: someone who knows that rushing is the best part.

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AVIAN DEMISE , or Bruised Tailbones and Lost Sunglasses

The day that Into the Woods opened, a bird flew into the picture window at the Lily Pad.

It went like this: I was up early, was eating the (dregs) of (my) granola (that Touchstone had basically finished), enjoying what Phoebe assured me would be my last speck of free time. There were still two months of summer left, but the theater season was kicking into overdrive, and there was a lot to do in the costume shop. The next few weeks promised late nights of steaming garments and reaffixing rhinestones to Cinderella's slippers. As I ate, I lost myself in the view out the picture window: the sparkling river, the sweep of the far bank. The tent we'd noticed our first week was gone now, and the view was pure and unobstructed.

Then came the bang. I jumped. Granola dust went everywhere.

"What was that ?" yelled Touch from upstairs.

I scurried out the side door to investigate. The bird was there, lying on the deck. It was pale brown, no bigger than my palm. I didn't know what kind of bird it was. I didn't want to know what kind of bird it was. I had yogurt and granola in my mouth, but I didn't want to swallow it. The taste had gone off. Was it stunned, or dead? I couldn't tell.

I went back inside.

Touchstone had emerged from upstairs, rumpled, pillow marks on his cheeks. He'd

been out late with Audrey the night before. Clowning, it turned out, was a surprise aphrodisiac.

“A bird flew into the window,” I said.

“Oh, shit,” said Touchstone. “Is it alive?”

“I can’t tell,” I said.

We looked at each other, unsure of where to go.

“I’m getting Ros,” I said.

“Like they’ll know what to do,” said Touch.

Ros was still sleeping, sprawled on the bed chaotically, as if they’d fallen from a great height. Our room didn’t get a lot of light—even on the brightest afternoons, it stayed dim and cave-like. In the half-light, I looked at them.

The confusing thing about being in love with Ros was that it wasn’t always visible—sometimes it faded when I was preoccupied, like with the busyness of work. Loving them was like the moon—brighter and more obvious at times, and then sometimes you had to hunt for it, search for the black within the black. Sometimes it was so faint I convinced myself that it would be fine if nothing happened between me and Ros. That it would be all right if we stayed friends. Not all right: better.

But then sometimes, like now, I thought they were the most beautiful person I’d ever seen.

They opened one eye.

“What are you doing?”

“There’s a bird,” I said. “It flew into the window.”

“Oh no,” they said. “Really?”

“Come see,” I said.

We gathered around the bird. His little beak was open. I’d never seen a bird tongue before. It was pink, just like a person’s.

“Oh yeah,” said Ros. “He’s toast.”

“Toast!” I said. “I thought he was just stunned, maybe.”

“No way, man,” Ros said. “He’s dead. Or good as.”

“Rest in peace, little sparrow,” said Touchstone.

“May bird heaven be full of worms.”

“Endless cars to shit on.”

“How are you both joking ?” I said. I could feel my voice getting high and whiny, like I was about to cry. “I know it’s just a bird, but it was alive, and now—”

People forget that Capricorns can be deep feelers , my mother said often.

I missed my mom. She would have known what to do in this situation.

There was that familiar tug of homesickness.

“Hey,” Ros said. “Hey, hey. It’s okay.”

They hugged me then. They smelled like the woods. Like dirt, in a comforting way, that reminded me of building our fairy towns when we were little kids.

“Sorry,” I said. “I know I’m being sensitive.”

“You and my stomach have so much in common,” Touchstone said, and I laughed a little at the joke.

“Sorry we upset you,” said Ros. “Sweet Celia.”

They smiled at me. It was then that I noticed something different about them.

“What happened to your necklace?” I said.

They reached for their neck, as if confirming their chain’s absence.

“Oh,” Ros said. “I took it off. It was bugging my skin.”

“You’ve been wearing it forever. It started bugging your skin now ?”

“Yes,” Ros said.

“Can that happen?”

“I don’t know,” said Ros. “It did.”

“Huh. That’s so weird. Are you okay? Do you need, like, Neosporin or anything? I packed some....”

“It’s fine,” said Ros. “I’m fine.”

“Should we focus on this bird?” said Touchstone.

“Yeah,” said Ros. “Good idea. I don’t want any of us to be late for work. Maybe we leave him for now and figure out what to do when we get back?”

“Okay,” I said, still trying to work out what happened with Ros’s necklace, still doubtful that you could really develop an allergy to something you wore daily. “Sure.”

In a way, Ros was telling the truth about their chain. Your skin could be fine with something for years and years, and then, suddenly, for no reason at all, you could become allergic to it overnight. Years later, long after we left Lovesick, I had a ring that I loved so much I never took it off. Then one day the skin grew scaly and red beneath it, and my body rejected it even as my heart still loved it.

Later that day, I hiked out to the Service Spot and checked in with my parents. It was good to hear their voices—so good, in fact, that I forgot about the bird waiting on the patio. I told them excitedly about the good things in my life: gearing up for Into the Woods . Phoebe working on the yeti costume. How Ros and Touchstone had made us veggie burgers.

When I hung up, I texted Ros: I just remembered there’s hydrocortisone cream in the first aid kit I brought. If your neck is bugging you.

They gave my text a thumbs-up.

It was a simple, polite interaction. But I spent a long time in the clearing staring at it, trying to figure out why I felt so awful. Something was off between me and Ros, and I suspected that something looked a lot like Jess Orlando.

As for the bird: When I got back from the dress rehearsal, it was gone, and Ros was nowhere to be found, in spite of what they'd said earlier that day. Maybe the bird had healed, flew away of its own accord. Or maybe something wild had carried it off into the woods, something that lived out there, furred and feral and hungry.

The first Into the Woods show went off without a hitch.

And the next show.

And the next show.

And the next show.

Which wasn't to say that we weren't busy. Even when the production ran smoothly, Benna always had work for us to do, which I enjoyed—steam this. Fold that. Wash that. Remove those stains. The nights were late, but the costume shop was busy with everyone working to make the shows come together. There was camaraderie that came with being there late into the night, all of us losing sleep to make sure the show went seamlessly, pun intended.

And still: No one in the costume shop, with the exception of maybe Benna, was working half as hard as Phoebe, who was doing everything we were doing plus furiously helping Benna design the yeti costume. Benna fought for her to get a raise halfway through the season, and Phoebe actually got one. Her process was very collaborative, which meant that Oliver Teller was often in the shop with us when he wasn't in rehearsals, offering his thoughts on yeti character development, which I didn't mind: in the first place because he was nice to look at, and also because it meant that Jacques was slightly more tolerable. His calls of existential distress had decreased considerably in Oliver's presence, and once, he'd even let me touch the very tip of his tail.

“Hey,” Phoebe said one day. It was actually the first of July; I remember because I had looked at my calendar and been shocked at the passage of time, how quickly the summer seemed to be moving. “Oliver and I are going to get lunch at the Dropped Acorn. You want to come?”

“Touchstone said that place was supposed to be good,” I said.

“It rules,” Phoebe said. “They do strawberry shortcake for the Fourth of July.”

“ Oh ,” I said. “I forgot all about that!”

“You have the day off,” said Phoebe. “You better do something good. And then tell me every single detail. Come with us, now, though,” she said. “Honestly. You won’t regret it.”

The Dropped Acorn was adorable: an outdoor spot beneath the redwoods, set up with little tables in the woods and fairy lights strung overhead. Much to my delight, Oliver and Phoebe were down to feast . Everything on the menu and in the display case looked utterly delectable, and between the three of us we ordered heaping crunchy salads with peanut dressing, medium-rare salmon over forbidden rice, an avocado BLT on homemade sourdough, two orders of french fries, the Fourth-of-July-inspired strawberry shortcake plus the two extra cookies and a lemon tart that Oliver noticed at the eleventh hour and threw in to the order. He paid for everything before Phoebe and I could argue and waved me off when I tried to give him some money.

We took our haul out back, Oliver balancing four plates on his arm and a fifth in his free hand. A few people were staring at him in that way people did when they recognized someone famous, though I also wondered if it was because of how impressive it was that he carried all our plates, or if the stares had to do with how loudly he was moaning now that he’d bitten into a cookie.

“Why didn’t we get two of the double chocolate? You have to try this....”

“Oliver,” I said.

“Celia,” he said.

“How do you deal with, like... all these people staring at you?”

“What makes you think they’re staring at me and not you?”

“Ha ha. Seriously. How do you deal with this?”

“I’ve been in way worse places,” he said.

“We’re used to actors in the summer,” said Phoebe, breaking off a piece of cookie.

“We try to not treat them like zoo animals.”

Oliver nodded in agreement. “Everyone’s actually been pretty good about respecting my privacy. Besides the one person outside my window, and that one person who I caught spying on me from a tree.”

“I wasn’t spying ,” I said.

“Knew I could get your goat,” said Oliver with a wink. I had to take a bite of lemon tart to recover. Was he flirting with me?

“It’s really not been so bad,” he insisted. “Except when you, like, walk in on employees of the theater festival watching your sex scenes.”

“I’m sorry,” said Phoebe. “Come again?”

“Okay, I want you to know that I did put that episode on, but it was because of the Kenna/Louisa storyline. I honestly forgot that scene was even a part of it,” I said.

“You forgot that I had sex while on roller skates while on a merry-go-round ? Do you have any idea how hard that scene was to film?! 16 And now you’re telling me it was forgettable ?!”

“It’s hard to compete with Kenna and Louisa!”

“Ugh, I know. They’re so cute together. That scene where they finally kiss…”

“It was so good ,” I said.

“I know. I know. We all just about lost our heads reading the script. We were so excited,” he said. “I know Phoebe’s above it all.”

“A hater,” I agreed.

“I’m not a hater ,” said Phoebe. “It’s just not exactly my cup of tea. I’m sort of surprised you like Power Jam , Celia.”

“Why?” I said.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like your style necessarily.”

“What would my style be?”

“ Sixty Minutes ?”

“ SIXTY MINUTES ! How boring do you think I am?!”

“That was a joke . I don’t know what kind of stuff you’d like to watch. Law and Order , maybe. Or, like, Hitchcock.”

“I haven’t watched a lot of Hitchcock,” I said.

“It’s good,” said Oliver.

“So I’ve heard.”

“It surprises me that you’re into something so... fluffy,” Phoebe said.

“But it’s not fluffy; that’s the thing,” I said. “I mean—it’s definitely outrageous , but it’s not shallow . The plotlines are all ridiculous, but the characters all feel so real to me.” Oliver handed me a corner of a homemade Pop-Tart, which he must have ordered and I missed entirely. I accepted. “And ultimately, it’s, like— fun . There’s a lot to be said for fun.”

“Yeah,” Phoebe said. “Speaking as someone who’s been totally consumed by work for the past sixty hours, fun does really matter.”

Our conversation turned and kept turning—we discussed whether the strawberry shortcake or the double-chocolate cookie was better; caught one another up on the latest exploits of Oliver’s director (she was last seen dancing on a table at a bar in town—“my agent owes me for doing this show,” Oliver said); and how I’d gotten much better on the sewing machine with Phoebe’s help. It was the perfect lunch, and we left feeling stuffed and happy.

“Would you all mind waiting for me for two seconds?” I asked as we headed back to the car. “I want to buy some stuff to bring back home.”

“Sure,” said Phoebe. “Take your time.”

I made my way back into the storefront and purchased a sourdough loaf, which looked so delicious it might send gluten-free Touchstone into tears. I was on my way out when I saw her walk in: Jess Orlando, carrying a bouquet of flowers.

“Hey,” she said to me. “I know you. Celia, right? Ros’s friend?”

I couldn’t believe she remembered me. Both our meetings had been so brief.

“Oh, hi,” I said. “How’s it going? Is Ros with you?”

“No, they’re back at the shop,” Jess said. “Take a look at this, though. Ros built this bouquet.”

She showed off the bouquet to me, a mix of poppy reds and oranges and yellows.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? They’re learning so fast,” she said, and I could hear the pride in her voice. I wondered how the two of them being just colleagues was going.

“It’s really nice,” I said.

“Here, take a closer look,” Jess said, and handed me the bouquet. She nodded at the counter. “It’s for one of the baristas. From her mom, for her birthday. Isn’t that cute?”

The flowers were so heavy they practically sprained my wrist. I turned them this way and that, made a great show of admiring Ros’s handiwork. It was amazing, how much they’d learned in so short a time. I was overcome with a feeling of gladness, that they were doing well at work, that they were getting back to feeling like their old self. I handed the bouquet back to Jess—which was when I noticed the chain. The chain that looked exactly like Ros’s, circled around their neck.

“I like your necklace,” I said before I could stop myself.

Jess's hand went to her neck. "Thanks," she said, but otherwise gave no clues as to the necklace's provenance.

I walked back to Phoebe's car clutching my sourdough, slightly stunned by what I'd seen. Maybe the chain meant nothing. Maybe chains like Ros's were a dime a dozen. Maybe Jess had been, once upon a time and two and a half hours away, to the very same store Ros had been to; maybe Ros really had been allergic to it, had donated it to a thrift store in a classic fit of Ros-pique, and Jess had picked it up one day, casually, because she thought it made her look more like Rocky, or Sylvia Plath, or whomever it was she was trying to emulate, with her punches and her poetry.

Maybe Ros hadn't given their necklace to Jess.

Maybe they weren't falling in love and leaving me behind.

I climbed into the back seat of Phoebe's car, and as she piloted us away, the tears began to fall. I fished around for my sunglasses, which were reliably in one of three places: propped on my head, in the front bib of my overalls, or in the front pocket of my backpack. Only my search for them came up empty.

"Do either of you see my sunglasses up there?" I asked.

"Did you have them at lunch?" Oliver said.

"No," I said. "They should be here...."

"Do you want to go back?" Phoebe said.

I did not want to go back. I did not want to see Jess again, wearing Ros's chain. I didn't want to wonder what that meant and what was happening between them. I wanted everything to be in the right place, right where I expected it to be.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m not attached to them. Honestly.”

“We’ll steal you a new pair from the Togshop,” Oliver said.

“I’m pretending I didn’t hear that,” said Phoebe.

I leaned my head against the window, watched the trees zip by in a blur. It wasn’t a huge loss. They weren’t even that nice. They were just shitty plastic sunglasses we’d bought on the way to Lovesick. Boring, tortoiseshell sunglasses that I’d tried on at the gas station and showed to Ros, and their face had lit up, and they’d said, Yes, yes, those are the ones; you have to get those .

“Where’s Ros?” I said when I got home that afternoon.

Touchstone was lying on the living room couch, reading a book that Audrey had lent him called *Discovering the Clown* . “Oh, hello, Celia, it’s so nice to see you, too. Yes, the Young People’s Workshop has been going rather well, if you don’t mind my saying so, and Audrey is just terribly smart, I don’t even mind that I have to stand on my tiptoes to kiss her....”

“Touchstone. Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” he said, rolling his eyes and picking his book back up. “Out.”

They didn’t come home until after we’d eaten. My cooking skills, in spite of what I’d promised my parents, had hardly improved any since our arrival at the Lily Pad. I’d had such high aspirations for what we might be eating together—roasted chickens and rosemary potatoes, slow-roasted soups, salads topped with watermelon radishes—but I was so tired after getting home from the costume shop that most of the time I felt lucky if I could get it together to make toast (Touchstone joined me in a slice that was sure to upset his stomach, though he deemed the bread “worth it”),

which is what I was eating when Ros walked through the door.

“Hey,” said Ros brightly. “Ooh—is there any more of that bread? I’m starving.”

“Big day?” I asked. Their neck looked oddly naked without their chain, and I was reminded of the fable about the girl whose head fell off when she removed the green ribbon she always wore around her neck. Only Ros seemed healthy, digging into the bread with gusto, more alive and energized than ever.

“I was alone at the shop while Jess did deliveries. Weirdly busy. You wind up walking a ton, even when you’re just in the shop,” they said, helping themselves to a slice of toast from the pile I’d made. “Damn , this bread is good.”

“It’s from the Dropped Acorn,” I said.

“ What? ” Touchstone yelled. “I’ve been eating secret Dropped Acorn bread this whole time? You went to the Dropped Acorn without me? I was the one who told you about that place! You knew I wanted to go there!”

“It wasn’t my idea,” I said. “Phoebe and Oliver were going, and they invited me along.”

“Wait, you didn’t just go to the Dropped Acorn without me, but you went with the dick from Power Jam ?”

“Oliver’s actually very nice,” I said.

“It’s not Blade’s fault he’s a dick,” Ros said, taking another big bite of their toast. “His character has a very difficult home life.”

“Yeah, I bet Old Fish Eyes is being nice to you, Celia,” Touchstone said, with a

waggle of his eyebrows. “He’s just trying to get into your pants.”

“Whoa! That is so not what’s happening,” I said, though my eyes flicked over to Ros to see if they’d reacted at all to the suggestion that someone else might be showing a shred of interest in me. Unfortunately, they were still hoovering toast, unmoved by Touch’s suggestion. “Look, we’ll go to the Dropped Acorn again; I promise. It’s delicious. My point was that guess who I ran into there.”

“You certainly didn’t run into me, because I was waiting to go with you,” Touch said.

“Ros? Any guesses?”

“Um... I don’t know. Mr. Greeb,” said Ros.

“Our history teacher?”

“Do you know another Mr. Greeb?”

“It wasn’t Mr. Greeb. Guess again.”

“I don’t know, Celia. Virginia Woolf.”

“She’s dead .”

“Just tell me who you ran into!”

“Jess! I ran into Jess Orlando.”

It wasn’t how I intended the conversation to go, but I watched Ros receive this news. They didn’t look caught. They didn’t look guilty. They looked relieved, almost excited. Like I’d opened a door to a room they weren’t allowed in and told them, It’s

now fair game .

“Oh, good,” Ros said. “Did you say hi?”

“I did say hi,” I said.

“I still would like to meet this person officially,” Touchstone said. “We’ve talked about her so much it doesn’t seem right that I haven’t.”

“Come visit us at the shop,” said Ros.

“She showed me the bouquet you’d built. It was really pretty.” I waited a beat, to see if Ros would bring up the glaringly obvious fact of their chain around Jess’s neck. When they did no such thing, I took matters into my own hands: “She looked like she was wearing your necklace,” I said.

If Ros hadn’t had any reaction to my running into Jess Orlando, I thought at least they would have a reaction to this . But instead they took the last bite of their toast and took time to chew thoroughly. I felt them turn the slightest bit cool, like they didn’t like what I had told them, and when they finally spoke, I was flummoxed by the brevity of their response.

“So?” they said.

So? So?

“So you never take that necklace off, and now you’ve given it away to someone, which seems like a fairly significant gesture of fraternity. Which is interesting given that the last time we talked about her, we decided it’d be best if you and Jess just stayed colleagues. I’m not aware that colleagues have the sort of relationship where they trade jewelry.”

“What on earth do you mean by ‘significant gesture of fraternity’?” said Touchstone.

“ You decided it’d be best if we stayed colleagues. But things changed,” said Ros. “I decided to show her the poem. And now we’ve been hanging out a little.”

“Dang, Ros’s got game,” Touchstone said, and offered them a pound. My stomach dropped. This was getting worse and worse: the poem, the chain, and now hanging out ? How was this all going so thoroughly sideways?

“What do you mean, hanging out?” I said, trying to keep the wailing out of my voice.

“I mean—hanging out. I don’t know. We go to her house. We go for walks. What’s with the third degree? Why do you even care?”

I was almost insulted by the question. Why wouldn’t I care? Ros was my best friend in the whole entire world. Maybe I was jealous, that was always possible, but let’s not forget they were now involved with someone who, last time I checked, had punched someone at a party. I cared because our first night here, they had walked headlong into the river, without knowing how deep it was or how strong the current was, and they were doing the exact same thing, only now with their heart.

And I had followed them the first time, but I couldn’t follow them now.

“Phoebe says she’s bad news,” I said, pathetically repeating my same lie.

“You said that the first time we talked about Jess,” Touchstone said.

“Who’s Phoebe, anyway?” said Ros.

“Seriously? You met her. She’s my coworker at the costume shop. See, this is why I care about the chain—because we came here, the three of us, and the whole point was

that we were going to spend time together, but I feel like I haven't seen either of you in weeks. We're the Triumvirate! And we have only two months left in the summer, and we don't even know the basics about what's going on in one another's lives."

"Yeah," Touchstone said. "Like how some of us wanted to go to the Dropped Acorn."

"It's like—we're sleeping in the same room, but I feel like we're living in different worlds," I said to Ros.

It wasn't just that we were living in different worlds. It was that Ros was carefully, and deliberately, constructing another world without me.

"So come hang out with us," Ros said.

"Okay," I said, sort of surprised at how easy that was. "When?"

"The Fourth of July?" said Ros. "We're gonna go to Lovers' Lagoon. It's supposed to be a good swimming spot. Back in the day it was where you went after you visited the spring, to meet the new person you were going to fall in love with. Do you want to come?"

No, I thought automatically. I did not want to spend a day with Jess, who inspired poetry and was wearing Ros's chain. I wanted to spend the day just me and Ros, convincing them that I was the one they were really in love with.

"Can Audrey come?" Touchstone said. "We were maybe going to do something that day."

"Sure," said Ros. "The more the merrier. Celia? How about you?"

To reiterate: I did not want to come. Certainly not with Ros and their new squeeze, Jess, and certainly not to a place called Lovers' Lagoon . Couldn't these people come up with any normal landmarks, things that didn't revolve around love? Faces carved into cliffs, say, or extremely large balls of twine?

"Earth to Celia," said Ros.

"Sounds great. I'm in," I said.

"Easy peasy," Touchstone said, and Ros and I finished, in sync for one brief moment, "Lemon squeezy."

Footnote

16 In fact, I did have an idea how difficult it was to film, thanks to the special edition magazine that Ros had bought me for my birthday. Not only had Oliver sprained his wrist when filming this scene but his costar had sustained a severe bruise to her tailbone when she fell when Oliver first kissed her. The injuries were significant enough that the showrunners decided never again to film a sex scene on wheels, which was a real disappointment, if you asked me.

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NEEDLE AND BONE , or On Losing My Voice

Of course—it wasn't that easy. Nothing ever is.

I woke on the morning of the Fourth of July with a pit in my stomach. And then I walked into the kitchen, and there was Jess Orlando.

She was a tiny goddess in a sports bra, running shorts, and a backward baseball cap. Her strawberry-blond ponytail was thrown across her shoulder. Ros's chain glinted at her neck.

"Hey," she said, and she gave me a big, friendly hug. Her head came up to my shoulder, and next to her, I felt oddly like a giantess—not unlike the ogre she'd clocked that first night we saw her. "Nice to see you again."

"Hi," I said, trying not to notice how good Jess smelled—like a redwood forest in human form. "Where's Ros?"

"They're grabbing sunscreen from the car."

"I don't keep sunscreen in the car," I said.

"No, my car," said Jess Orlando. "I always have some in there, just in case. Lovers' Lagoon is pretty shady, but still, you never know when you're gonna need it."

"Prudent," I said.

“What’s that mean?” she asked.

“Prudent? Like—um. Wise? Showing good judgment?”

“Ros warned me your vocabulary was good.” Jess’s smile was wide and gorgeous, which struck me as highly favorable compared with a big vocabulary. She looked like she’d never had braces, that her teeth had grown straight enough that no one complained. And her smile grew even bigger when Ros walked into the room. “You find it?”

“Right where you said it’d be,” Ros said. “Oh, good—you’ve met.”

“Get my back, Ros?”

Ros obliged, and my stomach turned. It wasn’t the touching that got me. It was the familiarity with each other’s bodies. They couldn’t have been hanging out more than, what—two weeks? How were they already so comfortable putting their hands on each other’s skin?

“So you’re a Jammer!” said Jess, while Ros spread sunscreen all over Jess’s back. Okay—so, fine. We were going to have this conversation now, while this sunscreen situation was happening.

“Um,” I said. “I don’t know if I really identify as a Jammer, but I watch a lot of Power Jam , I guess.”

“Dude, I fucking love that show. Kenna and Louisa? Finally, am I right?”

“Finally,” I agreed. Ros’s hand was moving under Jess’s sports bra. I appreciated their thoroughness—I’d never let them forget the time they’d somehow missed an entire section of my neck and I’d had a sunburn that outlined their fingertips.

Sometimes, if I hunted for it in the mirror, I thought you could still see it—evidence both of where they'd touched me and where they'd let me down.

“Celia's buddy-buddy with Oliver Teller,” Touchstone said, emerging from his nook upstairs and descending the spiral staircase to join us.

“No way!” Jess said. How she was able to have a conversation with me while Ros paid such careful attention to her shoulders was beyond me. “I heard Blade was in town! I was actually waiting outside his window one morning trying to get a glimpse of him, but I think I freaked him out....”

“We're not buddy-buddy, ” I said, shooting a glare at Touchstone. “He's in one of the shows in the festival, and I'm working in costumes. So I've just been around him a little bit.”

“They went to the Dropped Acorn,” said Touchstone.

“I love the Dropped Acorn,” said Jess.

“Heard it's nice,” said Touchstone.

“Touchstone, I've both apologized a thousand times and promised you that we'd go to the Dropped Acorn together.”

“I love what they're doing with his character. On Power Jam , I mean,” said Jess.

“Yeah,” I said. “It's... it's...”

I could not concentrate. Ros's hands were on Jess's low back now. I hung on to the island counter to prevent myself from spinning away.

