

The book is a collection of stories both made up or exaggerated from real life. A few of them are about fun times at my friend's farm. A few of them are about trips made with friends and family that created fond memories. Some of them are made up about places I've wanted to go or just stories that popped up in my mind. In any case, these stories show the insight of a teenage girl into multiple sets of life.



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“Life is meant for good friends and great adventures” — Unknown

“A good friend listens to your adventures. A best friend makes them with you.” — Unknown

*To my friends and family, for
helping me in this great adventure*

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
businesses, places, events, locales, and
incidents are either the products of the author's
imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or
actual events is purely coincidental... or not*

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Introduction

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I met Renata Daou in the fraternal group named SEMEADORES DO AMOR, made up of families that, for seven years, here in the city of Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, have worked as volunteers, assisting street dwellers offering them spiritual support, food, and other basic needs items. This fact was enough to catch my eye, once, after all, it is not that commonplace to find such young people who are lively engaged in social projects of such magnitude.

Discreet, hardworking, generous, Renata does not miss any of our activities, unless it is a case of force majeure, demonstrating she is one of those beautiful souls that, since an early stage of life, brings a light within which emanates from the Creator, and that it is expressed by love for the neighbor, aiming to make this planet a better and more worthy place to be living, aware of the fact that, as Mother Tereza used to say, hands that serve are more sacred than the lips that pray.

Interestingly enough, Renata is a good daughter and good friend, studious, sensitive and, above all, she owns a unique literary character, which, properly sharpened, as time goes by, will result in fruitfulness, not only for herself, or for her parents and friends' pride, but fundamentally for the society, which will benefit from a benign, insightful, giving voice.

Brazilian, she writes in English, which is a noticeable surprise. Texts are light, insightful, and cater to her age themes. Renata dialogues with her generation, which is fundamental for those

who write. I dare, therefore, to prophesy, that a promising writer is born. Whatever she says and does comes from her heart.

I recognize a talent when I see her. For me there is no bigger happiness, if I can contribute, somehow, to see her flourish. Renata is a revelation, as a writer and as a person. I hope that, from now on, God continues to bless her and to guide her on the way of those who are destined to make a difference in the world.

JÚLIO ANTONIO LOPES

PRESIDENT OF THE AMAZONAS ACADEMY OF LETTERS,
SCIENCES AND ARTS

Foreword

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Ten years ago, I would have laughed if someone were to suggest I write a foreword to a book written by Renata, especially one that is, at its core, a celebration of friendship. Not because I found it ridiculous that at such an age she could have written a book (for how often I saw her writing, it wouldn't have been surprising that she came up with a story at some point), but because, at the ripe age of eight, we absolutely hated each other.

Of course, we never said so straight to each other's face. Being a part of the same friend group, we were expected to interact, if not amicably, but at least with courtesy. Still, I was determined to expose Renata for her nefarious ways. I soon came to the conclusion that, if anything, her journals would lead to her downfall.

Everywhere she went, she would bring along a battered old notebook, upon which she would write furiously for hours on end. All of them were equipped with a small lock to prevent unwanted readers, and she would always keep the key close. Despite any obstacles I might face, I was determined to find out all the horrible things I was sure she'd written about me.

As it turns out, I never read any of her diaries, and as the years passed we eventually put our animosity aside and became genuine friends. However, the image of a small girl leaning over a blank piece of paper and clutching a pen was something that I bore in my mind for a long time.

And so here we are. That little girl who practically gushed grown-up words, which flowed from her pen so naturally I can't cease to be amazed at it. Every time she would send me a short, unedited story I'd smile in anticipation; and I'll never forget how excited I was when she began to post her stories on Wattpad.

Some of the stories gathered in this little book have been years in the making; others I'm sure she wrote in two hours a couple of weeks ago. Nevertheless, most of them tell of the experiences of a girl who grows by experiencing the world with her friends. A few of them also tell of the unsteady waters of adolescence and of trying to find your footing in a rocky boat.

I've spent the last decade of my life reading books about kids, teenagers and kids who become teenagers. However, all these books share the commonality of being written by adults, who over time might have become detached from the realities of adolescence (there's a lot more angst going on than most adults would care to remember). So I'm glad Renata chose to share her personal experiences, while addressing universal aspects of the teenage experience from a teenager's point of view.

As her friend, I'm just glad that Renata is finally putting her talent out in to the world. I hope everyone who reads this will laugh and cry just as I did, and feel, even if just for for a while, that they are understood.

Hannah Neves

or as you might come to know me,

Harper

Adventures in an Amazonian River

• • • • •

I looked at my friend Harper, who has beautiful curly hair, before saying:

“Shit, Harper, I think we are sinking.”

Okay, so maybe our brilliant idea wasn’t that good.

I was at my friend’s farm located in the Amazon in the north of Brazil, with four of my friends. It was a really nice place to go on a holiday to have fun. Whenever we came here, we would swim in the pool, ride bicycles, and drive four-wheelers in a trail in the forest.

There was a river passing there, a really large one. Calm, with dark-colored water. We weren’t allowed to swim in there because it was full of piranhas, small carnivorous fish. However, we were allowed to go kayaking.

It was a really hot day and we wanted to be close to the water. We knew that if we went far enough, there was a part of the river that was free of piranhas. If we went even further, we would find a beach with a waterfall. How did we know? Let’s just say that we like exploring.

Being as hot as we were, where we could feel the sweat running down our faces and our backs, we decided to take the kayaks.

We were a group of five, but there were only two kayaks that could each hold two people. Being the irresponsible kids that we

were, we decided that it wouldn’t be a problem having an extra person in one of them. We weren’t that heavy after all.

We put the kayaks in the water with a splash, panting with effort. We tied them on the docks, so they wouldn’t float away with the current of the river. At this moment, we noticed that one of them was filling with water.

We pulled it out of the water, back on the docks and noticed that the water was starting to leak through a hole.

“I know how we can fix this.” Harper said.

I looked at her, an understanding smile creeping across my face.

“Oh yeah, do you know where to get it?”

She nodded her head “Yeah, wait for me here,” she stated before darting in the direction of the house.

“Where is she going?” Caroline, the most quiet and cautious of my friends asked. She looked at the place Harper was moments before.

“Just wait.” I said, my face still smirking. Harper came back a few moments later with a cork in hand. “Oh no...” Caroline groaned, shaking her head in disapproval. “We are not doing this.” Harper just laughed before proceeding to plug the hole, the exact same size as the cork. It fit perfectly, and we put the kayak back in the water. Everything seemed fine. Harper and I got inside it, just to test if it was going to sink. When we saw that the water in fact wasn’t coming inside the kayak, we figured that it was ready for use. We got out of it before I asked, “So who’s gonna go with whom?”

My friends Indie and Maddie didn’t want to go in the recently-fixed kayak, and climbed inside the other one.

Caroline didn’t know what to do, “I mean, the maximum amount of people in one kayak is two and the good one is already filled up. But this one has a freaking hole in it.”

She decided to go with Maddie and Indie while Harper and I got inside the one with the cork.

We rowed for a while, kayak next to kayak, having fun, throwing water at each other, telling jokes, and whispering gossiping.

"I heard Alex is going to the party on Friday" Indie said giggling. "We should go too."

Everything was going well. At least until we approached the middle of the river. It wasn't sudden. The water started flooding inside the kayak slowly, creeping through the sides of the cork. We were okay with it in the beginning, till we saw that the water getting inside the boat faster and faster, filling it quickly. "Shit, Harper, I think we are sinking." I said, despair laced in my voice, as I looked at the water filling the kayak.

The back of the kayak was under the water now.

"Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit." Harper muttered looking around frenetically, trying to find a solution.

"INDIIIIIIIIIE"

Indie, who was in charge of the paddles in the other kayak turned to face us. Her eyes widening as she realized our dilemma.

By that time, our kayak was already under the water, and I was holding it by the rope that we used to tie it on the docks. Harper held the paddles. We were swimming towards our friend's boat while they were rowing towards us.

I've never been so afraid in my entire life. I was afraid of drowning but I was even more afraid of getting bitten by a piranha...or hundreds, since this river was full of them.

We finally got to the kayak, climbing into it and tying the already-sinking kayak onto the back of the buoyant one. We started rowing back to the docks and the second kayak started to sink because it was over its capacity. The back of the kayak was already under the water, and we started paddling faster, hoping to make it back in time before it was completely submerged.

After a few minutes of terror and panic, we finally made it back safely. Nobody was bitten, nobody died. We were safe at last.

Now we had to face another problem: how to get the kayaks out of the water.

The kayaks were at least five times heavier now that they were full of water, and even with five girls using their all their strength, it still wasn't enough.

Then Maddie had the brilliant idea. She got the ATV and brought it to the docks. After tying the kayaks to the four-wheeler, she accelerated and successfully dragged the kayaks out of the water. We left them there turned upside-down so the water drained out. It was the scariest, yet the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me. We high-fived each other, happy that everything was solved in the end. "I'll never go kayaking with you again, idiots." Caroline joked, letting out a nervous laugh.

Bioluminescent Plankton

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I turned around to make sure that Nick was following me.

My hair was sticking to my forehead, and a burst of deep laughter escaped from my throat as I turned around to run again.

“Come back here!” Nick screamed somewhere behind me, also laughing.

My feet sank a little bit in the sand with every step I took, making it a little bit difficult to run. Sweat ran down my face, and I had to keep pushing my white dress down all the time so it wouldn’t lift with the wind. The other hand was occupied pushing my glasses back so they wouldn’t fall off my face.

I was in a clear disadvantage in this running.

I let out a shriek as Nick caught me from behind in his arms and spun me in the air.

He gently put me back down, and I turned around to give him a playful punch on the shoulder. He put a hand above the place I had just hit and made what was supposed to resemble a face in pain, but his acting skills needed severe improvement.

We were barefoot, and as I moved my foot around, I could feel the little sand grains between my fingers.

I looked up at Nick’s face. He was also a little bit sweaty, and his shaggy brown hair was sticking to his forehead. I could see that he was genuinely happy because his brown eyes matched the smile on his lips. His smile was absolutely beautiful. It was a big

smile with small dimples on the side. It was the kind of smile that would actually take over half of his face. Just looking at him made me feel a little bit happier.

I reached up to his curly hair, feeling it around my fingers. I played a little bit with it before actually fixing it. I let my hand drop to my side.

He was wearing a white v-neck lace-up shirt that matched my dress and khaki shorts.

He looked absolutely adorable, and I couldn’t help but smile a little bit wider.

But I wasn’t here for him.

We were here to see the bioluminescent plankton.

I turned around to go in the direction of our room so we could change into our rubber swimming clothes and get the life jackets we were going to need for our adventure tonight.

So far, this trip has been absolutely fantastic. Backpacking through Thailand had been the best idea I have ever had, and thankfully I had found a friend like Nick who was willing to go on this adventure with me.

So far we have been to Bangkok where we visited some temples like Wat Phra Kaew and Wat Pho; Sukhothai, where we could see a piece of rural Thailand; Chiang Mai, where we visited the Elephant Nature Park and went on a hill tribe trek; Pai and Mae Hong Son loop where we went to some forest hills, hot springs, and waterfalls; Krabi, where we went rock climbing; and finally Ko Phi Phi, where we would see the so-desired planktons.

We entered the room and started changing to the trip tonight.

“Are you ready?” Nick asked me as soon as he finished putting on his clothes.

“Yes,” I answered. I had taken off my glasses and put on my contacts. That way I could get into the water and still be able to see something. I had a pretty bad far-sighted vision. I needed my glasses if I wanted to see anything one palm in front of me.

Nick theatrically opened the door, gesturing with both arms for me to go ahead and walk through the door.

"Let's go," he said, "adventure awaits."

We got to the beach in less than five minutes. We noticed that there were already a few people waiting in the sand beside some kayaks that were tied to a tree in the water. Everyone was wearing the same types of clothes as we were, so we knew that we were in the right place.

The guides arrived no much later. They gave each one of us a flashlight and explained to us the procedure. The guides were going to take the orange kayak, and we were supposed to take the yellow ones. We should put on our life jackets and follow them closely, always keeping the flashlights on until they said so.

It was pretty dark, even with all the artificial light around us.

We paddled for a while, getting farther and farther away from the shore. I could barely see anything in front of me with this darkness, even with the flashlight on. I was sitting in front of the kayak, so I turned around to look at Nick's face.

He was facing the water beside him, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He was trying to spot the planktons. I could tell.

We paddled and paddled until the guides told us to stop and turn off the flashlights. We all obeyed.

Once all the lights were off, It was impossible to see anything. It took me a second to get used to the dark.

"Okay, everyone," the instructor began, "now we will row slowly without the lights on. Be sure to stay close to us all the time."

The guides started paddling, and...

The water was lighting. The water was actually glowing a pretty blue light.

"Start paddling or we'll get lost," Nick said behind me.

"Oh my God," I said every time the paddle hit the water.

With every movement, the water started to glow. It wasn't difficult to follow the other kayaks now. We only had to follow the glowing water.

We paddled a little bit more. I let out a giggle as I put my hand in the water beside me. The water lighted up as I touched it. I felt so grateful to be here and be able to witness such a marvelous thing. The instructors made a signal for us to stop rowing.

"This is the place the water glows the most." He explained. "This is the place that has the greatest concentration of planktons. Who's ready to get into the water?"

I looked at Nick and he looked at me.

If there was a reason we were so perfect for each other was that we had the same sense of adventure. We would never let an opportunity like that pass.

The guides tied all the kayaks together so they wouldn't float away while we were in the water. The guides and the people who were too afraid to get into the water would still be up in the kayaks, taking care of them.

Nick and I were the first ones to jump into the water. The water lit up in its beautiful blue glow as we hit the water. We laughed as we splashed sparkly water on each other. In no time, other people followed us into the water.

Nick gave one of the guides our camera. The guide was filming us play with the sparkly water so we could watch it anytime we wanted after tonight.

It's hard to explain what it was like to be there. How it felt to actually see the view we just had.

All I can say that it's the kind of sensation that you can't get looking at human-built sights. Only nature made views.

It's just shocking to see that despite all the bad things, lies, wars, poverty, disasters that happen in our world, there is still a very, very beautiful part of it.

It is a magical sight created by a force bigger than any of us.

It doesn't matter if you believe in God or not. The sensation is the same.

You feel blessed. You feel the power of the beautiful things around you. You feel lighter, refreshed. You feel connected with the nature around you. You feel happier.

For someone who doesn't actually believe in the church, it's difficult to not believe in God in times like this one. You might not believe in Jesus and the miracles he made, but you will believe in miracles. You are seeing a miracle. It's something perfectly made. Perfectly calculated; with all its parts complete.

It's different than looking at human-made construction. No matter how hard men try, there's always an imperfection: crack here, a scratch there.

But you are looking at something completely flawless, just like every other thing produced by nature.

Every time you do something outdoors, in nature, it's a new breath of fresh air, it's a less stressful day, it's a guarantee of a better night of sleep.

It's a new challenge.

I made a cup with my hands and lifted it above the water. I watched it as the glowing blue water leaked through my fingers.

Blessed.

All the information cited about Thailand was obtained on these sites:

- indietraveller.com
- myfunkytravel.com
- rvcoutdoors.com

City Girls Gone Camping

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There's nothing more entertaining than three city girls who have never been in contact with the nature trying to go camping without any experience.

But that's exactly what Harper, Indie and I tried to do.

We live in Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, which is right next to the Amazon forest, making our city the best city for someone who wants to go on an adventure in contact with nature.

The perfect spot for camping is a beach that is located in an Amazon River tributary, Acarinã, close to part of the forest, far away from the city. This part of the river, specifically, had clear water, where we could see the bottom; a sharp contrast from the black water for another tributary that we were used to seeing, due to its closer location to our city.

We couldn't reach this beach by car, only by boat. In case you don't know, the Amazon River is the biggest river in the world, and it is just as vast as the sea. It has multiple tributaries, and it would take days to explore everything. To get to this beach on Acarinã, it usually took one day and a half sailing from Manaus to get there. This wasn't a problem. Both my and Harper's parents had boats that could be used in this little adventure, but Harper's was bigger, and it had rooms where we could sleep during the night that we would spend on the boat on our way to the beach. Therefore, our parents thought it was a better idea to use it.

Our parents wanted to come, but they weren't going to sleep on sleeping bags in a tent like us. They were going to sleep on the comfortable beds available on the boat. They were only going to stay on the beach with us during the day.

My parents and I arrived at eight o'clock at the dock where the boat was anchored, ready to leave. We were the last ones to arrive, as usual. While my parents went to Indie's and Harper's parents to catch up with whatever they were talking about, I went to talk to the girls.

