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Little Drops

11th Grade

Word Count: 2000

You can watch a single train rumble past for the solid part of an hour if you have the patience. If you sit on top of a chain-link fence with nothing to do and just watch. You'll notice the spaces in between the cars where floodlights are shining through, the eerie, blaring horn, the clacking of the wheels, and the squeaking of the breaks as the train slows down miles before it reaches its destination. The giant, mechanical beast dashes along the earth's scathed surface every night, waking the neighbors from their dreams. Some never get used to it – the noise, the trembling ground. I grew used to it at an early age. After all, that was my lullaby when nobody bothered to put me to bed.

There aren't a lot of guards at the loading docks. It's easy to sneak over the fence and tiptoe across the tracks to explore what they're shipping: coal, sometimes crude oil, luxury cars. There are different number-letter combinations that identify each crate, their long codes near impossible to memorize. I write them in a little leather-bound journal full of useless human curiosity. The majority of the handwriting in it is mine, but some is Seth's. His numbers suck because the ones look like **L**'s, the threes look like **B**'s, and the fives look like **S**'s. And zeros vs **O**'s, God help me.

He hasn't come around recently, hasn't met me here in several months. I think it's painful for him because of what happened last May. It broke his heart.

But after the train passes, I hear footsteps. Heavy, leaden footsteps as if the person taking them holds the world on his shoulders. I would recognize them anywhere. "Hey, Seth," I say.

He doesn't reply and simply climbs the fence, sitting right next to me. I shift closer to him. "Seth," I say.

No reply. He takes a beer from his backpack, pops the top off, and sucks it down. His handsome face is now haggard and pale, his eyes puffy and bloodshot. This bottle is definitely not his first.

"Selfish," I mumble. "None for me?"

Seth stares straight ahead and then slowly turns, his swollen, watery blue eyes conflicted as he stares right through me. After a minute, he reaches into his bag again and pulls out another beer, placing it through one of the chain loops, but it falls, smashing on the gravel. He doesn't seem to care. The brown pieces glimmer in the floodlights like pinpricks of stars reflecting moonbeams.

But this scene is far from romantic. It's meant for the damned. The ones breaking when nobody can see, clawing for the light as it grows dimmer and dimmer.

Carefully, slowly, Seth opens his mouth. "You should have been there today," he rasps.

"At school?" I ask quietly.

"At school. They started whispering about *it* again. But they're not sad anymore. I don't know what happened, but for some unknown reason... they started in again. About how you're... you know... How we were—"

"Why?"

"It's funny. After someone dies, there's this period of sadness. *Real* sadness 'cause of the loss of life but then... after a while, it's like they think the ghost has moved on. They think they're safe again. They think karma can't get to them anymore after a year of mourning. They start to judge again."

"I know they do."

"I... I feel ashamed, okay? 'Cause I used to be like them, *exactly* like them, the *king* of them. And then you... you came along. Crap, I don't know what happened, but you just struck something inside me. I felt everything more. Every emotion was acute and magnified, and I could articulate what I was feeling. The level of empathy you helped me experience was astounding. Just like you – astounding and colorful and beautiful."

His voice slips a couple of times, and a large knot bobs in his throat. I can't tell if those are tears in his eyes or not, but I don't dare move. He's never been this vulnerable in front of anyone – even me. I don't want to ruin the moment.

With a tip of his head, he's staring up at the moon. Those *are* tears in his eyes; they're slipping down his cheeks, glinting in the floodlights. Little drops of him, of whatever has finally burst within his soul. I both hate and love that I am the cause of it. I rub my nose. Then stuff my hands in my pockets.

He keeps staring at the moon and crying.

I let him.

Vulnerability has a way of sneaking up on people and taking them by surprise. It comes at the strangest times. I wonder if he's cried before now about what happened last May, about the vows he took, and the ones I didn't return. The ones I never can. I reach out to touch his face, and for a moment, he leans into it. A wracking, disgusting sob explodes from his lips,

brandishing the sheen of sweat coating his trembling mouth, and then he's done. He pulls away and wipes the rivulets from his face. I can't help but wonder if they'll be gone forever, the memory an unwanted blur.

I expect him to get up and leave. To forget he ever bawled like a baby over someone he never glanced twice at before last January. But he begrudgingly stays. His eyes dart down the tracks as if he's heard something. I hear nothing.

"What's out there?" I say.

"It's darker now," he answers.

"You're right."

"So dark. Cold."

"I don't know about that. It's May, it isn't that cold anymore."

He stays silent, tapping his fingers on the fence. They're bloody and short as if he's been biting them. He didn't used to have that problem.

"Your fingernails," I say, pointing at his hand. I gulp because I feel stupid for saying it. **Yes, those are fingernails**, I can hear him say, but he keeps quiet.