“Making him human?” Jess offered.

“Yeah,” I said. “Agree.”

Ros handed Jess the sunscreen and turned around. I could not do this. I could not spend all day watching this—watching them, Jess and Ros, be so much more than colleagues.

Unfortunately, I had agreed to drive.

Lovers’ Lagoon was crowded.

“I told you it was going to be a scene,” said Audrey, who we’d picked up on the way there.

Half of Lovesick Falls seemed like they had shown up to celebrate the Fourth of July at the lagoon. We had to park nearly a mile away thanks to the long line of cars that’d pulled over on the side of the road. There were five of us—Touchstone, me, Ros, Jess, and Audrey—but it felt like we had enough stuff for twice that many people: towels and the aforementioned sunscreen and a portable speaker, snacks that Audrey had brought in a big, blocky cooler, which, she said, included homemade limeade and seltzers to go with them. In my own tote bag I had my water, my requisite duct tape in case of an emergency, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I thought I might finally get a head start on, if I stopped obsessing over Ros and Jess for fifteen seconds.

And that was if I even made it to the lagoon. It was, in no uncertain terms, an intense vertical ascent to get to where we needed to go.

“Sorry,” Jess said to me. “I always forget it’s kind of a steep uphill.”

“It’s okay,” I said, determined not to let her see me sweat, which I was doing, quite a

lot. Little kids and geriatrics alike darted past me, while I pulled over on the side of the trail to breathe deeply. I could get down with a spontaneous hike—I did wear shepherd boots, after all, and hiking had been suggested in our MODEST PROPOSAL—section II, a.i. But I would have liked some time to thoroughly blast myself with bug spray, locate my hat, maybe pack my signature blend of trail mix that went heavy on the M she was content to walk along as slowly as I walked.

“We just don’t do a lot of marathon running at the costume shop, you know what I mean?”

Jess, to my surprise, laughed.

“I totally know what you mean,” she said. “Well, I promise you, the lagoon is worth it, even if it is really crowded. Honestly, just go at your own speed. We’ll get there when we get there.”

I was determined not to like Jess, but she was incredibly nice and also hiked with me, instead of soldiering on ahead like the rest of my friends. I wondered if this was what Ros liked about Jess: both her kindness and her ability to match pace.

We made it eventually. Jess hadn’t lied about the lagoon being worth it. It was a deep pool created by a big waterfall, bounded by big, flat rocks, on which the entire raft of humanity reclined, at least the ones who weren’t swimming. It did seem, as Audrey had claimed, like a scene: I recognized a handful of people from the festival, including the dance captain from Into the Woods , the intern from the scene shop I’d once walked in on crying in the bathroom, and even the janitor named Lou who Phoebe always said hello to.

I wished that Phoebe were here with us.

“I feel like I’m guaranteed to run into my ex here,” said Jess as we picked our way

across the boulders.

“Would that be a bad thing?” I asked, the nefarious wheels of my brain turning. Maybe I could somehow orchestrate Jess falling in love with her ex, if I couldn’t get Ros to fall out of love with her.

“I mean... it wouldn’t be a disaster. I just wasn’t very nice to her. I don’t like being reminded of how I treated her, you know? I don’t like being reminded that I’m capable of being really mean to someone.”

Jess’s candor surprised me. She seemed mature, to admit to her wrongs so easily, and like she’d actually learned something from the relationships that she’d been in, which was more than I could say for myself (the only thing I’d learned was not to date Touchstone). Maybe, if I stopped being so stubborn for half a second, I could admit that she wasn’t the worst match for Ros.

But where did that leave me ?

The rest of our group had found space on a small rock tucked away in the shade. Everyone had stripped down to their suits and busted into the snacks and the limeade. Audrey had a script in her lap, making her the only other person who’d brought reading material. Jess settled in next to Ros on the same towel, curling up next to them with a kiss on a cheek. I threw my towel and my book down next to them—I would have preferred something farther away, but there was nowhere else I could sit—and stood there for a moment, surveying the joyful scene before us.

Well. It was time to be in my bathing suit.

A word on disrobing. I know it’s totally normal to be in a bathing suit at a water-based activity. Still—I always hated the moment of peeling off your clothes in front of teeming hordes of people (or even in front of your friends). Especially now, since I

was the only one doing it. It was a bathing suit, said everyone; what did it matter? I don't know! It just was weird when you thought about it, being practically naked in front of a bunch of strangers. It's not even like my bathing suit was that scandalous—I was a simple-black-one-piece sort of girl, one that concealed more than it revealed—but still, I hated the moment where I suddenly became exposed. Like, everyone could see my bikini line, the red bumps that I couldn't get rid of no matter what internet remedy I tried. It wasn't like I was naked , but I was close.

I let the straps of my overalls fall, and in that very second, who should I make eye contact with across the water but Oliver Teller.

He was seated on a rock with the rest of his yeti cast, including the director, who was raising a bottle of wine to her lips, and the lead actor, who appeared to be trying to wrest it from her grasp.

For a second I looked away, and then decided it was more awkward to pretend not to have seen him, so I turned back and raised one hand in greeting.

He raised one hand in greeting right back.

I raised a second hand in greeting, failing to remember that continued hand raising was not a social custom. I resisted the urge to put my overalls back on.

“Who are you waving at, Celia— oh ,” said Touchstone. “That guy. Fish Eyes.”

“It's Blade!” said Jess. “Celia, wait—you really know him? I thought Touchstone was making it up!”

“I sort of know him,” I said.

“Really?” said Audrey. “Do you think you could get me like ten minutes with him?”

I've seen him around Arden, but I never want to interrupt him, and I want to ask him some questions about agents....”

“He’s coming over here!” said Jess.

I sat on my towel and pulled out my copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* . I wondered, again, if it would be strange to put my overalls back on. Oliver was getting closer. I opened *A Tale of Two Cities* to a random page. I was going to talk to Oliver Teller in my bathing suit. And he was going to be in his bathing suit. This was fine. This was all fine.

“Hey! Celia. Funny running into you here,” he said. He was shirtless again, which I tried not to notice and failed miserably. His bathing suit seemed shorter than a usual men’s bathing suit. It was black, printed with funny shapes—squiggles and doodles in shades of lavender, mint, and pink.

“Oh, hi,” I said, and stood up without putting my book down, just in case I needed it for an emergency in the middle of this conversation. “What are you doing here?”

“Our director thought it would be good cast bonding for us,” he said. “Unfortunately, she brought a lot to drink, and she’s just been fighting with her ex-husband, so it’s not exactly going the way that I wanted. What about you?”

“Just... here with some friends,” I said, as though they weren’t all staring at us like drooling dogs. At him , rather. “These are they,” I said.

“Hiya,” said Oliver, waving hello politely.

“Hi,” said the chorus back to him.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Audrey said.

“I’m a big fan!” said Jess. “Go, Soul Crushers!”

That was exactly how I’d greeted him from inside the tree, but of course, when Jess said it, it sounded totally normal.

“Thanks so much,” said Oliver. “That means a lot!”

There it was: the completely normal human interaction I was incapable of having with him.

“Does anyone want to get in the water?” said Touchstone. “Celia?”

“I need to warm up a little more,” I said.

“I still have lines to learn,” said Audrey.

“I want to go in,” said Jess, who helped Ros to their feet.

“I heard there was a snapping turtle in there, so I’ll pass,” said Oliver.

“So much for living on the edge,” said Touchstone, and jumped in with a splash.

I watched Ros and Jess in the water of Lovers’ Lagoon. They kissed, oblivious to everyone who was there, including best friends and celebrities. They splashed. They kissed some more. They swam around. They continued kissing. Jess carried Ros at one point, and Ros wrapped their arms around Jess’s neck. And, oh yes—more kissing.

“Celia? You okay? You look a bit pale,” said Oliver. “What’s the matter?”

The thing was, I couldn’t say. I’d been stunned into silence. For the life of me, I

couldn't find my line.

This may come as a shock given my tendency to ramble on, but as a child, I used to pretend to lose my voice. In part, this was motivated by an obsession with *The Little Mermaid*, and in part motivated by cough drops, which were all the rage at school, the way limes were the fashion for Amy in *Little Women*. The preferred cough drops were the sugary kind that came in a little white box, lemon or red or orange, the only food item first graders were allowed to keep in their desks. They were as precious as jewels, those cough drops, a gem in the palm of your hand. If you had a sore throat, they were easier to come by. A perpetual case of laryngitis meant you had every reason to be stocked.

Eventually, though, the cough-drop fad faded and my voice was still nowhere to be found, and so my reluctance to speak landed me in the office of the school psychologist, who didn't really offer a solution so much as note that it was interesting that, in losing my voice, I was both drawing attention to myself and asking that no one pay attention to me. It was paradoxical, she noted, to want to be invisible and visible at the same time. At home, I looked up paradoxical in the dictionary, and thought about that word for a really long time, and then read the rest of the paragraph because I was already there.

The other kids said I was a faker, and they weren't wrong: silent Celia the faker, with her lips stained wild-cherry red and a little notebook that she would write in if she really needed to say something. I had no friends, but I was light-years ahead of everyone in terms of writing and penmanship.

What I remember, what I couldn't express at the time and fear I may not even be able to express now, is the feeling I had—of something happening in my throat. The longer I stayed silent, the more physical it felt, like there really was something damming up the words: a literal gobstopper. All the words just got stuck, like they could not pass through. Maybe it had started out as pretend, but the longer I went

without talking, the bigger that ball of words became, all the letters tangled. I worried that the cough drops were getting stuck in there, too, coating the words, heavy and dense as the rubber-band ball that sat on my teacher's desk, but I couldn't stop eating them, hopeful that they might help.

At night, I'd cry silently, worried that if I couldn't figure out how to speak, it was just going to explode inside my throat—obliterate me from the inside out.

Speak, honey , my mom said.

But I was worried I couldn't, afraid that I might never speak ever again.

Ultimately at Lovers' Lagoon, I found my words again. When I did, I made up an excuse that Phoebe had texted me from the costume shop about a button emergency, and I left. I didn't care that I was their ride. There were plenty of them, and they were all bright, competent people, capable of finding a different way home.

Even though there was no button emergency, I actually went to the costume shop, which was mercifully, beautifully quiet. No sunscreen in sight. Not even Benna was there on the holiday, nor were the kind-of-comforting-if-only-in-their-consistency wails of Jacques, who she must've brought home for the holiday.

I sank into a chair by a sewing machine and tried to steady my breathing. I couldn't get the sight of them kissing out of my head. I didn't want to be this person. I wanted to go swimming with them and find them charming and adorable, and I wanted to support queer love in all its forms, and I kept thinking of fourth grade and my parents telling me to take risks and how that meant I met Ros and could conceivably meet other people, too.

It seemed so reasonable. So why was I having this reaction?

I didn't want to be the person who was jealous of a new person in Ros's life, covetous of their time, of their attention. It was such a tired plotline that they'd even accelerated it in season two of Power Jam : Everyone liked one another, right off the bat. They supported new relationships. They were a lot nicer than I was—better friends and better people.

It was then that Phoebe walked in, carrying a cream-colored bolt of furry fabric.

“Hey,” she said, surprise in her voice. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Fancy meeting you here,” I said. “Don't you have the day off?”

“Don't you, too? Audrey told me you all were going swimming.”

“Yeah—I just. I don't know. I was just feeling pretty tired. And then I thought... well, maybe I can practice my sewing at the very least.”

Phoebe nodded, placing her fabric down onto one of the desks.

“How's the costume going?” I asked.

She sighed heavily, running her fingers through the white fur. “I don't know. I mean... it's just a lot. They meant well, having me work on it, but now I feel, like, totally overwhelmed.”

“What have you got?”

“You want to see?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Definitely.”

Reluctantly, she showed me her sketches. She'd drawn a dramatic, hooded coat that swept the ground. It had spikes at the shoulders and spikes on the hood that she'd shaded light blue—icicles that formed a kind of terrifying armor. Down the front, she'd added a spill of red.

It was honestly incredible.

It was also deeply terrifying.

“Is that...” I pointed to the red.

“Blood,” Phoebe said.

“Oh my,” I said.

“Fuck. It's stupid. I knew it was stupid.”

“What! It's not stupid .”

“It's a yeti, you know? I was trying to make him scary. Like, maybe that's stuff he's killed, or eaten? I'm going to have to start over.”

“Oh my God, don't start over . I like the idea of the coat. It makes him seem...” In spite of myself, I thought of what Jess Orlando had said about Oliver's character in Power Jam . “Like, more human, in a way.”

“That's what I wanted,” said Phoebe. “Plus then Oliver could still move.”

We studied her sketch for another moment.

“It might be a little too human,” said Phoebe.

“I see what you’re saying. It’s like... more powerful winter sorcerer than yeti.”

“Yeah. Or, like, commander of a frozen army.”

“Maybe it needs to be less good,” I said. “Like... less polished. He would have made it himself, right? How dexterous are his paws? What kind of materials would he have had? He wouldn’t be able to make anything that nice.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah. That’s a really good point. Thanks, Celia.”

I’d hardly done anything. She was the one who’d put in all the work.

“How’s the sewing going?” she asked.

“The machines are kind of intimidating,” I said.

“You want me to show you again?”

“Please,” I said.

She did, and then we worked quietly for a while, Phoebe sketching, me feeding scrap fabric through the machine to practice seams. It was nice, to be quiet with someone else. Eventually Phoebe got up and sat at the machine in front of me with her furry fabric. The only sound was whirring needles, until there came a cry that sounded a lot like Jacques, only louder, much more human—

“Celia,” Phoebe said. “Can you come here?”

She wasn’t moving her hand. Why wasn’t she moving her hand?

The needle had gone clean through her finger.

I felt woozy.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck, oh, fuck, oh, fuck.”

“Deep breaths,” she said. “I need you to hit Release. And then I need for you to drive me to the hospital.”

The emergency room on the Fourth of July: just where everyone wants to be.

“You don’t have to stay,” Phoebe said for the thousandth time. After waiting an hour amid people who’d burned themselves setting off fireworks and tending to their grills, she’d finally been moved to a bed, separated by a curtain. This seemed like an upgrade, though not when you considered that the TV was playing exclusively metal music videos and the remote was nowhere to be found. The needle was still in Phoebe’s finger. “My mom’s going to come as soon as she can.”

“I’m not going to leave,” I said. “Besides, I’m really enjoying this program.”

“Why would they put this on for people? It’s not exactly soothing.”

“No, but it’s really making me want to come up with a name for my metal band,” I said.

“Prolapse,” offered Phoebe.

“Split Infinitive,” I countered.

“Can I ask you something?” Phoebe said.

“Sure.”

“Why were you in the costume shop today? Why weren’t you swimming with everyone else?”

I shifted in my chair. It was freezing in this place. “Remember when I asked you about Jess Orlando?”

“Yeah.”

“She and Ros... I guess. They’re, like, a thing now.”

“Really?” Phoebe said. “That was fast.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“I thought you said Ros wasn’t interested in anyone,” Phoebe said.

“They weren’t,” I said. “Until now.”

I must have sounded obviously miserable, because a look of dawning mixed with sympathy passed over Phoebe’s face, and I knew she knew how I felt about Ros. “Oh, Celia,” she said.

“Don’t you ‘Oh, Celia,’ me—you’re the one with the needle in your finger. It’s totally fine. I’m totally fine.”

“Celia. It’s not fine. That sucks .”

“It’s stupid,” I said.

“What’s stupid?”

I traced the seams of the blanket on Phoebe's bed. "Having a heart."

The metal music blared loudly.

"People talk about falling in love like it's this amazing thing," Phoebe said. "I don't know. Maybe it is amazing. But for me, it's only ever sucked." She took a deep breath and continued. "Last year, I was, like, totally in love with this guy the year above me. Like, for three years, I was completely in love with him. And he dated other people, but, like, we'd text, and he'd always find ways to touch me, and, like, I just always thought there was something special there. And then finally, finally, he came home this winter break, and we kissed. And it felt—like it felt so perfect. Like it was everything that I'd been waiting for, and we could finally be together. I would have done anything for him. Literally anything."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. We hooked up for that week, and then he went back to college and stopped talking to me."

"No," I said.

"Yeah," Phoebe said. "I told him I liked him, and he told me he was dating someone else and that he always wanted me to be in his life, and that was the last I ever heard from him. I feel so stupid. Like... why did I give my heart away that easily? I'm tough, you know?"

"Fuck that guy," I said.

"Yeah. Fuck that guy. But also... I don't know. You know the really sad part? I still hope he thinks about me. Isn't that pathetic?"

“No,” I said. “It’s normal.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You seemed so fearless, with Ros. The first night at the party.”

“I mean. What am I going to do? Sit around and wait for him to come back? But I just... I know that it sucks. When the other person doesn’t feel how you want them to feel. I mean the whole story about the spring exists, I guess, because people wanted to get rid of this feeling.”

“What does Audrey say? About the guy, I mean.”

“Audrey? Oh, I didn’t tell Audrey.”

“What? Really?”

“Audrey and I aren’t really that close. I mean, she’s nice , and we’ve done theater together for a while, so we have that in common, but... I don’t know. I don’t know if she’d really understand. Don’t—look, I love Audrey. I’ve known her for a long time. But sometimes it feels like our relationship is very surface level, if that makes any sense. Sometimes I just feel like the pool of people you know in high school is so arbitrary, you know? Like, how much did we choose one another, versus how much were we just around each other all the time, so we became friends? I’m not saying it’s not real . I’m just saying that it doesn’t always feel like a choice. You know?”

It felt both shocking and refreshing, to hear her talk so plainly about high school friendships. And it made me feel doubly lucky for Touch and Ros, who I had just abandoned at Lovers’ Lagoon: They were people I really wanted to be friends with, not just because we came from the same pool, but because I really liked them.

“I’m probably telling you only because I have a needle in my finger and I’m on drugs and they’re severely affecting my ability to think clearly,” Phoebe said.

“So I’ll have to injure you every time I want to talk?”

“Looks that way,” Phoebe said. Her phone buzzed. “My mom’s coming.”

“What does she do, that she’s working today?”

“Runs a restaurant in the next town over,” Phoebe said. “What about yours?”

“She writes horoscopes.”

“Wait, really? That’s so cool!”

“It’s... something.”

“Can I read them?”

“Yeah—they’re online.”

“Will you read me mine? Please? I’m a Scorpio. You have to; I’m injured.”

I rolled my eyes but navigated, reluctantly, to my mother’s website.

“Scorpio,” I began. ““You may be dealing with some new challenges in life or career....”

“That’s true,” said Phoebe.

“It’s true of everyone. Who isn’t ever dealing with new challenges in life or

career!?”

“Keep reading, sassafras.”

“Don’t let your passion override your ability to know when to stop.”

“Could have used that advice earlier.”

“Emotions are your friend. What does that even mean?”

“Spoken like a true Capricorn,” said Phoebe. “What does yours say?”

“Um.... okay, Capricorn. Blah, blah, blah, check your materialistic impulses—thanks, Mom. Also... a relationship may be testing you. Give someone new a chance; they might surprise you.”

Phoebe and I sat with that for a minute, letting it wash over us.

“It’s definitely talking about Jacques,” Phoebe said.

“You’re so right,” I said.

I stayed until her mom came, and for a little time after that, too.

When I got home, I was so tired, I didn’t even notice Ros wasn’t in their bed.

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So Celia left Lovers' Lagoon early, without saying goodbye. Big deal.

So she missed the swimming, and the limeade, and the fireworks over the water. Big deal.

So she drove away, leaving us stranded. So she'd marooned us. A slightly bigger deal, but Jess finds a friend at the lagoon that can give us a ride back to her house.

Jess's house is nothing like the Lily Pad. She lives with her mom, who drives trucks for a living and spends most of her time away, working. When she is at home, there's TV to watch and beer to drink. She's not mean, Jess says, just not around much. There are three cats, with personalities that remind me of Goldilocks: one friendly, one who wants to be seen but not touched, and one who spends the whole time hiding.

Her house feels spare and utilitarian, though her room is cozy and sunny: a twin bed, a bookshelf filled with books, classics like *Little Women* and *Little House on the Prairie*, a set of weights in the corner. Above their desk, she'd taped up inspirational quotes: "You are STRONG," "I am the storm," and "Stay positive!" Several succulents from the plant store line her windowsill; from one, she's coaxed a flower, coral blossoms like little bells against gray-green leaves. Even though the room is small, there's space for things to grow.

On her twin bed, she has a lavender crocheted bedspread that I sink into.

"What's up?" says Jess.

“I’m just sad Celia left,” I say. “I wanted you to get to know her.”

“There’ll be other times,” Jess says. “I liked Touchstone.”

“He’s a good egg,” I say.

We sit in silence, which isn’t unusual. We don’t do a whole lot of talking. There’s other stuff to get to, stuff that feels like the most beautiful blooms at the plant store. I pluck at the chain that Jess now wears around her neck.

“I liked your friends,” Jess says. “But I like you best.”

“Same,” I say.

“You can stay the night,” Jess says. “My mom doesn’t care.”

So I text the Triumvirate: staying at Jess’s.

Touch texts back a thumbs-up; Celia says, See you tomorrow! As though everything’s fine. As though she didn’t leave us in the lurch. As though she hasn’t been smothering me since we’ve been here, acting like she knows what’s best for me; as though she hasn’t tried to talk me out of Jess Orlando, the best thing that’s happened to me in recent memory.

See you tomorrow! she says, and, as if I want to prove her wrong, one night turns into two. Then three. Then the whole week.

Staying with Jess feels like living in the Fernery.

And no, there isn’t a whole lot of talking.

What there is instead:

a mouth on a hip bone

a tongue on an elbow

slow kisses and fast fingers

tangled legs

questions of whose body and breath were whose

The longer I stay in Jess's room, the more shockingly beautiful it becomes, and the more the Lily Pad recedes, like a far-off memory of a pond I swam in once with friends. Once, the water at that pond was cold and clear enough that you could see to the bottom, swim down to touch, but now, its surface is choked with duckweed, so green and thick that no light could penetrate.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

FRYING AN EGG , or a Compendium of Shirtless Blade Scenes

A full week of Roslessness passed. They'd spent every night at Jess's. It was suddenly mid-July, and I'd wake in my army cot in a pool of sweat, look over at the bed across from me, and think, They are never coming back .

After Into the Woods closed, I had a few days when I could take a breath. Though we'd been texting and calling per the terms of the Modest Proposal, I FaceTimed my parents on a lazy Sunday morning to say hi. The pheasant featured prominently in the background, though now I couldn't remember what we'd named him. If Ros had been around, I would have asked them.

"Every time I see this place, I'm jealous of your staying there," my mom said. " We should have gone there for the summer and made you stay home with the dogs. Buckets, that's my breakfast, not yours."

"How are they?" I asked.

"Old. Snoring. Extremely motivated by food."

"Is that Andrew in the background?" my dad asked.

"Hi, Thomas!" Touchstone called to my dad. He was in the kitchen, scrounging for food, and I turned the camera to face him.

"How's the theater workshop going?" my dad asked. "We're excited to come up and see the showcase at the end of the summer!"

“It’s good,” said Touch. “We’ve been doing a lot of clowning, which is interesting... and, like, looking at the difference between clowns, and fools, and jesters....”

“Do you get to wear a red nose?” my mom said. “I think Buckets would look good with a red nose.”

“Agree,” said Touch. “No red nose for me yet. I’m still working up to it.”

“Is Ros there?” my mom said. “I know their mom’s been trying to get ahold of them....”

“They’re not here....,” I said. “They’re...”

I didn’t quite know what to say then. I wasn’t in the habit of lying to my parents. On the other hand, to tell them Ros had permanently shacked up with Jess would probably be met with disapproval, and I wasn’t ready for them to decide it was time for us to come home. It was hurtful that Ros was gone, but it wasn’t like they were in a ditch. They were with Jess; they’d told me they were with Jess. Her parents are okay with that? I’d texted. Just her mom. She’s gone a lot , they’d said. I’d read this and written back Wow , because I didn’t know what to say, and because, honestly, it sounded sort of sad—and similar to Ros’s situation, now that their dad was gone and their mom was working. 17

“They’re out,” I said finally.

At their girlfriend’s sex palace , I did not add.

“They’re at work,” I heard myself say. “At this plant store. It’s really cool. The store sells these beautiful arrangements and terrariums.”

“Oh!” my mom said. “Good for them.”

“Oh yeah,” said Andrew. “Ros has got a regular green thumb. They come home every day covered in soil, telling us all about orchids, how we should start a tomato garden....”

I moved the camera away from him.

“ Anyway ,” I said. “The next play is The Trojan Women . By Euripides.”

“Sounds uplifting,” my dad said.

“It’s definitely depressing, but I think it’ll actually be easier than Into the Woods . It’s, like, war-torn and ravaged, so everyone is just in these raggedy tunics. The worse they look, the better.”

“Do you feel like you’re learning a lot?” my dad asked.

“I do,” I said. Phoebe had finally stopped having to unwind my tangled thread on the sewing machine, and Benna had told me that I seemed like I was finally getting the hang of it.

“Good,” my dad said. “What about you, Andrew? Is he still there?”

“He’s still here.” I swiveled the camera on Touchstone, who was now frying himself an egg.

“I’m learning a ton,” Touchstone said. “One of the clown teachers is really supportive. He’s got a connection to this school in Paris. He wants me to go.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “He wants you to go to French clown school?”

“It’s actually quite reputable,” said Touch.