"So whoooo's ready?????" I could tell by the look on the girls' face that I was the most enthusiastic about the whole adventure. Sure, they might be looking forward to it too, but I definitely was the one who wanted to do it the most.

"I'm ready." Harper said, "Now let's get onto the boat and claim our bedroom."

We went directly to the room downstairs, while our parents preferred the bedrooms upstairs that had windows and access to the open area of the boat.

We were three girls sharing a tiny room with only one medium size bedroom, but that was all that was available for us, so we had to go with it. Also, it would be more fun to sleep together for a night rather than in separate rooms, despite our uncomfortable situation. Together we could talk and gossip all night, play cards, and just generally have fun.

We dropped our bags on the only space left on the floor, got out of the tiny room as soon as possible, and went to the roof of the boat. It was the best place to stay, watch the view, and take insta-worthy pictures.

We sat on the floor, and Harper stated, "We are going to arrive at Acarinã about two to three o'clock tomorrow."

We spent the rest of the day taking pictures and sharing stories. At night, after dinner, we came back to the roof to see the stars.

After a whole day sailing, we were pretty far away from the city and its pollution. The stars seemed more evident now, even though there were only a few of them.

I lay back on the floor, appreciating the view of the stars. The girls copied me, and we stayed there, admiring the view that we didn't have back in the city.

"I can't wait to see the stars tomorrow," I said, "We are going to be very far away from the city, so I bet that the stars will be so much brighter."

Harper and Indie didn't respond for a while. Then, Harper whispered, "I do too."

We arrived around two at Acarinã, just like Harper expected.

The boat was huge, so it couldn't reach the beach without running ashore. It was anchored in the deep part of the river, and we had to take a canoe to reach the beach. It took us multiple trips in the canoe to bring to the beach all the tents, sleeping bags, and even a portable power generator that we could use to light up a line full of light bulbs that we could use to illuminate the beach when it got dark.

Harper's dad hired a man, Jorge, that was used to camping to accompany us, because we honestly had no idea how to do it.

Jorge helped us to set up the tent and arrange the beach chairs next to the water. Harper's dad even bought an inflatable slide to put in the water.

The beach itself was small, surrounded by the forest that extended for miles and miles. We weren't afraid of a jaguar or another type of dangerous animal appearing because Jorge said that this beach was safe. If we were lucky, maybe, just maybe, we would be able to see a monkey; the small type: the squirrel monkey.

The water was really clear, and we could see the small fish swimming there. Jorge warned us to swim only close to the shore on our side. On the other side of the river there was more forest, and he said that in the water, next to the trees, it was where we

could usually find alligators, and we wouldn't want to face one of them.

We also didn't have signal there, which meant no Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, Pinterest, YouTube, Tumblr, Kiwi, or Telegram. But we honestly didn't care, because we wanted to experience the whole natural environment thing.

Harper, Indie and I put on some jungle boots and military shirts that we bought before coming to this adventure. We put some insect repellent on our arms and legs before we started to explore a part that had overgrown grass next to the water.

As soon as we started walking in the grass, we started sinking. I realized that where the grass was located, the sand wasn't as compact as the rest of the beach. It wasn't like it was quicksand or anything, but we would get buried to the ankle.

"It's really difficult to move in this sand," I said.

"I know." Harper said, before asking "Race to the water?"

This would be so much fun.

I agreed, and we started running towards the water. Or at least we tried to run towards the water. In reality, we moved really slowly, with our feet sinking every time we touched the ground. We would stumble towards the water, sometimes falling and getting all dirty in the muddy sand.

Harper got to the water a little bit before me. She had water to her knee, and she turned to me with a triumphant smile. "I won! Suck it!"

I laughed as I joined her in the water. We were all dirty, with mud in our shirts, arms, face, and hair, and now we were soaked to our knees.

"Where's Indie?" Harper asked.

We looked back to the place where we started running and found Indie walking carefully, not getting dirty at all, except for the mud on her boots. She was walking slowly towards us, making sure that she wouldn't fall or splash mud around.

Harper and I looked at each other. We didn't have to say anything. A mutual agreement was sealed between us as we dashed towards Indie and pushed her to the ground.

She screamed as she hit the sand and frowned at us, clearly annoyed. We stretched out our arms to help her up, but instead, she pulled us to the ground beside her. We laughed, all filthy, but happy.

We got into the water, clothes and all, cleaning ourselves up a little bit, before getting out and actually changing into bikinis and playing in the water for the rest of the day. Our parents relaxed on the beach chairs, or in the water while we played on the inflatable slide.

It was getting dark, so we turned on the power generator. Everyone sat on the beach chairs while we waited for the boat staff to bring over the dinner (yes, because it was that fancy).

While we were eating, the power generator stopped working. Jorge tried to turn it back on, but no one could quite figure out why the thing stopped working in the first place. We had some flashlights, but they weren't enough to illuminate the area.

Thankfully, Jorge knew how to start a bonfire.

We all helped to collect the branches and wood that we needed to start the fire. Soon, the fire started burning bright, and we all settled back to finish the meal.

After everyone was done with the food, Jorge asked if we wanted to go alligator-spotting. We didn't know exactly what was it, but we wanted to go anyway.

We got a canoe that was big enough to fit Harper, Indie and I, and our parents. Jorge was the one conducting it. Jorge was leading the canoe, and we were heading to the other side, where the alligators could be found.

Jorge told us to be quiet as we approached the other side. He had a flashlight on his hand, and he kept waving it around, looking for an alligator.

"When we focus the light on the alligator's eyes at night they get paralyzed," Jorge said, "They don't move at all, so it's safe to fetch them."

We continued looking around, in search of an alligator.

Jorge finally spotted one. He handed the flashlight to Indie's mom and told her to keep focusing the light on the alligator. Then he did something that none of us was expecting: he jumped in the water.

He fetched the alligator and swam back to the canoe. He climbed it, holding the alligator by its tail and mouth, preventing it from opening its mouth. Indie's mom still had the flashlight on the alligator's eyes, as Jorge instructed. He said that as long as the light was on the animal's eyes, it wouldn't move.

He told us how to handle the alligator, and all of us took our turn to hold it and take pictures. I was scared to hold it at first, but eventually, I did.

Jorge returned the alligator to the water, and we headed back to the beach. It was such a beautiful night that our parents didn't want to go back to the boat. The staff brought some of the boat's mattress, and we put them inside the tent. It was a big tent for twelve people, so it fit everyone perfectly.

It was nice, except when someone needed to pee. Then you had two options: the river or behind the trees. If we choose to go behind the tree, we had to bring someone along. Going to the trees alone could be dangerous.

The fire had died down, and we all settled inside the tent. Harper, Indie, and I slept on sleeping bags and our parents on the mattress.

The weather was nice. Not too hot, not too cold. Just the perfect amount of chilly.

Everybody was asleep when I woke up. It was probably around one a.m. There were drops of water falling from the roof on me. It wasn't raining, so it was probably water from the dew falling through a hole in the tent.

I moved my sleeping bag to a dry place and lay down again.

But I just couldn't sleep. Since I woke up, I figured it would be nice to walk around a little bit. Get a little bit of fresh air.

I walked outside. It was way darker without the bonfire.

I lay down on one of the beach towels still extended to the sand.

The sky looked different from everything I've ever seen before.

It was black, like almost every night sky back in the city. But it had way more drops of silver spread across it. Way more drops of silver. A thousand drops of silver over the black background. A little bit to my left, there were splashes of dark and light blue, where the concentration of stars was higher, making the view breathtaking. Right in the middle of this turmoil of stars, there was the moon.

The moon was completely full, looking like this imperfect ball with brushes of lighter silver.

It looked almost like a painting.

Looking at this amazing display of stars, I could understand where Van Gogh got his inspiration to paint "Starry Night." Looking at the sky, I could understand why the painting had become so famous.

I just wished I could see it every day, and not only when I was far away from the city.

I don't really know how long I stayed outside, appreciating the marvelous view. But all I knew was that I was going to make the most out of it before I woke up tomorrow and made my way back home.

Away from the sky.

Away from the stars.

Bookworm

• • • • •

Hey, everyone!

It's your favorite Book Blogger in the area, BookWorm. Today's post is going to be a little bit different from what you're used to.

Today I am not going to do a review about a book I just read [a small spoiler: the next book review is going to be about a book that happens in an amazing futuristic game scene. I bet you can guess which book I am talking about :)]. Today I am not going to update any of the stories available online for you guys.

Today I am going to talk a little bit about me. I am going to talk about the whole reason behind this website.

for a better understanding of my feelings, put on "Waving through a window," from the musical Dear Evan Hansen.

For a long time, I felt like I wasn't good enough. I tried my best, but still couldn't be the best in what I did. I studied a lot and gave my best effort, but still wasn't the number one in class; not even number ten, actually. Danced up to eight hours a week and still wasn't able to be the best dancer in class. I have been taking singing classes since I was eleven and am still totally out of pitch.

It was like everything I did wasn't good enough. I was never good enough.

There was something definitely wrong with me. Everyone had a special talent. Why didn't I have one too?

When you live in a place where you NEVER meet new people, and the people you know, you've known since you were kids, it's easy to get stuck in labels. Once people get used to this specific

idea of you, it is difficult to break through it. It's difficult to try to change.

I was stuck as that girl. The girl who is smart, but not too smart. The girl who is always reading, but is not reading as much as the other girl who, by the way, is waaaay more intelligent than her. The girl who was pretty, but not too pretty. The girl who never raised her voice. The girl who was just... there.

It gets pretty tiring to be this girl after a while.

It's hard when you get stuck in labels like this because it becomes almost impossible to break through them. People get used to you being like that. They don't really accept the fact that you are going to grow up someday and try new things. That you can change. That you can become a better version of yourself.

I turned to books as a way to escape from it. To be someone else for at least a couple of hours. As I read them, I found a way to avoid reality and live a better life. Like William Lyon Phelps said, "I divide all readers into two classes: those who read to remember and those who read to forget." I think I find myself in the latter.

While reading, I could be anyone I wanted to be. A ballerina. A demigod. A magician. A witch. A princess. A fairy. Anything.

It didn't matter what or who I was. What mattered was that at least for a few minutes I was someone else. I was someone free from the society labels that I was already stuck on.

But I started feeling like something was missing in these stories. A personal touch was missing to make it MY story. I felt like the story I needed the most haven't been written yet. So I decided to write it.

I decided to write my own stories. That way I could create a better version of me. I would be able to be whoever I wanted, without having to be someone else.

But guess what? Once again I wasn't good enough. Not good enough to win writing competitions. Not good enough so I would show it to my colleagues and they would like it like they did to some of my classmate's stories.

Like in the song “Waving through a window,” I was “on the outside always looking in.” I started feeling that people didn’t want me to succeed. It was as if they weren’t going to make things more difficult; they also weren’t going to help me. If they could, they were going to stop me right in the beginning, before I could even try and make my dream of becoming a writer come true. I was alone on this journey.

It got pretty tiring.

And reading got pretty lonely.

I wanted to share the amazing stories I was reading with someone. I wanted someone to feel the amazing feelings I felt while reading the books. As I read, I felt like I was part of something. As I read, I felt like someone understood me. As I read, I felt like someone would be there for me no matter what. As I read, I gained hopes that I would be able to overcome any difficulties I encountered.

I wanted someone to share these feelings with me.

I didn’t want to be looking from the outside at people who would never accept me as I am.

I also wanted to share my stories. Even though no one I knew appreciated my stories, I believed that I was somewhat talented. I knew that the problem wasn’t my lack of talent and hard work. The problem was that I was showing the stories to the wrong people.

So I created this blog. I adopted the name BookWorm hoping that if no one knew my identity, they wouldn’t do anything to stop me. They wouldn’t do anything to hold me behind.

And it worked.

Here I shared everything I felt while reading a book. Here I posted my stories.

Here I found an incredibly supportive community, even though you don’t know me in real life.

I never thought I would get more than five views. But today, as I reached 100k followers, some of my stories reaching up to 500k readers, I feel blessed to have found you.

Thank you for showing me that my work is worth it. Thanks for showing me that I should believe in myself no matter what others say about me. Thanks for being the friends I asked for. Thanks for always supporting my work. Thank you for being these amazing followers.

Never forget that if you believe that you are good at something, if you have a passion, you must pursue it, no matter how hard the path is. You have to do your best, to reach all the possible options, and, most important, never give up.

Never forget that you are good enough, that you have talent. The difference is that some people find their way earlier than the others, but that doesn’t mean they are better. Keep your head up, and you’ll find your way.

And you’ll do great.

I love you so much and stay tuned for the next update.

From the bottom of my heart,

BookWorm

Garden Florencia

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I was walking with my eyes closed. My hands were covering them, while Nick had his own hands above mine. He was guiding me so I wouldn't crash into something.

It was a beautiful warm day. It wasn't hot, nor cold, but very humid. Nicolas had one of his arms around me, making the walk a little bit difficult.

"Alright," he said, removing the hands from my eyes, "you can see now."

When I opened my eyes, I saw one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.

It was an explosion of lilac.

The street was completely covered in cherry blossoms, and the trees were covered with the same flowers. On the right side, there was a water stream that was covered by the flowers that had fallen from the trees surrounding it. Light poles illuminated the channel, giving it almost a magic tone.

I turned around to look at Nick, bewildered.

"Where are we?" I asked before turning back to appreciate the view of the flowers.

He gave me a small smile, clearly pleased with my reaction, "Garden Florencia."

"This is so pretty..." I said, still amazed by what I was seeing.

"You're welcome," Nick said, clearly satisfied. "I hope you don't mind that it wasn't anything material, just a trip to a park but... this is your gift. Happy birthday, Sam."

"Are you kidding me?" I asked, turning around to look at him once again. "This is perfect."

"Can we..." I began.

"Walk down the street?" He said, finishing my sentence, "Of course we can."

"But the flowers on the..."

"Street?" He said, completing my sentence once again, "We can step on them."

"But what if they get kneaded?" I asked, not wanting to be the one to ruin the view.

"Dude, this is a park. There is a couple pushing a baby carriage in front of us. There's a cyclist over there. There's a girl walking in our direction. They are all stepping on the flowers. It's a street. We can step on them. C'mon."

He grabbed my arm to pull me forward to walk beside him.

Once I fell in step with him, he let my arm go.

"I always knew," I stated, letting out a small laugh.

"Knew what?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That you had a crush on me."

I was kidding. I was teasing him like I always do. And Nick knew it.

"Oh yeah," he began, letting out a laugh, "I've been secretly in love with you since we were nine years old when I accidentally stuck cotton candy on your hair. Also, my girlfriend is, in fact, a facade to hide my love for you."

Oh, the sweet irony.

Later, that night, or should I say, morning, I woke up with my phone ringing.

I looked at the clock placed beside my bed.

00:15.

"What kind of person makes calls at this time?" I thought.

I looked at the lock screen.

Him.

He was the kind of person who would call that hour.

Nicolas.

I answered it quickly.

"Hey, Nick, what's up?" I asked, letting out a yawn.

"Sam?" He said, his voice cracking in the end.

"Yeah?" I asked, sitting up quickly, worry creeping upon me.

"Open the door, please."

I got out of the bed fast, knowing that something was wrong. I still had my phone with me as I walked down the stairs. I opened the door, and Nick was there, with a lost puppy face. He simply walked in, without saying anything, and walked straight to the kitchen.

I followed him, and, when I entered the kitchen, he had already helped himself with a glass of Coke and was putting a slice of pizza inside the microwave. BEEP. He took the pizza out and started eating it. Not even his favorite food seemed to lighten the mood.

"What happened?" I asked, worried.

"Can we go to your room?" He asked.

We reached my room, sat on the bed, and he grabbed my stuffed bear that was sitting beside my pillows and started hugging it. The tip of his nose started getting red, very subtly. Very very subtly. Most of the people wouldn't have noticed it. I almost missed it.

But I did notice it.

"Do you wanna talk about what happened?" I asked gently, my hand brushing his shoulder.

"Jessy." He said simply.

Oh.

"I see," I replied, understanding where we were heading to.

Jessy was his girlfriend. In my opinion, she was not the best company to keep around, but he liked her, so, like the good friend that I am, I accepted her with open arms.

The thing is that Nick and Jessy recently started having this heated arguments and they were getting more frequent. They also stayed mad at each other longer than they used to. Nick looked affected by it. He wasn't as happy as he used to. He was smiling less.