I do too. For a while.

Then I mumble, "C'mon, Seth, **talk** to me. Please."

Nothing. I drag a hand through my hair, mussing it in frustration. Seth turns away from me, and he grabs the strap of his backpack, obviously debating whether or not to sling it on and leave. But he still stays. What is he waiting for?

"What do I have to say to get you to hear?" I ask. "**Talk** to me."

He opens his mouth, but only a whimper escapes, "I miss you."

The words tumble out with a raw intensity that stuns me into silence, the force of them raking nails down my heart. His head falls into his hands, and I can tell that **this** is his most vulnerable point. Tears again stream down his cheeks, his nose, and then his lips until he's swallowing his own sadness. I know what that tastes like. Salty, sharp. He shudders too – inside and out – but there's no train rolling past. It's just him, shivering on a fence in the middle of May. Watching the same tracks that took his lover's life a year ago. And he'd like to believe it was an accident, to believe I hadn't stood there, arms out, waiting for the rumbling to overtake my body and split me apart.

“I’m weak,” I remember telling him when he found me just seconds before the train made contact. “I’m so, so weak.”

He’d promised that we would escape before hell erupted around us. He’d lied – we both had – and I had paid the price for it. For our slowness, our hesitation, our heels making ruts in the dirt. That price which left my hips bruised and my pride thoroughly damaged. That neglectful love I’d known from my parents since forever had turned into overwhelming humiliation in a matter of seconds, and Seth hadn’t been there to prevent it. I’d been on my own. And in that awful, dark hour, I’d had a moment of clarity. I would always be on my own – *always* – because I always had been. What would change? And that thought, which was so deeply rooted into my brain, was the one thing I thought I could never have recovered from.

So I’d made my decision. A bloody one at midnight on May 21, 2016.

I’d headed to the train tracks, texting Seth one last goodbye. The blinding light didn’t bother me. The only thing that broke my heart was the *I love you!* Seth hurtled at the top of his lungs over the blaring, frightened horn. For one second, I’d wished it was all a horrible nightmare, and I’d wake up in my bed, sweating bullets. But I knew better.

I’m not so sure now that we couldn’t have made it. Maybe we could have gone somewhere, become *something*, and fixed whatever horrid scars throbbled on our bodies.

“I wanted to say goodbye,” Seth finally says. “I’m heading to Chicago.”

“What? Why?” I ask, rubbing my nose.

He shrugs as if he heard me. I know he didn’t. I know he can’t. “My parents are refusing to pay for my college, and I can’t get a scholarship with the abysmal grades I have without you to help me study,” he says. He shrugs again and chucks his empty beer bottle onto the gravel. It smashes right next to the one that dropped.

“I’m gonna try the world on for size, the whole big mess of it. I hope you’re proud of me.” He glances at me, and this time, he’s *looking* at me. “I know you’re there, I just wish I could see you. I know you’re talking to me, rubbing your nose, wondering why I didn’t show more vulnerability or whatever when you were alive. I’m sorry, I should have.”

“Don’t apologize,” I tell him, taking his hands. My own slip right through his, and wisps of tears spring into my eyes. “I miss you too. God, Seth, I miss you...”

The tears are welling, falling. They exist in another plane – *I* exist in another plane. It’s enough to make a string of cuss words trip over themselves out of my mouth. I can’t hear

anything else but them and the distant horn of an approaching train. I hate this. But I can't go back. Why did I have to see this? He's the only one who ever cared, and he's the only one I have to see grieving for me. Anyone else, I would have thought it was an act. But it took him a *year*, a freaking *year* to come back here to me. I hate him as much as I love him.

Suddenly, he jumps off the fence, landing like a panther on the gravel with his backpack slung over his shoulder. The straps are frayed. The color is worn. I tear my eyes from the pack and glance at the tracks. No sign of that train yet, but he's already running away.

And I follow him. I haven't moved from the loading station for a year, haven't tried to. But now I do. I can.

He drove his car here, but it's parked a quarter mile back just off of Helm Road in a pocket of shrubs barely up to our waists. It does nothing to hide his beaten, old station wagon. "You're still here?" he mumbles to me as he unlocks the door.

I slide into the passenger seat. "I'm still here," I say.

He doesn't hear me, but I don't care. We're going to Chicago, and he'll make it. I'm going to make sure of that.

I hear him laugh, the sound loud, maniac, but excited. And I have to chuckle too. His laugh could stop a full-speed train.

"It's funny," Seth says quietly, tentatively. "I never thought I'd run into it again so soon – the laughter, I mean. Thank you." He glances over at the passenger seat.

I smile hopefully and murmur, "Please, laugh again."