“Whoa,” my mom said. “This would be next year?”

“Yeah. A gap year, maybe,” said Touchstone. “Instead of heading straight to college. I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“Sounds wonderful, Andrew,” my dad said.

“Does it?” I asked.

“Is The Trojan Women the one with Cassandra?” my mom said. “Poor Cassandra. No one ever listened to h—”

“I’ve gotta go,” I said, and I hung up the phone quickly and turned to Touchstone. “You didn’t tell me about clown school.”

“You didn’t ask,” he said, popping two pieces of gluten-free bread into the toaster and twisting the plastic on the bag. We were down to the heels, the part no one wanted to eat. “You lied to your parents about Ros.”

“Seemed easier than explaining about Jess,” I said.

“For them, or for you?”

I shrugged this off. “Would you seriously go all the way to Paris to be a clown?”

“Maybe,” he said. “The school is supposed to be good. You don’t have to be so judgmental about it.”

“I just... you hated French,” I said.

“Are you talking about sixth grade? I hated Madame Ernst, and I hated that stupid

project we had to do.”

“Where we built the café? That was kind of fun, I thought.”

“Yeah, because you were good at French ,” he said. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said. The egg sizzled. “Paris is far.”

“You knew I wanted to go to school out east. Paris really isn’t all that far away, especially if you’re on the East Coast, too.”

“They’re on different continents, and they speak a different language, and there’s a time change and...”

“Okay, okay, okay. You’ve made your point.” He flipped the egg, counted to ten. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“We’re going to be seniors. We have to apply somewhere. Have you thought about where you might want to go?”

“Of course I’ve thought about it,” I said. If you’d asked me then, I would’ve told you that I wanted to go east to college, to one of a dozen small liberal arts schools in New England. But the closer we got to becoming seniors, the more I started to dislike this plan. New England, like Paris, seemed impossibly far away and lonely without Touch and Ros. I knew the idea was that you made friends in college, but I felt that familiar stab of homesickness just thinking about it, and I didn’t have Ros there to make the whole thing better.

“My mom thinks I should take a year off,” I said.

“And do what?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “She’s got some loony idea as always. Move to Peru. Become a goat herder.”

“I like Audrey’s goats a lot, actually.”

“Yeah, I mean, goats are great. But do I want to spend a year working with goats? I don’t know. I mean, how does one figure out what they want, in the existential sense?”

Touchstone considered this, slid his egg onto the toast. My stomach rumbled. I was hungry.

“I think you have to ask yourself what you’re drawn to,” he said finally. I hated how wise and sure of himself he sounded. I was supposed to be the one who had everything figured out.

“I’ll tell you what I want,” I said. “I want the three of us—you, me, and Ros—to go live in a yurt, and fill it with plants, and have it be like *My Side of the Mountain* , or like *The Boxcar Children* , and where we, like, toast tangerine slices on a sunny tree branch and no one bothers us, except there’s also, like, a really good ice cream place down the street that’s never crowded and always open.”

“So you want this,” Touch said, looking around the Lily Pad. “You want real life, but magic.”

“I... is that from something?”

“Blanche DuBois says something similar,” Touch said. “ *A Streetcar Named Desire* .”

“Oh, Jesus. I don’t want to be Blanche DuBois!”

“Dude, you are not Blanche DuBois. Blanche DuBois wouldn’t be caught dead in overalls, and she sure as hell would not be a fan of Power Jam .”

He cut into his egg, and the yellow broke over the toast like water over a dam.

“We can’t live in the same place forever,” he said.

“Maybe not.”

“You’d get tired of toasted tangerine.”

“I doubt it,” I said.

“Do you want me to fry you the last egg?”

“Yes, please. I’m so hungry.”

He laughed and started to move about the kitchen. He had a dish towel slung over his shoulder, an expression of mild concentration on his face. His red hair caught the light, turning different shades of copper and auburn; his freckles had deepened since the start of summer. He cracked pepper over the egg, which sizzled in the pan, whistling as he did so. He seemed somehow so confident and grown-up to me: I could see him preparing this same meal for his kids twenty years from now.

“One egg coming up,” he said.

“In Paris, I believe that’s called an œuf .”

“ Mais oui ,” he said.

We spoke in French for a while—or I spoke in French and Touchstone shouted certain vocabulary words back at me—and when I finally ran out of vocabulary, we moved to French accents. The egg tasted good: buttery, with golden frilly edges and just the right amount of salt and a single twist of pepper. If I didn't think about it too hard, I hardly noticed it was the heel of the bread.

And then, in the few days after *Into the Woods* closed and *The Trojan Women* opened, Oliver Teller asked me out.

That's right. The extremely hot star of *Power Jam* asked me out. Not to do anything fancy, just go on a hike—but still. A date with a celebrity: There was a bucket-list item I could check off.

But here was the real kicker: I thought about saying no.

I thought about a lot of things, actually. I thought about Ros, and I thought about what Touchstone had said, about Oliver (“Old Fish Eyes”) trying to get into my pants. I thought about Ros some more, specifically them kissing Jess at Lovers’ Lagoon, and I thought about what Phoebe had said in the hospital: What am I going to do? Sit around and wait? I kept thinking about Ros, and I thought, begrudgingly, about my mother’s horoscope: Give someone new a chance; they might surprise you.

I thought a lot about how handsome he was. And, to be totally frank, I thought a lot about the scene where he has sex on a merry-go-round. 18

So I said yes and met him after work at the Lovesick Falls Trailhead a few days after *Into the Woods* closed, so we could “get our tourism on.” Oliver had gotten the same memo I had that the Lovesick Falls tour was cheesy and a waste of money, so we were hiking in via the steeper route, much to my chagrin. He’d made up the difference, he said, by bringing along the pamphlet from the Welcome Center, which he showed me at the start of our hike. *Have You Ever Wished to Fall Out of Love?* it

said in big typeface across the top. I opened the pamphlet and read on:

In love with the wrong person? Jilted, rejected, or passed over for another? Stranded at the altar? In most places, your broken heart would be an unsolvable problem, but in Lovesick Falls, the cure for your heartsickness lies deep in our woods. One sip from our waters and you'll be back to your old self in no time. Lovesick Falls has helped hundreds of thousands of people mend their broken hearts and carry on with their lives.

"They spelled unsolvable wrong," I said, handing the pamphlet back to Oliver.

"That's all you have to say?"

"It reads like an advertisement," I said.

"I think it is," Oliver said. "I just thought it was silly. That you might like to see it."

"I liked it," I said. "Thanks for showing me."

"You ready to see this spring?"

"Let's do it," I said, and we began our climb in earnest.

"How are rehearsals going?" I asked.

"Still kind of a mess," Oliver said. "The director has me doing all these weird movement exercises to get me moving in a way that's supposed to be more animal. But I've spent so much time on skates that I might have permanently damaged my relationship with movement. Everything is too flowy. Too liquid."

"Ah yes, what a shame, to be too graceful," I said.

Oliver laughed. He seemed to laugh a lot with me, which struck me as a bit strange. Ros and I sent each other into hysterics, but only because we spoke a language entirely our own; among the three of us, I'd always thought of Touchstone as the funny one.

"Phoebe's costume is looking really good," I said. "She started with this coat, but now it's becoming this, like, wild wrap thing. Kind of like a big blanket. I think it's going to look great."

"I have no doubt. She's talented. She's going to make great waves as a costumer someday, if that's what she wants."

The trail rose, and we moved to the side to catch our breath, letting some other hikers pass us.

"How did you know you wanted to be an actor?" I said when we started walking again, thinking of my recent conversation with Touchstone.

"I don't know. I just thought I would be good at it. And I was."

"Is it that easy?"

"Maybe for some people," he said. "Do you want to keep doing costumes?"

"I don't know. I like making costumes. Mostly applied for the internship so I could be here with my friends. I like it. I don't know if I want... like, I don't know if that's what I want. You know?"

"What are you good at?" Oliver said.

"Color coding," I said. "I do well in school, but the only thing I ever really felt like I

was any good at was being friends with Ros and Touch.” I paused, my hands on my hips. “You know what job I really want? I want to be the person who comes up with names for nail polish.”

“Is that a thing?”

“Yes! They always have these wild names. Like, Meet Me in the Sleeper Car . Or Dressed to Krill .”

He laughed again. It was nice, the laughter. But I didn’t even think I was being funny; I was just being honest.

“ Dressed to Krill would be, like, pink?”

“Yes. Salmon. Heavily saturated.”

“You know what you are?” Oliver asked.

“Wondering when we’re going to get to this waterfall?” I said.

“You’re good with words,” he said. “If you don’t do something with nail polish colors, you should do something with languages.”

I let this sink in, surprised at how right Oliver was and how obvious it seemed when I thought about it for a half second. I did love languages. I’d taken Spanish and Latin all through high school; I would have taken French, too, if it’d fit in my schedule. I always called English my favorite subject, and wasn’t that a language, too? Oliver had hit the nail on the head—I’d be perfectly happy if I could study languages in college.

“I think we’re getting close,” Oliver said.

We'd been steadily talking louder as we'd been walking, approaching the sound of the waterfall. The trail grew steeper and more crowded. We were not the only ones getting our tourism on. The falls appeared through the trees suddenly: a thin cascade into a small, deep, blue-green pool. It was moodier than Lovers' Lagoon—more hidden in the rocks, too small to swim in, and difficult to get to—but it was such a gorgeous color that you could see how people might invent stories about it.

“Wow,” I said. “It's beautiful.”

“Seriously,” said Oliver.

We joined the line to scramble our way up close to the water's edge, and once we were by the water, I dipped my fingers in: It was bracingly cold.

“So, what?” I said. “One sip from this, and you're cured of your lovesickness?”

“Supposedly,” Oliver said, consulting his pamphlet again. “It's so wild that people are that desperate to feel better that they'd come all this way.”

“Ridiculous,” I said, my voice small.

“Some serious magical thinking,” he said.

There it was again: that word, magic .

“You can see why people tell stories about it,” I said. “That kind of beauty. You have to say something about it. It does have power.”

Among the other tourists, we were sharing the spring with two families who'd hiked up with their preteen girls, and it didn't take long for them to notice Oliver. They were several years younger than us—eleven, maybe, or twelve.

“Oliver,” I said in a low voice, “you’re being recognized.”

“Oh, really?”

He turned around and waved at the girls, who tittered shyly.

“Hey,” I said, going up to them. “Jammers?”

They nodded.

“He’s actually really nice,” I said, and then I turned back. “Oliver, come meet your fans.”

Oliver took some photos with them while I considered the water more. What would I call that color? Lovesick Blue. But it was greener than that. Lovesick Teal. But it didn’t come to me, and I wondered if nail polish perhaps wasn’t big enough. No nail polish name could possibly contain all the depth of that color.

“Oh, hey,” Oliver said, rejoining me and breaking my reverie. “I got you something.”

He handed me a pair of sunglasses with red-orange frames.

“They reminded me of the Cinderella dress that you refused to try on,” he said. “Do you think it’s Dressed to Krill?”

“Close,” I said. I held the sunglasses in my hand. Not only had Oliver Teller asked me out on a date, but he had gotten me something. They were lovely. Thoughtful.

“Thank you so much. That’s really, really nice of you,” I said. I slid them on, but something about the lenses changed the color of the water—turned it yellowish, sickly. I propped the glasses on my head. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know,” he said. “I wanted to.”

We sat by the falls for a while. In his backpack, Oliver had brought cut melon in a Tupperware. I ate a piece. Ros hated cantaloupe. The Jammers hung around, looking at us. They were jealous of me, these girls, I could tell—getting to spend time with Blade—but all I could think about was Ros. What was wrong with me? As much as they were looking at Oliver, they were looking at me —like they couldn’t believe my good fortune, to be out here, in the woods, with the guy from Power Jam . And I was fortunate. So why couldn’t I like him? What was wrong with me? How could Blade push all my buttons, but Oliver still felt so much like a friend? And why, oh, why, was I still so hung up on Ros?

We rinsed our hands in the pool, and when Oliver wasn’t looking, I cupped my hand and drank the water, germs and all.

Later, bored and alone in the Lily Pad, I did two things: I baked a gluten-free cake that came out soupy in the middle thanks to the shitty oven, and I tried on the Cinderella dress that I was supposed to have returned to the Togshop weeks ago. The cake was an unmitigated disaster. But the dress?

Sure enough: It fit me perfectly. It was just a smidge stretchy, heavier than I’d expected, and as I slithered into it I felt like I was pulling on armor. I studied myself in the mirror, and I finally understood why my mom was always lamenting my wearing my preferred palette of grays and olives and browns—the sunset color of the dress did something for me, made me look alive, less waxy, brought out the golden undertones in my hair. The fit was snug on the hips and boobs, and my waist looked tiny, the cut like no dress (or pair of overalls) I had ever owned before. I was shocked. I had a body. I had a shape . I looked, no joke, like Marilyn Monroe. I turned in front of the mirror, stunned. I felt like a whole new person—a cross between a mermaid and a phoenix. And a thought occurred to me.

Maybe, no matter how much spring water I drank, I wouldn't fall out of love with Ros.

But maybe, just maybe, if they saw me in this dress, the opposite would be true: Maybe they would fall in love with me.

Footnotes

17 The whole situation reminded me of my mother's principal critique of Power Jam , which was "Where are these kids' parents?" (Her other two favorites were "Do these kids ever go to school?" and "Why aren't these kids in therapy?"). "Just let it go, Mom," I'd say with a sigh. "Just enjoy it." Because they seemed to enjoy it on the show. And Ros sure seemed to be enjoying it now.

18 Other scenes I thought about: Blade ripping his shirt off when they win regionals; the shot of Blade in the fourth episode emerging from the shower with a towel around his waist; Blade shirtless and skating in an effort to get in extra practice after Kenna accused him of not trying hard enough... if you're sensing a theme here, and that theme is shirtless , you'd be correct.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

My guess is that the Lily Pad will be empty the morning The Trojan Women opens. The idea is a quick in-and-out: a surgical strike for things I need. Fresh clothes. A new book. A toothbrush. I've been brushing my teeth with my finger this whole time, and my teeth are furry and unhappy, crying out for bristles and mint. I bring a tote bag, and when I get there (mercifully the premises are vacant), I pack everything as quickly as I can and get ready to go.

But the plants are howling for a drink. Who's been taking care of them? Just a quick splash of water. And that's when I notice that on the counter, there's a lumpy cake, just begging to be eaten.

No sooner have I grabbed a fork and moved it into the cake, do I hear, "Well, well, well."

Touchstone descends the spiral staircase, his hair mussed from sleep. With my fork in the cake, I feel caught, like I've fallen into the trap of a pitcher plant.

"The prodigal son returns," he says.

"What are you doing here?" I say. "And what does prodigal even mean?"

"I don't know about prodigal, but I'm here because I overslept," says Touch. "We'll have to ask Celia. Don't worry; she's not here."

Touchstone grabs a fork and joins me in the cake, assures me his stomach will be fine. We eat in silence, standing by the counter, carving off bites. The pitcher-plant feeling starts to ebb, and it feels almost comfortable, to be eating this way with

Touchstone. We always bonded over sugar: sour straws that burned a hole through our tongues, cookies that left the corners of our mouths sandy with crumbs.

“This cake is wet,” says Touchstone finally.

“‘Wet Cake’ could be the title of my next poem,” I say.

“I’d read it,” says Touch. He moves his fork to a drier portion of the cake. “So are you coming back ever, or are you spending the rest of the summer shackled up with the Fightin’ Flower Child?”

“I thought you liked Jess.” At Lovers’ Lagoon, Jess had shown Touchstone the basics of how to fight: how to stay light and steady on his feet, how to throw a quick jab. Touchstone and Jess had both laughed their way through it, giggling giddily as Touchstone made fists.

“I do like Jess,” says Touchstone. “I also like you.”

I snort.

“Celia misses you,” says Touch.

“Yeah, well, maybe she should have said that instead of just marooning us at the lagoon.”

“We got home okay.”

“It was the principle of the thing,” I say.

“I miss you, too,” says Touch. “You realize you’ve ditched both of us, right?”

The cake hardens in my mouth like cement.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, brushing me off.

“No—Touchstone. I mean it. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” he says. “I know you’re sorry.”

“Besides,” I say, trying to lighten the mood, “I thought you’d be happy I was gone. Just you and Celia out here, all by yourselves. Isn’t that, like, your wildest dream?”

Touchstone blushes deeply, and I feel guilty, naming the thing that neither of them likes to name, those old feelings that Touchstone carries around with him like a sack of stones.

“She’s busy with Oliver Teller,” he says, and his voice grows disdainful. “They went on a date.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” says Touch.

“Does she like him?”

“I mean, he’s Oliver Teller,” says Touchstone. “Aren’t you obligated to like him?”

“Sorry, dude,” I say. “That’s a tough one.”

“C’est la vie,” says Touchstone, but I can see the hurt in him, how it drags him down

like an anchor.

“You know what I wish?” says Touch. “I wish the spring were real.”

“Same,” I say, and in the silence, I think not of Celia or Oliver Teller or even Jess but my father, far away on the East Coast, who was now nothing more than a series of missed calls on my phone. If I drank from the spring, maybe I’d forget all about him.

Touchstone and I eat for another minute—we’ve done considerable damage to the cake—and then I shoulder my tote bag and leave for what seems like a better place, the exact same way my dad did.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

THE DROPPED ACORN REVISITED , or French Words That Start with W

Perhaps the spring's magic worked by keeping the beloved away.

Ros had been staying at Jess's for nearly two weeks, and the whole house slept poorly in their absence. Not just the people, but the Lily Pad itself: Its joints shifted and creaked all night, as though it were deeply disturbed by the events of the summer. Ros sent texts—pictures of Jess's cats or bouquets they were making—and I occasionally dropped in at the Hidden Fern to see them and say hello. But the house knew in its bones that things were going wrong, that something had disturbed the easy comfort of the Triumvirate, something far worse than Touchstone finishing all my granola with his hands. Time passed slowly and painfully. The Trojan Women opened. It was the third week in July, and Ros was officially a ghost.

It hurt.

I could have said something to them, I suppose. Hey, I miss you. Hey, are you going to come back and hang with us, ever? But I preferred to stew, which probably wasn't the most mature response (my mom would have called it extremely passive aggressive). Besides stewing, I started spending more time in the costume shop. Benna and Phoebe were knee-deep in designing the costume for the yeti, while the rest of us handled the costumes for The Trojan Women . Phoebe claimed she didn't need the extra help, but after her injury, it didn't seem fair that I didn't pitch in more. Plus, it was fun to watch her work through the yeti costume with Benna. It was coming along well—she was making changes, trying out different fabrics, and the coat seemed clumsier, more haphazard than it had in the beginning, in a way that worked for the character. I loved not just Phoebe's ideas but the way she

worked—her focus, the way she slipped her earbuds in and disappeared into her drawings, or the way she tacked fabrics to the wall and stood back and squinted at them, turning her head slightly to consider them.

“It’s looking good,” Benna assured Phoebe, eyeing her sketches. It was Monday morning, and we were all exhausted from the opening of *The Trojan Women* —all of us except for Benna, who seemed to come more alive the busier the theater got. “I had a thought. Something I wanted to show you.”

She typed something into one of the desktop computers that lined the room.

“Phoebe, have you ever seen *Beauty and the Beast* ? The black-and-white one? By Jean Cocteau?”

Phoebe shook her head.

“Do you know who Cocteau is?” Benna asked.

Again, Phoebe shook her head.

“Does anyone know who Cocteau is?” Benna asked, calling around the room. Her question was met with resounding silence by the other costumers. “If you’re working in costumes, you’d benefit from looking at his work. Personally, I think everyone would benefit from looking at his work. Cocteau called himself a poet, but he was, among other things, a French filmmaker working in the first half of the 1900s. He was a gay man and one of the early surrealists. Lots of movie magic. His version of *Beauty and the Beast* is, in my opinion, the best adaptation there is. Look.”

She stepped back from the desktop, and we watched as a fearsome creature—the Beast—stepped out from behind a rosebush. His eyes literally flashed, like two small supernovas. It was no *Power Jam* , but the Beast took my breath away.

“Cocteau made that flashing effect by pricking holes in the film,” Benna said. “Isn’t it incredible?” She turned back to the computer, hitting pause on the scene. “Tell me what you notice about his costume.”

We studied the screen. The Beast was fearsome, yes, but he was also dressed to the nines. He wore a tunic with an upturned lace collar, heavily embroidered gloves, and a set of sparkling necklaces. He wasn’t just a big hulking animal—there was something light about him, some elegance, in spite of his size and heft.

Phoebe spoke first. “There’s an animal quality, but there’s so much more to it than that. The lace and the embroidery create this feeling of daintiness.”

“He’s, like, graceful, even though he’s a beast,” I said, thinking of what Oliver’s director had said, about him being too graceful. If Oliver were graceful, I thought, why not lean into that attribute, make it an essential part of the yeti’s character, rather than trying to erase it entirely? Why not exploit that inconsistency, make him less of a Neanderthal and more like this beautifully dressed beast?

“Exactly,” said Benna, as though she were confirming my thoughts. “I think that’s what’s missing from the yeti costume—the beauty and the grace. He’s fearsome and maybe ugly, but I think the costume will be better if there’s more tension. Are there opportunities for more moments of beauty in the design of a terrible creature?”

Benna turned the video back on, this time with sound, and was immediately interrupted by her walkie-talkie going off. She retreated into her office, and the French came through the speakers, and I listened hard and caught a few words. I was surprised by how much I’d liked speaking in French with Touchstone that day in the Lily Pad; it had me wishing that there were space in my senior year schedule to take three languages, Spanish and French and Latin, even though my schedule was crammed with all the senior electives I could take.

“Did you know that French doesn’t have any words that start with w ?” I said to Phoebe.

“Really?” said Phoebe.

“There’s wagon , but it’s pronounced like v . Everything else is imported from another language. Like Wi-Fi. Webcam.”

“Do you speak French?” Phoebe said.

“No, I take Spanish. We did some French in middle school. I just remembered that. I thought it was interesting.”

“Huh,” said Phoebe. “Why do you suppose that is? The w thing?”

“I’m not sure.” 19

“Knock, knock,” we heard, and in walked Oliver Teller. Jacques threaded himself between Oliver’s legs and mewed pathetically. “Do you need attention?” Oliver asked, and bent to scratch the cat’s chin.

Oliver had been stopping by since our hike, but we didn’t have plans to go on a second date. I thought about asking him all the time, but I found myself hemming and hawing when the opportunity presented itself. Phoebe told me the ball was in my court—I just couldn’t figure out what to do with it. Sometimes I thought about asking him if he wanted to play tennis, but every time I got close, I remembered Ros and swallowed the words, lost my voice like I had that day at the lagoon.

“Hey,” said Phoebe. “We just got a lesson from Benna, and the takeaway is that we’re supposed to make you more beautiful as the yeti.”

“That sounds lovely. I’m all about beauty,” Oliver said. “Celia, how are you doing?”

How was I doing? How was I doing ?

I’d spent most of my time since the date trying to figure out what was wrong with me, and why my internal love compass seemed to be so screwy. Here was this really nice guy who I liked quite a lot—and whose character on TV I loved—but I couldn’t seem to transfer the feelings I had for Blade to the feelings I had for Oliver. Plus I still was thinking about Ros all the time, and the spring’s magic wasn’t working nearly as quickly as I wanted it to. The ball may have been in my court, but it was lodged in my chest, and I didn’t know whether to cough it up and serve it up, or swallow it, let it be eaten by my stomach acid. I had the same problem with the sunglasses he’d given me. I kept them on me, but found myself squinting in the sun instead of reaching for them.

Of course I didn’t say any of this.

What I said was:

“I’m fine.”

“Do you want to get lunch?” Oliver asked us.

“Yes, definitely,” said Phoebe. “I need a break from all of this.”

“I actually told my friend Touchstone I’d take him to the Dropped Acorn,” I said.

“Oh, fun,” Phoebe said. “I haven’t seen him since Audrey’s party.”

“Really? We’ll have to change that soon,” I said. “You should get to know him. He’s the best.”

“That’s the clown friend, right?” said Oliver. “Tell him I say hi?”

Given that Touchstone still referred to Oliver as “Fish Eyes,” I suspected I would not.

My secret hope in going to the Dropped Acorn was that I’d run into Jess delivering bouquets again, and that this time, Ros would be with her. But even though the restaurant was crowded—everything had been crowded lately as more tourists flooded in to see the shows—there was no Jess in sight. With all the people to serve, the food took longer to arrive than it had our first day. Touchstone kept checking his watch.

“You have somewhere to be?” I asked, mock-offended.

“Yeah,” he said. “I need to be back on campus at one for a movement workshop with the visiting director. They’re coming all the way from Seattle. They’re supposed to be kind of a big deal.”

“Oh,” I said. “You haven’t heard anything from Ros, have you? They’ve been, like, silent on the group text.”

“Actually,” said Touch. “I saw them the other day.”

“Wait. Really? Way to bury the lede, Touch. You two hung out without me?”

“It wasn’t really like that,” Touchstone said. “They came to the Lily Pad to get some of their stuff. We ate your cake.”

“I saw someone had gotten into it. I just assumed it had been only you.”

“It was really wet in the middle. Like it hadn’t cooked through.”

“You try baking a cake in a broken oven,” I said. “How’d they seem?”

