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The Way I Used to Be

The Last to Let Go

Something Like Gravity

Code Name: Serendipity

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PART

ONE

April

EDEN

I'm disappearing again. It starts at the edges, my extremities blurring. Fingers and toes go staticky and numb with no warning at all. I grip the edge of the bathroom sink and try to hold myself up, but my hands won't work. My arms are weak. And now my knees want to buckle too.

Next, it's my heart, pumping fast and jagged.

I try to take a breath.

Lungs are cement, heavy and stiff.

I never should have agreed to this. Not yet. Too soon.

I swipe my hand across the steamy mirror, and my reflection fogs over too quickly. I choke on a laugh or a sob, I can't tell which, because I really am disappearing. Literally, figuratively, and every way in between. I'm almost gone. Closing my eyes tightly, I try to locate one thought—just one—the thing she said to do when this happens.

Count five things you can see. I open my eyes. Toothbrushes in the ceramic holder. One. Okay, it's okay. Two: my phone, there on the counter, lighting up with a series of texts. Three: a glass of water, blistered with condensation. Four: the amber prescription bottle full of pills I'm trying so hard not to need. I look down at my hands, still not right. That's five.

Four things you can feel. Water dripping off my hair and down my back, over my shoulders. Smooth tiles slippery under my feet. Starchy towel wrapped around my damp body. The porcelain sink, cool and hard against the palms of my tingling hands.

Three sounds. The exhaust fan whirring, the shallow huff and gasp of my breathing getting faster, and a knock on the bathroom door.

Two smells. Peaches and cream shampoo. Eucalyptus body wash.

One taste. Stinging mint mouthwash with notes of lingering vomit underneath, making me gag all over again. I swallow hard.

"Fuck's sake," I hiss, swiping the mirror again. This time with both hands, one over the other, scrubbing at the glass. I refuse to give in to this. Not tonight. I clench my fingers into fists until I can feel my knuckles crack. I inhale, too sharply, and finally manage to get some air into my body. "You're okay," I exhale. "I'm okay," I lie.

I'm staring down into the black circle of the drain as my eyes drift back over to the bottle. Fine. I twist the cap in my useless hands and let one chalky tablet tumble into my palm. I swallow it, I swallow it good. And then I down the entire glass of water in one

gulp, letting tiny rivulets stream out of the corners of my mouth, down my neck, not even bothering to wipe them away.

"Edy?" It's my mom, knocking on the door again. "Everything all right? Mara's here to pick you up."

"Yeah, I—" My breath catches on the word. "I'm almost ready."

JOSH

It's been four months since I've been back. Four months since I've seen my parents. Four months since the fight with my dad. Four months since I was here in my room. I've been home only a couple of hours, haven't even seen my dad yet, and already I feel like I'm suffocating.

I slouch down and let my head sink into the pillows, and as I close my eyes, I swear I can smell her for just a moment. Because the last time I was here, she was here next to me, in my bed, no more secrets between us. And as I turn my head, I bring the pillow to my face and breathe in deeper this time.

My phone vibrates in my hand. It's Dominic, my roommate, who practically packed my bag and dragged me out of our apartment and into his car to come home this week. I had to come home sometime.

His text says I'm serious. be ready in 10 . . . and don't even think about bailing

I start to respond, but now that my phone is in my hand and Eden is on my mind again, I find our texts instead, my last three still sitting there unanswered. I haven't looked at them in a while, but I keep rereading them now, trying to figure out what I said wrong. I'd seen the article about his arrest. I asked her how she was handling it all. Reminded her that I was her friend. Told her I was here if she needed anything. I checked in a couple of days later, then again the next week. I even called and left a voice mail.

The last thing I wrote to her was should I be worried?

She didn't respond and I didn't want to push. Now months have passed, and this is where we are. I type out a simple hey and stare at the word, those three letters daring me to press send.

My bedroom door creaks open with two sharp knocks, followed by a pause and one more. My dad. "Josh?" he says. "You're home."

"Yep." I delete the word quickly and set my phone facedown on the bed. "What's up?"

"Nothing, I—I just, uh, wanted to say hi." He shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, his eyes clear and focused as he looks at me. "I didn't see your car outside."

"Yeah, Dominic drove us home," I explain, feeling my guard lower, just enough to let my anger start to rise inside me.

"Oh," he says, nodding.

I pick my phone back up; hope he takes the hint.

"Actually, if you have a minute, I've really wanted to talk to you. About the last time you were home. Look, I know I wasn't there for you when you were dealing with . . ." He pauses, searching for the rest of a sentence I suspect also isn't there.

