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Missing Forest

8th Grade

1,991 Words

The blank, dull, green of the Colorado planes stretched out on both sides of the car window as Illinois Mendez peered blankly at the soft blue sky. The events of the last half hour replayed through her head as Chas, her best friend, fiddled with the volume on the radio. There was an air of something missing in the back seat, a feeling that things should be louder, more interesting, more real. There was a lack of Forest, who had been already buried in his premature grave three days ago. Everything seemed eerily quiet as Illinois replayed the road trip so far in her mind.

It started after lunch at school, where after a multitude of pitiful glances and offered prayers, a silent conversation led them straight to the car with no destination in mind. In the parked car, parents were called with instructions to "not talk to us for two days, we will be back, please don't worry" that probably did nothing to soothe their already worried parents.

All in all, Chas and Illinois were looking for some place where they could leave the tense air that surrounded them 24/7.

This distraction did very little, because all they could think about in the cramped, messy car was how they had gotten the phone call, late at night, that Forest had been in an accident, and that he hadn't made it. The almost emotionless voice stating that their friend was gone forever had a constant space in their minds, the voice warping and changing until it was only the words left. The silence was broken only by the small talk that ended as soon as it began.

~

"Chas, can you change the song?"

"Why?"

"It's not that good of a song."

"'Never Gonna Give You Up' is art. It got on my mixtape, so it gets the Chas seal of approval."

"Well it doesn't get the Illinois seal of approval. Change it."

"Okay, compromise. We stop and get gas, grab some supplies for the trip, and then see what happens."

"I won't magically start liking that song if you buy me chips."

"We'll see."

~

Illinois and Chas waited in uncomfortable silence as the gas filled up the car, as the seconds ticked by slowly. The gas station appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, and there were some bearded truckers stomping around, holding long sticks of beef jerky and frowning. Both felt severely out of place, watching the dial move from the E to the F. Once done with that, they both made their way to the store that accompanied the pumps.

The store was cramped and humid, made even more so by the burly truckers that stomped around the

space. The cashier was a very bored teenager, who desperately needed a haircut. He ignored the two on their way in, focusing on the music blaring from his earbuds. Illinois and Chas were efficient, plucking family sized chips and bottles of water from their shelves.

"Hey, Chas, did you know that you can do the Macarena to literally any song?" Illinois blurted, trying to break the silent tension.

"Okay, you've gone insane. The Macarena is not a one size fits all dance move. Let's make a bet. Whatever song comes on next, you do the Macarena," announced Chas, as he listened to the tinny speakers playing some bubblegum pop.

"Bet taken. I will win."

They stood in anticipation, waiting for the song to end.

"Okay. Are you ready to Macarena?"

Illinois stepped in front of him, and stuck out her tongue, holding in giggles. She found it even harder to hold in giggles when "Ice Ice Baby" started. True to her word, she adapted the Macarena to the song's beat. She began to improvise, adding in footwork, much to the appreciation of Chas, who had begun to whoop as his smile spread wide across his freckled face. As the song ended, they stopped holding in the laughter and practically collapsed on each other, laughing long and deep, ignoring the troubled stare of the cashier.

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"Hey, Chas, do you still keep that note to self journal? You know, the one we made in middle school?"

"Yeah. It's in my glove compartment. What about it?"

"Can you put me doing the Macarena in there? I think we need some kind of memo of that amazing moment."

"Okay. It's in the glove compartment, write it down."

~

"Illinois, did you know your name is weird?"

"Says the guy named Chas."

"Touché."

~

"Hey, Chas."

"Yeah?"

"Do you think, that maybe, we could just go to a field or something? Stare at the stars, or something as

horribly cliché as that?"

"It's our trip. Why not? As long as I can choose the songs."

"Ugh, you suck."

"Don't worry, I'm just going to put shuffle on all the songs I have. In other words, get ready to witness all of my embarrassing phases in middle school."

"Okay, I'm exponentially more excited for this."

"Figured you'd be."

~

"Oh my god. Illinois. It's-"

"His favorite song."

"What do we do?"

"Don't change it. Just, listen to it."

"He had a crap taste in music."

"Why am I laughing? I need to stop. I can't laugh at my dead friend's terrible taste in music. But why is it so true?"

"He could've liked good music, but no. He had to like disco."

"God, why? Why do you have this trash?"

"He made me put it on the mixtape, nothing I could have done."

"Stop laughing!"

"You first."

"We suck, don't we?"

"Absolutely."

"Maybe you should put that in the note to self journal."

"That we suck?"

"Yes."

~

It was nighttime by the time they found a quiet place to stare at the stars. It was the empty parking lot of some deserted mall, and the night sky made them feel incomprehensibly small. The humid night air clung to their skin, and the radio silence around them did nothing to calm the onslaught of mixed feelings they began to feel.