“They seemed good,” he said. “They joked about writing a poem about your baking efforts. It was titled ‘Wet Cake.’”

“Seriously,” I said. “How’d they seem?”

“Honestly?” he said. He sighed, and for a second he seemed almost bored. “I think they were kind of upset with you. They wanted to hang out with you on the Fourth of July. They wanted you to get to know Jess.”

“I talked to Jess.”

“You talked to Jess for two point five seconds and then rushed away with this bogus excuse about buttons. You left us all stranded there, looking for a way home.” Touchstone played with his fork, dropping it and resetting it. “I think you hurt their feelings.”

“I—” I was embarrassed to admit that I hadn’t even considered Ros’s feelings—or anyone’s feelings, for that matter. Between me and everyone else, I was the one with feelings. Why would Ros—or anyone else—be upset with me?

“It wasn’t a bogus excuse,” I said finally. “It was a legitimate emergency.”

“Celia, really? Come on. I mean, even I was kind of upset you did that. We wound up getting home fine, but it was sort of a pain in the ass for you to ditch us like that.”

Our server arrived with our food then, an enormous prosciutto-and-mozzarella sandwich for me and a big kale salad for Touchstone, who was worried, accurately, that we were not getting enough greens at the Lily Pad. Especially in Ros’s absence, we were struggling with the contract’s stipulation that we were expected to learn how

to cook beyond gluten-free macaroni and cheese. We ate a lot of cereal for dinner, eggs if we were feeling fancy.

“Here’s a question,” Touchstone said, spearing a wedge of mandarin orange with his fork. “Is there ever a time in the future when you can stop being jealous of their relationship?”

“I’m not jealous ,” I said.

“So what are you, then?”

This, I didn’t quite know how to answer. What I was experiencing wasn’t jealousy . That was a word that felt so flat, and so villainous. Like the wicked stepmother who was jealous of her daughter’s beauty. What I was feeling was much more complicated than that, so complicated there didn’t seem to be a single word for it. I wanted them, yes, but I also wanted them to be happy, but I didn’t like the way that they’d chosen to be happy, and I didn’t like that I didn’t like it. I decided, instead of answering Touchstone’s question, to ask him one of my own.

“What did you mean, that you were kind of upset when I left Lovers’ Lagoon the other day?”

“I meant I was upset you left. First of all, you were our ride, and second of all, I wanted to hang out with you, too.” Touchstone sighed again, this time heavily, which felt oddly foreboding. I thought fleetingly of the night we’d broken up. It had been relatively painless—an “I think we’re better as friends” speech delivered by yours truly—and then we’d had a quick hug goodbye, and a week of awkwardness before things went back to normal. Now, though, the positions felt reversed, like I was waiting for Touchstone to deliver bad news. If we had been dating, I’d have been the one being broken up with.

“Look,” he said. “We’re talking a lot in the workshop about the character’s story. Each character, in any play, has an arc, has a story. And sometimes it seems like the story you’ve been telling yourself, Celia, is that you’re the wronged party. I wonder what it would be like to see things from Ros’s perspective. They’re in love for the first time in their life. They’re obviously going to forget us a little bit. They’re not going to text us back. They’re going to bumble through it. We’re not the thing they’re focusing on.”

“Okay,” I said, but my heart was hammering in my chest.

“I know it’s stressful what’s going on with you and Ros. But I don’t know, Celia. I’m not trying to make this into a competition over who’s more in the wrong. But I don’t think you’re... um... killing it on the friendship front, either.”

“What are you talking about? I’m so good to them!”

“I’m not talking about Ros. I’m talking about me ,” he said. “We’ve been hanging out for, what, almost an hour? You haven’t asked me about the workshop at all. You haven’t asked how it’s going with Audrey. You haven’t asked about any of the clown stuff. You haven’t even asked me how my salad is.”

“How’s your salad?” I said.

“It’s magnificent,” he said. “Look, I don’t like to bring this up, but, like, even before Ros and Jess, I felt a little left out. Like, you and Ros are always together, and I’m always a beat behind.”

“You’re not a beat behind.”

“I don’t know if that’s true. You went swimming without me the first night.”

“You could have come in,” I said.

“You went to the Dropped Acorn without me, even though you knew I wanted to come here with you. And you came here with Oliver .”

“Why do you say his name like that? Like he’s something that’s stuck to the bottom of your shoe?”

“Because guys like Oliver are competition.”

“For what ?”

“Parts. Career success.” He bit his lip and fussed with his salad. “Girls.”

“I don’t think you’re going to be competing with Oliver for any girls.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he said.

“You know I think you’re a catch. I just meant that he’s famous—he could have whoever he wants. He’s not a regular person, like you and me. Although—he’s actually very nice,” I said. “You might like him if you spoke to him a bit.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Look, my point about the Dropped Acorn is that was a thing I really wanted to do with you , and you went without me.”

“We’re here now!” I said brightly.

“Yeah, but you chose to come here with someone else beforehand,” said Touchstone.

He picked at his salad, quiet. We listened to the babble of other customers, all of them joyful, having a good time. I felt guilt start to creep in. He was right, and I

hadn't noticed it. I had been a bad friend to Touchstone. This whole time, I had been a bad friend to Touchstone.

"How's Audrey?" I said finally.

"We decided to be just friends."

"Wait, really? What happened?"

"Nothing. It's fine. It just... it felt better being friends than it did moving things along. Neither of us really felt into it, I don't think. It's no big deal. She and I are good."

"Touch, I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. It was for the best."

"Are you still going to go to clown school?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." There was a heavy sigh again. Guy could've sent a windmill spinning. "I'm kind of frustrated with theater stuff. Don't get me wrong—I like the clown stuff that I've been learning. I can be the clown. But if I go do clown school for a year, I wonder if everyone will only ever see me as a clown. I'll be pigeonholing myself. Like, no one will ever see me as a leading man."

"I see you as a leading man," I said.

"You obviously don't," he said. "That's part of what I've been saying."

"What are you talking about? I always think you deserve the lead."

“The one you see as a leading man is someone like Oliver . Someone muscular and tall and rugged-looking and handsome. You don’t see me . You don’t see the guy with freckles and red hair and the gluten allergy,” he said. “You know how many people in the workshop just assumed I was gay?”

“So what?” I said.

“Well, I’m not,” he said. “I need more male friends. I need to hang out with Sil, from the workshop. I need to hang out with people like my brothers.”

“Your brothers are meatheads,” I said.

“Meatheads have leading-man energy,” he said. “A meathead wouldn’t order salad.”

“What if you hung out with Oliver? I could set you two up on a friend date.”

“I have absolutely no desire to hang out with Oliver Teller! I’d rather eat nuts and bolts than hang out with him! Have you been listening to anything I’ve been saying?” Touchstone said.

“I thought you said you wanted male friends....”

He threw his fork down, looking exasperated. “You know what? Never mind. I take it all back. I don’t need more male friends at all. I don’t want to hang out with Oliver. I don’t want to hang out with my brothers, even. What I want is to hang out with you , which is somehow very difficult to get you to do, even though we’re supposed to be best friends. Not to mention the fact that we live together.”

He sounded angry, and I shrank back into my seat, staring at my half-eaten sandwich. Touchstone rubbed his eye socket with the heel of his hand.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m not trying to yell at you, or guilt you, anything. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

“Can I tell you something? It’s just—but—like—part of me worried, when you said you wanted to come here for the summer, that you didn’t even really want me to come along? Like I was crucial, because it’s my uncle’s cabin, but you really didn’t care that I was here. Like it would have been better for you if it was just you and Ros. And I was just a cog in the machine.”

“He’s not your uncle.”

“Dude. Are you even listening?”

“Sorry. Yes. I’m listening. Touchstone—I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Yeah,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Okay.”

“I’m serious,” I said, and I reached across the table and grabbed his hand, made sure to lace my fingers in with his. His palm was sweaty, but I didn’t flinch.

“Celia, you don’t need to hold my hand,” he said.

“Andrew Holt Touchstone. You’re my best and oldest friend . You are so much more than a cog. I’m sorry I’ve been distracted with Ros. I’m sorry I’ve been...”

Obsessive? Jealous? A terrible friend?

“But I don’t want you to think for a second that your being here is ancillary to the plan. You’re part of the plan. You are the plan. You made me an egg , okay? You’re

part of it. You're part of us .”

“Yeah. Yeah. Okay. It's okay, you don't have to, like, make me feel better or whatever. I know what you're saying.”

“The contract says the Triumvirate,” I said.

“Can you let go of my hand now?”

I squeezed it tighter. When I'd lost my voice in first grade, clammed up for weeks, Touchstone was the one who finally got me talking again. He came up to me on the playground and offered me some of his chocolate orange. I took a slice, and my manners came back to me suddenly. Thanks , I said. You're welcome , he said. We'd been friends ever since. He'd swept into my life and helped me solve my problem as though he were magic, and I hated that I had done him wrong.

“There are three of us. That's who we are. We're not the... Twoumvirate.”

At this, he managed a small smile, but pulled his hand loose from mine at the same time.

“We should go,” he said.

So I drove him back to campus, the air between us so thick that no words could get through, even if I had them.

Footnote

19 I looked this up later that night, when I might have been watching old episodes of Power Jam or making progress on A Tale of Two Cities , but instead I fell down an especially large rabbit hole about the peculiarities of the French language. W is a

nonnative French sound, and the letter wasn't added to the alphabet until the nineteenth century. The other nonnative letter is k , which joined the alphabet shortly after w .

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

MASTER CLASS: THE BODY IN MOTION

As a child, Andrew loved to dig.

He destroyed his family's backyard. Ripped open the roots of the rosebush. Dug holes to the bottom of the sandbox. He asked for a shovel for Christmas. He loved machines that dug, with their brontosaurus necks and their scoops like claws. He loved the feeling of earth in his hands. When Ros came into the picture and the three of them built that world just off school property, before the people who lived in the house boarded up their fence, he was in charge of irrigation and moats. When the visiting director tells them that she wants them all to dig deep in today's movement exercise, Andrew thinks of a big yellow excavator, scraping through the earth.

Just begin , the director says, by being aware of your body .

Honestly: Andrew'd rather not. He feels, to the extent that he can, his slim calves and his stringy arms. His face, so freckled, even more so in the summer. He leaves his body, remembers seventh-grade chorus, where he was the only boy still singing in the soprano section, how the music teacher wouldn't stop complimenting him on his lovely voice. Remembers Ros and Celia, in the middle alto section, mouthing the words to the song for the winter concert: S'vivon, sov sov sov."

Move as you normally do , the director says.

He walks. Heel toe. Heel toe. Celia told him once he had a distinctive gait, and he wonders if it's possible to have a clownish walk. He doesn't really want to be a leading man, in spite of what he said to Celia. He likes being the clown, is the thing.

Likes making people laugh. He cracks wise. People haven't always thought of him as funny, but it's something he sees in himself now and likes.

Be aware of others , the director says. Acknowledge them with your body, with the space your body takes up.

Just below the surface, an undercurrent, always there, like a smell coming up from the floorboards, like crocuses peeking through the snow, is Celia Gilbert. Celia Gilbert, his kindergarten wife, Celia Gilbert, who's almost forgotten him. Celia Gilbert, who thinks he's moved on.

Now change the way you're moving , the director says.

He stands up taller, tries to walk like his brothers. They're older than him by ten and eight years, Andrew clearly an accident, so much so that no one even bothered to pretend. Both were over six feet tall by the time they reached sixteen. One played basketball and the other rowed. Andrew spent his childhood being shuttled around to sporting events, waiting for the day he'd grow. He practiced handstands behind the bleachers, taught himself to do a backbend.

Change it again.

His whole life, Andrew's been weak. As a kid, he was constantly sick. Always running fevers and suffering stomachaches. He and another kid could take the exact same fall off the monkey bars: The other kid would brush the wood chips off their pants, and Andrew would wind up in the hospital with seven staples in his head. He broke his arm trying to teach himself to do a front handspring. Missing school because of doctor's appointments and trips to the allergist. Gluten's the latest on the laundry list.

Move like you've had some good news.

Welp, there's Celia Gilbert again, Celia Gilbert that he can't seem to get over, even though it lasted two weeks—eleven days, really. Eleven days, two and a half years ago. It started the last week of school before winter break, when everyone is supposed to be doing the most and no one is doing anything, when flurries outside can make the whole class erupt into shrieks of "It's snowing!" They were partners in computer literacy, designing a website for an imaginary company. They touched a lot. He made her laugh. She smelled like clementines. He went up to Ros and said, "I think I'm in love with Celia." "No shit," Ros said. They gave him the combination to Celia's locker, and he planted a trail of peppermints all over the school, taped to flash cards with clues as to where she might find the next one. Ros helped him think of the riddles. It was the closest he'd ever felt to Ros: trying to win over Celia.

Now this news is even better , says the director.

Eleven days, but it was the start of winter break, so they saw each other all of four times. The first time, he misread the movie times, and so instead of seeing a movie as planned they wandered around a Target, reading each other sympathy cards from the greeting aisle. The second time they rode bikes around the college campus by Celia's house. It was a production: putting air in the tires, blowing cobwebs from helmets. It was twenty degrees, the coldest day California had seen in decades. After fifteen minutes of riding, they were sweating beneath their jackets but their hands had frozen into claws. He blew on hers to warm them up, rubbed them between his own hands.

The third time, his parents accidentally locked him out. By the light of his phone he hunted for the key in the bottom of the right terra-cotta pot that stood amid a thousand identical terra-cotta pots in their backyard greenhouse, the one he'd been scared of as a child, the one he was still sort of scared of, honestly, drafty and full of spiders and hiding spots, where anything, or anyone, could be waiting. She'd wrapped her arms around him and kissed the back of his neck, an inch or two west of his right ear, a place on his body he wasn't sure he'd been aware of until that very moment, a place that he still reaches to touch every now and then, just to make sure it's still there. He

touches it now; it's part of his walk, and every time he touches it, he imagines his limbs getting lighter, more spring in his step.

Change again , the director says. Move like someone who's been hurt.

Around him, people drop to the floor. Nina Booker-Pope clutches her leg and starts literally screaming until the director reminds them all that this is a silent exercise, please. Sil is doing kind of a drunken stumble; Audrey crawls, drags one leg behind her. Andrew settles on a plodding stagger, hands in pockets, shoulders around his neck, lifted in a perpetual shrug. He'd had to drag the breakup out of her.

Now the hurt is worse , she says.

Eleven days, two and a half years ago. He's glad they're friends. But he wishes he could drink from the Lovesick Falls spring and fall out of love in an instant. Because it hurts to know that he was the only one who fell in love. It hurts to untwist a peppermint from its cellophane shell, to smooth the wrinkles from the wrapper while the candy disappears on his tongue, leaving him sugar-toothed, muck-mouthed.

Andrew runs his tongue over his teeth.

The director speaks again. Move like the person you are when no one else is around.

Andrew can't help it: He pays attention to what other people are doing. Audrey is running laps around the room. Nina Booker-Pope is doing literal handstands. Jesus Christ.

His reaction is to make himself small.

He is a tiny rolling pebble, somersaulting around.

A rock in dirt.

There are his brothers, so much older, saying, Don't be such a... He shudders at the hateful word.

There is the fear that maybe, maybe, at the rock and the core, there is something he might not know about himself. Not that he could be gay, but that he doesn't know . That other people know him better than he knows himself. That there is something about him that people recognize , and it's not fucking fair. How can parts of yourself be a secret to you but clear to strangers?

Now put on armor , the director says.

Later, the director will have them discuss their discoveries—what they noticed, how it changed their movement. Nina Booker-Pope says something about how walking on her hands helped her see the world as it really is. Barf. Audrey will say something really, really smart: about how the armor—that her armor, actually, wasn't all that different from her neutral walk, and that she wondered if what she thought of as neutral was actually a way of protecting herself.

When Andrew leaves the class, he finds he's still wearing his armor. It's frightening and metal, with a big claw like an excavator, and is so loud it scares even him. But he knows it's there. He can put that armor on now. He doesn't have to be weak anymore. He can be the thing that rips open the earth, that leaves behind gaping wounds.

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THE TRIUMVIRATE REUNITED , or Planning a Party

Immediately after my disastrous lunch with Touch, I called Ros. Normally we texted, but this time, I called them.

“Hey,” I said. My voice wasn’t shaking, but it felt like it was. “Sorry to bother you.”

“What’s wrong?” Ros asked.

They knew. They always knew.

“I had a weird conversation with Touch,” I said. “Do you think you could come over?”

“Give me twenty minutes,” they said, and even though things were a little strange between us, they said twenty minutes, and we were together in sixteen.

“I feel awful,” I said to Ros.

“I don’t think you need to feel awful ,” Ros said.

“Okay, then I feel just plain bad,” I said.

“It sounds like you had a productive and necessary conversation. Like he talked to you about something that was bothering him, and you said you were sorry.”

We were sitting outside on the porch like we had that first night, when we both

smelled like river and when the summer yawned out before us, fresh and easy, pre-everything: pre-Jess Orlando, pre-Oliver Teller. Pre-Dropped Acorn and pre-Friendship Disaster. Neither one of us had mentioned the marooning at Lovers' Lagoon. We'd put aside our own friendship woes to talk about Touchstone and the way that I'd failed him as a friend.

"Yeah, but I don't think I fixed anything," I said. "And the fact still remains that I'm a shitty friend."

"You're not a shitty friend," said Ros. "You were the best friend to me all year long."

"Yeah, but I'm being a shitty friend to him now, is the thing. He's right. I wasn't even paying attention to what was going on with him. It's supposed to be the summer of Very Serious Friendship, and I've been so caught up with..." Here I caught myself, because I almost said you. "Costuming."

"You're not the only one who's been caught up," said Ros, a little abashed. "I haven't been very good to Touchstone, either. Or you."

There was silence for a moment. It was the first time either one of us had broached the gap that had widened between us since the failed Fourth of July hang, which had precipitated the Ros-shaped absence in my life.

"The houseplants are definitely struggling without you," I said.

"Celia, I'm sorry I haven't been around," said Ros.

"That's okay," I said.

"It's not," said Ros. "I never thought I would be the sort of person who ditches their friends. We're not those people. We're not those friends. You know what I mean?"

I agreed, except for the fact that we seemed to be gathering all evidence to the contrary.

We very much were those friends, and the longer we spent apart, the more I felt the Triumvirate splintering.

“Before we left, my mom warned me about this,” I said.

“About us being bad friends?”

“Just that things might get hard between us. That being here was going to be different than being at home.”

“I’m sorry,” Ros said again. “I know I’ve been spending all my time with Jess.”

“No,” I said. “It’s okay. I mean, I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“It’s more than fun,” said Ros. “She told me she loved me.”

“Wow,” I managed to say, in spite of the fact that I’d just been struck dead by a lightning bolt. “And did you... say it back?”

Ros nodded.

Well, that was the ball game.

Ros was in love, exotic, all-consuming, fern-spore love, and I was just me, Celia, sewing buttons on trousers and living my dinky little life.

“That’s fast ,” I said.

“It is fast, but Jess is really great, Celia. She’s got some rough edges, but so do I. She went through a really hard time a few years ago. Her dad died. Her mom drives trucks for a living just to make ends meet and is hardly ever home. Jess basically raised herself. She has a brother who is kind of an asshole. That’s pretty much why she learned to fight.”

“Like, to fight him ?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus.”

“I know.”

We sat together in silence and let this sink in: In some homes, you learned how to throw punches; in others, you learned the Greek alphabet for fun and that nothing tasted as good as a bowl of ice cream after dinner. Not for the first time, I felt so lucky to have been born into my family.

“You’d really like Jess if you got to know her.”

The if you got to know her hung there between us. Suddenly everything that Ros and I weren’t talking about seemed to find its way into the room. I owed them an apology as much as I owed Touchstone.

“I’m so sorry I left you stranded at Lovers’ Lagoon on the Fourth of July,” I said. “I did want to spend time with Jess. I just...”

“It’s okay,” Ros said. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around more. We can try Lovers’ Lagoon again another time.”

The night itself seemed to feel lighter then, after our apologies. With the weirdness between us out of the way, I felt like confiding in Ros, as though it were old times.

“I do feel sorry for ditching Touch,” I started. “But he also said this weird thing that I can’t get out of my head. About how everyone in the workshop thinks he’s gay. He sounded upset about it. Like he took it as an insult.”

“That’s weird,” said Ros. They were quiet for a moment, considering. “Honestly, it kind of reminds me of my dad.”

It was the first time they’d mentioned their dad in I didn’t know how long. I wondered vaguely if this was Jess’s influence—if Ros had become more open, willing to talk about their situation now that they’d met someone who was dealing with something similar.

“How?” I asked, trying to prod them softly into saying more.

“Like... just, like, subtle things that hurt. It was, like, he said he was okay with my gender. But then sometimes these things would come out of his mouth that were like, whoa . Just little stuff. Like, how it was weird that this woman in his office didn’t shave her legs. Or, like, you and I would be texting, and he’d call it girl talk . You say you get it, but is that really what you think?” They paused. “It’s hard sometimes, not to think that it all had something do with him leaving. Like if I’d been a different way—a daughter, like, cookie-cutter, instead of a—” They gestured at themselves. “Maybe he’d still be here.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not the most cookie-cutter, but my dad still hasn’t forgiven me for quitting the tennis team.”

“Yeah, but he’s still around ,” Ros said.

There was silence. I didn't know what to say. So I waited. And, a surprise: Ros spoke into this silence.

"This is so stupid," they said. "You know how I used to pretend I was a wolf as a kid?"

"You barked at me," I said.

"I did," they said. "And you were so nice about it."

"I treated you like anyone else would have," I said.

"I don't know if that's true. I think you were especially nice to me," Ros said. "Anyway—obviously, with the barking, I was being disruptive. And reasoning with me didn't work. So what my parents did, finally, was my dad would give me a fake magic pill every morning that would turn me into a girl the second I left the house. It was a vitamin. But we'd go through this whole ritual. Swallow the pill; now you're a girl. And, like, he'd have me twirl and call me Lady Rosalind, which was sort of fun, but also, I just wanted to be a wolf.

"And like—later—after the gender stuff—I'd see him in the morning and look at him, and I'd just know, like, he wants to give me that pill ." Ros paused. "But when we met—you were the first one I felt like really saw through that pill and liked me."

"I still like you," I said, and what I felt then, intensely, was the friendship we used to have, back when we were kids. I missed the way we would play. I missed the world we'd built together, boarded up in someone's backyard. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too," Ros said. "I sometimes forget it's good to talk."

"Okay," I said. "Well, good." I paused. "What's going to happen when we go home?"

With you and Jess, I mean.”

Our contract for the Lily Pad was for another whole month. Privately, I’d started hoping that somehow we could bow out of it sooner. Three months had seemed like nothing at all when we’d first gotten here, but now, given the way things turned out, I found myself dreaming of home. I missed my parents. I missed my dogs. I missed a house that didn’t smell like mildew; I missed watching Power Jam on the couch with my mom. I even missed my dad’s badgering me to play tennis. At least he wanted to do something with me.

“She and I are talking about it,” Ros said slowly.

There was a cryptic edge to their voice, and I wanted to press Ros on what they meant by this, but there was a hello from inside the house: Touchstone, returned home.

“We’re out here,” I called.

“The gang’s all here,” he said, stepping out onto the porch. “Did another bird die?”

“Not yet,” said Ros.

“Should we make dinner?” I asked hopefully.

“I ate on campus,” Touchstone said.

“I was supposed to go see Jess,” Ros said, but their voice trailed off, as though maybe they could be convinced to stay.

We all stayed still for an awkward moment. I thought of what my mom had said about triangles, and then, in a fit of pique, I threw up my hands.

“This is pathetic!” I said. “This is supposed to be a summer of Very Serious Friendship, not a summer of Very Serious Avoidance,” I said. “You know what we need to do?”

“Organize the spice cabinet?” said Ros.

“You know I’d be down for that, but no. We should have a party.”

“A party,” Ros said, looking skeptical. “This place is barely big enough for three people.”

“Okay, maybe not like, a party party. Lord knows I don’t want anyone getting punched out on my watch. I know, I know , cool your jets. What about a dinner party?”

“A dinner party,” Touch said. “With our oven?”

“The cake worked,” I said. “Enough that you two scarfed it down.”

“Right, but we’re animals,” Touchstone said.

“What would we even cook?” Ros said.

“And when would we even have it?” Touchstone said. “We’re all so busy.”

“We’d cook whatever you wanted, and we could have the party whenever you wanted, too. You two are such good cooks. You can just make veggie burgers again if you want. Or I’ll cook.”

“No one wants that,” said Ros.

“Look, it’ll be fun. We can come up with a menu together,” I said. “Ros, you can invite Jess... Touch, you can invite Audrey if you’re on okay terms....”

“That does sound kind of fun,” said Touch, with a hint of trepidation in his voice. “Maybe we can do a risotto? Audrey can probably get us some wine....”

“I like the risotto idea,” said Ros.

“We could get dressed up,” I said. “We could use those pink glasses.”

“You know I’m just going to break one,” Ros said.

“We’ll get you a sippy cup, then,” I said, and Ros laughed, and so did Touchstone, and the dinner began to take shape before us. There would be laughter and gaiety and frivolity. There would be wonderful smells: garlic and ginger and slow-cooked onions. There would be sparkling drinks. There would be abundance , and then calm—a long, lingering evening on the back porch, just like there’d been that first night. We would sit there until the sun went down, feel the loss of light and heat in our bodies, and the Triumvirate would be reunited.

