

Beware
the
Blessed
Memories



Arcade
Link

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A short story by Arcade Link

It was their birthday, Father's Day, *eighteen years from today*, when Dani started regressing. At least that's what Dani calls it. After years of consideration, they thought they would die today. But the universe was not so kind.

It started with love.

Let's not conflate that with love *causing* this. Dani may never know the why or how of their existence, and there's no point in speculation, but at the center of their story is their love for Sara. Sara, Dani's one constant in those eighteen years.

When Dani started preschool, Sara was there. When Dani needed someone to copy homework from, Sara was there. When Dani needed a shoulder, an ear, a hand—Sara was there. Sara was the person Dani first told their new name and pronouns. In all their life, Dani only wished that they could be as strong for Sara as she was for them.

Dani's seventeenth year was tough as Sara took her opportunity to go to an art school overseas for her senior year. But Dani, of course, supported her the whole way. She returned home just a few days ago.

Dani's eighteenth birthday, Father's Day, June 19th, 2022, arrived, and when their eyelids became too heavy to keep up, they walked over to the calendar on their bedroom wall. There was a scribble of black sharpie across the top of the day, and below they had written, "You're 18." They drew a red X over the previous day.

"Dani," a voice said quietly.

"Yeah?" They crawled into bed.

"Happy Birthday." Sara rolled over next to Dani.

They sighed and whispered, "Thanks."

"It sucks that we can't hang out for it tomorrow."

"I know, it's fucking stupid." Under the blankets Dani shuffled to get comfy, and delicately put their hand against Sara's. She didn't

move. They laid their head next to Sara's close enough to feel her breath.

It was not close enough for Dani. Not after going without Sara for most of a year. Not after memorizing every inch of Sara, and never gaining the courage to *tell* her.

"It's *my* birthday."

In the morning Dani woke with a start as a crash came from outside their open window. Sara was always a heavy sleeper. They could have laid there dreading the day ahead, as every birthday seemed to get worse, but the optimist inside of Dani—or maybe it was the romantic—instead laid there and appreciated Sara laying beside them. A tapestry of joy—the bus rides to school together, the sleepovers, the scary movies, the boy troubles, the girl troubles, the gender troubles, the countless hours of time never wasted if only it was spent together. A gestalt of beauty—her long auburn hair in a tangle of bedclothes; her body, underneath the light pajama shirt, hardly a mystery to Dani, from the years they'd known each other; her lips the real mystery. A confluence of desire, and regret.

At ten that morning, Dani touched Sara's arm and she fluttered awake, and whined.

"It's time to get up," Dani said softly. It could have been perceived as furtive, but if you could ask them, Dani would tell you it was simply a quiet sadness.

"I don't wanna leave," Sara buried her face in her pillow.

Dani touched her back and said "I don't want you to... but you know... next weekend we can do whatever we want."

Sara sighed. "Okay."

"The sooner this day passes. The sooner next weekend will come."

Sara was retrieved by her mother, and Dani had a birthday brunch with the family. A few presents littered the kitchen table with a cake at the center. Their mother, father, and younger brother Adrian sat

with them.

A card: "I love you Ally, happy 18th, my little girl is all grown up."

A good gift: A pile of books, but Dani didn't have it in them to care.

A bad gift: A dress, now hanging from the back of a chair.

A cake: "Happy Fathers Day."

A very expensive surprise: Four hockey tickets.

A bashful little brother: Adrian, holding out the final gift in his little mitts, a gift so small it could blow away with a soft breeze, like they wished the tickets would.

Dani took the gift and carefully opened it. They could tell that whatever was inside would tear easily. It was a single piece of paper, and a handful of index cards. Each one was different. One read, "Take the trash out for you 5 times," and there were five boxes drawn below for Adrian to check off. There was another for dishes, one for vacuuming, and one for doing the cat boxes. The last index card read, "A shoulder to cry on and an ear to listen." There was a single box below it that stretched across the whole card, and in the middle was a small infinity symbol. Dani stopped themselves from crying, but were the parents not there, they would have lost it. They hugged Adrian and whispered that they loved him. But it just never felt right to unleash their emotions on their ten year old brother. He really wanted to be there for them. They occasionally think back to that moment and consider that maybe it would have been okay.