Chas pulled out a beach towel, and set it in the trunk of his mom's truck. He climbed into the trunk first, and reached out his hand to help Illinois. He pulled her in the trunk and they settled in. They stared up at the sky, examining the white stars dotting the inky night.

"I miss him," whispered Chas, looking up at the sky as if it had all the answers in the world. Illinois looked at his face, and then at the sky.

"Me too. I don't think I understand it yet."

"Understand what?"

"Why it happened. Also, what happens next. Forest has always been in between us, you know? It's always been smart Illinois and cool Chas, with Forest standing somewhere in the middle. He was our bridge. What next? If I died, you would be better off. You wouldn't be missing the only thing keeping the three of us together."

"We would not be better off without you, Illi. I mean, you would be better off without me, if you think about it. I'm holding you guys back. He is this burst of creativity, and you are this super genius, and you guys are going places. Me? I'm staying here. I'm going to be ordinary, while you guys are changing the world."

"I think that no matter what happens, if one of us is gone, everything falls apart. Because we need you. And we need Forest too. And, I'm starting to realize that Forest isn't an 'is' anymore. He's a 'was', if that makes sense," at this, her eyes began to well up, starting to understand fully that Forest was gone.

"I'm going to miss him. So much," Chas sniffed, trying to hold in the tears that have been threatening to escape since Forest's funeral.

"I think we will always miss him."

"Can we stay together? Even without Forest between us, we are still best friends. Right?"

"Yes. No matter what happens, we are still going to be best friends."

Hearing the words broke down the dam. He grabbed Illinois' hand and began crying, tears rolling onto the beach towel as he sobbed. Illinois followed soon after, thoughts of Forest, her hurricane of a best friend, running through her head. They gripped onto each other's hand like a lifeline, and let all the pent up feelings free as the stars slowly began to disappear from the sky, being replaced by the brilliant pink sunrise.

~

"I have an idea for the journal."

"Again with the journal?"

"Do a note to self about how tired you are after you cry."

"Okay, Illi. Go ahead and have at it."

~

"You know what, Chas?"

"What?"

"This road trip is kind of stupid. Imagine what it's doing to our parents."

"Oh my god. Especially after losing Forest, having their children run away for two days without contacting them."

"Oh my god. We need to fix this."

~

"So, how did your parents take the news?"

"That's a complicated question for someone who just got back on the road, after an emotional cry-fest."

"Chas, I'm curious."

"Mom is angry. She's taking it out on her customers, but she really is hurting."

"How's anger doing for the business? I'm pretty sure being a fitness trainer is a pretty good job for anger."

"She's made soccer moms cry."

"What about your dad?"

"He doesn't know. Haven't talked to him since my last birthday, and don't plan to anytime soon."

"But he liked Forest."

"I don't like him. Neither does mom. All the liking is for his honeymoon with wife number three in Indiana. We won't talk to him. He'll figure it out on his own, or not at all."

"My parents are trying to help Forest's mom. I think they are just focusing their energy on helping other people get through it. Forest's mom is sort of in denial. She did accept the food, which was a pretty good sign, I think."

"What did you make her?"

"The grief fajitas. We made them for you when Sparky died, remember?"

"Oh, those."

~

"Illinois, how did you get your name?"

"Name generator from the internet. They were stuck. How about you?"

"Named after Uncle Chas."

"The uncle that died?"

"Yeah, that one."

~

"When are we supposed to go home?"

"Well, Illi, we technically have a full day until school starts again."

"I want to go somewhere."

"Where?"

"Home."

~

"Hey, for your journal, can you write about how we will always stick by each other? Or something like that?"

"Go ahead, Illi."

~

The drive home was predominantly silent, with a slight break when either would sing along to a song. Illinois called both her parents and Chas', and took the reprimands and well-placed anger from both. The sun was shining into their eyes as Chas pulled into Illinois' driveway, angry parents at the doorway and flowers blooming in the garden out front. Chas and Illinois shared a look, scared of what was about to come next, as Illinois reluctantly stepped out of the car.

~

When Chas parked his car in the driveway and walked into the house, all he could hear was muffled crying coming from the living room, as his mom stared at Forest's obituary in the paper. It was one of the first and only times he had ever seen his mom cry.

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That night, both Chas and Illinois laid in their own beds on separate sides of the town as they stared at

their bare white ceilings. There was cold silence surrounding both of them, and it almost felt like they could see through the ceiling into the starry sky above. They both offered a wish to the sky, imagining that somewhere up there, Forest was dancing to disco and catching their wishes with an outstretched hand. Both smiled at the sky, and as sleep overtook them, they felt a wave of peace wash over them, the word "goodbye" tattooed in their thoughts.