But Jessy didn't seem affected at all. She acted like she had always acted and she didn't seem to care at all about Nick and his feelings. That just annoyed the crap out of me.

"Are you here because Jessy did something specific or you just wanted someone to talk to?" I asked.

He took in a deep breath before saying, "She was cheating on me with Jay. I know that because I walked in on them."

My eyes widened when I heard that.

"Your cousin?" I asked just to make sure I had heard it right.

"Yes," he replied, with his expression darkening.

"Shit," I said. Jay was Nick's older cousin and best friend (besides me, of course). They lived together and shared everything with each other.

Apparently, girlfriends were no exception.

Now seriously, jokes apart, Jay was like a brother to Nick, and it was surprising that he would do such thing to him.

"If it were anyone else it wouldn't matter." Nick said, "But Jay? To whom I told everything? To the person I trusted the most?"

I realized that he came here because he couldn't stand being in the same house as Jay, knowing what he had done.

"If you want to spend the night here, you're welcome," I told him, which awarded me a small, grateful smile.

He accepted the invitation, and we settled the inflatable mattress that I had in my closet to him. It was not the first time that he was going to spend the night, so it wasn't an issue for my parents. They treated Nick like he was their son.

As we lied in bed, his mattress positioned at the bottom of my bed, I said, "You know, instead of pizza, you should have gotten ice cream. They say it helps to brighten the mood."

He let out a small laugh. "Only you to make me laugh in times like this."

He got up, and walked to my bed, climbing onto it and sitting beside me.

"C'mon," he said, smiling, clearly feeling better, "you make me laugh. Start your show."

I let out a laugh before sitting up and pushing him. I guess I pushed him a little bit too hard because he lost his balance and fell on the floor.

I put my hands on my mouth, unable to control my laughter.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," I said between my laughs.

Thankfully, he was laughing too as he climbed back on his bed and wrapped himself in the comforter.

"Good night, Sam," he said quietly.

"Good night, Nick."

On the other day, I went with Nick to his house. I couldn't leave him alone in times like this.

Nick fished the key inside his pocket and opened the door. As soon as we entered, we saw Jay sitting on the sofa facing the television like he didn't give a damn to what was going on.

Jay turned to face us when he heard the noise of the door.

"Dude..." he started, standing up.

"Don't." Nick said, turning Jay down on the spot, "I'm here to pick up my stuff."

Nick headed in the direction of the stairs, but Jay intercepted him at the bottom of the stairs.

"I am so, so sorry." Jay begged, "Jessy came here looking for you, but you weren't here. I told her you were with Sam and Jessy just go mad. I thought that maybe you and Sam were... And that maybe you dumped Jessy."

Both of them looked at me, making me feel slightly uncomfortable. Thankfully, Nick turned his attention back to Jay.

"I always tell you everything, Jay. Everything." Nick said emphasizing the word. "Always did, always have. Don't you think I would have told you if I had broken up with Jessy and started dating someone else? Especially if this person was Sam, someone you know?"

"Honestly?" Jay said, exasperated, "I don't know! You've been weird recently. You've been practically living at Sam's house. I barely see you, and we live in the same house."

"It doesn't matter," Nick said. "The thing is, when you and Jessy..." he hesitated, trying to find the right words "did it, I was still dating her, and I am certain that you knew it. You just saw the opportunity, and you took it. Well, now you'll have plenty of opportunities because I don't want to have anything to do with neither of you two."

"I know you're mad," Jay started, trying to make Nick calm down. Nick seemed that he was using all of his strength not to jump on Jay. "I would be mad too, but I swear that I didn't know you were still dating."

"Oh yeah," Nick said, full of sarcasm, "You talk like we didn't have breakfast with Jessy yesterday morning, and we didn't kiss in front of you or anything."

"I understand that you and Sam are best friends forever and all that shit, but you have to understand that maybe Jessy didn't get that. She was furious when she found out that you were alone with her. Honestly, you need to understand how that sounds."

"I want to hear it from her if that's what she is feeling."

And with that, Nick darted up the stairs, with me following right behind him. We got into the room, and Nick started putting

his clothes inside a suitcase. He seemed devastated by the whole situation.

"I feel like this is all my fault," I said, looking down.

He immediately stopped what he was doing and turned to look at me directly in the eye.

"Absolutely not." He stopped packing and picked up the bags he filled with clothing, books, and toiletries, "Shall we?"

I followed him downstairs. When we got to the living room, we saw that Jay was gone. Nick put his bag on the trunk of his car, and we got into the car.

He drove me to Garden Florencia. The park still had that magic air of happiness, something that definitely didn't match Nick's humor.

We got out of the car and walked side by side in silence for a while.

"It wasn't your fault." He said. "It was mine. I don't think I was a good boyfriend."

"That's no excuse for cheating," I said. "If she was unhappy, she should have broken up with you, not cheated on you with your cousin. Besides, it wasn't your fault, and you were better than her."

More silence. Nick stopped walking, sat in one of the benches, rested his elbows on his knees, and looked down, his hands covering his face. I sat down beside him.

As I studied his face, I realized that he was... crying?

I gave him a small punch in the arm before gently putting my hand on his chin and lifting his head up.

"I am here for you." I said, "It doesn't matter what you have done or the things that have happened to you. I am here."

He gave me a crooked smile. Nick hugged my head, pulling me towards him and messing my hair up.

"I know."

Slam

• • • • •

"New shit."

Said the man on the stage, dressed in polished black shoes, button up light-blue shirt, fedora black hat, and a social set said, calmly.

"New shit." The whole audience replied in return.

I was beyond excited to see this. This was my first time attending a Slam Poetry competition. I have wanted to attend one for a while, but, due to geographical circumstances, I have never been able to.

This time, I was going to a week-long summer camp in Austin, Texas. Austin also was the best place to see a live presentation, and everyone says that the performed part was half of the experience. It was an emotion that you couldn't feel through the screen of your computer. You had to see it live to feel it.

This was my golden ticket.

I first heard about slam poetry through one of my favorite books: "Slammed," by Colleen Hoover. In the book, the main characters attend a slam poetry competition. By the way that the author described it, it picked my interest in googling it, to see if it was any good.

Turns out it was. It was a marvelous way of expressing your feelings.

After seeing multiple slam poetry competitions on YouTube, I got the hang of what was it about.

Poetry Slam is a form of spoken word poetry. It's a competitive form of performing poetry. The difference between spoken word poem and slam poetry is that there's a competition when you perform slam poetry. It is a subset of spoken word.

There is no particular format. You could write about anything you wanted, in any form you wanted, as long as it was only you and your body. No outside materials were allowed. Each poem must be of the author's own authorship. Your poem must be performed on stage, and it can't be longer than three minutes. If your poem exceeds the time limit, you will have points deducted.

The poet will receive scores from five judges randomly selected from the audience, that will give him a score from zero to ten. Then, the lowest and highest scores are dropped, and the average of the last three ones is calculated to give the poet's final score. The audience is encouraged to react to the poets the way they seem fit, by clapping, whistling or whatever, and, that way, influence the judge's decision.

I was beyond excited to finally be able to attend a competition. I would finally feel that wave of emotion that everyone talked about.

I searched online where I could attend a Slam competition in Austin. I found out about this coffee place that also had a ballroom. Apparently, Slam Poetry competitions were held in the ballroom every Tuesday night, and they were very, very popular, so you had to get there early if you wanted a place to sit.

I left the camp at five, and the competition started at seven. I only had time to get to the hotel, change, and head for the ballroom.

My friend Kara wanted to come with me, and we arrived a little bit after six.

The bouncer asked for our IDs, and we had our hands stamped with a big black X to indicate that we were minors.

It was the most organized disorganized place I have ever laid my eyes on.

And yes, I mean organized disorganized place. The phrase "Keep Austin Weird," seemed to be handy.

The place was packed, even though there was still almost a whole hour left before it was time to begin. There was a small stage decorated with Christmas lights in the front of the room. In front of the stage, there were multiple lines of chairs that could accommodate almost a hundred people. On the back of the room, five round tables could accommodate eight people at it. There was this bar on the left-hand side, and I was surprised to see that there were already a couple of drunk people on the bar stools.

We got two places right in the middle the room, next to two girls that were too busy making out. I have never been in a place like this.

From where I come, I only attend to dinner places and fancy bars, utterly different from the scenario I saw here.

There were people from all shapes and colors, from all sexual orientations and nationalities. There were girls with blue hair; boys with piercings. It was a vast diversity that I had never seen before. And I loved it!

I loved the color, and I loved the life that the place exhaled.

More people entered the room, filling up quickly the empty seats and standing up on the sides, before a guy that looked exactly like Shaggy Rogers climbed up the stage.

"Welcome to another night of Slam."

The audience cheered.

"We are going to choose the judges for tonight." Shaggy said, clasping his hands together for emphasis, "This spotlight right above my head is going to spot someone in the crowd." He explained pointing up, to where the spotlight was located, "And the one who is chosen by the paramount power of the spotlight shall be our judge for the night!"

More cheers.

Everyone waits patiently while the spotlight went around before stopping. Every time someone new was spotted, there

was another round of cheers. The thing hasn't started, yet, you could see a lot of people with beer cans in their hands and eating tacos, that was the promotional food of the week. It was starting to become clear to me what someone once told me about Slam Poetry competitions: "It's a place where slightly intoxicated people go to express their bottled-up emotions in a way that they wouldn't do sober."

"It's time to begin with our sacrifice."

The sacrifice was the person who goes first but isn't competing. It's someone who volunteers to go up on the stage first and read their poems to break the ice. The judges grade the sacrifice as training for the real thing.

A small, petite blond girl climbed up the stage, to begin her presentation. She was wearing an oversized yellow sweater, ripped jeans, and a beanie on her head. She had a fierce look on her face, like she was ready for a fight whenever she needed.

She glared her throat and began.

"This poem is called 'I don't wanna be beautiful.'"

She took in a big breath before starting.

"Thank you for telling me I am beautiful
Yes, I've heard it before
Yes, I am thankful for your compliment
No,"

She paused a little before continuing.

"That didn't make me feel better about myself."

Another pause.

"I don't wanna be beautiful"

I will wear jeans and t-shirts hoping that you will notice
something in me besides my body

I don't wanna be beautiful

I will not put cream in my hair to keep for being frizzy just
because you like my hair shiny

I will tie it in a ponytail hoping that you will notice
something that you can't see

I don't wanna be beautiful"

She started speaking faster, especially in the "I don't wanna be beautiful parts." Her voice raised gradationally with every sentence, demonstrating her anger.

"I will not put contacts and makeup on just to go to that
pizza place because you want me to

I don't wanna be beautiful

I will not wear a dress just to catch your attention

I don't wanna be beautiful

I will not wear heels to make my legs look longer

I don't wanna be beautiful

Why do I have to lose weight?

I'm healthy!

I don't wanna be beautiful

I don't want to use that top just because it makes my boobs
look nice

I don't wanna be beautiful

I don't care if my ass looks nice in those pants

I don't wanna be beautiful

Why do I have to bleach my arm's and leg's fur?

I don't wanna be beautiful"

She paused, looking around the audience, before starting again, slowly, her voice calm.

“If you want to compliment me
If you want to flatter me
Then *compliment my brain*,”

The audience started clapping. I could hear a little bit of venom in her voice when she talked about her brain. The girl pauses for a little bit while she waited for the applauses to finish so she could continue her presentation.

“Tell me how smart I am
Tell me how funny I am
Tell me how much you like my personality
Tell me how much you like my writing”

She started talking fast again, but with her tone low, emphasizing everything she spoke of her brain.

“*Compliment my brain*
Complement my math skills
Compliment my rhetoric skills
Compliment my intelligence
Compliment my brain
Congratulate me on that competition that I won
Congratulate me on the things that I worked hard for and achieved

Compliment my brain
And you will flatter me
And you will make me feel a thousand times better than I was before
And you’ll make me like you better
Compliment my brain
And I’ll know for a fact that you like me for me
Because I don’t wanna be beautiful”

Pause.

“I wanna be smart.”

The girl finished her poem with a proud smirk plastered on her face. She gave a quick bow before quickly exiting the stage. Everyone applauded and there some wolf whistles.

I was in shock. Really. Completely speechless.

I looked at Kara, just to see the same bewildered expression plastered on her face. Clearly going up on that stage took a lot of courage, and I wished I had enough courage to do the same.

“Alright!” Shaggy Rogers said, climbing up the stage. “Judges, please give us your scores.” The judges were sitting together at one of the round tables at the back of the room. Each one of them had a stack of paper in their hands where they were supposed to write their scores in bold letters, and rise up so everyone could see.

The girl got two eight’s, one nine, one seven, and one six point five.

A woman was sitting with the judges was supposed to keep track of the scores. She jotted down the grades and gave

Shaggy a thumbs up, indicating that he could carry on with the competition.

“Now, it’s time for the real thing to begin,” Shaggy said, rubbing his hands together and giving the audience a malicious smile.

Kara nudged me on the side, “If that wasn’t the real thing, I am kind of scared.”

I could only nod. I definitely couldn’t wait to see the rest.

Shaggy calls for another poet to climb up the stage. It’s another girl. She is wearing a sundress, looking slightly nervous. She kept pushing her glasses up and playing with her hair, her bangs long enough to almost cover her eyes.

“New shit.” She said.

“Neeew shit!” The audience responded.

The girl cleared her throat, “This poem is called ‘Once Upon a Time Land.’”

“The Once Upon a Time Land is my favorite place to be
There’s no bad man who wants to destroy the world with a
nuclear bomb

And no Prince Charming wannabe who gets everything he
wants without even trying

And it is a place where money isn’t an issue

It’s a place where dreams come true

And you just know the villain is gonna lose in the end

It’s a place where no matter how many obstacles the hero
might find, you just know that goodness win in the end

And the Once Upon a Time Land finds peace again
As it always does.

The Once Upon a Time Land has magical powers

Big castles
Flying horses
Magicians
Gods and Goddesses
And the most important thing
Unbreakable friendship

It’s the kind of friendship impossible to find in our common
land

The kind of friendship in which the person can’t be bought
The kind of friendship in which the person would rather die
than betray you

The kind of friendship that can’t be found in any of this
land’s friendships

On the Once Upon a Time Land, there’s no grades or
evaluations

In this magical place, they only study magical shit
It’s a place where the person’s values are not measured by
numbers

On the Once Upon a Time Land, the person’s value is
measured by one’s capacity

Of thinking outside the box

Of doing what has never been done before

Of defying the pattern

Of starting a new era

Of doing what they believe is right, not what people tell
them is right

The Once Upon a Time Land is my favorite place to be

But while I'm trapped in this alternative evil dimension, all I
can do is try my best to keep in mind on the Once Upon a Time
Land

Trying to stay on the Once Upon a Time Land will help me
get through life in the most beneficial way not just to me, but to
everyone else around me

Keeping my mind on the Once Upon a Time Land will help
me see that no matter how many stones I find in my way, giving
up is never an option

The Once Upon a Time Land has taught me much more
values than this land ever could, even though I knew this place
long before the Once Upon a Time Land

In this magical place, I learned not to discriminate people by
their background

I learned that the losers are always the ones to save the land

I learned that it doesn't matter how people view you, the
only things you should care about are your dreams and beliefs
and what you have to do to achieve them

Giving up is never an option
That, and that you should never ignore your mentor

The Once Upon a Time Land taught me ethics and that if you
don't believe in yourself, no one ever will

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said "No one can make you feel
inferior without your consent"

So excuse me for liking the Once Upon a Time Land better
than here."

Differently from the girl who presented just a few minutes
before, Glasses didn't make various intonations during her

presentation. She maintained a neutral tone during the whole
poem.

But it fit her poem. When she finished, everyone clapped
really hard. You could see on the people's faces that she really had
touched them with her poetry. The calm, quiet tone she adopted
during her whole presentation played a crucial whole into making
people feel the way she felt. You could feel her sadness. You could
feel her hope.

It just gave me chills.

"Judges!" Shaggy called after them.

Three nine's, one five, and one seven.

The girl smiled brightly before exiting the stage.

I watched her as she made her way through the crowd to an
empty seat not too far away from my left. She sat among a group
of teenagers, who congratulated her. She was so happy, clearly
proud of what she showed. By the way she was still looking kind
of fazed with emotion and couldn't seem to stop smiling, I figured
that it was probably her first time competing.

"Come up the stage, Phillip! The guy who won our last
competition. The guy who everyone has been waiting for."

It was the man with polished black shoes, button up light-blue
shirt, fedora black hat, and a social set. I had watched him on the
outside of the ballroom, right before I got in, practicing. He had
his phone in his hand, and he was only lip-syncing while making
wide gestures as he read what was on his phone.