"Hockey time!" their dad shouted.

"I'm way too gay for this," they mumbled and laid their head on the table. The head that was still with Sara. The head that still is.

Adrian patted their back and said, "No such thing."

Dani may have enjoyed the hockey game had Sara come along. It's not like they hated hockey, and seeing Adrian be so extravagantly excited made their heart grow two sizes. Why couldn't they have just

gotten Sara a ticket too? When they arrived home, they immediately went upstairs, trampled the new dress on the floor as they got into pajamas, scribbled out the day on their calendar, and went to bed. They closed their eyes thinking of sleep, and the new year they get to have with Sara back beside them.

In the morning Dani woke with a start as a crash came from outside their open window. Sara was always a heavy sleeper—Sara was in their bed again.

They smiled, kissed her forehead, held her close, and said, “You’re always in my dreams, aren’t you.” It was more a statement than a question.

In what seemed like minutes but was more like an hour, Dani’s mom knocked on the bedroom door and shouted, “Girls, time to get up!”

Dani’s eyes bolted, open and Sara smiled at them. She snuggled up closer to Dani. In a Daze, not the least of which was caused by the unexpected physical affection from Sara, they looked across their room at the calendar to find that their birthday was not scribbled out as they remembered doing. The dress was not on the floor, and was nowhere to be seen. Sara was still with them in bed.

“Kay!” Dani responded.

They initially thought that their birthday was an oddly complex dream. That was until they realized that the sound that woke them up was the exact same as it was before. Was it possible to have a dream span a whole day in a split second? Could the sound that ultimately woke them up on their birthday give way to a dream and wake them up all at once?

It would only take a couple days for Dani to come to terms with the fact that none of this was a dream.

Dani’s second eighteenth birthday played out very much the same as it did the first time. The only differences being that they got more

snuggle time with Sara in the morning, and then spent the majority of the day more dissociated *than usual*. They didn't know how to hide their lack of surprise, and the anxiety from that caused them to check out.

When the family arrived home that night after the game, Dani pulled their backpack from the car and went for a short walk and sat against a neighbour's fence. Small figures of Nintendo characters dangled from the zippers and swung as they walked, and colourful pins glinted as lights caught their surface. They glanced around to see if anyone was present, and rummaged through their bag for a pack of cigarettes. A shaking hand placed one on their lips, and a quivering lighter lit it. They didn't often smoke—only when they needed to escape and calm down. It usually meant that things were not okay.

Dani smoked until the sun came up.

They entered their house, backpack in hand, leaned against the front door, and closed their eyes for a moment.

When Dani woke up they were relieved for a moment. They were alone in bed, there was no loud crash. Things were normal. Except they weren't in bed, they were on the floor in front of the door, head upon their backpack. It was when they went up to their bedroom that they looked at the calendar on the wall and found that the 18th was no longer crossed out. They fell on their ass and checked their phone to confirm that it was indeed June 18th. Again. Seventeen again? A day before their birthday.

They slammed their phone on the floor, and the screen webbed. It didn't matter.

They didn't bother to do the morning ritual, instead they walked down to the 7-11 in their bedtime shorts and t-shirt, where they purchased four energy drinks. Despite the warning labels, they intended to drink all of them.

On the way home Dani received a text from Sara saying: “aaaaa see

you in an hour!”

Dani had already decided that they would stay up as long as possible to see if the 18th, as well as their birthday, the 19th, would play out the same way again. They couldn’t fall asleep. It seemed that every time they fell asleep they’d lose another day. Soon they’d be another year without Sara. This needed to stop. It still hasn’t.

The First Energy Drink: Sipped throughout the day, to keep Dani alert and focused.

The day played out similarly, but how could Dani possibly let things play out the same, with the knowledge they had gained?

When Sara hopped off the bus near Dani’s house, they hugged each other and the first thing Sara said was, “Have you been smoking? You smell like smoke.”