It wasn’t until much later in the evening, after Touch had gone to bed, after Ros had retreated to Jess’s, that I had my epiphany. Maybe Ros would never love me, not the way I wanted. They seemed happy with Jess, even though there was no way that was going to last, not with our going back home at the end of the summer. But maybe, if I couldn’t get Ros to fall in love with me, I could at least get them to see what they were missing out on. I would have been a fantastic girlfriend, and I would prove it at the dinner party. All I had to do—besides cook the perfect meal and host the perfect evening—was slip into the Cinderella dress hanging in the back of my closet. By the end of the night, Ros would regret not falling in love with me.

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The party took place on Friday, August 1, and the first thing to go wrong was the limes. I'd decided at the eleventh hour to make a key lime pie for dessert—Ros's favorite and coincidentally Oliver's as well—but the little grocery store in Lovesick didn't have key limes in stock, so I drove forty-five minutes to the bigger, fancier grocery store, only to discover that they didn't have them, either. I settled on regular limes. 20 According to the internet it wouldn't make much of a difference anyway, though being a purist I had my doubts—and the limes I found were puny and rock hard, more like avocado pits than actual fruit, but by that point I'd already bought condensed milk and graham crackers and butter at the first grocery store, plus I'd lost an hour and a half driving to the bigger grocery store, and most importantly, it was Ros's and Oliver's favorite, so it was just too late to change course. Key lime pie it was.

The rest of the menu we'd agreed upon via text. The main event was risotto, carrot and feta, a dish Ros's mom used to make, a double recipe because there would be seven of us in total: me, Ros, Touchstone, Audrey, Jess Orlando, Phoebe, and Oliver Teller. For sides, Phoebe would bring green beans and garlic, and I'd make a salad, too, since Oliver, not unlike Touchstone, was obsessed with getting nutrients. Oliver Teller was actually a last-minute addition to the guest list: I'd finally taken the ball that was in my court and asked him if he'd wanted to come to dinner as my date. I'd told neither Ros nor Touchstone that I'd invited him—Touchstone because I wasn't about to incur his wrath/be audience to another diatribe about the quality of Power Jam . I hadn't told Ros because—if I'm being honest—I wanted to make them jealous.

On the day of the dinner, I'd panicked we wouldn't have enough food, so I'd decided to add the artichoke dip that my mother made on Christmas, crackers and cheese,

some sort of paté, 21 grapes because you needed grapes on a cheeseboard, and then also some cocktail shrimp, as an ode to Ros's ode. That was my third trip to the grocery store. Let no one say I wasn't rooting for Ros and Jess. I just wanted Ros to, you know, rue the day they'd chosen Jess Orlando over me.

There was no juicer in the kitchen. There was no Ros in the kitchen, either, which was a little annoying, since they'd promised to help me not only shop but also cook, but honestly the lack of the juicer was a more immediate problem, and it would be better if the pie was a surprise anyway. I imagined myself delivering the pie to Oliver, Ros looking on with a bewildered, envious expression. I crushed the graham crackers for the crust, which was messier and more labor intensive than I might've liked, but I got to use my hammer for the first time since hammering down that rogue nail; popped the crust into the oven; and shifted my focus toward the filling. I tried to squeeze the limes by hand, but they were so tough that I barely got any liquid out. I attacked them next with a spoon and succeeded more in spraying juice into my eye. In a fit of pique, I attempted to stab the juice loose with a fork, but my hand slipped and I stabbed myself in the palm.

It was at this point that I remembered my mother had told me to be patient.

I checked my phone while I ran my hand under cold water. There was blood, but nothing major—certainly not a Phoebe/hospital situation. I slapped on a Band-Aid that struggled to stick to my damp hand and texted Ros and Touch, hey—where are you??

Touch texted right back: hung up with show prep, be there as soon as I can

From Ros, there was no response.

At that point—with hardly any juice at all and our first injury of the night under our belts—I realized I'd bought evaporated milk instead of condensed, which led to me

switching off the oven in the middle of baking the piecrust and heading out on my fourth trip to the grocery store that day. It would've been smart, on that trip, to buy more limes, but have you ever cooked dinner for seven people and stabbed yourself in the hand with a fork on the night you've set out to bowl your best friend over with your cooking skills and good looks? Your brain just kind of ceases to function.

When I got back from the grocery store, Ros and Touch still weren't home.

Another text to Ros and Touch. ETA? Need risotto expertise!

Touch: hopefully out of here in twenty minutes

Ros: radio silence.

I had the pie filling done (it didn't taste like much—I had three-quarters of the lime juice I was supposed to, but what was I going to do, go back to the grocery store?), but I'd forgotten to turn the oven back on, so the piecrust still wasn't finished. I chopped onions for the risotto while I waited for it to bake, but they were so strong and the knife was so dull that the only way to keep from crying was by wearing a not-terribly-clear child's snorkeling mask that I found in the basement while breathing through my mouth and hoping that no creative spiders had laid eggs in the mask's rubber rim.

There came a knock at the door. It was Phoebe, holding an enormous bowl of green beans and garlic in one hand and two cases of LaCroix with her fingers. With. Her. Fingers. Talk about superhuman strength.

"Oh dear," she said.

"It's going badly," I said, though through my mask it sounded more like bits boing badbee .

“I see that,” she said.

She put her stuff down onto the counter and surveyed the mess in the living room and then the kitchen, scowling at the puny lime rinds, the bloody paper towel, my floral hammer. The flour that I’d spilled. She cocked her head and sniffed the air.

“Is something burning?”

“Diz it? I cabn’t really sbell—”

She pulled the smoking piecrust from the oven and set it onto the stovetop. I yanked the mask from my face. The pie’s edges looked like pumice.

“We’re screwed,” I said.

She cracked open a can of LaCroix, drank half, and rolled up her sleeves. “This,” she said, “is salvageable.”

She took over the kitchen while I worked on the living room, gathering all the trash into a bag, throwing shoes into the foyer, piling Touchstone’s sides and stacking them on the spiral staircase. In my frenzy I pierced my lower back on the corner of a slat of the staircase, which was so extremely painful I wondered temporarily if I had pierced a kidney. I pushed the chairs into a circle and formed a makeshift dining room table by pushing the antique trunk and coffee table together and draping it with a frog blanket for the tablecloth. I set seven places: seven pink wineglasses, seven knives, seven forks, seven napkins, seven plates.

“Was Snow White just constantly drenched in sweat?” I said, fanning myself with one of the pillows from the couch. “I know she had her animal friends helping her, but it’s not like they had opposable thumbs.”

Phoebe laughed. She never ceased to amaze me: In the time it'd taken me to overhaul the living room, she'd managed to scrape volcanic edges off the piecrust so it resembled something actually edible; chop the carrots and the rest of the onions for the risotto (without the aid of goggles, mind you); put shrimp into a bowl of cool water to defrost; and arrange slices of prosciutto like little rose blossoms on a cutting board. She was sponging down the countertops as she went; the kitchen looked tidier and more organized than it had the day we arrived.

“Phoebe. How did you do this?”

“I like cooking,” she said. “My mom and I do it a lot. During the year I work in her restaurant after school.”

“Is there anything you can't do? You're a literal goddess.”

“Oh, I know. Go shower and get ready if you want. I can get the rice started—honestly, this much will probably take a while to cook.”

“No, no—it's not your job—look, I'll call Ros and Touch—”

“Celia. Go , before you develop heat rash.”

Under the thin stream of water, I tried my best to relax. I pictured the end of the night, tried to see it in my mind's eye, like an episode of Power Jam . Ros would take a bite of their pie—the key lime pie, a labor of love I'd baked mostly for Oliver and only a little bit for them—and suddenly, in candlelight, they would see me in a new way, in a Cinderella dress that revealed all my curves and felt a lot like revenge and just a little bit like hope. Maybe, just maybe, if everything went according to plan, they would leave with their head spinning, wondering why they hadn't gone for me when they had the chance.

Time worked in a funny way at Jess Orlando's house.

It was as though her room were a vortex, one of those tourist traps where trees grew at strange, unnatural angles and clocks went haywire trying to keep good time.

Friday night, lying in bed, her skin against mine, I felt a buzzing, faint, in the distance—a vague sense I'd forgotten something.

"Holy shit," Phoebe said when I emerged. "You look incredible."

"Is it too much?" I said, smoothing the dress over my hips.

"It's definitely a statement," Phoebe said. "Spin. The fit is perfect. It's like it's made for you. Is this vintage? Where did you even get that?"

Before I could answer, the door to the Lily Pad swung open, and I felt my heart soar, anticipating Ros's eyes on me—but it was only Touchstone and Audrey.

"Sorry we're so late, we got totally hung up putting up scenery—whoa," Touchstone said. "That's a dress."

"Thank you?"

"I just mean—that's a dress," he said again.

"Yes, Touchstone, you've correctly identified the article of clothing I'm wearing."

I kicked myself for being sharp with him. Since lunch the other day, even though I'd apologized, something still felt stiff between us. I kept thinking of the way my fingers froze around a tennis racket in the late days of fall, how I needed to blow on them and stretch them to warm them up.

“I just meant... you never wear dresses.”

“Oh my God, you look so pretty ! You too, Phoebe! Andrew, you didn’t tell me we were supposed to dress up,” Audrey said, looking back and forth between their outfits in dismay. Of course she looked incredible—she always did—her curly hair loose, in a long skirt printed with daisies and a tiny T-shirt, a sunflower tucked behind one ear. Touchstone had gone with his traditional shorts and T-shirt combo, the T-shirt a stunning blue-green color that reminded me of the color of the Lovesick Falls spring itself and brought out the gold tones in his hair.

“You only wear things with bibs ,” Touchstone said, whose brain seemed to have short-circuited.

“Should we go change? Andrew, do you have anything fancier than that?” Audrey said.

“There’s no dress code. You look perfect, both of you. I just got carried away, that’s all.”

“Full Celia Gilbert,” Touchstone said with a smile. I was relieved that he was finally able to talk about something other than my outfit.

“The good news is, I managed to sneak some wine from my parents’ stash,” Audrey said, pulling a bottle from her tote bag and shimmying her shoulders. “Let’s get this party started! Where’s your opener?”

“Here’s a better question,” said Touchstone. “Where’s Ros?”

A rap on the door came as if in response.

“Seriously?” he said, moving toward the door. “I know you’ve basically moved out ,

but it's not like you have to knock , you still live here, you can just let yourself in like a normal person—oh. It's you .”

The surprise in his voice was palpable, which meant it could be only one person at the door. I shoved Touch out of the way before he could say anything offensive about Power Jam and held the door open wide for Oliver, who was standing on the lawn in his glasses, pressed linen trousers, and a pink short-sleeve button-down, holding a plate of deviled eggs and looking a bit wary.

“I wasn’t sure I was in the right place,” Oliver said. “You look—wow, Celia. You look stunning.”

“What is he doing here?” Touchstone whispered to me as Oliver passed by us and walked into the house. “I thought tonight was supposed to be about us . You, me, and Ros.”

“You invited Audrey,” I said.

“Yeah, because you told me to, and as a friend ,” Touchstone said.

“Oliver’s my friend.”

“Tell him that,” said Touch, rolling his eyes.

“Is that my yeti friend?” called Phoebe.

Thank God for Phoebe over and over and over. She hugged Oliver like an old friend, popped a deviled egg into her mouth, and spent the next ten minutes insisting we all try them. Audrey uncorked her bottle of wine and poured it into the pink glasses for all of us except Oliver, who begged off saying he had to drive home and rehearse the next day (“Ooh, how responsible,” Touchstone muttered, which prompted me to kick

him in the shin under the table, which probably hurt my bare toe more than it hurt Touchstone's sharp-ass shin). The wine tasted a little funny to me—was wine really supposed to have that much of a sting ?—but I figured at the very least it would help me calm down, so I glugged a half glass and waited to feel more relaxed.

Oliver hugged me hello. He smelled amazing, like the outdoors—cedar and just the faintest hint of moss—and I let the hug linger for longer than I might have otherwise. I wished that Ros were there to see it.

“No wonder you dressed up,” Audrey whispered to me, throwing a dramatic, meaningful glance in Oliver's direction.

I smiled, washed down another (delicious) deviled egg with another sip of (painful) wine, and didn't bother to correct her, that the person I'd dressed up for wasn't even here, that I was still waiting for them to come through the door and lose their mind at the sight of me.

The dinner.

Oh, God.

The dinner.

It's Jess who remembers. She sits up in bed and throws a hand to her forehead.

“Oh, shoot,” she says, “wasn't your friends' dinner party tonight?”

It's Jess who remembers, but it's me who makes us rush. Quick, quick, as fast as we can: Clothes thrown on our bodies. Keys shoved in pockets. We ransack Jess's pathetic pantry for contributions. We grow wings. Then we fly as fast as we can to the Lily Pad, hoping that we're not too late.

By eight p.m., the rice was refusing to come together, the temperature had soared because I'd forgotten to turn the oven off, my arms hurt from risotto stirring, and Ros still hadn't shown up.

Patience. Patience. Patience.

"So, Oliver," Touchstone said, his teeth turned slightly purple with wine, "how does it feel to be on the worst show on television?"

"Andrew, why would you bring that up?" Audrey asked.

"Yeah, come on, man," said Phoebe. "We haven't even had dinner yet."

"It's nothing I haven't heard before," said Oliver. He turned to Touchstone. "You think you're the first person to ask me that? Even I used to think it about my own show sometimes. You know, I originally wanted to do a Shakespeare festival this summer to prove I could be taken seriously—I wanted to put some distance between myself and Power Jam, to prove that I was better than the TV show. But now I think—well, I think that was kind of bad of me, honestly. Is Power Jam Citizen Kane? No. But it's a show that people show up for every day and work really hard on. That kind of care—that kind of investment—that's love." He took a sip of his water. "Besides, if all our fans are as thoughtful and kind as Celia, I think we're the luckiest group of actors on the planet."

"Oh, that's so moving," Audrey said.

"Truly touching," muttered Touchstone.

I wished Ros had been there to hear it. I kept my eyes on my risotto. I highly doubted he would have the same take if he knew that part of the reason I invited him here was to make Ros jealous.

Jess drives us through the night, rolling through stop signs, her foot heavy on the gas.

“Should we make up an excuse? Something wild?” she says.

“Up to you,” I say.

“Do any of your friends know about our plan yet?” she asks.

I shake my head no.

“What are you so scared of? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’m not scared,” I say. “I’m just worried about how Celia’s going to react.”

“If she really loves you, she’ll be happy for you,” said Jess, though I have a sneaking suspicion that the opposite may be true.

In what seemed like a peace offering, Touchstone offered to take Audrey and Oliver down to the river. It was like the whole house exhaled. Phoebe joined me over the pot of rice.

“How’s it going?” Phoebe said.

“Still badly,” I said.

“At least you’re not wearing a scuba mask.”

“No, but I’m not sure sequins are the most breathable fabric.”

“But you look fabulous. Um. Celia—I hate to ask, but is that dress from the Togshop? It’s really not a big deal, as long as it gets back. But because I’m the one who gave

you the key...”

“ Oh ,” I said.

“I know you probably weren’t thinking,” Phoebe said. “And again, it’s a minor infraction, probably not a thing I’ll get in too much trouble for if they find out it’s missing, but...”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she said slowly.

“I’ll take it off right now.”

“You can keep wearing it—like—truly, you look incredible in it, and Ros should see you in it....”

“It’s not worth it,” I said. “You’re you. And this is just a dress.”

“Thanks,” said Phoebe. She took a hard look at the risotto. “I mean, it definitely should be absorbing faster than that.”

She bent and peered beneath the pot.

“Aha!” she said. “I’ve figured out the problem!”

She clicked on the burner, and the flame caught. I left to change into my overalls, and by the time I got back, Ros had arrived.

Ros was sweating profusely. Their T-shirt was on inside out and backward. It was obvious they’d forgotten about the dinner party entirely and come in the middle of

whatever—or whomever—they were doing.

They offered me a half-eaten bag of tortilla chips. “We brought you these,” they said, and they seemed to be breathless, gasping for air, like they’d sprinted all the way from Jess Orlando’s. “I’m so sorry we’re late.”

“You’re never going to believe this,” said Jess. “But the reason we’re late is that there was a wolf on my lawn!”

“What,” said Audrey, “Seriously!? Should I worry about the goats?”

“A wolf,” I said incredulously, looking right at Ros.

“There are wolves here?” Touchstone said.

“There used to be,” said Phoebe, “but that was a long time ago.”

“Maybe they’re coming farther south? I was reading this thing that as food sources become scarcer...,” Oliver said.

“Oh my God,” cried Jess. “I didn’t even notice you were here! Blade, again!”

I linked my arm with Oliver’s in a way that I hoped looked both natural and proprietary. I checked to see if Ros was taking note of our closeness, and much to my delight, they looked surprised to see the two of us behaving, albeit momentarily, as though we were together.

“Oliver, this is my friend Ros,” I said, adding a little extra relish to the word friend.

“Hi,” said Oliver, extending his hand to Ros, “I think we may have met at Lovers’ Lagoon. It’s a pleasure.”

Ros shook his hand and looked to me in disbelief—what on earth was I doing linking arms with Oliver Teller? I pressed myself closer to Oliver and hoped Ros took note of exactly what they were missing.

After that, for a moment, for one brief shining moment, everything was convivial. Sure, I'd had to change out of the Cinderella dress, but I was on Oliver Teller's arm, and that seemed to be tickling some part of Ros's reptilian brain the same way the Cinderella dress would have. Jess hounded Oliver about whether they were going to be renewed for a third season, told him about all the fan boards she participated in. Touchstone had taken over stirring the risotto, and Audrey and Phoebe were out on the porch, looking out over the river. The house was filled with the sounds and smells I had imagined. The dinner was happening; it was really happening.

And there was Ros.

"Hey," they said, touching my free arm to pull me away from Oliver Teller. "I'm really sorry we were late."

Their apology hung between us for a moment. I wanted to yell at them. I wanted to kick them in the shins, take them by the shoulders, say, What the fuck, we planned this, and you showed up with some bullshit excuse about a wolf when you were off having sex, which you already do, constantly, while I'm probably going to die a virgin . I wanted to say, I wore a dress for you, but you were too late to see it . I wanted to say, Maybe you don't want me, but I thought at least we were friends .

Ros looked at me with their big amber eyes.

"I'm really, really sorry," Ros said.

"You were late," I said.

“I know,” they said.

My anger threatened to boil up and over. We’d planned this . We’d planned this, and they were late.

But I didn’t want to make a scene. I didn’t want to ruin the party. So I tugged on the tag of their T-shirt, the place where their chain used to be, and pushed my anger down the way we’d learned to press down coffee grounds in Henry’s french press.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Let’s just eat.”

No one was hungry. It was too hot, for one thing, and for another, we’d gorged ourselves on the deviled eggs and the artichoke dip and the cheese. Everyone managed a few polite bites, but for the most part the risotto sat in gluey lumps on our plates, developed a kind of skin-like sheen that reminded me of sci-fi movies—something horribly alien and natal.

I strategically squeezed myself next to Oliver, practically sitting in his lap, across from Ros and Jess and Phoebe, while Audrey and Touchstone took the head of the table. My elbow bumped Oliver’s every time I moved. No one wanted to eat, but we felt obligated to stay at the table, munching on Phoebe’s green beans with our fingers.

“How’s Abominable going?” said Audrey.

Oliver, Phoebe, and I groaned.

“It’s now called Snow Walker ,” Oliver said. “And it’s going to be fine. The lead actor has stopped bickering with the director long enough to learn his lines, so we’re in a much better place than we were a few weeks ago.”

“I heard they’re getting back together,” said Audrey.

“It does seem like that’s happening,” Oliver said. “But whatever’s going on with her, it seems her vision is finally coming together. She decided to stop taking the play so seriously and have more fun with it.”

“Have you learned all your lines?” I asked.

“Ook, ook,” Oliver said, and everyone at the table laughed, me the hardest and longest of anyone, and I lay my hand on his forearm to indicate just how funny I found him. Touchstone rolled his eyes at me dramatically. “See? The whole thing works much better as a comedy than it does a really serious play. There are still moments of emotional resonance, but overall it’s much lighter. It’s not the disaster I thought it was going to be.”

“No ,” said Phoebe. “Now it’s just the costume that’s the disaster.”

I was legitimately shocked to hear the doubt in Phoebe’s voice.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “It’s going so well. Every time I see you, you’re over there sketching or coming up with a new prototype.”

“I mean, Phoebe’s a genius,” said Audrey. “We know this.”

“Yeah, well, it’d be great if some of that genius decided to show up,” said Phoebe.

“Wait,” I said. “Do you really think it’s going badly?”

“I’m just... I really shouldn’t be saying this in front of the actor, so just promise me you won’t remember this, okay, Oliver?”

I cupped my hands over his ears in what felt like a very ingeniously flirty move. Again, Touchstone shook his head at me, like he couldn’t believe my outlandish

behavior. Ros, unfortunately, failed to notice; they were picking at their risotto, like they'd rather be anywhere else in the whole entire world.

"Um, Celia? You can stop," Oliver said.

"Sorry!" I said, and let my hands trail along his shoulder. This time Ros saw, and I swear a flicker of disbelief crossed over their face.

"I just don't know if it's going to come together," said Phoebe. "I'm so behind. Honestly, I feel a little bit like I'm being chased. We open so soon, and I have no idea how I'm going to get it all done. I know it's this incredible opportunity, and I don't want to let Benna down, especially now that she's given me this chance. I'm just so disappointed in myself. I mean, sure, it's not, like, awful . I just know that I can do better, and I can't figure out how. It feels like there's some missing ingredient I haven't landed on yet. I mean—Oliver."

I took my hands away from his shoulders.

"Did you feel, when you put it on, that you were fully the yeti?"

"Not yet," he admitted.

"I believe you mean not yeti," muttered Touchstone. It was the most disparaging I'd ever heard a pun sound.

"I really do think it's going to come together, Phoebe," Oliver said.

"I can help," I said. "Seriously. Whatever you need. Just ask."

"Thanks," Phoebe said.

“She’s a good helper. Just ask Ros. They would have failed physics without Celia’s help. In some cultures, that’s known as cheating,” Touchstone said.

To this sudden barb, no one had any response—the room was full of the sounds of people half-heartedly eating their risotto. Touchstone reached for more wine; he was nearly finished with his second glass. He was in a mean mood, no doubt perturbed by Oliver Teller’s presence, and he seemed determined to cause a scene tonight.

“Can I ask about this house?” Oliver said.

“Please do,” I said, batting my eyelashes at him and hoping Ros noticed.

“It’s sooooo cool,” Audrey said. “It’s funny—I’ve lived here my whole life, but I never knew this little road was back here.”

“Me neither,” said Phoebe. “It’s so sneaky. Like a weird little hidden pocket.”

“I didn’t trust Touchstone when he told me this was the turn. I was sure we’d have to back out and keep going,” I said.

“Well, I’m jealous,” said Audrey. “Living in a house with your friends for three months? My parents would never let me do anything like this.”

“Seriously,” said Phoebe. “Talk about lucky.”

“We’re really lucky,” I agreed, resting my head on Oliver’s shoulder.

“We are lucky,” said Ros. “But we also have Celia.”

It was the first thing they’d said all dinner. Everyone turned to look at them.

“What do you mean?” said Oliver. I lifted my head to give them my full attention.

“I mean, like—we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. Not just the dinner. But here, together. She organized the whole thing. Came up with the plan in like an entire afternoon. It was kind of amazing. She just, like... sprang into action.”

“It wasn’t that big a deal,” I said.

“You made a fully developed proposal with appendices,” said Touchstone.

“And gave a presentation,” said Ros. “That you practiced .”

“Which was ultimately unnecessary. They just sort of said yes.”

“Yeah, because they were saying yes to you ,” Ros said. “You think they would have let me and Touchstone come out here on our own? You’re the whole reason we’re here. You’re the whole reason we’re friends in the first place. So—yeah. We’re definitely lucky to be here. I mean that in every sense of the word. But we also have something that’s better than luck, and that thing is Celia.”

I felt it in my body, like the sun rising in my rib cage. Better than luck. Had there ever been a better compliment?

“Whose house is it?” said Oliver.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

The question hit like a chime, like the opening note of a song I knew by heart and had belted out a thousand times. Across the table, Ros's eyes caught mine.

"Well," said Touchstone slowly, carefully, like any wrong step would set off a bomb. "It's my uncle's."

I wasn't going to say my line. I really wasn't. It didn't matter, the particulars of the arrangement. What mattered was that we were here, eating (or not eating, as stuffed as we were with artichoke dip), all together, and frankly it was sort of a pain—and maybe even kind of rude—to get all mired in the details of property just for our own amusement.

But then Ros smiled at me, and I remembered our old game, and I couldn't resist.

"Technically," I said, "he's not your uncle."

"Technically," Ros said, that wry smile spreading across their face, "he's Touchstone's cousin."

"Oh, Jesus," Touchstone said, putting his face in his hands. "Do we really have to do this now?"

"Wait, what? What's going on? He's not actually your uncle?" said Phoebe.

"For all intents and purposes, he's my uncle," said Touch.

"Isn't it intensive purposes?" 22 Audrey said.

“Okay,” said Ros. “Let us explain it. The cabin belongs to Henry .”

“Henry is the one who Touchstone calls uncle,” I said.