He exhaled confidence. He seemed to be good.

My hands twitched with the expectation.

Phillip climbed up the stage, the light from the stage making
his black skin seem brighter. He grabbed the microphone and
adjusted the support to his level.

"New shit." He said, in a low tone.

"Neeeeew shit."

“This poem is called “The struggles of stopping a beating heart.” He said.

“You feel your heart starts to race
You tell it to stop
But it won’t listen to you
Instead, it decides to be a bad boy and starts beating even
faster
And faster
And faster
And faster”

His voice grows faster with every word. He is taping the microphone, simulating a heartbeat, following the rhythm of his words, before he stops abruptly.

“It hurts a little
But it’s not the ‘I’m about to have a heart attack pain’
It’s more like ‘I want to fucking rip my heart out of my chest’
kind of pain”

Pause.

“You try to control it
It seems to be controlling you
As your breath starts to race, you start to think about the
reason why you might be feeling like that
You can’t find anything
You just do

You can’t point a specific reason
It is just... happening
And you can’t do anything about it.”

He rubs his head as if he is panicking.

“Fuck
Your mom says ‘stop shaking your leg’
If you could, you would
But you can’t
So instead you start shaking your hands
Playing with your hair
Pacing around”

He starts talking just a little bit more quickly.

“Your mom tells you to stop
But you can’t
You need to burn some of that anxious energy and at the
same time find a way to stop your heart from beating that hard”

He pauses and taps the microphone twice. Then, very, very slowly he says:

“You need to think
Think

Think
Nothing.”

He doesn’t wait for his score. He takes off his hat, bowls, and leaves the stage.

“That was just amazing!” Kara said next to me, clapping her hands along the audience.

“Totally!” I said, clapping too.

The scores were all nine and one seven.

I took out my notepad out of my bag. I looked at the poem written in it, trying to decide whether I should give the competition a try.

“The blood in your veins”

It feels so good
You know you are right about to get it
You can already feel its taste in your lips
It feels like you could just reach out your hand and
It would be yours
It feels so good
You approach it slowly
You don’t want to scare it away
You lift your hand even slower
Getting closer
You touch it with the tip of your fingers
When you’re about to get it for good...
It is taken away from you in the cruelest possible way
It is ripped apart from you
So quickly

That you can’t take it back
You are left on the floor
Bleeding
On the inside
It hurts so bad
It is almost
Unbearable
No one understands
No one can see the blood
So you are left there
Alone
In a pool of blood
That poured out your broken dreams

I shook my head.

Not bad, I think. But maybe I should save this one for another time.

I put the notepad back in my bag. Shaggy Rogers was just calling another poet on stage. I take another look round at the mass of people. Everyone just looked happy. In peace.

I guess that’s how you felt after you confessed your feelings to an audience that you knew wouldn’t judge you, but instead, will support your art. You felt lighter. Like you finally made amends with yourself. Like you had taken a burden off your shoulders.

I wanted to feel that too.

Unfortunately, tonight was not the night.

Instead, I just set back and enjoyed the large number of poems that were still to come and appreciated the moment of raw feelings and sincerity provided by every poet to me, creating emotions within myself that I still haven’t fully comprehended, but wasn’t willing to forget.

Disclaimer: all poems written there are from the author.
Information about Poetry Slam can be found at *poetryslam.com*.

Four-wheeler adventure

• • • • •

I felt like I was inside a bottle that the barista kept shaking back and forth, seated behind Indie in the four-wheeler.

“You’re a terrible driver,” I told Indie.

“Am not.” She replied furrowing her eyebrows, upset, but kept going on.

“Yes, you are.” Harper scoffed behind me.

We were at Harper’s farm again, riding the four-wheelers at the trail in the forest right behind the farm. The four-wheeler was meant for two people at most but since we were five, and Maddie and Caroline were already occupying one of the two four-wheelers available, Harper, Indie, and I had to manage a way to go together.

We felt like it was better if the five of us went together to the trail since we thought it could be dangerous going alone. What if something happened? What if one of the four-wheelers broke? The person would be stuck in the forest with no ways of going back, or calling someone for help. In the middle of the trail, there was no phone signal, let alone internet. If we all went together, we could help each other.

We were taking turns on who was going to drive. I was the first one and drove on the big open space that we had to cover before reaching the forest and the trail. Now it was Indie’s turn and after that, Harper’s.

The only problem though, was that apparently Indie was afraid of driving. She would speed up and get scared when the four-wheeler moved too fast, so she would just let go of the handlebar. That meant that the four-wheeler would speed and stop all the time, not to mention it could be potentially dangerous, since she could just let go of the handlebar and lose control of the four-wheeler.

Meanwhile, Maddie and Caroline were just peacefully driving in front of us.

We weren't too far away into the forest when we reached a grassy slope in the middle of the trees. It wasn't too steep, just steep enough to make the drive in the trail challenging and exciting.

Caroline, who was driving the other four-wheeler, drove through it with ease and waited for us at the top.

Indie stooped at the bottom and didn't continue. Instead, she kept biting her bottom lip and looking up as if she was measuring the distance and the speed she should use to climb it.

"What's wrong?" I asked, "Are you scared?"

"No, I'm not," Indie answered, shaking her head forcefully.

"Then go!" Harper ushered, "I can drive through it if you want, you can continue driving on the other side."

"No, I can do it," Indie reassured.

Yet, I think five minutes passed and we still hadn't moved an inch.

"Are you ready, yet?" I impatiently asked, leg already shaking up and down.

"C'MON, INDIE," Maddie called from the top of the slope.

"No, wait," Indie answered, annoyance lacing her voice.

"I already offered to drive through it," Harper remembered.

"I don't want you to drive through it. I already said that I can do it!" Indie replied, annoyed.

"Then why don't you do it?" I asked.

"I'm going to."

Indie speeded up, and the four-wheeler moved forward just enough to stop right on the edge of the slope, not driving through it.

I rolled my eyes and let out an annoyed huff.

"INDIE LET'S GO," Caroline yelled from the top of the slope.

Then something happened. Harper simply reached out and pressed the accelerator on the handlebar. I don't even know how to explain what happened next. I guess maybe Harper accelerated way too fast right in the curve.

The ATV's wheels rolled, but the machine didn't move forward. It hit the curve, and the front of the ATV lifted from the ground. We fell down but thank goodness the thing didn't fall backwards on top of us. It just stopped upright. The car was stranded in a ninety degree with the floor, with the front part in the air and the back locked on the floor.

We quickly got away from the four-wheeler, afraid that it would fall back on us. It didn't. It just stopped right in that position.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked after a few moments of silence.

We were all still a little bit shocked with what happened.

"We can drive back to the farm and call someone to pick you up and take the four-wheeler back," Caroline suggested, still on the top of the slope.

"Good idea," Indie agreed.

Caroline and Maddie drove down the slope and headed in the direction of the farm. Indie, Harper, and I stayed.

Harper was still in shock.

"I did that..." She began, pointing at the ATV with wide eyes.

"It's fine," I said trying to sound cool.

"We could have gotten hurt," She stressed.

"But we didn't," Indie replied.

We kept calming Harper down all the time that we waited for Maddie and Caroline to come back.

We were a little bit scared of staying there with no means of coming back because we knew that we were in a part of the forest inhabited by a lot of animals, among them the famous Amazonian jaguar.

Fortunately, nothing happened in the twenty minutes that took them to come back with a farm worker driving a golf car in tail. We climbed up, and he said he would come back here later to retrieve the ATV.

The drive back to the farm was a long one, with all of us in silence, still a little bit shocked with what just happened. Especially Harper, who felt like this was her fault. She felt a bit bad for what happened, and it took her a while to recover from the incident and go back to her normal state.

The rest of the weekend ran smoothly without any major accidents.

Now, a few years later, we are able to look back on this moment and laugh at it, as we know that it is part of our share of adventures that we will carry with us forever.

Over the Top Fangirl

• • • • •

Bora Bora was definitely the most beautiful place I have ever been to. I travel a lot, so I sure do know what I am talking about. It's a place with a bright blue sky; clean paradisiac beaches; light blue sea water, so clear that you can see everything that is in the sand bottom; and it has almost no waves.

I was there with my friends Indie, Caroline, and Harper, for Harper's quinceañera; but instead of throwing a fancy party, she decided that going on a trip with her friends to an exotic place was more worth it.

And I completely agree with her.

The whole trip would be so much fun with us doing wakeboarding on crystal clear water, scuba diving in a barrier reef, and just lying on the clean sand. I couldn't wait to see what kind of adventures this trip would bring.

We arrived at the hotel, circled by the sea water and tall palm trees. It was one of the best hotels in the area. It had two pools, its own lagoonarium, free bikes for us to use, and a private beach with kayaks and stand-up boards that were included in the hotel rate.

We were all happy to be there, but Indie seemed to be the most excited about where we were.

"Can you believe it?" She said, "Just two days before Justin Bieber was here, like, in this same hotel."

Indie was a true Justin Bieber fan. A “belieber,” she said. She truly believed that someday she was going to marry him or something like that.

“I wish he had stayed just a little bit longer,” she put her hand on her chest, right above her heart and let out a sigh, “that way I would have had the opportunity to meet him.”

Harper’s parents were the ones responsible for us. I felt sorry for them. A single couple having to take care of four fifteen-year-old girls.

Harper’s mom handed each one of us a room key after she did the check-in at the front desk. We were going to stay in one room, and Harper’s parents in another.

“Take good care of this,” Harper’s mom said. “I am going to the beach,” she added, “you girls have fun.”

The first three days were so much fun. We visited the lagoonarium and swan with the sharks. By them, Harper and Indie had already lost their room keys.

On the fourth day, we decide to spend the day at the beach. Even though it was already late, the sun was still up in the sky. Caroline and I were getting tired, so we decided to go to the room, while Indie and Harper wanted to stay a little bit longer.

“Before you go,” Harper began, “can you guys leave a key with us? We lost ours.”

“Sure,” Caroline said handing Harper her key, “just don’t lose it.”

Caroline turned to me “You have yours, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied, without checking. I was sure I had it in my bag like always.

“Good,” she said, “because I don’t want to have to come back here to grab a key. It’s too far.”

Our room was a bungalow right above the water. To get to it, we had to walk an extensive footbridge, because our room was above the blue sea water. We could also get to our room riding

the bicycles offered to us, but it was challenging to ride a bike carrying beach bags and towels.

“Relax,” I reassured her, “I got it.”

We went back to our room and turns out... I didn’t have my key.

“Seriously, Rachel?” Caroline said to me, clearly annoyed, “Am I the only one responsible here? The only one who didn’t lose my key?”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. She was, in fact, the most responsible girl in our little group. Our room didn’t turn into a war zone because she knew how to keep things organized.

“Sorry,” I told her, “just hold on, I can fix this situation.”

I gave her my purse and took out my clothes, so I would be only in my bikinis. I looked out of the railing of the footbridge that led to our room. The water was deep here. Figuring out that it was safe enough, I jumped into the water.

Our room had a terrace with a table with four chairs and a ladder to access the water. We couldn’t open the door that led to the footbridge, but the glass door that led to the veranda was always open, and I could reach it by the ladder that led to the sea.

After I jumped in, I had to swim to the ladder, climb up, and get in the room through the veranda to open the door to Caroline.

She entered the room and looked at me like I was crazy. “You could have died, you know.” She said, “What if you got cramps after you jumped into the water? What if something happened when you hit the water and you couldn’t reach the surface? Our room is into the SEA,” she emphasized, “It is DEEP, you couldn’t touch the ground and you weren’t using any life jacket.”

I shrugged, “Well, I am alive, aren’t I?”

She just rolled her eyes, but let it go.

The next day we decided to stay in the room and make use of our exclusive terrace.

"It's almost lunchtime," Harper said, "I am going to order something from room service."

We waited for her to order the food before going outside to enjoy our terrace with access to the water. Harper dialed the room service number and pressed the phone to her ear, "Hi, good morning," she said to the person on the other end of the line, "I would like to order room service. Yeah, I would like two large pizzas, four cheeseburgers with fries..."

"I don't want cheeseburgers," Indie said, "I am on a diet."

Harper rolled her eyes before saying, "Cancel one of the cheeseburgers, please. We want only two large pizzas, three cheeseburgers with fries, and one steak with salad, please. Also, what kind of pasta do you have? I want spaghetti with tomato sauce, please...Yeah, that's it, thank you... wait! Do you have vanilla ice cream? Only the one-liter pot? Okay, you can bring it. Thank you very much! Bye!"

As soon as Harper got off the phone, Caroline asked: "Are you trying to feed four or forty people?"

"I am starving," Harper said, as if that explained everything, "I know that if I only order food for myself, you'll be asking for some of mine and I am really not in the mood to share my fries," she explained.

"But did you really need to order that much?" Caroline asked raising an eyebrow.

Harper just shrugged and said, "You are all invited to participate in my club," she said, "It is called the Fat Heart Club."

I snorted, "The Fat Heart Club?"

Harper looked at me in disapproval, "Yes, it's the Fat Heart Club. If you don't wanna be part of it, fine. Just don't come to me whining when you realize how much fun I am having. Now let's get in the water while we wait for the food. The lady on the phone said it would take almost an hour."

We all agreed, and soon we were inside of the water, swimming, relaxing on the floats, and gossiping around.

"I heard that Clarisse and Damon broke up again. Is it true? Isn't this like their third break-up?" I asked, and they all laughed.

I had my phone with me, since I was the only one with a waterproof case, and we used it to take a lot of pictures of us and the beautiful place that we were.

About thirty minutes later, Harper decided to go inside to take a shower and watch Netflix while waiting for the food.

Caroline, Indie and I decided to stay on the outside and make the best use of the limited time we would have in this paradise.

"Rachel, can I use your phone?" Indie asked me.

"For what?" I asked, already handing it to her.

"Justin Bieber stayed here, in this same hotel," she said as if she hadn't mentioned this fact for at least a hundred times. "I want to know exactly where he stayed. I want to know which room he booked."

Caroline and I looked at each other as she typed furiously on the phone. The girl had a serious Justin Bieber problem.

"I found it!" Indie exclaimed and showed Caroline and me the phone screen.

Apparently Justin Bieber stayed in one of the Master Suites. Our room was big, but the Master Suite was at least twice the size of our room. We had a big terrace, but the Master Suite not only had a terrace, but also a private pool in it.

"Look," Caroline said, "there is a Master Suite five rooms from ours on the right. It's not far. We can go swimming."

"Sure," I said, "why not?"

We grabbed the floats, so we wouldn't get tired of swimming, and started in the direction of the suite. As we passed in front of the other rooms, people looked at us like we have lost our minds for swimming in a place where we couldn't even touch the ground.

We stopped right in front of the Master Suite. Even though I was in the water, my weight sustained by one circular orange

float, I managed to take photos of Indie in front of the room. She was smiling brightly, like a little kid eating candy.

Indie started swimming towards the ladder that led to the terrace of the room.

"What are you doing?" I asked, widening my eyes.

She turned around to look at me and said, with a mischievous smirk "I am going to go inside."

"You can't go inside!" I said, "You don't know if there is anyone inside the room. You can get in trouble if someone catches you."

"I agree with Rachel," Caroline said, "I think we should come back. You already got your photos."

Indie let out a frustrated sigh but followed us back to our room.

When we arrived, we sat on the terrace table, wrapped in our towels, and looked at the pictures we took.

Indie had both my and her phone in hands. She was looking at our pictures in my phone and was looking at Justin Bieber's photos on Instagram that was logged in her phone. She was comparing her photos in front of the Master Suite with Justin Bieber's pictures in the Master Suite.

"I think we went to the wrong room," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Look at the background," she said, showing Caroline and me both phones, "There's a mountain behind Justin's suite. And there's no mountain in my picture."

Caroline examined the picture. She looked at the rooms on the right, where we've been. Then, she looked at the rooms on the left and said, "I think he stayed in the Master Suite on the other end."

The Master Suite on the left was too far away. It was at least one kilometer away, too far away for unprofessional swimmers to try to swim, especially if it is at open sea, without any lifeguards to look after us. And that didn't mean only one kilometer: there

was also the one kilometer you had to swim to come back. That meant two kilometers; round swim.

But for someone like Indie, it seemed like nothing.

"Okay, so we can swim to the other room and..."

"Are you crazy?" I asked, "We are not going to swim there. It's too far, it's dangerous. We could drown. We can't do it."