I watch him closely, waiting to see if he actually remembers what it was I was dealing with the last time I was home. I make a bet with myself while I wait: If he remembers even a fragment of what happened four months ago, I'll stay in tonight. I'll talk with him like he wants. I'll tell him I forgive him, and I might even mean it.

"You know," he starts again, "when you were dealing with all that."

"What is this, making amends?" I ask. "Step nine already? Again," I mutter under my breath.

"No," he says, wincing softly. "It's not that, Josh."

I sigh and set my phone back down. "Dad, I'm sorry," I tell him, even though I'm *not* sorry. But I don't need him breaking his sobriety again just because I took a cheap shot, either. "Shit, I just—"

"No, it's okay, Joshie." He holds his hands out in front of his chest and shakes his head, just taking it. "It's all right. I deserved that." He backs up a couple of steps until he can hold on to my doorframe like he needs something to lean on. He opens his mouth to say something else, but the doorbell interrupts him. I can hear my mom downstairs now too, talking to Dominic.

"I don't know why I said that." I try to apologize again. "I'm sorry."

It's fine, he mouths to me, then turns toward the hallway, greeting Dominic like the picture-perfect father he sometimes really is. "Dominic DiCarlo in the flesh! Good season for you, I hear." What he doesn't say is how *my* season has been shit—he doesn't need to say it, we all know. "Keeping this one in line, I'm sure," he adds in that good-natured way of his.

"You know it," Dominic jokes, shaking my dad's outstretched hand. "Someone's gotta keep him in line." He's all cheerful until he sees me, taking off my hat and trying to smooth the wrinkles in my shirt. "Man, you're not ready at all."

EDEN

My hands are steady now as they reach for the door handle. Steady as I flip down the visor in Mara's car and swipe mascara over my lashes. Steady as Steve climbs into the seat next to me and interlaces his fingers with mine, smiling sweetly as he says, "Hey, I missed you."

My heart has slowed now that the medicine found its way into my bloodstream. Even though I know it's not a real calm, I guess it's enough for me to do this for my friends. To be out and acting normal for one last night before I drop another bomb on them. And so I lie and say, "Me too."

Mara's boyfriend, Cameron, slams the passenger-side door as he gets in. He kisses Mara and then glances back at me and says, "We're probably gonna miss the opening act now."

"We will not," Steve responds in my place, then leans toward me and kisses my bare shoulder. "I'm glad you decided to come."

"Yeah, me too," I repeat, feeling like I should mean it.

"It's about time you got out again," he says.

"That's what I told her, Steve," Mara chimes in, all smiles.

"Think of tonight as a new beginning," he continues. "You'll be back in school on Monday, and then we have the last couple of months of our senior year to enjoy. Finally. We've earned it!"

"Hell yeah, we have," Cameron agrees.

They act like I'm recovering from a bad flu or something. Like now that I'm not keeping secrets, things can magically go back to normal, whatever normal used to be. As if finishing senior year is not the last thing on my mind right now. Or maybe they're right, and I should just try to ignore all the rest of the shit and be a regular teenager for the next two months while I still can.

"Cameron," I hear myself call above the music, and they all turn to look at me. "We bought the tickets for the headliner, anyway, right? So if we're late, it's still gonna be okay."

Not that I care much about either, but I owed them a little enthusiasm.

He rolls his eyes and turns back around, muttering, "You mean *I* bought the tickets." Cameron is the only one not pretending, not suddenly being nice to me just because of everything that happened, and I feel strangely grateful for that. "You can pay me back anytime, by the way."

Our bickering somehow makes Mara smile, and Steve holds my hand too tightly, both taking this all as a good sign that I still have some fight in me. I clear my throat, preparing to give them the disclaimer my therapist helped me work out during my session this week.

"So, guys, um," I begin. "I just wanted to say . . . You know

it's been a while since I've been around a lot of people, and I might, like, get anxious or—”

“It's okay,” Steve interrupts, pulling me closer. “Don't worry, we'll be there.”

“Okay, it's just that I might need to take a break and get some air for a few minutes, or something. And if I do, it's not a big deal and I'm okay, so I don't want anyone to worry or feel like we have to leave or anything like that.” It didn't come out as smoothly as I'd practiced, but I said what I needed to say. Boundaries.

Now his nervous puppy eyes are back on me. And Mara squints at me in the rearview mirror.

“I mean, I might not. It's hard to say,” I add so they'll stop looking at me like that. “Or I could just get really drunk and we'll all have a great fucking time.”