“No...” Dani quickly lied and smelled their hand. There was definitely a hint of smoke there, which meant others could smell it even stronger. The smoke had stuck with them on their skin, and their brain started spinning. “Huh, that’s weird.” They paused and said, “I’ll take a quick shower.” They took Sara by the hand and pulled them home, wanting to pull her all the way into the shower with them.

Later, sitting on the bedroom floor, Dani stuck in their own thoughts, Sara asked, “So, aren’t you gonna ask me about it?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry, I’m just...” Dani responded, “a little overwhelmed to finally have you back.”

Sara laughed and tackled Dani to the floor with a hug. “I had the best teacher, and she helped me improve so much.”

“Oh yeah, Madame Dantès, I remember you saying. Can I see some stuff?” Dani asked.

Sara salvaged a sketchbook from her bag and began quickly flipping through pages looking for something specific. Dani noticed something as they watched the pages flutter by, but wasn’t sure if it

was what they thought. She stopped on a page densely packed with color—it was a street view of a city, filled with neon lights and steel construction, stray dogs feeding in an alley, a tall clock tower with glowing hands in the distance. Dani thought it could have been from Blade Runner if it were more cyberpunk than steampunk.

“Oh, sick!”

“I kept coming back to this one all year.”

“God, I can tell. Your work is incredible, but this one...” Dani looked up at Sara and smiled. “It’s next level.”

This hadn’t happened last time, and it got Dani stuck inside their head. This whole thing, it couldn’t be real. Were they finally losing their mind? But if it was real, in just a few hours, they’d be without Sara for a whole ass year again. They weren’t ready, and in a moment of self-reflective sobriety, they admitted to themselves that the reason they had not implored Sara for that first kiss in all their years, was because they were afraid of losing her. They felt that some discomfort between them would be the end of it all. After all, neither had felt uncomfortable since the day they met.

Quickly evening came, and Dani hated themselves for not making a move. After Sara fell asleep, Dani continued their energy drink. With some newfound spirit, they gathered themselves to address what had been on their mind all day.

They sneakily rummaged through Sara’s bag and acquired the sketchbook. Pages turned between fingers and stopped when it was found. Looking back at them was their own face. A few pages later, another. Later, a day they remembered from grade ten, a celebration of a volleyball tournament they had won, and Sara got to see happen. They were all drawn with such affection, easily as much as the city, *perhaps more*, they thought.

“Yeah, I missed you too.” Dani let themselves cry, and got stuck inside their head.

Through the power of caffeine, taurine, and anxiety, Dani was able to lay in bed snuggling Sara all night and not fall asleep. They were determined to enjoy what little of their time and sanity was left with Sara.

The crash came, their mother came to wake them again, Sara went home, Adrian was the best brother ever, again, and this time Dani tried their best to enjoy the hockey game. Were they nineteen they'd have bet on it, they knew every detail of what happened, moment to moment. At one point they did hustle some schmuck for twenty bucks after calling two penalties, and a stick break correctly. They called a goal and both assists, and he said "Hell, I'll take that bet." As the playoffs went on people seemed to be more keen to make bets.

They spent that night sitting against the fence, smoking, and drinking their energy drinks.

"Fuck."

They woke up for a sunrise on what they figured was the morning of the 16th. And they were right. Their backpack was in their lap and a half-burnt cigarette between their fingers, but the butts that littered the ground were gone, as was the energy drink. They also noticed a familiar intrusion on their legs. They had shaved *not long ago, whatever that meant*, and the hair was coming in. It was hard to be curious about all of this when they realized they had failed.

It would be a year before they could see Sara again.

But what if they could acquire some meth, or cocaine? Maybe they could stay awake long enough to finally make a move. But, no, Sara wouldn't want to be with them if they were coked up. Plus they'd never done anything hard like that, they had no idea how it would affect them. They would have to make it there on pure determination. And a dangerous amount of caffeine.

The stress and anxiety made them pass out by noon, and they woke up the morning of—they checked their phone, fully charged

and no longer broken on—the 15th. They let out a furious scream that had their whole family come running.