Indie put on a sad face and said, "But this is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

I just shook my head, "It's too dangerous. Besides, look at the sky, it looks like it's about to rain."

And I wasn't just saying that to convince Indie of not doing something stupid. The sky, in fact, had big gray clouds that were getting darker by the minute.

"Okay. Fine. I am not going," Indie said, looking frustrated.

"Good," I said, "I am going inside to take a shower. I am almost dry, and I don't think I am getting into the water again."

I got into the room, passing Harper, who was sitting on her bed, to reach the shower. She was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, and she had her tablet on her lap.

"What are you watching?" I asked.

"Supernatural," she replied. "It's really awesome."

I just chuckled and went into the bathroom to finally take a shower. It was a great sensation to have the hot water against my skin, washing away all the salt.

I got out of the bathroom, changed into a sundress, and was about to plop down on the bed beside Harper when the doorbell rang.

I opened the door, and there were two men with trays on their hands filled with food.

"Come in, please."

They placed the food on the table located in the middle of the room. Harper got up to pay them and got a handful of her desired

french fries. We thanked them and, when they left, we drowned ourselves into the pizza.

"We have to tell the others that the food is here," Harper said, between bites of her pizza.

"You're right," I said, even though my mouth was full of pizza, "I'll do it."

I went out into the terrace to call the girls and, to my surprise, I found it empty. I looked at the table where we were moments before, and I noticed that my cellphone was gone. The only phones on the table were Caroline's and Indie's.

"I can't believe they actually did that," I muttered to myself.

I looked to the left and confirmed my suspicion. I saw Caroline and Indie, each one with an orange float, swimming in the direction of Justin Bieber's room.

They were too far for me to scream and call them back. So I decided to call my phone, which I was one hundred percent sure they took with them, so they would be able to take photos. But the thing is, I didn't know their passwords.

I went back to our room and asked for Harper's phone.

"Why do you need it?" Harper asked, taking a bite of her cheeseburger.

I told her about our little adventure five rooms to the right and how Indie found out that this room wasn't Justin Bieber's room. I told her that Indie discovered that Justin Bieber's room was on the other end, to the left, and how she was dying to go there. I told her that Indie and Caroline weren't outside when I went out to call them and how I had seen them swimming towards Bieber's room. I told her that they took my phone with them —without my permission, may I add— and why I needed her phone to call them.

I didn't expect Harper to get so mad. She dropped her cheeseburger on her plate and went outside to see the two girls swimming away.

Once she spotted them, she grabbed her phone and dialed my number, putting her phone on speakerphone.

"Hello?" Indie asked, picking it up.

"ARE YOU INSANE?" Harper asked, shouting at the phone.

"Oh, hey Harper, what's up?" Indie asked, calmly.

"What's up is that our food arrived, and when we tried to tell you, we found out that the two of you decided to be weird stalkers and go to that Bieber guy's room." Harper was fulminating, "You need to come back RIGHT NOW."

There was a noise on the other side of the line, like they were moving the phone around.

"Hi, Harper," Caroline said, "we'll be back really fast, just give us a sec."

"Out of all people, you're the last one I would expect to do such a thing," Harper told her.

"I am sorry, but Indie really wanted to do this. I gotta go, see you in a few." Then she hangs up the phone, leaving a furious Harper for me to deal with.

"If they drown, it's gonna be my parents' fault," by the way she was pacing around, one hand tugging on her hair, it was obvious that she was apprehensive about the whole situation, "they are the ones responsible for us in this trip."

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Oh shit," Harper said heading to open the door. I followed right behind her. Just like I expected, Harper's parents were getting into the room.

"I just wanted to make sure that you had dinner," Harper's mom said. She looked at the table in the middle of the room and said, chuckling, "I see that you already got that covered."

We smiled back, not knowing if we should tell her about the girl's little adventure before anyone gets hurt, or if we should try to convince them to come back ourselves.

Harper's mom looked around, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Where are Indie and Caroline?"

Harper and I looked at each other, widening our eyes. We probably had a BUSTED expression written all over our face, "Well," I thought, "now we don't have a choice."

"I think it's better if I show you," I said, guiding Harper's mom outside.

Harper and her dad followed behind us. They didn't understand why I brought them to the empty veranda, but then Harper pointed to the left, where we could see two brown dots far away, that were the girls' hair, and two orange dots, that were the floats.

"What are they doing?" Harper's dad asked, alarmed, "Why are they swimming that far? It's dangerous."

"Indie wanted to take a picture at Justin Bieber's room" Harper explained.

"I can't believe this." He said, shaking his head.

"CAROLINE. INDIE." Harper's mom shouted, "COME BACK HERE."

"They can't hear you, mom," Harper said.

"I need to tell them to come back now!" Harper's mom exclaimed.

"We tried, they wouldn't listen," I said.

"But they will listen to us." Harper's mom said.

"Do you want me to call them? They got my phone with them." I asked.

"Yes, please."

"And I am going to take a golf cart and drive next to them over the footbridge, to make sure that they are alright." Harper's dad said.

Five minutes later, Harper, her mom and I were sitting on the terrace, waiting for them. Harper's mom had her phone on the

table on the speaker mode, and we were following Caroline and Indie's steps through it. Harper's dad and a couple of hotel staff were driving the cart on the footbridge, following close every move of theirs to make sure they came back safely.

To make things worse, the wind started to grow stronger, blowing in the opposite direction than that they were swimming, making it more difficult for them. We just weren't more worried than we already were because they were with the floats.

They took almost an hour to make it back, and they were exhausted by them, even though they didn't actually make it to Justin Bieber's room. It was too far away for them.

"I feel like I just hit the gym hardcore." Said Indie, rubbing her sore thighs.

Harper rolled her eyes and said, "That was your idea, genius."

Harper's mom and dad were relieved that they made it back safely. After a long lecture telling them to never do this kind of things again, they left us and went back to their room.

"Out of all people, you were the last one I expected to do something like that," I told Caroline, "Especially if you take in the fact that Justin wasn't even there anymore. It was just the room he STAYED like almost A WEEK BEFORE."

Caroline just shrugged and said, "I'm really into making good memories with you guys, and that's definitely one of them. It was fun, although I am a hundred percent sure that I am never doing something like that again."

"Yeah, it was super fun." Harper said, sarcastic, "Now my food is cold, and the blame is on you."

The two girls just chuckled.

They took a shower, changed into their t-shirt and shorts, and finally plopped down on the table beside us to eat the long desired food.

"I am starving!" Caroline said, taking a bite of her cheeseburger.

"I wonder why." I chuckled.

After a few minutes, we were all laughing at what happened. Even Harper, who was really mad at them and tried to give them the silent treatment. We also laughed at the fact that now Caroline and Indie were sore because of the intense exercise.

Harper was definitely right: a trip with friends was more worth it than whatever party she might throw. Things passed by, memories were forever.

Lost and Found

• • • • •

It was SeaWorld day. I was nine at the time, on a trip to Orlando with my parents and my older cousin, Gretchen. She is eleven years older than me, but we get along really well, much better than any of our relatives expected. Despite the vast age difference, she's my partner in crime, and we've shared a lot of adventures together, making us very, very close.

Today it was going to be a great day, not because I was going to see the sea animals (in fact, I didn't like the idea of wild animals confined), but because I was gonna ride a roller coaster that was really cool. According to Gretchen, this roller coaster was even more radical and wilder than the one at Universal. The Hulk roller coaster, I mean.

We were going to ride Manta. A roller coaster full of loopings, where we barely stayed upwards, and our feet touched the water while we were riding it. It was 3,359-foot-long (1,024m), reaching top speeds of 56 miles per hour (90 km/h). All the riders stayed in the prone position, and the roller coaster had four inversions.

To say I was excited was an understatement.

I felt someone pulling my arm. I looked up and saw Gretchen pointing at something ahead of us.

"Look," she said.

As I followed her gaze, a flow of disappointment invaded me. The line to ride Manta had a sixty-five-minute wait. I let out a frustrated sigh.

This roller coaster was the only reason I wanted to come to this park! It wouldn't make any sense to come here and not ride it!

I turned to Gretchen and said, "I'm willing to wait."

She studied the line, weighing her opinions.

"We came here to ride this thing. It makes no sense to skip it." She said, finally.

I let out a happy squeal and turned to my parents.

"We are going. Where are guys gonna be when we get out?" My parents weren't going to ride it. My mom was too scared to do it, and she gets nauseated quickly. My dad had high blood pressure, so it wasn't recommended that he go on this kind of things.

"We are going to wait here." My mom said, "Have fun."

Gretchen and I started to walk in the direction of the line when my mom called after us. We came back to see what she wanted, and she said that we should give her our purses and phones.

"You can't ride a roller coaster with it." She explained, "It's better if I keep an eye out for it instead of you letting it on the side. Someone might wanna try to steal it."

We just handed my mom our stuff and went quickly to the line.

Time passed quicker than we expected. We got distracted with the rays we were able to see while we waited, and we talked about a lot of different topics, like whether Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were meant to each other, or whether cold cake or hot cake was better.

It was finally our turn to ride Manta.

We sat on the car, happy that we didn't have to worry about our things since my mom was keeping them for us.

The ride was insane. I loved the feeling of adrenaline rushing in my veins every time the car hit a high point right before going down in that fast pace. I loved the feeling of wind in my hair, and the cold feeling in my stomach with every fall.

I just felt happy.

We got out of the roller coaster, laughing. We didn't get wet riding it, like we expected to, but it was still really cool. I looked at Gretchen, who had her hair sticking all over the place.

"Your hair looks like the one of a mad scientist." I giggled.

Gretchen frowned at me, before twisting her hair into a ponytail. Once she's done, she reached out to mess my hair.

"So do you."

I stuck my tongue out at her.

We started heading for the entrance line, where my mom was supposed to be waiting for us.

On our way, we passed a roll of parked baby carriages. There was a squirrel inside the stroller bag at the bottom of one of the carriages, used by the parents to stack the kid's stuff and food. The squirrel was taking cookies out of the bag one by one and eating them.

I nudged Gretchen and showed her the smart squirrel, making her laugh.

We finally reached the entrance, but... there was no sign of my parents. We looked around a little bit. Maybe they decided to grab a bite at the closest food truck, or perhaps they decided to check the souvenir store that was close to the attraction we had just gotten out of.

Nothing.

We couldn't find them anywhere.

"What are we gonna do?" I asked Gretchen as soon as I realized that we weren't going to find them anywhere close.

"I don't know," Gretchen said. "I mean, we can't call them. Your mom has our bags with our phones and stuff and she said she would be here..."

We looked around once more. It was almost one p.m., and we were starting to get hungry. The bad part was that we didn't have any money on us.

Then Gretchen had the most fantastic idea.

Or the most stupid idea. It really depends on the point of view.

"Since we have nothing on us, I know how we can get ahold of your mom."

Gretchen grabbed my arm and started towards the administration building. She stopped next to it, out of the line of sight of people who were inside it, "Since I am a legal adult, they probably won't help me if I tell them that I got lost." She pointed at herself, "I'm an adult I'm not supposed to be lost."

She pointed to a couple of women standing behind a counter inside the building. "But you're a kid. So here's what's going to happen: you're gonna get inside, saying that you can't find your mom. You'll have to say everything in Spanish, though. The point is that they are not supposed to understand you. While you're talking to them, I'll get in and sit down as if I am waiting in line for my turn to talk with the tickets manager."

I just nodded my head, not really getting what the point of the whole facade was.

"While you talk to the woman, start crying. Just do it, I know you can fake cry when you want to."

I just nodded along. There was no point in denying the truth.

"While the woman gets desperate that she can't understand you, I'll step in, say that I can speak Spanish and will translate to her while you tell her your mom's phone number. You have to pretend that you don't know me for this to work." She finished, smiling.

It was a good plan, I have to admit. There was just a small problem.

"I don't know mom's number by heart," I said.

Gretchen just rolled her eyes before placing a hand on my shoulder. "I know you don't." She said, "But I do. That's the whole point of the whole get-inside-and-pretend-you-cannot-speak-English-and-that-you-dunno-me thing. You're just going to set the perfect opportunity for me to use a phone."

I let out a laugh, "Why can't you just ask the woman to ask her phone?" She just smiled, "And what's the fun in that? Now go."

She urged me forward in the direction of the building's door. As soon as I stepped inside, a gulf of cool air made me shiver. It was pretty cold inside if you compared to the scorching weather that was Florida in the summer.

I rubbed my arms up and down and approached one of the ladies on the front desk.

"Hola," I started, already letting my eyes fill with water, "Estoy perdida. No sé dónde está mi madre.*"

The woman just smiled at me and asked, "Do you speak English?"

"¿Qué dice?*"

The woman sighed and turned to the other woman beside her, "She doesn't speak English. What are we going to do?"

Just then, Gretchen entered the room and took a sit right outside the tickets manager office, where the other people were waiting for they turn.

I mumbled a couple of other things in Spanish just for the sake of the whole facade. I also cried a little bit harder, making the women behind the counter get a little bit desperate. One of the women, the one who had glasses, turned to the people waiting outside the office.

"Does anyone here speak Spanish?" She asked, knitting her eyebrows together in worry.

Gretchen got up from her seat and approached us.

"I do," she said, "how can I help?"

The woman clasped her hands together in delight.

"Thank you!" She exclaimed, "I just need you to translate what this young lady said."

Gretchen turned to me smiling, "¿Puedes repetir, flor?*"

"No creo que esto funcionó.*" I replied, still faking sobbing for the women.

Gretchen's smile just widened before she turned to the women behind the counter.

"She's lost." She told them "Do you have any phone that she could use to call her parents?" The woman with glasses nodded and grabbed a phone that rested on her desk, handing it to Gretchen.

"Finge que me estás diciendo un número telefónico mientras yo pongo el de tu madre.*" Gretchen told me.

I nodded my head and started saying random numbers while Gretchen tapped them to me. She handed it to me once she was done and I pressed the phone against my ear while I waited for my mom to pick it up.

"Hola, mama."

I said once my mom answered the phone. She didn't question me why I was speaking Spanish. When you grow up in a bilingual family, you get used to speaking two languages at the same time without even realizing it.

"Hola, mija!" She said to me, "¿Dónde estás? ¿Y de quién es este teléfono?*"

"Creo que la pregunta es dónde tú estás. Dijiste que que estaría esperando en la salida de la montaña rusa.*" I replied.

"No pensé que ibas a salir de la tan rápida. Estamos en el acuario. Vuelve a la montaña rusa que nos encontramos allí.*"

"Estoy en la administración. No creo que déjenme salir de aquí sin un adulto responsable.*"

"¿Y dónde está Gretchen?*" She asked, clearly worried.

"Larga historia. Viene pronto que tengo hambre.*" And with that I hung up the phone, returning it to the woman behind the desk.

"Es mejor que esperes a mamá afuera para explicar lo que está pasando antes de que ella entre aquí haciendo muchas preguntas en inglés.*" I told Gretchen.

She nodded her head and turned to the woman behind her desk. "Her mom is on her way. I think my job here is done."

The woman behind the desk thanked her once again before she left.

It didn't take long for my mom to show up here. From the look on her face, I knew that Gretchen had already explained to her why I was here and what we were doing.

She just thanked the women for taking care of me before guiding me outside.

"I can't believe you did that." She said once we joined Gretchen on the outside. "Why couldn't you just ask the woman to borrow her phone?" She asked us.

"It wouldn't be half as fun." Gretchen shrugged.

My mom laughed at her answer. "You two, I swear."

"Can we just go and get something to eat?" I asked, laughing "I'm starving, and it's almost two p.m."

And just that, our little adventure at SeaWorld ended, over a couple of burgers and French fries.

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Translations:

Estoy perdida. No sé dónde está mi madre. = I am lost. I don't know where my mom is

¿Qué dice? = What did you say?

¿Puedes repetir, flor? = Can you repeat, flower?

No creo que esto funcionó = I can't believe this worked

Finge que me estás diciendo un número telefónico mientras yo pongo el de tu madre = Pretend that you are telling me a phone number while I put your mom's

Hola, mija! ¿Dónde estás? ¿Y de quién es este teléfono? = Hey, my daughter! Where are you? And Whose phone is this?

Creo que la pregunta es dónde tú estás. Dijiste que que estaría esperando en la salida de la montaña rusa. = I think the question is where are you. You told us that you would be waiting at the exit of the ride.

No pensé que ibas a salir de la tan rápida. Estamos en el acuario. Vuelve a la montaña rusa que nos encontramos allí. = I didn't think you would get out that fast. We are at the aquarium. Go back to the roller coaster and we'll meet you there

Estoy en la administración. No creo que déjenme salir de aquí sin un adulto responsable. = I am at the administration. I don't think they will let me out without a responsible adult

¿Y dónde está Gretchen? = And where is Gretchen?