“Good start,” said Touch.

“ What is happening? ” said Oliver.

“Henry is married to Vish, but he used to be married to a guy named Freddie.”

“We don’t like Freddie,” said Ros.

“Freddie’s a dick,” I agreed. “But he is Touchstone’s... cousin ...?”

“Stepcousin!” said Ros.

“Yes! Freddie’s mom was married to Touchstone’s uncle. But that was her second marriage. So Freddie is Touchstone’s uncle’s stepkid, and he was married to Henry, but then they got divorced.”

“Right, because Freddie is a dick. But Touchstone’s family hung out with Henry a lot.”

“Henry is the best!”

“And so now they just call him uncle because it’s easier.”

We turned to Touchstone, holding one shared breath. Touchstone thundered out a drumroll that shook the glasses on the table, sent the liquid sloshing inside. The pheasant—Angelo! I’d just remembered his name—on the wall gazed down at us. No one spoke. Had we done it? Had we gotten all the particulars in the right order?

“Ding, ding, ding,” said Touchstone.

There was an eruption that shook Angelo on his perch. I shrieked with joy. Ros leaped to their feet and bowed theatrically, sweeping nearly to the floor with a flourish of their wrists. We’d done it. We’d done it. We were magicians who had pulled rabbits out of a joint hat. We were trapeze artists in sparkling leotards soaring through the air, making the catch at the last second, our bodies spangled and bejeweled beneath the lights.

“I honestly followed none of that,” said Audrey.

“Same,” said Phoebe.

“Welcome to my world,” said Touchstone.

“Okay, what was that?” said Oliver.

Touchstone sighed heavily. “That,” he said, “was Ros and Celia.”

The conversation continued. Touchstone walked them through the lineage again, everyone getting more confused with each subsequent step. All those little details, all those little particulars—there were so many places to get tripped up. What did it matter, whether the house belonged to Touchstone’s uncle or Touchstone’s tangential relative or the Frog Prince? What were we trying to prove, by remembering all these stupid facts? Because that’s what the question had come to feel like: like a proof on a test. If together, Ros and I could remember them, all the totally arbitrary, nonsensical ways Touchstone was related to the owners of the house, it would mean something.

What mattered was that Ros and I had remembered together, had worked through it together, had paid enough attention to each other and our history that we were able, at that dinner table, to build something shared. What mattered was that we’d seen the

vision together: the rabbits and the sparkling crystals on our leotards and the flips on the trapeze. We'd glimpsed our friendship, and it was beautiful.

We did it , Ros mouthed to me, and I knew they meant more than explain about Touchstone's uncle. They meant the whole summer—we'd done it, we'd made it to Lovesick Falls, this place that had existed only in our dreams, and now we were having the summer we could never have imagined.

We're stars , I mouthed back.

After that—it felt like we were us.

I drag Celia by the hand and pull her down to the river.

I could keep up with Ros in my overalls. I yelled at Touch to follow us.

The moon is big and full and deserves to be howled at.

"Are you seriously howling?" Touch said, right in step alongside us.

I bark at my friends: Join in, join in, join in.

We howled together, our pack of three.

"Yo!" cried Phoebe. "What are y'all doing down here?"

It was cooler down by the water. The sun had long since set. Back up the hill, the Lily Pad was glowing like a golden ball against the black woods; everyone's voices carried down toward the bank.

"Thank you so much for all your help getting dinner ready," I said.

“Everything was so good,” Ros said. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry all the work fell to you.”

“Yeah,” said Touchstone. “You really did an amazing job.”

“Oh yeah. It’s no problem at all,” Phoebe said. “I really like to cook, actually. I had fun.”

“Well... thanks anyway,” Ros said. They looked back up to the hill. “I should go make sure Jess hasn’t left me for Oliver Teller.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Touchstone.

The two of them loped back up the hill, and I watched the backs of my friends recede, my heart filled with love, even if they did drive me nuts half the time. It was just me and Phoebe then, looking out at the darkness of the water.

“Hey,” I said, remembering our dinner conversation. “I didn’t realize you were so stressed about the yeti costume.”

“It’s not very helpful to show up in the costume shop and be pulling my hair out. It doesn’t really contribute to a positive work environment, if you know what I mean.”

“It’s funny,” I said. “You bend over backward to help other people. Like, you were so nice to me in the shop, my first week. You taught me how to sew, how not to get my face bitten off by Jacques, how to find cell service—I mean, Phoebe, you basically cooked this whole dinner. But you don’t ever let people think about helping you.”

“Mmmm,” said Phoebe. “Celia with the insight.”

“Don’t be a dweeb,” I said. “You act so tough. You are tough; I get that. Like, you literally sewed through your finger and didn’t lose your cool. That’s fucking metal.”

“Thank you.”

“But, like... even metal people need help, too.”

I waited for her to brush me off or tell me that I was being overly sentimental. But then she said something I didn’t know I was thinking, too, until she said it.

“I wish we lived in the same place.”

“Me too,” I said. “I mean—who knows. Maybe we will one day.”

The voices were growing louder, carried down toward us where we stood.

“You want to hear something funny?” said Phoebe.

“Definitely.”

“You know the wine they’ve all been drinking?”

“Yeah... I stopped drinking it. It tasted weird.”

“Me too. That’s because it’s not really wine,” Phoebe said.

“It’s not?”

“It’s cooking sherry.”

“Wait, for real?”

We erupted into laughter. I cried harder than I’d cried over the onions. The stress of the dinner party fell off my shoulders. Ros was my friend again, and all that was left

was to serve the pie. We were home free.

“Phoebe,” I said. “I just want to make crystal clear—like, whatever you need—like, someone to model the yeti costume for you, someone to drive you to the hospital when you sew through your finger, someone to bring you an emergency case of LaCroix—I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, Celia,” she said. “You’re a good friend.”

“Okay, okay, they’re back,” yelled Touchstone as soon as we climbed the steps. Everyone had arranged themselves on the porch: Touchstone was perched on the edge of the couch, not so much sitting as hovering, like he might have to jump up at any moment. Audrey looked exhausted; Oliver, annoyed. Ros and Jess were curled up together on the couch.

“Important question,” said Touch.

“I’m actually not sure how important it is,” said Oliver.

“Who do you think would win in a fight? Me or Oliver?” His face was red from cooking sherry.

“Oh, Jesus,” Phoebe said.

“I’ll get the pie,” I said.

The pie, in spite of its dubious beginnings, had actually turned out beautifully. Phoebe had dutifully scraped off the charred edges of the crust so that it resembled something more properly baked. I’d whipped the cream on top and shaped it artfully, transforming it into churning whitecaps. With a cheese grater, I’d zested one of the runty limes, tiny curls of green settling over the choppy whipped-cream waves.

It was, if I do say so myself, a work of art.

A work of art that might also finally force Ros to see what they were missing out on. Jess might be able to win in a fight, but could she bake? Ros would never get a girlfriend who baked such delicious key lime pie.

I stepped onto the porch balancing the dish on one hand—it was surprisingly heavy—and silence fell. All eyes were on me. I wondered if this was what Touchstone or Oliver or Audrey felt like when they stepped out onstage, if this was what Phoebe felt when she saw her costumes on the stage.

“And here we have Mr. Oliver Teller’s favorite dessert,” I said, placing the pie in the center of the table.

“Wow,” said Oliver.

“It’s gorgeous ,” said Phoebe.

“You made that in our oven?” said Touch. “How?”

I looked around. I was dimly aware of the praise that people were heaping on the pie. It was what I’d wanted, sort of—it was all just coming from the wrong people.

“Where’s Ros?” I said. My voice was thin. I hated how badly I wanted them to see this pie that I had labored over, that I had worked so hard for. I hated that they handed me weak coffee and I told them it tasted delicious. I hated that I tried so hard, that all I did was try, that I was standing here with a pie I’d baked for Oliver, not them, and they were nowhere to be found. Sure, I might be better than luck, but I would never be magic, and if I wanted Ros to see me, to love me, to choose me, what I really needed was to be magic. Because of course that was what I wanted, even more than to make them jealous: I wanted them to realize they’d been in love with me this

whole time.

“They didn’t leave , did they?”

“No—no—I think they just went off with Jess somewhere for a second,” said Touch.

“They’re coming back. At least—I think they’re coming back.”

We all stared at the pie.

“Can we eat it, or...”

“We’re waiting,” I said. “For Ros and Jess.”

I was making everyone feel awkward; I knew that. I’d brought the conversation to a screeching halt.

“It looks gorgeous, Celia,” said Oliver. “Truly spectacular.”

“ This guy,” said Touchstone.

It wasn’t the worst thing that Touchstone had said to Oliver that night. It was barely audible—an exhalation, a mutter, an aside. But it was ultimately the one that set Oliver off.

“Okay,” Oliver said, and he popped to his feet. “Celia, thank you so much for the very nice time. Phoebe, thank you for all your cooking. Audrey, it was lovely to see you again. I’ll see some of you on Monday.”

“ Wait , what?” I said. “You’re leaving ?”

He was leaving—in fact, he was already halfway around the house, and I was

following him as best I could. Oliver was quite quick.

“Oliver,” I called. “Wait.”

He paused outside his car and folded his arms. He looked at me expectantly. I didn’t quite know what to say.

“You can’t go ,” I said.

“Look—it’s not a big deal, all right? It’s just... it’s not fun for me, being here.”

“He’s just drunk and being an asshole....”

“ I’ll say,” said Oliver.

“It turns out he was drinking cooking sherry the whole time, which I don’t know if it makes a difference, but maybe there’s, like, an increased level of belligerence....”

“He tried to get me to fight him.”

“I know, I know—I’m so sorry—I know he’s not a fan of Power Jam , but I really didn’t expect him to be such a dick to you just because he doesn’t like your show.”

“ Power Jam ,” Oliver repeated, looking at me with an expression that was caught somewhere between disdain and pity. “Celia. Come on. Do you really think he’s acting this way because of Power Jam ?”

It hit me like a punch, but one that seemed to be coming from the inside. Like a million little people were drumming on the backs of my eyes. All the heavy food we’d eaten was roiling in my stomach.

Of course Touchstone wasn't acting this way because of Power Jam .

Pining sucks , Touchstone had said. It suuuuucks.

We're competing for girls , he had claimed.

"I mean—look, yeah, we should all be nice to each other, but I can take a certain amount of abuse. Do you know how many guys thought I shouldn't have been with Ronnie? They had no problem telling me that, to my face. His behavior is fine. What makes me really upset..." He paused, and his voice got very small, a cautious little mouse squeezing itself through a teeny, tiny hole. "Is that I sort of thought there was something happening between us?"

I didn't know what to say. I felt like I had swallowed a frog. Of course there had been something happening between us—all that horsing around in the costume shop, our date to the spring, the sunglasses, the lunches at the Dropped Acorn. But I had been too in love with Ros to really give us a chance, and I saw that now, fully.

Oliver was still talking. "Now it just seems like... well, it seems like tonight you were mostly interested in making me your prop."

"Please just stay," I said, and my voice was suddenly hoarse. "We haven't even had pie yet—it's good, you'll like it—it's nowhere near as good as the stuff at the Dropped Acorn, but—"

"It's better for me to go," he said. "I just—I want you to know something. I should have told you this earlier. But you looked incredible in that dress."

I was shaking when I stepped back onto the patio.

"You are such an asshole," I said.

I don't think I'd ever been so angry—at Touchstone, at Ros, at myself. How had I not seen any of this sooner? How had I let things get this far? Ros and Jess were back from wherever they'd gone, cuddled up on the couch.

“Me , the asshole?” said Touchstone.

“Guys,” said Phoebe. “Guys.”

“I'm not the one who left in the middle of dinner!” said Touch. “I'm not the one who showed up two hours late reeking of sex !”

“Whoa,” said Jess. “Whoa, whoa, whoa.”

“Leave Ros out of this,” I said.

“Leave Ros out of this!? Leave Ros out of this?! When have we ever left Ros out of this? You want to start leaving Ros out of this now, right this second, after years and years and years of being so obsessed with them that you can't even see straight?”

“Shut up, Touchstone.”

“I think everyone should chill!” said Audrey.

“Do you honestly think they don't know? That you're subtle ? News flash, Celia, you've never been subtle in your whole entire life, least of all when you're offering to lick Ros's boots and peel them a grape and tend to their every waking need!”

“Shut up ,” I said.

“I don't even know what makes me more angry, the fact that you are so obsessed with them or that they let you be obsessed with them! Oh, look who's back, just

waltzing in here whenever they fucking please,” said Touchstone. “How convenient. Oh, you know what’d be a good idea—why don’t you tell Celia your plan, Ros?”

“What plan?” I said.

“Oh, it’s a really great plan,” said Touchstone. “I heard them talking about it earlier. I warned you both a thousand times how thin the walls were, did I not?”

A pit was forming in my stomach.

This was not how the night was supposed to end. This was not how the story was supposed to go.

“Tell me,” I said. My voice had developed a steely edge.

They knew. They knew how I felt. And they did not care.

“I’m not coming back home with you in the fall,” said Ros. “I’m staying here with Jess.”

They explained. They explained, and they explained, and they explained. And I was honestly so angry I had trouble listening. They were still explaining when I lifted the untouched pie—the dessert that, in concert with the dress, in concert with the whole evening, was meant to change their mind—and hurled it at their head.

To this day, my father maintains that I could’ve been a great tennis player.

Here’s the thing: I’m not sure he’s wrong .

Sure, my serve needed a ton of work, and okay, my forehands frequently sailed into the next court, but I wasn’t actually that bad. It wasn’t like I was destined for

Wimbledon or anything like that, but I could hit a good shot. Like with anything, I would have had to practice if I wanted to get better. But it felt really good to be able to hit a good shot—full-body good, like everything was aligned, everything was attuned. The swing of the racket, the pop of the ball against the strings. The sound of the tennis court: the rounded pop-pop-pop, the silence, the squeaking shoes. I loved it so much. More than I loved the sound itself, I loved the sense that you were the one creating that sound. The sound couldn't happen without you.

Still—I quit. According to my father, my problem was mental.

Again, he's not wrong. But it might be more accurate to say that tennis made me really, really angry.

It was one thing when it was going well. Yeah, yeah, the sound of the court, inhabiting your body, being in tune with the universe—how fucking magical. But most of the time? Most of the time tennis was a fucking drag. Most of the time, tennis made me want to kill someone.

Shots skewed left. Shots skewed right. Shots went straight into the net even when I knew exactly how to hit them. Serves went out. Double fault. Serves went into the net. Double fault again. Lose, lose, lose, even though you knew exactly how to hit the ball, and even though you were playing someone worse than you, someone named Camille in a visor who just kept hitting these stupid fucking dinky shots—no quality to them or beauty in them at all, just relentless, obnoxious, dink, dink, dink, these pathetic little shots over the net. Camille won. I lost. I threw my racket and got a talking-to from the coach.

“Just don't get so angry,” Ros had said with a shrug, like emotions were something totally within my control, and theirs. Like one day they wouldn't pour acid on someone's baseball cap. Like one day they wouldn't fall in love with someone because they threw a perfect punch. “Try deep breathing,” my mom had said, like she

didn't yell fuckhead at someone who didn't use their blinker.

Since getting less angry didn't seem like a reasonable option to me, I did the next best thing: I quit tennis. No tennis, no anger. Problem solved.

I learned two things on the porch that night.

The first thing, granted, was something that I probably already knew but wasn't fully ready to admit—the way you hang on to old sweaters you've outgrown, or the way you ignore certain lingering glances from certain friends. The fact of the matter was I could still get plenty angry, even if I never picked up another tennis racket in my life.

The second thing was a bit of a surprise. I was an okay swimmer, and I might've been a great tennis player, but I would have been an ASTONISHING baseball player. A pitcher, to be specific. I'd need to work on my aim, that was true—but not everyone can throw a key lime pie at their best friend with enough force to shatter an entire picture window.

Footnotes

20 Regular limes, it turns out, are actually known in the biz as Persian limes or Tahiti limes and are actually a cross between key limes and lemons—that is to say, the lime we most commonly think of as a lime is actually a hybrid, a triploid cross, to be specific, being that key limes and lemons are both citrus crosses as well. They're sweeter than key limes, tend to be seedless, and grow on bushes without thorns. I found this to be fascinating; indeed, when I returned home, I wasted about twenty minutes reading all about them when I could have been cleaning the Lily Pad or prepping food or doing any number of tasks that would have helped the party not be a disaster.

21 I'd never actually eaten paté, but this seemed like a good time to start.

22 In fact, no , it was not intensive purposes , though plenty of people believe that to be true. Intensive purposes is an example of an eggcorn—a word or phrase that sounds like and is mistakenly used in a seemingly logical way for another word or phrase, e.g., expresso instead of espresso . Nip it in the butt instead of nip it in the bud . But—I digress, lost again in the details of language.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

EIGHTEEN COURT LANE , or Dog Therapy

There was glass everywhere. And pie.

“We’re dead,” said Touchstone. “We’re dead, we’re dead, we’re dead.”

Glass across the porch. Glass inside the house. Glass in Henry’s dead plants I’d only just now realized how much we’d failed to water, and so they had turned brown and shriveled. Glass in the frog blanket; glass still trapped in the window, hanging like stalactites, like jagged teeth, like a booby-trapped tomb. Glass on the couch that we’d moved closer to the window the first morning, where Ros and I had once taken a tandem nap, sacked out like two dogs in a sunbeam, the summer spread lazy and endless before us.

“Shoes,” said Phoebe. “Who’s wearing shoes?”

Audrey was wearing shoes. Phoebe was wearing shoes. They spontaneously dematerialized and rematerialized with their arms full: Ros’s lace-ups, Touchstone’s Birkenstocks, my slip-on boots. My knees were weak. My body was numb. I’d thrown a pie at Ros’s head. I’d destroyed the Lily Pad. I’d destroyed the Lily Pad.

“Celia,” Phoebe said gently. “Put on your shoes.”

“You tried to kill me ,” said Ros.

“I think that’s a little dramatic,” said Phoebe.

“I didn’t—I wasn’t—”

“You could have taken my head off ,” said Ros.

“Really not sure that’s the case,” said Phoebe.

“I found a broom!” said Jess. She sounded very far away, even though she was close by.

“I couldn’t—it wasn’t—”

“I’m gonna be sick,” said Touchstone, and threw up over the porch railing.

“Oh,” said Audrey. “Oh, oh, oh.”

A broom was placed in my hand. I’d tried to kill Ros. I’d tried to kill Ros. No, I hadn’t. I loved Ros. Ros was my best friend.

“Celia,” Phoebe said. “Shoes.”

“I honestly didn’t mean to—I’m so sorry—”

“Get out,” said Touchstone, before he retched again. “Celia. Get out .”

“You mean, like, leave ?” I said.

He threw up again and shot me a thumbs-up.

“Dude, you can’t just kick her out ,” said Ros.

“Andrew, you’re not thinking clearly,” said Audrey.

“It’s my uncle’s house, and she needs to go ,” he said.

“Touch, I can help—”

“Just get out, ” he said. “Leave.”

Phoebe let me stay the night at her house.

“They’re my best friend . What is wrong with me?”

She held me stiffly in her arms. It was the first hug we ever had, and we’d joke about it later, when hugging became second nature to us—how bad we were at it, how weird it was.

“This will all look better in the morning,” Phoebe said.

But I couldn’t wait that long.

I was home by six a.m. I crept in through the back door on tiptoe like a cat burglar in my own home. In the mudroom, I caught a smell—musty, the faintest hint of mothballs, the dry smell of tennis balls in cans, towels we used to dry off the dogs after they went swimming—and it took me a few seconds to realize it was, in fact, the house. How strange: to not even recognize the smell of your own home.

A single light was on in the kitchen, which I knew was my mother, up early, making coffee, the dogs lying at her feet. She’d be wearing the soft clothes that she preferred for writing—an old pink bathrobe over soft pants, and her hair would be piled thick on her head, streaked through with gray. She hadn’t heard me come in, so I watched her for a moment—the steady thin stream of water over the grounds, the slow trickle into the carafe. I knew she loved this ritual—it took forever but it made her feel like an alchemist—but I’d never actually been up early enough to see it.

It looked so nice that for a moment I regretted coming, or at least regretted not sending her a text, warning her that I was on the way. It'd been too late to call, and then too early, and now I couldn't bear the thought of her solitude being disturbed—and what a way to disturb it, too. HEY, MOM, I THREW A PIE THROUGH A WINDOW AND ALL MY FRIENDS—and also that one guy from Power Jam —HATE ME. I contemplated slipping out the back door, continuing to drive, east maybe, until the car ran out of gas.

But then the dogs saw me, and she saw me, too, and then there was no turning back.

“Surprise,” I said weakly.

“Cece!”

Her arms were around me so quickly I'd wondered why I'd ever left home. Why would you leave a place where an alchemist hugged you good morning, where you could lay your cheek against the shoulder of a soft pink bathrobe the same way you'd done as a baby, where dogs would whine with happiness and lick your knees hello?

“You scared me,” she said. “What are you doing here? What's wrong?”

She was still hanging on to me. My mother's specialty—besides convincing people that the transits of particular planets would have an impact on whether they should sign financial contracts on particular days—was long hugs. We'd stand there till noon if I didn't initiate disentanglement, which I did now.

“Hi,” I said. “Nothing's wrong.”

“But it's so early ,” she said. “Are you sick ? Do you have a fever?”

She laid a cool hand against my forehead. Buckets set about licking my ankles, which

he would do for the next fifteen minutes unless I stopped him. Tabitha, gorgeous girl, clever baby, observed me with her trademark superior air. I wondered if she'd get along with Jacques. Between the two of them, they could probably figure out how to rob a bank.

"I'm fine," I said—a grand total of three minutes before I snapped at her, which was probably a new record. "I just thought it'd be fun to come say hi for a little bit."

I could hear how flimsy that sounded and wished that I had Touchstone's gift of gab, or Ros's charisma, or Phoebe's confidence. But my mom, miraculously, seemed to be willing to accept this, at least temporarily—maybe because it was so early, or maybe because she knew I wasn't ready to talk.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" I said.

"I'm totally glad to see you," my mom replied. She hugged me again—one hug was not enough; there had to be multiple. "I want to hear all about Lovesick. How's Andrew? How's Ros? Did you drop them off already?"

"They stayed," I said into her shoulder, and on the second hug, Tabitha's knowing face visible just over my mother's shoulder, I felt it all at once: all the late nights at the theater catching up with me—the quick changes, burning myself with the steamer, the lonely nights at the Lily Pad. The stomachache I'd been battling since I left Lovesick Falls. How the summer had turned out nothing like I'd planned; how, in fact, it seemed to be the exact opposite of what I'd wanted. Instead of bringing everyone closer together, I'd managed to drive everyone away.

"They didn't—" My voice caught, and then I didn't know if I was crying or yawning. "They didn't—they didn't—they didn't want to come."

"Cece? What's wrong?"

“Nothing—I’m just tired—”

I was fully crying then, like a baby, in utter collapse. It was like my bones had melted. My mom held me. I couldn’t believe what a mess I’d made of things. Sure, we could fix the window and sweep up the glass, and I’d spend the rest of my life paying for it, but the rest of it seemed totally impossible to put back together.

“Buckets is standing on my foot,” I said.

“He wants to help,” my mom said.

“It hurts,” I said.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t know why I’m so upset....”

“I think you should go rest,” my mom said.

I listened to her. It turned out sometimes, it was really nice to not be in charge.

I slept for what felt like a hundred years. The afternoon sun was bright and hot, bathing my room in yellow light. I’d tried to make some changes over the years, but my room still looked like a little girl’s—a print of a dancing ballerina mouse, the tea sets I used to collect. I had cleaned my room in a frenzy before leaving—there were still vacuum cleaner marks on the carpet, and the rest of my summer reading was stacked neatly on my desk, strategically left at home so it’d be fresh in my brain for school. I thought I knew exactly what I’d need the next time I’d be home. But none of this helped.

I took another shower, even though I’d taken one at Phoebe’s. I still felt like there

was glass dust everywhere, making me twitchy, uncomfortable. The water pressure was so strong it nearly knocked me off my feet. The shower grew steamy, and slowly, everything grew comforting: the fruity smell of my shampoo, the ragged edge of the old monogrammed towel, the huge bucket of lotion I couldn't justify bringing to Lovesick since it took up so much space. I sifted through the dregs of my closet, hopeful to find something that still fit, something that I didn't hate too much. Some old running shorts were tighter than I remembered but worked fine, though a serviceable shirt was harder to come by. I'd left behind the ones I didn't like, and then a handful of them were Ros's, which meant that they were an immediate no. I finally found one buried way down deep with my pajamas: an old shirt I used to sleep in as a kid, slate gray that was faded from so many washings, printed with a diagram of the solar system. Sleep had turned it soft, almost threadbare in parts, but I was shocked to see that the fit was almost perfect—loose but not too loose, roomy in the shoulders. I remembered it coming down to my knees.

“There she is!” my dad called when I emerged downstairs. “And she smells like a walking fruit salad!”

“What time is it?”

“Almost two. You hungry? You'll have to try some of this bread I made,” he said. “Then I was thinking if you'd be up for it, it might be nice to hit the court, it's a beautiful day—”

“Celia's going to walk the dogs with me,” my mom said. There was a firmness in her voice that made me strangely afraid.