“Edy,” Mara scolds at the same time Steve is shouting, “No!”

“Joking,” I say with a smile. It's also been four months since I've done anything bad. Though my therapist would tell me to replace bad with “unhealthy.” I haven't done any drinking or guys or smoking of any substances at all. I'm still not sure how taking these pills when I get overwhelmed is any different from the other *unhealthy* stuff. Not sure who decides what's good and what's bad. But I'm doing it anyway, following these rules, because I want to get better, be better. I really do.

Walking up from the parking lot, we pass a group of college kids with drinks in their hands, hanging out around this old wooden picnic table that looks like it's being partially held up by the concrete walls of the building. Their cigarette smoke calls to me as we

walk by, and I watch them laughing and spilling their drinks. If Steve weren't holding on to my hand so tightly, if things weren't different now, I'd imagine myself drifting toward them, finding an easy space to fit for the night.

But things *are* different now; that kind of easy doesn't seem to exist for me anymore.

At the door we're each issued a neon-pink UNDER 21 wristband that the guy puts on me, grazing the inside of my wrist as he does so. I know it's nothing, but I already feel somehow violated by that small touch, yet also strangely numb to it.

It's too tight, the wristband. I tug on it to see if there's any give, but they're the paper kind that you can't tear off or squeeze over your wrist.

Mara doesn't seem bothered by hers at all, so I try to forget it.

Music's thumping from the speakers. Everywhere I look people are drinking, laughing, shouting. Someone bumps into me, and I know, I know my body should be feeling something about all this. That old shock of adrenaline, heart racing, breath quickening. But there's nothing. Except for that disappearing feeling again, except this time it doesn't kick off a panic attack. It just makes me feel like part of me isn't really here. And I'm suddenly unsure if I can trust myself to even know whether I'm safe or not with that part of me dormant.

This time I hold on to Steve's hand tighter as he leads us closer to the stage. Mara takes my other hand, and when I look back at Cameron holding hers, I'm reminded of kindergarten recess, little kids forming a human chain to walk across the street to get to the playground. I hate that I need this now.

"You good?" Mara says, close to my ear, as bodies start to pack in around us.

I nod.

And I am. Sort of. Through the first set of the opening band, I'm good. I even let myself sway a little. Not dance or jump or move my hips or close my eyes and touch my boyfriend the way Mara is doing that makes it look so easy. It's different, chemically, the absence of alcohol, the presence of this medication clouding my head instead.

By the time the band—Steve's favorite band, the one we came to see—takes the stage, I feel myself emerging again. Softly at first. There's that familiar jagged heartbeat in my chest and my breathing comes undone and messy, the bass reverberating in my skull. "It's okay," I whisper, unable to hear my own voice in my head over the music. I let go of Steve's hand. My palms are getting sweaty. And I'm suddenly very aware of every part of my body that's touching other people's bodies as they bump up against me.

I look around now, too quickly, taking in everything I missed when we arrived, all at once. I spot our school colors; a varsity jacket catches the lights from the stage. I immediately get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach—I don't know why I hadn't counted on seeing people from school tonight. We're here, after all. But then I see him in clips, flashes, his head back, laughing. Jock Guy. One of Josh's old friends.

No. I'm imagining things. I close my eyes for a second. Reset.

But when I open them, he's still there. It's definitely Jock Guy. The one who found me at my locker that day after school. The one who chased me down the hall. The one who wanted to scare me,

wanted me to pay for my brother beating Josh up. I face the front, look at the stage. It's now. Not then. But I can't help myself; I look over again. Close my eyes again. Hear his voice again in my ear. *I hear you're real dirty.*

My head is pounding now.

I clear my throat, or try to. "Steve!" I yell, but he can't hear me. I place my hand on his shoulder, and he looks down at me. I cup my hands around my mouth, and he leans in. I'm practically shouting in his ear. "I'm gonna step out."

"What?" he yells.

I point toward the exit.

"You all right?" he shouts.

I nod. "Yeah, I just feel weird."

"What?" he yells again.

"Headache," I shout back.

"Want me to come?"

I shake my head. "Stay, really."

He looks back and forth between me and the band. "You sure?"

"Yes, it's just a headache." But I'm not sure he hears.

Mara notices me leaving and grabs my arm. She's saying something I can't make out.

"It's just a headache," I tell her. "I'll be back."

She opens her mouth to argue and grabs hold of my other arm now, so we're face-to-face, but unexpectedly, thankfully, Cameron is the one to gently touch her wrist, making her let go of me. He nods at me and keeps Mara there.

I squeeze through openings in the crush of bodies, holding