Larga historia. Viene pronto que tengo hambre. = Long story. Come quick cause I'm hungry.

Es mejor que esperes a mamá afuera para explicar lo que está pasando antes de que ella entre aquí haciendo muchas preguntas en inglés = It'll be better if you wait for my mom outside so you can explain to her what happened before she enters asking a lot of questions in English

Haunted House

• • • • •

Nothing made me happier than a slumber party at my best friend's house. Harper lived in a huge two-story house, her room big enough to fit four girls with their own mattress, making it the perfect spot for our annual encounter; especially if you consider the fact that she had a pool, which always made our parties way more fun.

I arrived at her house early, at five p.m., right after I got out of my dance class. I was the first to come, so Harper and I organized the sleeping space while we waited for the other girls.

They didn't arrive much later, and by one a.m., we already crashed every single song available in Just Dance 2015 on Wii, sang almost all the songs that Harper had on her karaoke machine, watched people sing horribly or marvelously at American Idol, and watched people nearly kill themselves to make one thousand cupcakes in two hours at Cupcake Wars.

It was so much fun, but there was this unsaid rule that in our annual slumber party, we only could sleep when the clock strikes four a.m. Eventually, we ran out of things to do. We were getting sleepy, and we were occupying ourselves with a very lame truth or dare game when Melissa, the fearless girl in our little group, gave us a mischievous smile and said, "I know what we can do."

We all looked at her, waiting for her to elaborate. She didn't say anything else. She smiled and told us to get out of our pajamas, put on comfortable clothes and our running shoes.

We were all suspicious about what her plan might be, after all, she was known for her unorthodox ideas. We didn't want to spend the next four hours doing nothing, so we did as we were told to and followed her out of the house. It was around one thirty by then.

We walked down the street, the hot summer breeze making my hair messy, and waited to see where Melissa was taking us. We weren't scared of walking in the street in the middle of the night. This was a safe neighborhood, and every once in a while, a policeman would pass by us in a scooter, verifying if everything was okay in the area.

The houses around us were all dark and silent, their residents probably on deep sleep, the only sounds coming out from the crickets and frogs in the bushes.

"Can you please tell me where are we going?" Caroline, the quiet girl in our group, asked Melissa, "I am getting chilly."

"Are you kidding?" I asked Caroline, "It's like 30 Celsius. You can't be chilly."

She wrapped her thin jacket around her tightly, "I just think it's too late for us to keep walking around. We should come back."

"Patience, little grasshopper, we're almost there." Melissa said chuckling, "Besides," she added, "you have nothing to be scared about."

I understood why Caroline was scared. Every turn we took, there was a sound of a branch cracking or a movement between the bush leaves.

"This might be a safe neighborhood," Harper began, "but I don't think my mom would like to know that we got out of the house so late."

"We're here!" Melissa exclaimed, completely ignoring Harper.

We stopped in front of a huge, dark brown house. It had two stories, like almost every house on the block, a big underground garage that could be accessed by a ramp right in the middle. The house was built above the garage, and it had a big veranda that

could be accessed by the two set of stairs on each side of the garage.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked.

"Yes," Melissa said grinning, "the Haunted House."

Everyone in town has heard of the Haunted House. Like every suburban myth, no one knew how this one actually started. All we knew was that house has been empty for almost twenty years, and rumor has it that the previous owners died or something like that. Anyway, everyone said that the house was populated by ghosts and if you dared to go into the house, you wouldn't be able to get out of it.

"And what are you planning to do here?" Caroline asked. By the look on her face, she knew precisely what Melissa wanted to do here, but she wanted a confirmation.

"We are getting in, of course," Melissa responded.

"And what makes you think that we are entering the house?" Harper inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Your spirit of adventure, of course," Melissa replied with a smile before walking to one of the stairs.

"I am not going inside," I said shaking my head.

"Me neither," Carol and Harper said in unison.

Melissa ignored us and jogged up the stairs. From where we were standing, we could see Melissa in the veranda. There was a big wooden door in the middle that led to the inside of the house. Melissa pushed and pulled, trying to open the door, but it wouldn't move.

"It's locked!" She shouted from the veranda, down at us.

"Melissa!" Caroline whispered-shouted at her, "Don't shout! You're gonna wake up the neighbors! Now can you please get down here before a policeman appears and you get arrested for trespassing?"

Melissa scoffed but started walking down the stairs, "And who is gonna press charges? The owners of the house?" She paused for

a moment, pretending she was actually thinking, "Oh, wait! The house is abandoned. There are no owners."

"If the door is locked, it's because someone doesn't want people going inside the house," Caroline stated.

Melissa finally reached us, and I blew out a sigh of relief. It was the end of this crazy idea.

"Let's go home," Harper said, and we started to walk back in the direction that we came from.

"Guys..." Caroline started. Harper and I turned around to see that Melissa wasn't following us. Instead, she was walking down the ramp that led to the garage.

We ran back to the house. We stopped at the edge of the ramp and looked down at Melissa. There was a door at the back corner of the garage, and Melissa was walking towards it.

"Melissa!" I called her, "Come back here!"

She just smirked back at me, pulled the door open and got inside.

"Should we follow her?" Caroline asked, "I hate the idea of getting inside, but I also hate the idea of her alone inside of this creepy house."

"We have to follow her," Harper said, "if something happens to her it's gonna be MY fault because she was at MY house."

We walked down the ramp cautiously, right next to each other. As we entered the house, we found Melissa standing in what was supposed to be a kitchen with her arms crossed and her ever-present smirk on her face, "I knew you would follow me."

The kitchen was dirty, covered in dust and a heavy smell of mold lingered in the air. All the electronics like the fridge and the stove were rusty, like they haven't been used in a long, long time.

We walked out of the kitchen into the next room, Melissa in front of the group. The room was just as dirty as the first one, and it had a couple of couches and a fireplace. The house was so silent that I could hear my heart beating on my chest. I looked at Harper and Caroline, who seemed just as scared as I

am, especially Caroline, who was clinging to my arm. Melissa, however, seemed really happy to have finally entered the well-known dreaded house.

We climbed up the stairs to the ground floor, into what looked like the main sitting room. It was big, and the cream-colored couches seemed like they were once stunning. The floor was covered in glass, coming from a broken window. We stepped on it carefully, making sure that we wouldn't get cut, and continued our exploration.

A light flashed by one of the windows. We ducked quickly, getting out of the view of anyone on the outside. Melissa approached the window slowly and looked out of it, without standing up.

"It's a policeman," she said, looking back at us, "he'll be going away soon, but don't make much noise, or we could get in trouble."

"I told you!" Caroline exclaimed, her voice laced with irritation, "We can get arrested for trespassing!"

"Shut up!" Melissa replied, turning her gaze back to the window.

"Can we get up now?" I asked, interrupting the argument that was about to develop.

Melissa was still looking out of the window, waiting for the policeman to go away, "All clear," she finally said.

We finally crossed the big living room, that seemed to be the only thing on the ground floor beside a dining room on the side that had a big glass table for twelve people, and we climbed another set of stairs.

We entered a large hall, lined with doors on each side. We continued walking down the hall, opening the doors. Inside, there were a lot of different rooms: one that looked like it once belonged to a little girl, its walls painted pink and full of stuffed animals; another room that apparently belonged to the girl's parents, with a big king size bed; another room that probably belonged to a boy, with a lot of toy cars on the shelves.

While we were walking down the hall, Harper noticed something in the ceiling.

"What's that?" She asked pointing to a square in the ceiling that had a small handle in one of the sides.

"I have no idea," I said.

Melissa reached up, standing on the tip of her shoes, and pulled the handle, revealing a narrow pull-down ladder that apparently led to the attic.

"The house doesn't have only two floors." I stated, "It has an underground floor, two common floors, and a fourth that is the secret attic."

"Cool," Melissa said, "we can go home now."

"What?!" Caroline exclaimed, much to my surprise. She let go of my arm and said, "We didn't come all this way to back out now. We are going up."

She started to climb up the small steps, and the rest of us followed.

If the rest of the room was dusty and smelling of mold, that was nothing compared to the attic. The small room was at least twice as dirty, and twice as smelly. I started sneezing due to the amount of dust.

The room had no windows, making it very dark. We grabbed our cell phones and turned on the flashlights and started wandering around. We found a box full of dusty books, a big wooden dollhouse, and Mundi maps in one of the corners. It was Harper, though, who found the most interesting thing.

In the back of an apparently empty closet, she found a small music box. On the inside, there was a picture of what probably was the previous family that lived in this house. The picture showed a woman and a man smiling to the camera, with two little kids—a boy and a girl—in front of them. They seemed to be happy.

We were all examining the picture when we heard a scratching noise coming from downstairs. We all looked up in the direction

of the stairs, half expecting for someone to suddenly jump up and kill us.

Nothing happened.

"It is probably just the wind," Melissa said, smiling, trying to sound brave, when, in fact, I could see that she was also scared.

Then there was a thud, like someone had turned over one of the dining room chairs.

"Is anyone there?" Caroline shouted to whoever might be in the house.

"Get... out... of here!!" A grave, typical ghost movie voice shouted back.

We didn't need any more encouragement! Scared to death, we rushed down the three sets of stairs that led us to this attic and got out as quickly as possible out of the garage door.

We only stopped running when we were two houses down the Haunted House. We were panting, struggling to catch our breaths.

"At least we proved the myth wrong," Melissa joked, "we survived the haunted house."

"We sure did," Harper said, "but what was that noise? Do you really think there was a ghost in there?"

"I don't know," Caroline said, "but can we please get going? I am terrified."

We started to walk back, but I stopped as soon as I heard someone laughing behind me.

As I turned around, I saw three boys getting out of the garage, laughing their asses off.

"Girls!" I called them. They turned to see why I stopped. Their shocked expressions matched mine as soon as they saw who were the said "ghosts."

"JOSH, NICK, AND ANDREW I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DID THAT" Harper screamed at the guys walking in our direction, laughing even harder.

"Shut up," said the boy with a blue t-shirt and dark brown hair, Josh, still laughing, "You're gonna wake up the neighbors."

"I really don't care," Said Harper, fulminating Josh with her eyes.

"That's not funny," Melissa said, reaching forward to give Andrew, the blond guy, a small punch in the arm.

"I think it is," he said laughing while rubbing the spot Melissa just hit.

They were laughing really hard and then Nick, the dark-haired guy, exclaimed, "We saw you guys getting into the house and we couldn't miss the opportunity to scare the crap out of you."

A policeman turned into the street and stopped when he saw all of us on the outside that late.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Nothing," We all answered, pretending to be nonchalant.

"It's too late. You should go back home," he said before taking off on his scooter.

"We'll see you guys tomorrow," Andrew said before the three guys started walking in the direction of Josh's house, who also lived in that street.

Caroline, Melissa, Harper, and I looked at each other. Neither of us believed what just happened.

"At least now we know that there weren't any ghosts," Caroline said, letting out a laugh.

We walked all the way back to Harper's house. When we entered her room, I pulled out my phone to check the time.

"It's only three a.m." I said, "We still have an hour before it's officially sleeping time. What are gonna do?"

"I have an idea," Melissa said and the rest of us groaned.

Melissa let out a laugh before saying, "Relax, it's nothing like we just did. Besides, you're acting like it wasn't fun, but I know you liked it."

No one contested her, because we all knew she was right. We had fun at the Haunted House.

"What's your idea?" Harper asked.

"We could chill out in the pool," Melissa said.

"That's actually a good idea," Caroline said and we all agreed.

And that's how my night ended with a golden key. Relaxing in peace in a warm pool late in the night, after a great night of fun and adventures, and memories that I would carry with me forever, with my best friends in the whole world.

Northern Lights

• • • • •

It has always been my mom's dream to watch the Northern Lights, so naturally, when the opportunity presented itself while we were in Canada, she couldn't let it pass.

My parents and I were in Canada for a little more than a month to perfect our English skills. We went there with Indie's family too, since her parents were really close to mine. We were staying at the same building and going to classes in the same place, so basically we were spending the whole time together.

It was Indie's idea to go to Alaska; we weren't even thinking about the Northern Lights then. We just thought that it would be nice to visit a place that we have never been to. Coming from the north of Brazil, place that only had summer all year and temperatures about thirty Celsius, the idea of visiting the place known for its interminable winter was thrilling.

We left Vancouver and took a flight to Anchorage, where we were going to spend the first two days, as to not miss any days of school.

Since it was January, we soon discovered that there wasn't much we could do there. In the winter, the temperature could drop to as cold as minus fifteen Celsius. No one was prepared for that, since we weren't planning on coming to Alaska in the first place. We thought we were only going to stay in Vancouver, that was about fifteen Celsius. However, we managed to get all of our warm set clothes and be comfortable in this harsh weather.

Most of the touristic attractions were closed. Skii stations were closed because there was too much snow and it could be dangerous. The boat trips to see the glaciers weren't happening because it was impossible to pass through the ice. The Wildlife Conservatory was closed because the animals were hibernating.

It was visiting one of the few not closed tourist information centers that the idea of watching the Northern Lights, also called aurora borealis, first appeared. The woman of the information center told us that Fairbanks was the best place to watch it, but it was almost a seven-hour drive with the snow, and we didn't have the time. Then she told us that the closest place to go and still have a good view of the Lights was Talkeetna, that was two and a half hours away.

We decided to try. We rented a car big enough for all of us and Indie's father got the driving duty. It ended up being an almost three-hour drive. No one had ever driven in the snow before, so we went slowly to prevent an accident from happening. The best part of the trip for me was obviously the view.

Everywhere I looked there was white. I felt like I was in Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" music video. There were tall pine trees covered with snow, the green almost disappearing under the white. The floor was looking like a blanket of white cotton, untouched. We stopped once in a road shouldering a particular part of the road that was exceptionally beautiful.

Even though the sun was up in the sky, it was still freezing. I laid down on the soft snow. There was a small streak of snow falling for the sky, and I opened my mouth in hope to catch a small snowflake.

After a few pictures, my mom kept telling me to get up from the snow, otherwise, I would get a cold. We finally made it to Talkeetna, known for once electing a cat as its mayor. It had about nine hundred inhabitants, fewer people in the city than there was in my high school. It was minus twenty Celsius there, and we were all shivering, even with the car heat turned on.

Since this was an unplanned trip, we didn't have a place to stay. Apparently, everyone thought that today was a perfect day to watch the show of vibrating blue, yellow, pink, and green. The few hotels that existed in the region were all fully booked.

Thankfully we didn't need to spend the night; we were planning on going back to Anchorage on the first hours in the morning. We just needed a place to stay since it was still around six p.m. and we have been told that the lights only appear around eleven p.m. and two a.m.

It was too cold to stay outside, and we didn't want to waste gas by remaining in the car to feel the warm heat, so we decided that we would stay in a small restaurant that was also connected to a hostel. We ordered our food, ate, and kept sipping on coffees and hot chocolates while waiting for the aurora borealis.

"Where are you guys from?" A man from a nearby asked, realizing that the language that we were speaking wasn't English.

"We are from Brazil," I answered him with a smile.

The man nodded, seeming slightly surprised. "I've seen Brazilians here before, but never in the winter."

I laughed and shrugged, "I guess there's a first time for everything."

"Is this your first time seeing the Northern Lights?" The man asked, seeming genuinely curious.

I nodded enthusiastically, "I can't wait to see the colorful sky. This definitely is in my bucket list of 'things to do before I die,' along with seeing a solar eclipse and seeing plankton bioluminescent on the glowing beaches."

He raised an eyebrow in question, "A big fan of natural phenomenon?"

I raised a holder in return, "You could say so."

The man smiled and said, "Me too. It's my fifth year coming here to see the Northern Lights. I can guarantee that the experience will be better than what you expect." He paused before continuing, "I must warn you that maybe you won't be able to see

the lights. They do not appear every day. Usually, people stay for three or four days to make sure they catch them at least once. Where are you guys staying?"

"Anchorage." I replied, "We are only going to stay here for the aurora borealis and then we are going to head back."

The man frowned, "I don't think it is a good idea for you to drive in the middle of the a.m in the snow."

"We only have today to see this, though. Tomorrow morning we need to take a plane to Vancouver. Also, all the hotels are booked, so we don't really have much of a choice."

The man nodded in understanding. He started putting his coat and hat on, to battle the cold and extended a hand in my direction. I took it, and we shook hands, "It was nice meeting you. Good luck."