I felt like I had been summoned to the principal's office—not that I really knew what that felt like, but I imagined it was something like this: a creeping sense of dread, of impending doom. I did not want to have to account for my sudden presence back home, or my tears. I did not want to explain to her all the ways in which I'd done my

friends wrong.

“Take it to go,” my dad said, handing me a hunk of warm baguette. “You have to eat.”

Bread in hand, dogs in the lead, my mom and I headed off on the normal route, toward the college campus at the end of the road. Tabitha was the confident leader, with Buckets stopping to sniff every tree, getting himself tangled in the leash no fewer than three times at the end of the block. I took a bite of the baguette and chewed slowly—my dad had added some butter, a generous sprinkle of salt.

“This is really good,” I said, chewing.

“He’s been baking a lot,” she said. She adjusted the leashes and looked at me. “I haven’t seen that shirt in a while.”

“It was deep in the pajama drawer,” I said.

I saw her do the math—that I hadn’t brought anything home with me, which meant I’d left in a rush. There it was: that feeling of dread again. She had an extremely piercing brown-eyed gaze that she used, mercifully, in limited quantities, but sometimes she really let it fly, and in those moments, I was half-convinced that my mother was maybe just a hair magic. Like in spite of the very obvious truth that astrology was made-up, there was still something that she was able to see and interpret the way the rest of us were not. It was a gift, and it was unpleasant to have that gift turned on you.

Just let me finish my bread , I thought.

She seemed, somehow, to hear this.

“Well, it fits you nicely,” she said, and tugged on Buckets’s leash. “Come on, Buckets. We’re not going to smell every flower.”

At the end of our street we crossed over into the campus, where my mom had been walking the dogs for years. The school was small and quiet—it was a Catholic college, and most of the students were commuters—but the campus was open to the public, and it was actually kind of pretty in a storybook way. The buildings were made of stone with red-shingled roofs, there were ponds filled with ducks and swans, and for several years, sapphire-chested peacocks had wandered the campus, haughty denizens of some lesser royal court. (“Sometimes I think Tabitha got her attitude from them,” my mom had said once.) Ros and I used to collect their feathers when they dropped, along with other treasures we’d found—a cracked blue shell of a robin’s egg, a rock shaped like a heart, and once, the parched white shell of a turtle. I’d clung to these objects—they were still on display in my bedroom, balanced along the top of my bookshelf. They were probably covered in dust now.

“Whatever happened to the peacocks?” I said.

“I don’t know,” my mom said. “Flew away, maybe? Or got eaten.”

That seemed right—another beautiful thing gobbled up, a messy crunch of blood and bones and feathers.

We trotted over the wooden bridge, the dogs keeping their noses low, and past the little outbuilding with the waterwheel.

“We’re excited to come see the show soon,” my mom said.

“Oh—yeah,” I said. “I think... I don’t know. I’m not convinced you should come anymore. We still have a lot of work to do on the costumes. And it might not be any good.”

“Nonsense,” my mom said. “Is Mr. Blade still as charming and conscientious as ever?”

“He is,” I said mournfully. I could have used his sunglasses now, though they were somewhere in the Lily Pad. I doubted, based on where we’d left things, that Oliver would ever want to talk to me again.

“And Ros?”

“I actually haven’t seen that much of Ros,” I said.

“Really?” my mom said. “Aren’t you living in the same room?”

“I mean—technically, yes. But they started dating someone up in Lovesick,” I said, proceeding with caution, not wanting to give my mom too much information, lest she subject me to her take on things, which I wasn’t quite ready to hear yet. “Anyway. They just sort of... started spending all their time there. It was just a little bit at first, but then it was a lot.”

“Oh,” my mom said. “You didn’t mention any of that to me when we talked on the phone.”

I shrugged.

“It didn’t seem like a big deal at the time,” I said.

“Well, that’s nice for Ros. Though I don’t think it’s very nice of them to just abandon you like that.”

“Abandon feels a little strong,” I said. “What are you doing?”

We'd come to the end of the pond, the place where we normally turned right and continued on with our route, across the field, up the stone path by the gazebo. But Tabitha and my mom had turned the other way; Buckets, too, was trying to follow them.

"We've started going this way," she said.

"What? Since when?"

"Mmm," my mom said, like that was an answer to my question. "There's a spot down here in the creek where the water gets deep enough to swim. Are you coming?"

It was strange to be walking a different way. It reminded me of what Audrey and Phoebe had been saying about the Lily Pad: how strange it was to discover new pockets of your own hometown. We crossed on the back side of the dorms, passed an old greenhouse that seemed to have been abandoned, joined up with a path that had been worn by other walkers.

We came to a spot with a deep swimming hole and unclipped the dogs. My mom found a stick on the bank, and she tossed it in, and the dogs leaped in after it. They swam in happy circles like fat black seals, both their mouths chomped around one stick.

"I didn't even know this was here," I said.

"I know," my mom said. "Believe me, I was shocked, too. We started going this way because of construction originally, but then it turned out there was this whole part of the campus I hadn't even seen."

The dogs swam to the far side of the bank. Tabitha stole the stick from Buckets, who barked at her.

“What a jerk,” I said.

“They have such a funny dynamic,” my mom said. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe they have the same mom.”

“Do you worry they’re going to get stuck over there?” I said.

“Not really. They’re too desperate for biscuits.”

Tabitha left the stick and sniffed around the far edge of the embankment; Buckets, having reclaimed his stick, set about swallowing pieces of it. I wished, not for the first or last time in my life, that I could trade places with the dogs. I would eat a million sticks if it meant I didn’t have to return to Lovesick Falls.

“Mom?”

“Yes, baby.”

“Ros says they’re not coming home.”

She turned to look at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean they’re not coming home. They met somebody up there, and they want to stay. They’re not coming back,” I said.

“Well, that’s never going to happen,” my mom said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? Ros is seventeen years old, Celia. They live here. If you think for one second Fiona Brinkman is going to let her kid skip town,

you've got another think coming."

I blinked. Of course my mom was right. Of course Ros couldn't just leave home. Of course I'd thrown a pie at their head for no reason.

I felt my eyes fill with tears.

"Oh, Celia," my mom said.

"It's fine," I said, though it didn't feel fine. It felt like nothing would ever be the same ever again. "It's just—I've been having some trouble with Ros—they're there, but they're not there—and it's been really hard to be supportive...."

"What does Andrew have to say about all of this?"

I snorted. "That I'm obsessed with Ros. That I'm a bootlicker. Oh, and Machiavellian. I can't forget that."

"Well, that doesn't sound very nice."

"I think I deserved it," I said. "I'm a really bad friend."

"I don't think that."

"I threw a pie at Ros's head."

"You what?"

"I—"

The whole story came spilling out of me. I told her about the key lime pie and the

Cinderella dress. I meant to stop there, but once I got started, I couldn't seem to stop. I told her about doing Ros's physics homework. About how empty the Lily Pad felt at night, about that one night I was alone, about how the bird had flown into the window but how I thought it was something much, much worse, how scared I had been, how the trees looked like something else.

"I would have come," my mom said.

"You would have hopped in your car at three a.m.?"

"Sure," my mom said. "I've got very stylish pajamas. I'd love the opportunity to show them off to the world."

"Thanks, Mom," I said.

I let myself feel it: how lucky I was to have a parent who would come help me.

"You should not have been doing Ros's physics homework," my mom said.

"Mom. Seriously? I thought we were having a moment."

"I'm serious, Celia. You were cheating; you know that, right? That's cheating."

"I didn't benefit," I said.

"Celia," my mom said.

"Yeah—yeah. I know."

"And you know I didn't raise you to take things that aren't yours."

“I know.”

“That’s entitlement, Celia. The world is not yours for the conquering. You are part of this world, and you have to be a good neighbor.”

I was silent. She was right, though I didn’t like hearing it.

“I want to go back to the physics homework....”

“Oh my God, really ?”

“Can I talk for a second, please? You should not have been doing Ros’s physics homework. But I care less about the rules in this case and more about why you were doing it. Why were you doing it? Did they ask you?”

“I offered,” I said. “They would have failed without me.”

“Failure is a part of life,” my mom said. “And it’s not your job to glue someone back together.”

“Yeah. I know. I just—I thought that if I worked hard enough, did all the right things, then eventually they’d... go back to normal.” I sighed.

“It’s really beautiful how much you love Ros, how much you want to take care of them. I knew you were taking care of them, but I don’t think I realized just how much you were doing for them. How tenuous everything was. I never should have let you go on that trip.”

“I wanted to,” I said.

“I know but—it’s too much for a seventeen-year-old. It’s too much for a lot of adults

. And you're right—you'll be away at college next year—but—it's a big responsibility. A big change. You are not responsible for another person's happiness, no matter how close you are."

"Well, it's not like it worked anyway."

My mom sighed, tossed the stick again for the dogs.

"Celia, you love to fix things. You are one of the most resourceful people I know. I've never seen a problem that you can't solve. And I'm not just talking about grades. But I think... sometimes being a good friend isn't about trying to solve the problem. Sometimes it's just about letting the problem be there and paying attention to what your friend is asking for. Not trying to push things on your timeline."

"So it's my fault," I said.

"Throwing the pie is, yes. And you have to take accountability for that. But friendship isn't tennis, Celia. There might be faults, but there's no score. At least, there shouldn't be. Friendships are complicated. When it comes to you and Ros, I clearly have no idea how complicated it is," my mom said. "When friendships blow up, it's really easy to get into a story about who did what to whom—they did that wrong, she did that wrong. You start keeping score. But keeping score doesn't really get you anywhere. It certainly doesn't move you into the future."

"I don't know if we have a future," I said.

"Of course you do," my mom said. "You just don't know what it looks like yet."

We stayed there until the dogs swam back to shore. They shook water all over us, found a new stick, held it between them, and moved on, tails held high.

That night, I looked over everything on my desk, hoping I'd find some clue that would help me put the pieces back together. I had to go back tomorrow; Phoebe had asked for my help with the yeti costume, and I couldn't leave her in the lurch. I'd left everything out: my summer reading, a fresh pack of highlighters, the pens I preferred for making notes in the margins. I always took notes. It wasn't just a matter of wanting to learn; I also wondered if it was a matter of wanting to be like Tabitha—wanting to be superior, the sort of person who was prepared for every eventuality. Not that any of this had helped me. Below my summer reading was the packing list I'd been working on right before leaving— overalls x 3, bandannas x 4, bug spray, beading kits . But even that list belonged to a different Celia, a younger Celia, a Celia who thought everything could be reduced to a task: Write it down, cross it off.

Fix window , I wrote down. Then: Fix Triumvirate .

I looked at it for a while, and then I lay on the ground with the dogs and pet them for a long, long time. They were twelve years old—old for dogs, exhausted from their walk. Buckets had developed a cyst above his eye—an old-man lump, my dad called it, nothing to worry about, according to the vet. Tabitha's muzzle was gray; at the end of the walk, she'd walked into a bush and emerged totally covered in little spiky burs, which looked sort of pretty actually, like jewelry. Buckets had fallen asleep holding an old stuffed bear of mine in his mouth. They smelled like the creek. They wouldn't be around forever. They were such good animals, such good friends.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

“I’m done with her,” I say to Jess as we’re closing up at the Hidden Fern. She’s balancing the cash register; I’m sweeping, feeling furious about Celia, still furious two days after the dinner party. She’s been my best friend for years, but I’m done with her—done with her chore wheel, done with her hovering, done with her nervous energy, erratic as the flight path of a moth.

“Because of Piegate?” Jess says. “To be honest, I thought it was kind of funny.”

“It wasn’t just the pie,” I say, and I readjust my grip on the broom. “It’s been a whole summer of things. Of not being supportive of you and me. Of ditching us on the Fourth of July.”

“But it must have been a shock to her to hear you want to stay here,” says Jess. “Have you thought of talking to her? Telling her why?”

I think of all the reasons why I want to be someplace new next year: how good it feels to be with Jess—of course. But it’s more than that. How important it feels to be far away from the memory of my dad; how it feels like relief to be in a place where no one knows me as the Kid Whose Dad Left, a place where people just know me as Ros. I feel a little guilty over potentially leaving my mom—not that she’s said yes yet—but not guilty enough to keep me there, at home. Home feels smothering, like a shirt I’ve long outgrown. But I think of explaining this all to Celia, and I feel suddenly exhausted.

“About Celia,” Jess says.

“Celia, who I’m done with,” I say, sweeping aggressively.

“I know, I know. It’s just—is it possible you’re being a little rash? Maybe there’s a way for the two of you to save something.”

“You sound like her,” I say. “Telling me not to rush.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing,” Jess says softly.

My anger releases its hold slightly. If I’m being honest with myself, part of me loves Jess for telling me to think things through. She doesn’t just know how to rush—she knows how to pause, too. It occurs to me that the patience I love in Jess is something I love in Celia, too.

I’m so lost in thought that I knock over one of the terrariums. It shatters on the floor, a mess of soil and glass, like the picture window in miniature. I sweep it up and go to throw it away when Jess calls, “Wait!”

From the dustpan, she fishes out two succulents that were growing inside. She replants them in empty terra-cotta pots and sets them by the cash register, where they greet customers like old friends. Two happy, healthy green plants, rescued from the broken parts.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

RETURN TO THE LILY PAD , or the Hilarity of a Bologna Sandwich

I felt more normal waking up at home. So normal that I could have stayed at home forever. It was so tempting to slip into the old Celia like a costume, to go back to regularly scheduled programming: my to-do lists and color coding my bookshelf. That Celia had never thrown a pie through a glass window or let a bunch of healthy plants die on her watch. Beyond some run-of-the-mill name-calling, she'd never hurt or been hurt. Not in a way that stuck with you. Not in a way that transformed you.

But she'd also never met Oliver. She'd never split a precious last can of LaCroix with Phoebe. She'd never stayed up deliciously, deliriously late with her, spitballing ideas for a yeti costume while eating stale Twizzlers, and hid from Jacques when he was out for blood.

Back today , I texted Phoebe. Then it's all yeti all the time.

Don't text and drive , she said.

I won't , I said, and I put my phone on do not disturb.

Two hours and change later, I arrived back at the Lily Pad. Broken window aside, the cabin remained in its state of chaos from the other night. Though the glass had been swept up and the dishes had been done (all credit to Jess Orlando and Ros, apparently), the furniture was still arranged to accommodate the dinner party, the table still laid with the frog blanket. The plants looked unhappy, wilting, near death; I didn't know whether they could be saved with some aggressive watering.

In the center of it all was Touchstone, standing on a ladder in front of where the window once was, trying to rig some sort of sail across the opening—though he mostly appeared to be cursing and struggling.

“Hey,” I called. “You need a hand?”

No sooner had I spoken than Touch’s system gave out; the sailcloth dropped, leaving the back of the cabin totally exposed to the elements.

“Yes,” he said. He looked relieved to see me—maybe even grateful, though perhaps that was wishful thinking on my part. “Please.”

We worked quickly and efficiently. I held the ladder; with my hammer, he drove in nails and tied rope to them. One by one, we strung the sail up, like a giant curtain that fluttered in the breeze. We stepped back to admire our work. The sail looked archaic, like it wouldn’t have been out of place on a pirate ship.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I got it from the prop closet,” he said. “I asked to borrow it; don’t worry. They did The Tempest last year. There’s a shipwreck in the beginning. This was part of the staging for that. I actually managed to get it up by myself the first time, if you can believe that.”

We collapsed around the dinner table. It was strange to not see outside; the cabin was so much smaller and dimmer. Not only that, but now I didn’t know where to look. Looking at Touchstone certainly wasn’t an option, and to look at the sail was a horrible reminder of how the night had ended. I settled finally on my cuticles, worrying the skin where it met the nail.

“Was Henry mad?” I said.

“You think I’m the one who’s going to tell Henry?” Touchstone said.

“I—uh—no. No, I guess not,” I said.

Touchstone nodded, like I’d given the right answer.

“I’m never going to hear the end of this, you know. Like—you’re the one who broke the window, but I’m the one who’s going to have to live with the consequences. My family’ll never let me forget it. They already think I’m a joke. They bring up the time I got caught in the catwalk all the time. It’s, like, their favorite story to tell at Christmas. This will be a good one, too. We can all sit around and laugh. That time you destroyed your uncle’s house! ”

“But I destroyed it,” I said.

“You think it’ll make a difference who actually broke the window? It all happened on my watch,” he said. “Maybe they’re right. To think that I’m a joke.”

“Touch, you can’t possibly believe that.”

“It’s hard not to believe the story that people tell about you over and over and over.”

“She’s an orthodontist and he’s an accountant,” I said. “They wouldn’t even know a good joke if it hit them in the face. To them, a bologna sandwich is probably high comedy.”

“When we dated, you know what they said? That you were too good for me. That you’d come to your senses, eventually. You know that?”

“That’s fucked up,” I said. “You shouldn’t listen to them, Touchstone.”

“How can I not? They’re my family,” he said. He sighed heavily. “Sometimes I just feel less than. I don’t have Ros’s *je ne sais quoi*. I’m not good at sports, like my brothers. I’m not going to be a leading man, like Oliver Teller. I’m just me, and that doesn’t always feel like enough.”

“You are not less than,” I said as firmly as I could. “You are one of the only people in the world who make me feel normal. Look, you’ve got more talent in your little finger than all of them combined.”

“Celia,” he said finally. “I owe you an apology. I was a real shithead the other night.”

“Touch, you really don’t have to....”

“Please let me finish. I just want to say that, like, I feel... like... really embarrassed. About how I treated you. And how I treated Oliver.”

“Evidently you were drinking cooking sherry,” I said.

“That explains my two-day hangover,” he said. “Anyway. I was seriously out of control. And I’m really sorry for that.”

“We both were,” I said. “I feel like—I mean, I’m part of the problem. The stuff you said earlier. About you being left out. I was wrong to abandon you like that.”

“The summer’s been quite a showing by both of us,” Touchstone said. “High drama between ex-spouses.”

It was our old joke, but now, after what Oliver had said to me— Do you really think he’s acting this way because of Power Jam ?— it made me sad.

But what could I say? I couldn’t tell Touchstone what he wanted to hear. I didn’t

want to bring up anything that he didn't want to share with me of his own volition—to force him to tell me something that we both already knew. I couldn't tell him that, any more than Ros could tell me what I wanted to hear. In that moment, it seemed a miracle to me that anyone got together with anyone. And Ros and Jess—as harebrained and senseless as they were, as reckless as I thought it was, as destined for heartbreak—there was a part of me that softened toward them as I was there, sitting with Touchstone. It was nothing short of a miracle: that they were both in the right place at the right time, and they both wanted the same thing, and that thing was each other. That mutual desire alone seemed to me to be miraculous.

The fairy tale that I wanted was someone else's. Ros had gotten a fairy tale; I had gotten a broken window and a bunch of dead plants.

And Phoebe. I had gotten Phoebe. And Oliver. And Touchstone.

“You know you're more to me than a kindergarten ex-spouse, right?”

“Celia. I'm kidding .”

“I know you're kidding. But I just—I want you to know that you're my oldest friend. And I feel really lucky to have you in my life. Touch, I'm so sorry—”

“You don't have to prostrate yourself on my behalf.”

“I'm so sorry,” I kept on, “about the way I treated you this summer. I totally abandoned you. You were right that day at the Dropped Acorn. And I thought I was fixing it with the dinner party, but I just made everything worse. We should have hung out, just the three of us.”

He looked a little abashed at the intensity of my apology. “Thanks,” he said finally. “I know you're sorry. It's okay. We'll be okay.” There was a long pause. “Have you

talked to Ros?”

“We don’t have to talk about Ros,” I said.

“They came by looking for you. Well, they came by first to talk to me—to tell me they, too, were sorry for having ditched me this summer. But they seemed... well, I don’t know how they seemed. They seemed like they just wanted to talk.”

“They sent me a text,” I admitted. Hey , they’d said. I’d had no idea how to respond.

The sail shifted in the breeze; for a moment, the house seemed to tip, like we were really on a boat.

“Do you really think they’re going to stay?” Touchstone asked.

“I think they would stay if they could,” I said. “Though I don’t know what their mom’s going to say about their plan.”

“I hope they come back,” said Touchstone. “It wouldn’t be the same without them.”

“I hope they come back, too,” I said, and I felt a sudden sense of urgency then: to see them, to apologize, to have us put everything back together again. There was some part of me that still believed we were fixable, that we could still be the Triumvirate, if all parties agreed.

“So what’s your plan?” said Touch.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean? I can’t believe you haven’t gone full Celia Gilbert on this already. I mean, like, what’s the plan for Ros? They obviously can’t

stay here. What are you going to do to convince them to come home with us?”

It was the question I'd been asking myself over and over on the drive home, and then again on the drive back. When I couldn't sleep last night, I wondered—how could I get them back there? What could I say, what could I do , that would make them change their mind?

Patience , my mother had said.

I took a deep breath.

“Well,” I said, and I said the thing that I'd been dreading. “I think the first thing to do is call Henry.”

“Do you want me to sit with you?”

“Oh my God,” I said. “Please.”

Henry was British. He was also on a beach in Croatia, where, he said, it was difficult to be too bent out of shape about anything.

I wouldn't say he was thrilled that I'd destroyed the Lily Pad, though I wouldn't say he was expressly mad, either. He was more upset about his plants than he was the window, and he gave a little cry of “ My beauties ” when I told him about the ones we'd let die. He told me he'd send me the name of some construction guys he liked; told me to call them, get them out to the house; and keep him in the loop. I told him I wanted to pay for the repairs, and he said the damage was probably out of my price range, but he was sure I'd find a way to make it up to him.

“I stayed at Audrey's last night,” Touch said, when I hung up with Henry. “She's got plenty of room. I'm sure you're welcome there, too.”

“I kind of want to be here,” I said.

“By yourself?” he said. “Are you sure it’s safe ?”

“I mean, I think I was the biggest threat to our safety.”

“I know, but what about bats or bears or pumas or—”

“I’ll sleep with a tennis racket by my bed,” I said.

“Maybe a pie tin would be better,” he said.

As it was, I couldn’t sleep anyway. Or maybe I might’ve been able to sleep if I tried, but I couldn’t go into the room that Ros and I had once shared.

At great risk to injuring my back, I moved all the furniture back to where it had been before the dinner party, pulled the sailcloth back, and watched the rain. The sound was really nice, and every so often a breeze sent a cloud of mist into the living room, which felt like being by the seaside.

I looked at the sailcloth we’d jerry-rigged. It was a really good, if ridiculous, effort. It reminded me of the Halloween costumes I’d made for Touch and Ros, concoctions out of poster board and staples and hot glue that’d completely fallen apart by the end of the evening. But the homemade-ness—the falling apart-ness—was part of the charm. There was a looseness about them that I liked—even in their imperfection, you could tell that they had been loved. They were lumpy and ragtag, but that was part of what made them good, I thought. There was something about them that was so clearly human.

I looked out into the rain and called Phoebe.

“Bonjour,” she said. “How you doing?”

“Okay,” I said. “We can talk about it—I want to tell you about it—but I called because I had some yeti thoughts.”

“Hit me,” she said.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

THE YETI COSTUME , or Power Jam , Season Three

The next week disappeared into a blur of yarn scraps—white and gray and icy blue. They stuck to my clothes. I found them in my bed. Merino and acrylic and nylon, shedding fibers. And glitter. So much glitter. There was glitter everywhere. It clung to Jacques's fur, gave his misery some pizzazz. Phoebe shook it from her scalp and called it fairyland dandruff.

If we weren't working with art supplies, I was walking in the woods while Phoebe did the more complicated sewing, searching for treasures the same way that Ros and I used to. My best find was a bough from the white tree in the woods back behind the Hidden Fern (I thought about going in to talk to them, but couldn't quite strike up the courage). Phoebe almost cried when I showed it to her.

We brought all our treasures into the costume shop, lined them up on the windowsill, and taped a big sign over them that said IMPORTANT—PLEASE DO NOT CLEAN .

Between the two of us, we averaged a case of LaCroix a day.

Benna told us she was happy to see we were onto something, but she was worried about our tooth enamel.

We were absolutely punchy. We cried. We swore. We laughed. We sweat into the fabric. We bled into the yarn, scratched it out with fingernails, left it because we thought it looked better that way. Was this a health-code violation? Most certainly. But this was metal. We were doing it. We were making the yeti costume.

And finally— finally —a week before the show went up, when the actors were deep in tech, we had something for Oliver to try on.

If you ever want a lesson in professionalism, look no further than one Oliver Teller. He came to the fitting all business—friendly but distant, speaking mainly to Phoebe but not ignoring me entirely. You’d never know that the last time I saw him, I was near tears outside the cabin, barefoot, trying to persuade him to stay at a dinner party he wanted desperately to escape. You’d never know there was history between us, except that seeing him felt like cleaning up glass in bare feet, tiptoeing around, waiting for something to slice your heel.

“How you doing in there?” Phoebe said. “Do you need help?”

“I think I’m okay,” called Oliver. “It’s just—heavy.”

“That’s the point,” said Phoebe. “It’ll make your walk more beastly.”

“I’ll take all the help I can get,” Oliver said.

He went quiet—on the other side of the door there was just fussing, heavy breathing. Phoebe crossed her arms and looked at me nervously. At this point, the backup plan was putting him in sunglasses and a fur coat and calling it avant-garde. That, or ordering a prefab yeti Halloween costume online for \$12.99, which certainly wasn’t going to impress Benna.

“Okay,” Oliver said, “I’m coming out.”

The second he opened the door, I knew it was going to work. I’d always known Phoebe was going to make it work, but I didn’t know it was going to work this well . Now I understood why Phoebe had kept saying more —more yarn, more branches, more pom-poms—because he—the monster—was absolutely massive. He was like a

walking mop. A gentle walking mop made of a million different kinds of yarn, yarn that had been threaded with treasures from the forest.

“How do you feel?” Phoebe asked.

“It’s a bit warm,” Oliver admitted.

“Don’t be such a snowflake,” Phoebe snapped. “The actor who played Godzilla had to literally pour the sweat out of his boots at the end of the day . Margaret Hamilton’s makeup caught on fire during The Wizard of Oz ! The first Tin Man was poisoned by his own makeup !”

“You asked how it was! I’m just saying!”

“I’m not sure those are good comparisons, Phoebe,” I said. “Sorry—she’s, like, mostly coffee and LaCroix at this point.”

“I’m sure I’ll be okay,” said Oliver. “Maybe we can, like, tape an ice pack to my body or something.”

“Can you walk?” Phoebe said.

Oliver took a few steps. I’d found in the woods a single rusted bell. It rang when he walked, but it did not sound joyful. It sounded mournful. Eerie. Foreboding.

“I’m getting chills ,” said Phoebe.

Oliver stood in front of the mirror, giving himself a careful look. He seemed the perfect mix of beastly and graceful; a big Muppety monster who loved to decorate his coat with treasures he found in the forest.

“It’s funny. I feel like I get him more now. Like—the loneliness. And the human parts. There’s, like, this sweetness to him.” He admired himself, turning this way and that in the mirror. Jacques darted out from Benna’s office, hissed, and turned and ran.

“That’s how you know it’s going to work,” Oliver said.

“It was all Phoebe,” I said.

“That’s, like, 75 percent true,” Phoebe said. “But I had a really good sous-chef.”

“You did a good job,” Oliver said, looking and speaking only to Phoebe.

“Okay—Celia—I think we need something on this hind quarter—and maybe more pom-poms over here? Oliver, how mobile can you be? Like—how fast can you go? Can you move your arms? Can you twirl?”

Oliver attempted a clumsy pirouette; the abandoned bird’s nest that I’d found in the woods fell from his shoulder; I hustled to retrieve it, cradled it in my hands.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit,” Oliver said.

“No—it’s fine! It’s fine,” said Phoebe. “That’s what we were testing. It’s an easy fix.”

“And honestly, if they fall off onstage, it kind of works?” I said. “Like, he just leaves a trail of breadcrumbs wherever he goes.”

“The director’s going to want to kill me,” Phoebe said.

“I honestly don’t think so,” Oliver said. “I think she’s going to be psyched.”

Oliver went to change out of the costume, and Phoebe brought the bird's nest back to her station. Even across the room, I could feel her staring knowingly at me.

What , I mouthed.

Talk to him , she mouthed back.

And say what , I mouthed back.

Literally anything , said Phoebe.

Oliver emerged, holding the pelt in his arm, like something skinned.

"I can take that," I said.

He placed it into my arms gingerly. It was heavy and warm. If there was a time to say anything, it would have been then. But no words came to me; all I could think about was what he'd said to me the last time I'd seen him—how I'd treated him like a prop. I doubted he ever wanted to speak to me again after that.

"Thanks," he said. "Well. See you."

I ferried the costume back to Phoebe and went back to my yarn-covered station, ready to immerse myself in crafting yeti pom-poms.

"Dude," she said finally, "what are you even doing?"

"Pom-poms?" I said.

"Fix that," she said, nodding out the door toward Oliver. "The pom-poms can wait."

And so, at her urging, I hustled after him. It felt like an episode of Power Jam , the one where the music swells and Kenna chases Louisa out into the pouring rain, finally ready to profess her love. But the thing was—I wasn't trying to profess my love. Mostly, I just wanted my friend back. I didn't know what I'd say. I just knew that couldn't be the end of it all—him handing me the yeti pelt, nodding at me, and leaving.

I caught sight of him heading up the trail toward the spot in the woods where we'd first met.

"Oliver!" I called.

Mercifully, he slowed down, waiting for me to catch up with him.

"Reception time?" I asked, gesturing toward the trees.

"I've got to call my agent," he said. "I think we're getting a season three." 23

"That's great ," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm glad it's going to be renewed."

I stood feeling awkward. There were so many scripts for professing your love—Power Jam was absolutely chock-full of them. Always in the rain, or before or after finals, or even midmatch before the big try. Always epic, always heartfelt. Less common was the script for someone who had treated their friend badly and, on an otherwise normal day with normal weather, wanted to put it right. I'd gotten a little practice with Touchstone, but I still wasn't sure I'd be able to find the words I needed to convince Oliver of how sorry I was.

"Thank you for bringing the deviled eggs the other night," I said. As openers went,

deviled eggs weren't the strongest, but for better or worse, it was what I came up with.

"You're welcome," he said.

"And for taking me to see the falls," I said.

"Celia, I've got a call at twelve."

Here it was. My turn.

"I wanted to say that you were right."

Oliver nodded. "Andrew came to talk to me, you know. To set things right between us. It was nice, actually. He showed up with a bunch of stuff from the Dropped Acorn."

"Oh. That is nice," I said, even though I hadn't been talking about Touchstone at all. I was impressed with all the effort he put in.

"Yeah. I don't think we're going to be, like, best mates anytime soon, but I did appreciate that he made an effort." He paused.

"Um. I'm really glad that he came to talk to you. But I was actually talking about you. You were right. Like, when you said the thing. About me using you as a prop."

"Oh," he said.

"That was really, really mean," I said.

"It didn't feel great," he said.

Was this how apologies went? This was horrible. I wanted to shrivel up and die. I wanted to run the other way. I wanted to be eaten by the yeti.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Thanks,” he said.

“And I also wanted to say—you know the thing you said about—something happening between us?”

“Oh, God, do we really need to relive that?”

“I just wanted to say that it wasn’t all in your head. But, I just...”

“What is it?” he said.

“There was someone else,” I said. “That’s why I could never really... I should have told you earlier. It’s stupid, I know. I wish there were some magic potion I could take, or some way I could just, change my mind, because like, you’re you, you could have literally anyone, and I’m me, and I don’t understand why I can’t just... I want to want...”

“Celia,” he said gently. “It’s okay. Hey. We had a good summer, didn’t we? Maybe in another life.”

“What if for now, we say we’re friends?” I said.

“Friends,” he said, and he smiled, like that wouldn’t be the worst fate in the world. “I wouldn’t mind being friends with you, Celia Gilbert.”

“I wouldn’t mind being friends with you, either,” I said.

It wasn't how the big Power Jam speeches ended, with a big kiss to punctuate everything, confetti shot from a cannon. It wasn't even an ending, really—it was more a bend in the road. But it was ours, and it was real.

“How'd it go?” Phoebe said.

“Okay, I think. You kind of expect apologizing to fix everything, but to be honest, I still don't feel very good.”

“I'd be shocked if you did,” said Phoebe. “But it went okay?”

“He said he wants to be friends.”

“That sounds ideal,” said Phoebe.

“I think it is,” I said.

“You ready to make stuff?”

I was. I couldn't make everything perfect, but at the very least, I could make enough pom-poms that the yeti would look wondrous.

Footnote

23 Season three would turn out to be the best season yet. Blade's murder attempt on his brother is revealed to be a dream sequence; Kenna and Louisa break up only to get back together with Blade's help in fabulously dramatic fashion during a match, as in, while they're on skates trying to crush the other team; and Eva, of the season-two premiere, shows back up and turns out to be a great match for Blade. She manages to bring out his human side even as she conducts an underground drug ring using her rugby for cover. Blade proves himself to be instrumental to the team's success, and

they all lift him onto their shoulders after the championship match, celebrating the man who was a villain not two seasons ago.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:43 am

JUMPING IN , or On Waiting for Guys

We finished just in time.

Phoebe was literally sewing the bird's nest onto Oliver's shoulder in the final moments before he stepped onstage; I was trimming yarn from his feet so he wouldn't trip all over himself. They performed in the outdoor amphitheater, and Oliver couldn't have looked more perfect for the spot, as if he'd emerged directly from the woods. Oliver was right—the show worked better as a comedy than as a tragedy—though the Lovesick Falls Gazette praised Oliver for his performance and for bringing “surprising pathos” to the role of the yeti. Benna Bloom and third-year-intern Phoebe Zhao's “showstopper costume” was also noted in the review, citing its “zany creative flair” and its “silly elegance.” My parents came to see the show, too, as well as the Young People's Showcase, and they were “blown away” by the costumes Phoebe and I had managed to build. The yeti costume was a lot to maintain—I had to hunt in the woods for brambles nearly every day before the show—but it was worth it to help make Phoebe's vision come true.

The Young Company's Showcase was a success, as well: The actors had put together a series of original shorts, and Touchstone performed in Audrey's clown piece, wearing a red nose and big frown. He was sidesplittingly funny, though not without his own touching moments.

At both shows, I saw Ros. At Touchstone's show I was seated about six rows behind them and Jess, close enough that I could pick their laughter out of the crowd's. At Snow Walker , I saw their face, watched them from my post in the wings. The whole show, they held a bouquet of paper-wrapped flowers in their lap. Both times, I

entertained the idea of talking to them, breaking the ice between us, but something in me couldn't quite manage it. When the lights came up, I bolted, disappeared down a backstage rabbit hole where I knew they wouldn't be able to follow.

And there was still the matter of the Lily Pad.

After our phone conversation, Henry had arranged for some "guys" to come check out the house. ²⁴ These guys that Henry had sent had already been once to assess the damage of the window. On that trip, they'd properly fitted a plastic sheet over the wound. Though I understood it was impractical—I had chased a bird out with a broom and once saw a possum lurking altogether too close—I missed the sailcloth. It rippled in the breeze, whereas this stretched yellow, the skin over a blister.

Today, the guys were supposed to come back to take some measurements, and though the arrival window they'd given me was from ten to six, by two I'd abandoned all hope. I was supposed to meet Phoebe, Audrey, and Touchstone down by the beach for a day of SUN AND FUN (no cooking sherry allowed), but because of the guys, I had to text them my apologies. Instead, I ordered so much Chinese food the delivery arrived with six sets of chopsticks, and I spent the afternoon catching up on laundry and watching old episodes of *Power Jam*. I had to be up to speed for season three, but it was a different experience, watching the same episodes now. In the first place because I had to keep texting Oliver during different parts, and in the second place, because I saw through some of the magic. I didn't not love it; I just loved it differently.

The knock at the door came halfway through my trough of General Tso's chicken, when I'd gotten down to the socks that I didn't feel like matching. It was close to the end of the arrival window, but still within. I opened the door, expecting to see the guys, but instead it was Ros.

"Hey," they said.

“Hi,” I said. I was shocked: Part of me had truly believed that I was going to leave Lovesick Falls without speaking to Ros again. I figured I’d just see them eventually one day in school, and we’d just pass by each other in the hall, like two people who used to be friends.

“Oh my God,” they said. “That shirt.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, looking down. I was wearing my solar system shirt I’d picked up when I went home the other week.

“That gives me so many sleepover flashbacks,” Ros said.

“Right? I can’t believe it fits me now.”

“Did you have it with you this whole time?”

“No. I went home the other week.”

“Touchstone mentioned,” they said. “How was it?”

“Good,” I said with a shrug. “My mom says hi.”

“Tell her hi back.”

In the silence between us, the sounds of unpaused Power Jam came drifting through, bits of dialogue I knew by heart.

“Finals episode?” Ros said.

“Finals episode,” I said. “You want to watch? I ordered tons of Chinese food, way more than I can eat....”

“Do you want to go for a walk?”

I checked my watch. It wasn't like the guys couldn't wait for me.

We walked along the river where we'd walked the first day, when I'd watched them walk straight in without flinching. It was a painfully beautiful day. The sky was so blue it felt like a cut, and the edges of everything seemed sharper because of the light (or perhaps that was just because I'd spent all day inside watching TV). The breeze felt good; it was nearly four, and I hadn't been outside all day.

“I saw the show,” they said. “The costume turned out amazing.”

“It was mostly Phoebe.”

“I looked for you after,” they said. “I brought you a bouquet.”

“I had a lot of work to do,” I said, which was true, I did. “I'm sorry about the flowers. I'm sure they were beautiful.”

There was a long silence between us.

“So,” Ros said. “Remember that pie?”

“Unfortunately,” I say.

“Don't say that,” Ros said. “It was a really fucking good pie.”

“You didn't even get to try it.”

They shot me a look.

“You didn’t ,” I said. “Ros, there was GLASS in that pie, it’s probably like, shredding your stomach lining....”

“Oh my God, I ate it BEFORE. How dumb do you think I am?”

“But we didn’t eat it—”

“ You didn’t eat it. I ate some. When you followed Oliver around the front. And then I covered it back up with whipped cream.”

“You weasel .”

“I have no regrets. Because it was absolutely delicious.”

“Well,” I said. “I’m glad you got to try it.”

They nodded. We paused on the riverbank and looked back up at the Lily Pad. The plastic sheeting was yellowish, rippled.

“It reminds me of dead skin,” I said.

“Gross,” Ros said. “When does the new window go in?”

“It doesn’t,” I said, and I found myself getting oddly choked up. “I guess—it’s, like, really difficult and expensive to get a piece of custom glass that big? And Henry wanted to do some work on the house anyway....”

“You’re kidding,” Ros said. “No window ?”

“I think there will be windows,” I said. “Just smaller. And like, more throughout.”

“That’s awful,” Ros said.

“I know. On the other hand, maybe fewer birds will fly into it.”

“Maybe,” Ros said.

As if listening to us, a flock of starlings took off from the bushes, made new shapes in the sky. We watched them for a moment, considering the ways they shifted. They made me think of a river, with their own ebb and flow.

“So what’s going to happen in the fall?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—you’re not actually staying here, right?”

Ros’s face darkened. “No. I don’t think so.”

“What about home? Are we going to…”

“Are we going to what?” said Ros.

“Be the same,” I said finally. “As we were before. Are we going to be that close?”

Ros didn’t answer for a minute, and in that long, painful pause I wished the summer had never happened, and that we were back home, watching Power Jam and hoovering Chinese food. I wished nothing between us had ever changed, that I’d never gone swimming that first night, never worked on costumes, never drunk the water from Lovesick Falls.

“We’ll be friends,” said Ros finally. “Though I think it will be different.”

“Different how?”

“Maybe we won’t be the Triumvirate. We’ll be more... fluid. Porous. It won’t be just the three of us all the time. Maybe we’ll let more people in.”

In spite of my stubbornness, I softened then, thinking of all the people that we had let in that summer: not just Jess but Phoebe and Oliver and Audrey, even Benna and Jacques (okay, maybe that last one was a stretch). In spite of what the spring’s waters had promised, we were leaving Lovesick Falls with more love than we’d had when we arrived. When I thought of it that way, I was glad that the summer had happened, and my heart expanded with all the love I felt. I didn’t want to wish the summer away but instead wanted to hold it tight in my palm, like a stone made smooth by a river.

“Three can be a tricky number, anyway,” I said slowly, remembering my mom’s long-ago speech about triangles. Then, thinking of our absent third side, I said, “I feel so bad about how we treated Touch.”

“I do, too,” said Ros. “I apologized to him, but it doesn’t feel like enough.”

“No apology could ever feel like enough. We forgot that he existed,” I said. “We were so hung up on our own problems that we wound up being awful to him.”

“I know,” they said. “We’ll find a way to make it up to him, I’m sure.”

“Maybe he needs flowers.”

“A bouquet of red noses,” said Ros, and I giggled a bit.

We walked in silence then, thinking of and missing Touchstone, wishing he were with us. He’d been such a good friend to both of us—we wouldn’t be in Lovesick Falls if it weren’t for him—and we’d let him down so thoroughly and completely. It

wasn't at all how I wanted the summer to go. It wasn't the sort of person I wanted to be.

"I'm glad you're coming home," I said, thinking of our life after Lovesick.

"I'm not," they said with a snort.

"Can I ask you why you wanted to stay here? Aside from Jess."

"I just wanted a fresh start," they said.

"Isn't there a way to have a fresh start at home?" I said. "Like, can't you get a drastic new haircut and call it a life?"

Ros laughed. "Celia. Do you know how strange it was to be without my dad this year? Like, do you really know?"

"I know it was hard," I acknowledged.

"Hard doesn't begin to cover it," said Ros. "To look into the balcony at swim meets and not see him there? To drive home and not see his car in the driveway? To not hear him singing along to oldies as he cooked? That was all hard. But it wasn't just that he was gone ; it's that without him, I was suddenly famous. Like I was wearing the scarlet letter—like everyone, classmates, teachers, coaches, neighbors, you name it, knew who I was and what had happened to me, and they were all staring at me with these looks . Sometimes like they pitied me. But sometimes it was like they couldn't get enough of staring at some sideshow freak. I was everyone's worst nightmare: the Kid Whose Dad Left, and all they could do was stare. I felt like a zoo animal. Even you were looking at me all the time."

"I thought I was helping," I said.

“You did help,” Ros said. “You knew that a change of scene would be good for me. And it was. When I was here, I finally got away. No one was looking at me. I wasn’t under any microscope. I wasn’t the Kid Whose Dad Left. I was just me.”

They paused to chew on their thumbnail, and I took the opportunity to look at them, their hair like a tornado, their golden eyes glinting, their snowbrow as alluring as ever. I’d had their face memorized for years, but there was still so much about them that I didn’t know. Still so much about them I wanted to learn, if they’d let me.

They bit off their nail and continued. “I think it’s better this way, going home. Better not to leave my mom all on her own. I’d just be doing the same thing my dad did if I left.”

“Do you think—if I hadn’t brought us here—if I hadn’t done all of this—we’d still be—” I stopped, unsure of which words I wanted.

“I think we’d still be different,” said Ros. “That’s part of it, isn’t it?”

“Part of what?”

“Growing up.”

We were crossing under the bridge now, the one we took to get into town, picking our way along a steep downhill. Beside us, the river gathered speed and the water tumbled down the hill, forming a small set of falls I hadn’t known was there. I turned back to catch a glimpse of the Lily Pad, but from this angle, it wasn’t even visible.

“Maybe the Lily Pad’ll be better,” I said. “Maybe they’ll, like—put in a waterslide into the river.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Or, like, a greenhouse.”

“A tree house.”

“Or like, a swim-in fish tank... oh, wow,” said Ros. “Look.”

Just beyond the falls, the river opened up into a deep pool, the kind that practically begged you to jump in. It was the same color as the Lovesick Falls spring—the sort of sparkling cerulean that I didn’t see with my eyes so much as felt with my body.

“I had no idea this was here,” I said.

Ros was taking their shoes off again.

“Wait,” I said. “What are you doing?”

“Have you even been in yet? Besides that first night,” Ros said.

“I’m worried about currents, and eels, and I read about this bacteria—”

“Celia,” Ros said. “You have to get in.”

They jumped in first.

I went in after.

It felt amazing.

The water washed over us, and Ros splashed me and I splashed them back, and for a moment, we felt like us again. There wasn’t anything magic about where we’d jumped in. These waters didn’t form a gorgeous lagoon, and they most certainly weren’t a spring that would help us fall out of love. It was just water, a place to dunk one’s head and body, and we were swimming in it together, like any two friends on

any hot summer day.

It'd be a steep, wet climb back up in sopping clothes. We'd risk twisted ankles. Bug bites. And the worst of it was that at the top of the hill, they'd say goodbye, and we'd see each other at home at and at school, and we'd be friends, but it wouldn't be the same, and I was going to miss them. I was going to miss this version of us.

But for now—now we were swimming in the same water, normal, regular water, and that water felt good. Felt best, even. It felt like what we needed.

I would remember this.

Footnote

24 Reader, have you ever dealt with “guys,” or perhaps just “a guy,” singular? Once you live in a place that is your own, things will go wrong with that place, and to fix it, someone will always be sending over guys. Guys will give you an arrival window. The window will not matter. They will show up forty minutes early, when you are still in your towel, or six hours late, after you've had to cancel your plans. Maybe they'll show up on time, but they'll be missing a part, or because of some bureaucratic mix-up, they can't actually install whatever it is they're installing until Thursday, oh, and also, it's a holiday weekend, so the washing machine your landlord finally agreed to replace will sit in the middle of your hallway for a week, and every time you pass it you must choose: squeeze past, or vault over? For this, there will be no apology. Here is the real fairy-tale happy ending: A guy that shows up on time, fixes the furnace that same day, and rides off into the night, never to be heard from again.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER , or Lessons I Have Learned

I left plenty of time to get to Touchstone's play. Too much time. A year and a half in New York, and I still didn't know when to leave, how to budget enough time for trains and buses and walks. Because I disliked being late, it meant that I frequently arrived to places half an hour early, and on this particular occasion—Touchstone's fall show—I'd forgotten to bring a book, which meant that after texting Oliver to wish him good luck on his new pilot and then Phoebe, promising that I'd pick up milk on the way home, I was left staring around the theater, half-aimlessly listening to people's conversations and half stressing out about all the work that I had due in the next week.

While Touchstone and Phoebe had carried on in theater, I was majoring in linguistics. I'd always liked languages—the rules, the peculiarities, the curiosities. I was finally around people who wanted to talk about eggcorns as much as I did, who wanted to chew on technicalities and minutia and talk about the absence of certain letters from the French alphabet. Who loved breaking down words in phonemes. Who thought it was fascinating to learn the origin of the cat's out of the bag 25 and other idiomatic expressions.

About ten minutes before curtain, two men came in and sat down in front of me, one a handsome Southeast Asian man in a thick wool sweater I immediately wanted to steal, the other a white man in a brightly patterned green shirt. They flipped through their programs excitedly, looked around the theater. The white man had sandy hair and a kind of jumbled, cubist nose that looked like it had been broken many times, and now gave his face character and warmth.

“Are we meeting him after?” said the man with the gorgeous sweater.

“I hope so,” said the other. He spoke with a British accent.

His shirt—which I had taken for an abstract design—was actually frogs, their bodies stretched out end to end.

Before I even knew what I was doing—before I could think it through, and I tried to think things through these days—I’d tapped him on the shoulder. He didn’t seem upset that I’d bothered him; on the contrary, he looked a little amused.

“I’m sorry, but are you Andrew’s uncle?” I said.

“I am ,” he said. He turned to get a better look at me and smiled. His eyes were a sort of piercing green blue of the Lovesick Falls spring, and they gave the whole of him a magical quality, like maybe I was talking to an apparition—a sprite, or a faerie, spelled the British way, like Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* , which I’d just had to read. In that way, he reminded me of Ros.

“I’m Celia,” I said. “Gilbert. I um—I stayed in your cabin a couple summers ago. I’m the one—the one who—well. I broke your window. Sir.”

“Oh, Celia , yes!” he said, and turned excitedly to his husband. “Vish—Vish—this is the girl who broke the window at the Playhouse!”

Vish seemed nowhere near as charmed by this revelation as Henry did.

“I’m still so sorry,” I said.

Henry waved a hand at me.

“Please. It’s been grand, actually. It’s a little bigger. Better insulation. A shower that

actually works. All sorts of room.”

“I loved it there,” I said. “Even... before.”

“It’s a special place,” Henry said. “You’ll have to come see it.”

“Board up the windows first,” quipped Vish, mostly to Henry. “And hide the plants.”

“I’m so glad you and Andrew have each other in this city. It’s a big place to know no one. There was a third of you, wasn’t there?”

He looked around, as though they might be in the theater. Sometimes I caught myself doing the same thing: searching for them out of the corner of my eye.

“Ros,” I said. “They’re still in Lovesick, actually.”

After we graduated, they’d taken a year off and moved up there, to make things work with Jess Orlando before they went off to college. I’d tried to see them when I was last home for Christmas break, and even though we’d had two weeks, we never could find the time. We were still friends, though Ros was right: It was different than it had been before—not as tight or as grasping as we’d been before going up to Lovesick. I’d even made some new friends senior year, good friends, people who had come out of the woodwork, people from swim team, people who I thought I’d known because I’d played tennis with them in middle school, but of course, I hadn’t known at all. People who felt like my people—who felt like friends—but who didn’t feel like a part of me.

“That place has a way of getting under your skin,” Henry said.

I nodded, feeling suddenly like I wanted Henry to know every detail of what had happened that summer: of us counting the frogs and swimming in the river and rearranging the furniture so we could stare out the window that no longer existed.

How that first night we stayed outside long enough that we experienced the onset of night, felt the temperature change on our skin as we lost the sun.

“In some ways—” I said.

The lights dimmed, saving me from myself.

“Talk later,” Henry whispered.

In the darkness, there were sounds—coats being shuffled off, throats being cleared, peppermints being unwrapped. Melodic jingles of phones being powered down. How long had we spent in Lovesick Falls—eleven weeks? Still, what I would have said, if the show hadn’t started, if I’d had the chance to tell everything to Henry, to pour my heart out to this stranger-who-was-not-a-stranger, what I would have said was this: I hadn’t been there long, and there was still so much about my time there, about the world, that I didn’t understand or know, and I didn’t know if I would ever go back, though I hoped I would, one day—when I was older, maybe, under my own steam. I would have told Henry that I grew up there. I would have meant it.

I settled back in my seat. The actors stepped onstage, and the show began.

Footnote

25 I’ll spare you. You can look it up if you’re interested.