The man exited the restaurant shop just as a woman came to inform us that the restaurant would be closing in half an hour. It was still eight p.m., meaning that there was still three hours to go before we could expect the Northern Lights to appear.

We asked the woman if she knew about any place that might still be open for the night where we could stay. We really didn't want to stay out in the cold.

The woman thought about our question for a minute, "I guess you can stay in the hostel lobby until eleven." The woman conceded, "But you can't stay longer than that."

We thanked her, relieved that we would have a place to stay for the next hours. We didn't need to stay longer than eleven anyway. We were going out to see the Northern Lights that were supposed to appear around that time.

After ordering another round of hot chocolate to battle the cold and paying the bill, we went into the hostel lobby, settling down for three hours of waiting.

It didn't take us very long to get bored. We played every game that was available for us: puzzle, board games, and cards. There

was so much two fourteen-year-old teenagers could wait until they both got bored.

"What now?" Indie asked, resting my elbows on my knees while looking over at Indie.

I just shrugged, "Wanna play in the snow?"

"Sure." She said in reply. We went outside and were joined moments later by Indie's older brother, Charles.

"Do you guys mind if I join you?" He asked.

"Not at all," I replied.

"What are you guys doing, anyway?" He looked down at us. We were sitting in the snow, putting all the icy texture together in what was supposed to be the low body of a snowman.

"A snowman?" Indie replied with a 'duh' tone in her voice.

"It certainly doesn't look like a snowman." He chuckled at the deformed blobs of snow that we put together.

Indie stuck her tongue out at him and said, "I dare you to do better."

"I have a better idea." He said before walking to a big trash can near the hostel back door. He grabbed the trash lid and walked back to us.

He put the lid on the floor. It was big enough to hold both Indie and me into it. We looked at Charles expectantly.

"Sit down on it," he mentioned to the lid on the floor, "I am going to pull you."

He removed his scarf from around his neck to serve as a rope. I smiled excitedly. It was the first fun thing to happen in a couple of hours. I promptly sat down on the lid after checking that it wasn't dirty.

Indie scrunched her nose. Indie was a pretty prep girl. She wasn't the outdoors type of girl, and she definitely wasn't the let's-sit-on-a-trash-can-lid-and-be-pulled-by-a-scarf type of girl.

"C'mon, Indie," I said patting the empty space behind me. "It's going to be fun."

She hesitated for a second before making her decision.

"Okay." She said sitting behind me.

Once Indie and I were properly seated, Charles gave me one end of the scarf while he held the other. I held the scarf firmly while Indie held for dear life on the borders of the trash can lid.

"Ready?" Charles asked, grinning back at us.

I nodded enthusiastically while Indie muttered, "Oh, God."

We played for a couple hours, laughing and falling on the snow, taking turns at who was going to pull the others, before my mom came out to call us back, saying that we better head out to catch the aurora borealis.

We put the lid back in place and walked to where our parents were standing in the entrance of the hostel.

The woman at the hostel had told us to walk all the way down the street to the frozen lake. This was the best spot to watch the Northern Lights.

As we walked, we passed a large house with a large courtyard. Covered in snow, untouched. I walked over and stepped on the fluffy snow, laughing as my feet sank, the snow getting almost to my knees.

It wasn't too difficult to guess if we were in the right place. Once we got near the lake, we saw a lot of people sitting around wrapped in blankets, eating midnight snacks, and getting their cameras ready for the display of colors that was about to happen.

We decided to get ready. We all sat close together, trying to battle the cold, and we waited

And waited. And waited. And waited.

There wasn't a trace of the lights in the sky.

Around one a.m., some of the people around us gave up, saying it was too cold to stay on the outside and that the lights weren't going to show today.

In a way they were right. Even with my four coats and my dad's arms around me, I was still shivering. I was pretty sure the

temperature dropped as cold as to minus twenty Celsius. As I blew out a hot breath, the air right before my mouth became a thick white fog, an indication of how cold it actually was.

We still had hope. They told us that it usually appeared around 11p.m. and two a.m. We still had an hour left.

The clock finally hit two a.m., signing that in fact, we were out of luck. The aurora borealis wasn't going to show itself today.

With slumped shoulders, and giving each other tight hugs, we made our way back to the car.

Once everyone was inside and the heater was on, Indie's father finally pulled out of the small tall, and we started the three-hour drive back to Anchorage.

Even with the heater on and in full blast, we were still shaking. We definitely weren't used to the harsh weather. Even Indie, who barely used coats back in Vancouver, wouldn't let go of her jacket here.

The drive seemed to take longer than it took on our way to Talkeetna. Maybe it was the fact that everyone was tired, maybe Indie's father was driving way slower than before. It didn't matter the reason, no one would sleep to keep the designated driver company.

About halfway through the course, we heard police sirens. They were coming from right behind us, finalizing forms to pull over.

"What's wrong?" My mom asked sounding concerned.

I just shrugged.

Indie's father rolled down the window and started talking to the policeman with Charles' help, since his English wasn't that good.

"Is something wrong?" The policeman asked.

Charles frowned and stole a quick glance at his father before answering the man, "No, sir."

"Oh, okay." The man said, sounding relaxed, "It's just that you're driving way too slow. You should drive a little faster. It's dangerous."

Once the policeman was gone and we were on our way back, we all started laughing.

"I knew the police would stop you if you drove too fast, but I didn't know they would do the same if you drove too slow," my father laughed.

Indie's father just grunted and mumbled: "Who had the idea of coming to Alaska, again?"

"Indie," her mom said.

"I'm never taking your travel requests again." He said.

As we laughed, I couldn't help thinking that, even though we didn't get to see the Aurora Borealis, the trip still was worth it. I may not have taken any pictures of the Northern Lights, but I certainly got to take many beautiful pictures of the snowy forests, and I had plenty of gorgeous photographs taken around the Gulf of Alaska, something I wouldn't have been able to do without this trip.

I got to see landscapes that genuinely belonged to movies or music clips and made memories that would last a lifetime. I would always be able to look back and smile, because even though we didn't see the lights, I had a good time.

I had fun.

And I was happy. And that's all that matters.

Back with the Slam

• • • • •

This time I was all alone.

I didn't bring Kara with me this time to the house that in just one night I had become so fond of. I had to do this alone. Exposing myself in a slam competition wasn't exactly in my top ten things-to-do list, but it was something I had to do for myself.

It was a way to open up; to let loose all the things that kept me trapped within myself.

It was the perfect way to express my feelings.

I didn't trust anyone I knew with my deepest feelings; I couldn't tell them everything I wanted to. But, somehow, talking in front of strangers felt different.

It didn't feel like I was exposing myself. It was like I was stepping into someone else's shoes and they were the ones doing the talking. I was merely passing along the message.

Why didn't it terrify me? Well, I didn't know them and they didn't know me. They wouldn't judge me.

I entered the ballroom and the bouncer asked for my ID, marking my hand with a big black X once he saw that I was underage. Passing the security, I looked around. It looked just like the last time I was here with Kara. Packed. A mix of alcohol and cigarettes filling the air.

I breathed a handful of air and let it out slowly, before heading to the table where I paid my entry fee. I was told that I was going to be the fifth to present, fourth to compete. I let out a relaxed

sigh. I was glad I wasn't going to be the first nor the last. It was too nerve-wracking.

I went to the back of the room, in the direction of the only available seat. The walls have been decorated with some red fabric this time, giving the room a more intimate aura. Something really fitting to a place where people came to proclaim their emotions.

Not much later, the guy that looked exactly like Shaggy Rogers climbed on the stage.

"Welcome to another night of Slam." He opened his arms wide, exactly like the last time.

The audience cheered.

"We are going to choose the judges for tonight." Shaggy said, continuing the ritual, "This spotlight right above my head is going to spot someone in the crowd." He explained pointing up, to where the spotlight was located, "And this who have been chosen by the paramount power of the spotlight shall be our judge for the night!"

After selecting the judges, Shaggy said, "It's time to begin with our sacrifice."

This time, it wasn't the petite blonde who climbed up the stage. Instead, it was a beautiful girl with shiny black hair, tanned olive skin, and hazel eyes, with Peninsular Arab features.

She cleared her throat and began.

"This poem is called 'Just Leave'"

"Take a deep breath and turn around
C'mon Sam, you don't have to watch this
Just turn the fuck around

It isn't working
No matter how many times I tell myself to leave, my feet
aren't moving
I am frozen in place, watching Nate be with someone else

I know we are not together, we never were.
In fact, we never will be

But it still hurt
It still hurt to see him holding her like she was the most
precious thing in the world
It still hurt to see him kissing her with an incomparable
passion
It still hurt, and that is what hurt the most, to see him
looking at her

His eyes shined with happiness every time he saw her, like he
couldn't believe his luck
He smiled at her like he was truly grateful to be with her
He looked at her like she was the most beautiful human
being he has ever laid his eyes on
His whole face radiated love and happiness every time he
looked at her

It hurts
But I love that he loves like that
And I'm happy that he is happy

It just makes me sad that it will never be directed at me
That he'll never look at me like that"

She gave the audience a sad smile before finishing.

"I finally turn around."
She turned around just as she said that and climbed down the
stage.

I clapped along with everyone else. Clearly the beauty of this
poem laid on the emotion. It didn't have to be long to cause an
impact.

The girl bowed and left the stage quickly. Soon after, Shaggy
Rogers climbed up and asked the judges for the scores. Once they
were recorded, he called the first competitor up on the stage.

A guy in his mid-twenties wearing a flannel shirt went on
the stage. He grabbed the microphone from Shaggy's hand and
stepped forward nervously.

"New shit."

"Neeew shit" the audience chanted.

"Personal true shit" He added.

"Personal true shit" The audience copies.

He cleared his throat, adjusted his collar and began.

"Right now I am curled up in my bedroom wearing
sweatpants and a hoodie

I am wearing Christmas socks even though its 90 degrees
outside

I have a cup of coffee beside me
And a J. R.R Tolkien book in my hands

They are shaking a little bit
I do everything I can to keep my mind on the story before
me"

He shook his hand for emphasis before continuing.

"Today was a good day

After I had such a shitty day yesterday, that's what I deserved

A good day"

He briefly pauses. Just long enough to look around the audience.

“I woke up at nine, but I decided to avoid reality till ten
At ten I got up, had a glass of milk and went back to bed,
where I stayed till midday
Playing with the fact that I could breathe without having to
move a single muscle
After getting up at midday
I decided to take a shower
Something I’ve been postponing since I first woke up
yesterday”

He sighed, shaking his head and pressing his lips together like a person would do when they scolded a five-year-old.

“Such a simple thing to do
But I lacked energy
When I finally did it
I felt like a winner”

He pumped his fist in the air.

“Showering was what turned my bad day into a good day

After forty-eight hours without showering
I was finally doing it

And it was so good

Feeling the refreshing water was like washing away my
problems along with the dirt

And I felt so happy

As the water hit my head

I started to sing”

He starts walking around the stage.

“A little bit of Coldplay, passing through Panic! At the Disco,
finishing off with High School Musical
Yeah, I like it. It really helps to get into good spirits

And it was so good
I was so happy by the time I got out of the shower
As I dried myself,
I started to feel bad again

That made me go back to bed
Where I stayed
Playing with the fact that I could breathe without having to
move a single muscle
Till I realized I still haven’t eaten today

I wasn’t hungry

At all”

He gesticulated with his right hand from left to right for emphasis.

"In fact, the thought of food made me sick
It took me another half an hour for me to actually get up
Put some clothes on
And have my breakfast/lunch/dinner

It was good

It made me happy

Almost as happy as taking a shower

I brushed my teeth
Kissed my mother on the cheek
Who spent the whole day trying to make me feel happy
...
Or at least less miserable

I went back to bed
But this time I brought my book with me"

The audience cheered. The judges' grades were mostly nines.

The guy quickly bowed and left the stage. A lot of people praised him for his heartfelt poem. He smiled shyly at them and took his seat back in one of the first rows. The guy next to him handed him a beer, and they clasped their cans together in a toast before taking a sip.

Shaggy Rogers climbed the stage and took the microphone from the support where the flannel shirt guy had left it.

"Alright," Shaggy said, "the next competitor is Philip Jones!"

It was the same guy from the last time. He was wearing the same fedora black hat that apparently was his registered trademark.

With the confidence of an experiment spoken word poet. He climbed up the stage and claimed the microphone.

"New shit." He said in a low voice.

"Neeew shit." The audience chanted back. That never failed to make me excited.

"Imma gonna make things different tonight." Phillip said, adjusting his hat, "This is not a poem where I express my anxieties. This is an 'I'm better now' poem."

The audience cheered and clapped, urging him to continue. As he smiled, his dark skin seemed to shine under the spotlight.

"This poem is called 'Simple steps to a Happy Life'"

"One

First of all, smile more

Just do that

You don't have to be feeling good to do that, just simply
smile more

Scientists say that it helps, so you should try it

I don't know the science behind it

But you have nothing to lose"

I felt the corners of my mouth lifting up just as I heard these words.

"Two

You know that schoolwork due the next day that is stressing
you out?

It's not that important!

Let me tell you a secret: one missing assignment is not the
end of the world
Just relax, read a good book, watch a good movie, and allow
yourself to relax
Don't worry about the possibility of punishment
Instead, take your pants off
Which leads us to

Three
Dance
Sing out loud
Allow yourself to be the inner superstar that you know you
are
Put your favorite music on and just allow yourself to let go of
all the things that are worrying you

Four
Surround yourself with people that make you laugh
I know that at the time you will probably think that you are
alone in the world, that no one gets you, no one knows what
you're going through
But trust me
You are wrong
You are so, so wrong
Despite what you might think, there are a lot of people that
care about you and would do anything to see you happy
And I know you know who they are
Allow yourself to remember them and ask them for help
They won't mind
They love you

Five
Forget about the things that make you anxious
They are a waste of your time
At the end of the day, the only thing that matters is your
happiness
Nothing else
That's what you're here for

Six
Forget what people say about you
Forget about how people underestimate you
Forget how people misunderstand you
Forget about how people accused you of things that you
didn't do
You know who you are
And that's what matters"

I smiled when he reached the end of the poem. It was a nice
change from the previous ones.

"Judges, the scores," Shaggy asked.

Six, six, eight, eight, ten.

Philip gave a quick bow and left the stage. He was clearly
known by the people who frequently came to this place. On his
way to his seat, he stopped to talk to a bunch of people, and he
even stopped for a minute to hold a conversation with some of
them.

He stopped at the bar to grab a drink before strolling to the
back of the room. When he finally reached it and sat on the empty
chair next to me, he laid back on his seat like he was planning on
only relaxing till the end of the night.

I don't know if it was the fact that maybe I was staring at him a little too intensely, or perhaps it was the fact that I was clutching a notebook in my hand for dear life, but he looked over at me and said, "Hi."

"Hi," I said, a little bit nervous and not really knowing what to do. "You did great up there."

"Thank you," he replied with a genuine smile, "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome." I didn't know what else to do, so I just turned back to the stage, where the next poet was preparing to begin her presentation.

"I tried to do something new," Philip said next to me. I turned to look at him, but he had his eyes fixed on the stage. "The poems are usually too melancholic, angry, and sad. They are all good, don't get me wrong." He tried to explain. "I do this kind of poems all the time." He hesitated. "I just wanted to do something different today. Something a little bit happier."

"It was really good." I smiled. "I liked it."

"Thanks." He said placing his drink on the table and resting his elbows on his knees. He nodded in the direction of my notebook. "Are you going to present today?"

I quickly looked down at the notebook before raising my eyes back to his. "Yeah. It's my first time. I am a little bit nervous."

"It's going to be fine." He said, smiling. "Just remember that the competition does not mean anything. It doesn't matter the scores you get, your art is great. It is coming from your deepest feelings and nobody can tell you their value. It is how you feel."

I nodded in understanding. I was really grateful for his little piece of advice.

"And remember to have fun." He added.

"I'll try," I said.

After our little conversation, Philip left to talk to a group of people next to the bar, and I turned my attention back to the poets.

After watching the next two competitors, it was finally my turn.

I climbed the steps to the stage quickly, avoiding everyone's gaze.

"This poem is called 'I have no right to be sad.'"

I took in a deep breath to calm my nerves and dried my sweaty hands on my jeans.

"I have no right to be sad because I have a roof over my head,
food on the table every day, and amazing friends

I have no right to be sad because I am only seventeen and life
haven't started yet

I have no right to be sad because never have endured any
hardship. I never had to work a day in my life and I have my way
paved to college.

I have no right to be sad because I am not starving to death, I
have no fear of being exploded by a bomb, and I don't live under
any dictatorship regime

I have no right to be sad because I am not depressed. At
least I don't think I am depressed. I never really went to the
doctor to find out and I'll just ignore my last psychologist's
recommendation since by law she can't tell my mom about it
and I am sure as hell she won't

I have no right to be sad because even though I am a woman,
I am very privileged

I have no right to be sad because I have been to Paris before
and I travel at least twice a year

I have no right to be sad because I don't have any disabilities.
I can hear, I can speak, I can walk, and my brain works

I have no right to be sad because I am not sick. I don't have
aids nor cancer

I have no right to be sad because people told me I am pretty,
even though sometimes I have a hard time believing it

I have no right to be sad because I have been kissed and there
are boys that like me

I have no right to be sad because my parents are still together
and I don't come from a dysfunctional family

I have no right to be sad because if for some reason I end up
crying in front of people I will be laced crybaby, drama queen,
and spoiled bitch

I have no right to be sad because I am a crybaby, drama
queen, and spoiled bitch"

God, I was shaking. I clasped my hands behind my back to
stop them from moving and to hide them from the audience.
Breathe in. Breathe out.

"I have no right to be sad because even though half the
school hates me, the other half likes me... I think

I have no right to be sad because my family loves me and my
mom gets worried every time I don't sing along to my favorite
song or I don't wanna leave my bed

I have no right to be sad because I have access to the internet

I have no right to be sad because I am standing here talking
about my feelings, and that means I have freedom of speech

I have no right to be sad because I live in a country where
even though it doesn't always actually happen in practice,
girls have the same rights as boys. I am not being forced into a
marriage I don't want, I've never been raped, and my genitals
are intact

I have no right to be sad because my best friend gave me a
book with a letter saying that she loves me and I could count on
her for anything.

I have no right to be sad because I go to church and Jesus
loves me and he gave his life so God would forgive my sins and
blessed me with a good life

I have no right to be sad because I live in a beautiful place
with relatively good air, plenty of water, and plenty of trees
I have no right to be sad because I live in a good apartment in
front of a beautiful river

I have no right to be sad

But why am I so sad?"

Once I finished my poem, I smiled and gave a quick bow.
People cheered and clapped their hands.

I headed back to my seat feeling surprisingly light-hearted.
As nerve-wracking as it can be to go upstage and literally speak
about your darkest thoughts in front of an audience as it can be,
it was also surprisingly liberating.

It's hard to explain this feeling. I felt like a significant weight
have been lifted from my shoulder. I felt like I could finally
breathe.

As I made my way back to my seat, a lot of people stopped to
congratulate me, saying how wonderful my poem was and how
brave I was. There was still the smell of alcohol in the air, and the
noise people made between the presentations was just as loud as
before, but in my post-presentation stupor, I barely noticed it. I
was too happy as well.

I finally managed to reach my seat, and as I sat down, the cool
leather of the seat beneath my bare thighs was enough to break
me out of my stupor. I shook my head and looked at the stage
where a girl with red hair and a pink dress had just climbed on
stage.

I didn't pay attention at the scores the judges gave me tonight.
I was too happy to care. It didn't matter if I didn't win tonight. I
didn't care about the prize. I came here to express myself, and I
did just that. I did exactly what I was planning for tonight, and

it turned out to be even better than I imagined. I believe I did a good presentation.

I sat back and relaxed just as Shaggy made the introductions, allowing the magic to begin.

Strong Wind

• • • • •

The wind was blowing against us, and for a moment, I thought that we weren't going to be able to paddle back to the shore.

"We have to paddle faster before the wind gets worse," I said turning around to face Melissa, who just nodded.

We were in this little place that was a restaurant and a hotel in a tiny beach in the river, which we could only reach through a boat. On one side of the beach was the big river, where all the boats were anchored, on the other side, it was a smaller part of the river, surrounded by the forest, which formed kind of a "private river" for the restaurant.

It had a fishing house where we could fish what we were going to have for lunch, they had kayaks that we could take if we wanted to, it had a huge float that we could climb, a zip line from one side of the beach to the other, and some tiny floatable houses where people could spend the night. Floatable houses, the huge float, and the kayaks were on the "private riverside."

For my birthday, I decided that, instead of a party, I was going to take some of my closest friends there for a day full of fun.

So there we went. Kara, Caroline, Melissa, Harper, Indie and I in my parents' boat in the direction of the beach.

The day went on pretty smoothly without any significant incidents. That is, until we decided to go kayaking.

One of the floating houses was way bigger than the others. It was the initial construction of the hotel, so instead of several different little floating houses here and there, in the beginning

it was only one long big house with a living room and multiple rooms.

The thing is, this house was built many years ago, made of wood, and since it stays in the water, over hundreds of plastic bottles that float and keep the thing up, it got pretty run-down after a while, so the owner of the hotel closed it, but did not remove the construction from the water.

Melissa had the idea of going over the floating abandoned house to explore. We decided ourselves in groups. Caroline and I shared a kayak; Kara, Melissa, and Indie shared another; and Harper got a kayak for herself.

Kara, Melissa, and Indie were paddling faster than the rest of us, reaching the house before any of us.

The trio reached for the edge, tying the kayak on a pole.

Melissa was the first to step out of the boat. As she stepped onto the wooden floor and started to make her way towards the house, the floor wood began to creak.

"Maybe you shouldn't go that far..." I started.

"Don't be silly," Melissa said turning back to me, smirking. "What would be the fun in that?"

Kara, grinning, followed suit, hopping out of the kayak to join her, while Indie stayed inside. Caroline, Harper, and I didn't take much longer to reach the edge and tie our kayaks on the same pole. We didn't get out as we watched Kara jog to catch up with Melissa.

The floor creaked beneath them. As Melissa reached for the doorknob, we heard a noise. Better yet, a hissing noise. Melissa barely had time to turn the doorknob before Harper shouted "RUN!"

Kara and Melissa immediately turned back towards where we were, running for dear life. Kara, who was closer, hopped into Indie's kayak, who took off immediately. The rest of us waited for Melissa, who jumped into Harper's kayak.

While we paddled away desperately, I turned to look over at Melissa and Harper, who were beside me.

"Was that..." I began, only for Harper to cuff me off.

"Yes," she nodded, shock still covering her face, "It was a snake."

I blew out a breath and continued paddling, this time a little bit slower since we were already far enough from the border.

Indie slowed down to catch up with us, "Never do that again." She said glaring at the Melissa and Kara.

We started in the middle of the river, talking about what kind of snake that one might have been and what we could have done in case we actually had to face the animal. We were so distracted that we didn't realize that a strong wind started to blow, carrying us far away from the beach, towards the run-down house.

It was Caroline who finally noticed. "GUYS!" She exclaimed pointing at the wood house which was much closer now.

"Oh shit," I said.

Everyone grabbed a paddle, and we tried to get back to the shore.

"We have to paddle faster before the wind gets worse," I said turning around to face Melissa, who just nodded.

The wind started blowing stronger now and the sky was gray, like it was about to rain. Even though we were paddling faster, the kayaks almost weren't moving. Everything we were doing was so we wouldn't be dragged farther away, but we also weren't moving forward.

"What are we going to do now?" Indie asked, despair lacing her voice.

Melissa suddenly stopped paddling.

"We will have to swim." She stated, not a single drop of doubt in her face.

"Are you crazy?" Kara asked.

"The shore is a good hundred meters or so," Harper said, "And it's windy."

"Besides," I added, "we can just leave the kayaks in the middle of the river. We will lose it."

"Would you rather lose a couple of kayaks, or do you prefer to get dragged back to that snake inhabited house?" She retorted, annoyed. "Or worse," she added, "get dragged to the woods on the other side, where there is way more than snakes?!"

We all waited a beat in silence, pondering the words.

"She's right." Caroline mused, jumping into the water right after. We all followed suit, leaving the paddles inside the kayaks and leaving them to be.

Turns out it was much easier to swim against the wind than to paddle, and it didn't take much longer for us to reach the shore.

On the sand, few people watched the whole thing, and as soon as we got to the sand, they asked if we were okay and what happened.

After a few calming words and the reassurance that we were fine, we wrapped ourselves in our towels and waited under a roof till the rain passed, not once taking our eyes off the abandoned kayaks.

It took about half an hour for the rain to pass, and soon we were making up plans on how to retrieve the kayaks. Thankfully they didn't get to the woods. Two of the kayaks got to one of the smaller floating rooms, where a couple was accommodated. They had their own kayak, and they tied our kayaks to theirs and brought the things back to us.

The real question was how to get back the last one. This one got to the bigger house, the snake house. Since we didn't have other ways of reaching the house besides using the kayaks, and since the boats were anchored on the other side of the beach, Harper and I decided to go and retrieve the kayak.

We didn't even get out of the kayak when we reached the big house. I keep holding onto the house edge looking for any sign

of snakes, while Harper quickly tied the kayak to ours. We left as soon as possible, reaching the shore safely.

Finally, back on safe land, we gathered our things. It was time to leave before it got dark.

We got onto the boat, going back to the city. I looked at the girls sitting around me, and I couldn't help but chuckle, "I cannot bring any of you into the water ever again."

Imperial Theater

• • • • •

Everyone was getting ready for the party tonight. Bodies moved around, bumping into each other as people tried to maneuver inside the tiny room. Everyone helped however they could: we fixed each other's hair and make-up and gave opinions on whether the clothes we chose were hot or not.

We were getting ready in my room. The party started in ten minutes and we were nowhere close to being ready. It didn't matter, though; we were planning on arriving fashionably late anyways.

"What do you think about this top?" Angelica asked me.

I looked at her through the mirror and let my eyes scan all over her.

"Maybe you should use a blue top instead?" I suggested before turning my attention back to the mascara I was applying to my eyelashes.

And then I smelt it.

Hairspray.

But not any hairspray: the hairspray I used to use as a kid.

I let my hand drop by my side and smiled at the memory.

Since I've been able to walk, I've taken dance classes. To me, learning how to dance was like learning how to talk. It was completely natural, like a sixth sense. I would go to my dance classes after kindergarten, dance for hours, and love every second.

Without a doubt, the best part was the end of the semester. Not because we were going on vacation, but because we would finally perform what we had been working on for so long. We would go to the Imperial Theater and put on a show. The historical theater was in my city and was built in the 1800s to be one of the most beautiful architectural feats in the entire country. Its golden-peach walls, white columns, and the green and yellow dome made it resemble an English palace.

Not everyone could dance there; only a few selected people could perform. That was exactly what made it so special to me. I was good enough to be part of the chosen few. I was part of this small group of girls that danced well enough to be up on that coveted stage.

Even so, the best part was not the fact that I was on that world-famous stage doing what I liked the most. The best part was the excitement before the show. The best part was being in the backstage with my peers laughing, eating candies, and having fun before the big show that took us almost six months of preparation.

It was our time.

We would tell stories, talk about random events, do last-minute rehearsals. I felt like I was part of something special. Even while little, I felt like part of something big.

We would do— or at least try to do— each other's hair. But being less than ten years old, we weren't able to create anything presentable and our moms would come fix the messes we made. We were super excited with all the colorful makeup and hairspray lingering in the air. That same scent in the air every single time we performed.

Even now, more than ten years later, it takes me back to those golden days between kindergarten and middle school. Though I don't dance anymore, every time I go inside that backstage and smell that same hairspray, a smile reforms on my face.

That scent reminds me of the jokes we would make, the games we would play before the show, and the sense of excitement that

we would feel before setting foot on that stage and doing our best. We worked so hard to prepare and finally performing was so incredibly fulfilling.

I don't even need to go back to the Imperial Theater to feel that way anymore. A trip to the hairstylist is all it takes for me to feel nostalgic again. It can even happen if someone around me decides to do their hair. All they have to do is use the hairspray and the scent of it will take me to that dance school, to my dance friends, to my backstage moments, and most importantly, to the best part of my childhood.

I took in a deep breath of air and looked at my friends, most of whom were finalizing the finishing touches to their looks.

"Are you ready to go?"

The Hidden Waterfall

• • • • •

We've had our fair share of adventures in Harper's farm in the past couple years, but only a few of them involved exploring the least visited parts of the farm: the waterfall.

We knew all about the four-wheeler forest trail, but we hadn't been there since someone encountered a Jaguar there (the person was unharmed; the jaguar... not so much). We knew all about the hen house, but no one felt like running away from a chicken, no matter how cute the little chicks were. We knew all about a beautiful waterfall one kilometer away from the farm, on the other side of the river, but... we haven't been there before.

We knew about its existence, we passed close to the place a couple of times, but never really took our time to actually go there.

And that's what we were going to do.

Since the kayak fiasco, it's been quite some time since we last had a water-related adventure in the farm, but today we were going to do it again.

There weren't kayaks anymore for us to use. They were replaced by two stand-up boards and two paddles, but that's what we were going to use to reach the waterfall.

Since it was only me, Kara, and Harper, we decided that Kara would have one board for herself and I would go with Harper. We put the boards on the water, and Harper put her phone in a plastic bag and put it inside a ziplock tied to the head of the board.

"You're going to take your phone?" I asked bewildered. I would never risk my phone to something like that.

"Hum, yes?" She asked raising a hand like it was no big deal, "How are we supposed to take insta-worthy pictures?"

I nodded in agreement, "Good call."

We paddled in the direction of the waterfall. It was the perfect place for us today. It was too hot to just stay outside and do something unrelated to water. And since there was no WI-FI in the farm, what could we possibly do on the inside? Besides, the waterfall was located in a part of the river that was piranha free, so this meant that we could swim without the fear that we were going to be bitten or something.

"Can we just take a moment to appreciate this view?" Harper motioned to the black water around us and the big trees on either side of the river, some of them reaching 50-60 meters high.

I breathed an intake of fresh air, "It's beautiful."

"It is," Kara agreed, "But Harper can you paddle faster? I want to reach the waterfall soon."

Since Harper and I were sharing a board, and there was only one paddle, we were going to take turns along the way.

"My board is heavier," Harper replied with a hint of annoyance, "I have to carry two people. Of course I'm gonna be slower."

We had a long way to go, since the waterfall was pretty far away from the wooden docks from where we departed.

"Guys, what do you think George might be doing right now?" Kara asked.

George was a monkey that appeared in the farm. It probably came from the woods, and upon arriving and receiving food and love, he just decided to stay. Sometimes he went back to the forest but never too far and never for too long. He was free to come and go as he pleased, but he just didn't leave.

Playing with him was amusing. He was totally harmless, and he liked to climb on people's shoulders and play with their hair.

If you wear glasses, just be careful, because he likes to take them and toss them on the floor.

He also liked to make a mess. When someone hanged clothes on a clothesline, he would sometimes pull them off and throw on the floor. But people didn't care. He was just too innocent and friendly.

"He is probably jumping around the house messing someone's things." Harper laughed.

That's how we spent the entire way till the waterfall. Talking about light things and splashing water at each other.

We finally arrived at the waterfall.

It wasn't a big one, much smaller than the ones you could find in the nearby city, Presidente Figueredo. If you didn't look closely while passing by you would miss it. But thankfully we didn't, and soon we were pulling our boards on the sandy shore.

The thing about the sandy shore was that it was super frail. Once we stepped on it, the sand would submerge or our feet would sink in it till the sand was on our knees.

Once we managed anchor our boards firmly on the shore, we left our life jackets on it, and we sprinted in the direction of the hard soil to avoid sinking in the sand. Kara fell several times on the way. The poor girl had a terrible balance.

By the time we reached the hard soil, we were all dirty. We were wet, and our body was covered in sand. We walked in the direction of the waterfall.

Planted on the bottom was one small plunge pool, where we could swim and clean ourselves. We just had to be careful. We were barefoot, wearing only our bikinis and both the waterfall and the plunge were in the middle of rocks, which were all slippery.

It didn't matter that we had to pass through pointy branches and sharp twigs of small plants to reach the waterfall. Once we stepped under it and get the warm water hit our back, we knew that all the time we spent paddling was totally worth it.

We stayed there for the rest of the day. We took a lot of pictures and swan in the plunge, enjoying every moment we had in this place. We came back moments before the sunset, which we watched from the docks.

This farm was probably where my most found pre-teen memories came from. Between our midnight adventures in the dark without the street lights we were used to; the tree house that had a microwave and TV; the early times in the a.m. that we spent watching Cake Boss, American Idol, Cupcake Wars, and Are You the One; and all of our daytime activities with the four-wheelers and in the river, these were moments I hope I will never forget.

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