Dani ripped the calendar in half and wept, only for the calendar to return on the 14th.

13. 12. 11. 10. 9.

Each day they found themselves angrier, more depressed, and more accustomed to the confusion. Every day was the first day that family and friends would see them like this, but each was a decline inside themselves. When May arrived, Dani realized that their bank account wasn't emptying, in fact, it was growing bit by bit. Each transaction made was undone the next day. So, standing in front of the teller, and asking him to empty their bank account in large bills was the first time they smiled since turning eighteen for the third time. There was no happiness in that smile, but it was a smile nonetheless. Pulling the two-thousand dollars from their account every day for the several years that it sat there, would fill their backpack pretty quickly. They weren't sure what else they could do. Money could be a temporary fix for when things go bad, but it wouldn't save them.

Every day was a swirl of thoughts and emotions. At some point the seventeen year old their family knew would look nineteen years old. The sixteen year old would look twenty. Fifteen... twenty-one. Fourteen—twenty-two. Their hair would change dramatically, every day, once they pass the day they got their last haircut. They would have clothes that they hadn't bought yet. Panic attacks came when they realized that some of the money they would try to use, at some point, won't have been printed yet. That would have to be a bridge they'd cross when they get there, though, they considered organizing their money by date, using the newest first, and trying to exchange the newer money for older money, especially around the time that new runs would be minted.

It was about six months of regression when Dani confronted the fact that they'd have to leave home. Familial confusion and concern

had become too much. Every goddamn day. “Where’d you get those clothes?” “What happened to your hair?” “Why do you look like that?” “Why are you crying?” “I’m getting you a shrink!”

A shrink would be fucking great if I could keep a goddamned appointment.

So, Dani, in an attempt to appease the feeling that they were abandoning Adrian, and the whole family, bought a lottery ticket. They knew nobody won, they knew all the numbers, and they just gave a guy a hundred bucks to buy it for them. Sixty million.

They packaged the ticket in an envelope with a letter:

I don’t know what happens now.

Will you actually receive this? In a world where time moves forward... do you even get it? I’m hoping you do. Am I just fading from existence? Am I still there in the future? Some other me, doing your dishes, wearing my clothes, playing my games, loving my Sara. Trying to explain this letter.

If I’m not, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry, I swear it’s not my fault.

When you win, HALF of it is to go to Adrian.

Love, yer dude,

-Dani

Dani left it on the dining room table and left the house. Their first stop was the cheapest, sketchiest motel they knew of. They plopped a hundred dollars on the counter, and received a smile. The room was fine, and the shit television wouldn’t be used anyway, they had their laptop.

Each day they would have to sneak out and pay for a room for the night because they’d wake up between 5:00 and 6:00 a.m. in a room that wasn’t paid for. Something had occurred to them, but it came to fruition after eight days of living in the motel when they woke up,

hugging their increasingly-stuffed backpack tightly, a normal morning at this point. The one difference was the strange middle-aged man sound asleep in bed next to them. They hadn't realized until rolling onto their back. They froze as their tired brain calculated the necessary moves. They slithered out of bed grasping their backpack, and then looked down at the man in the bed. They silently sighed, and exited the room, the door slamming behind them. It didn't matter, they were out. But they didn't want to risk that again. Was it possible to wake up on top of someone? Underneath someone? Inside of someone—a Cronenbergian monstrosity? They didn't want to find out.

They spent that day out and about, finding solace in food and film. When night fell, they waited for the clerk to leave, then they waited some more. Instead of ringing the bell at the desk they just stepped around and took note of all the rooms that they could safely wake up in dating back through December, but that's when a noise startled them and they stepped around the counter. Nobody appeared, so they anxiously tapped the bell, and the clerk slowly emerged in a sleepy haze. They placed a hundred dollar bill on the counter.

"Hi, can I get room 203 for the night?" They would repeat that for eight mornings until they changed rooms.

Dani collapsed into the stiff chair in room 203 and transferred the dates and rooms to a new piece of paper and slipped it in the pocket of their backpack that was deemed the "note pocket." An important pocket indeed. They then started a new list of dates that they copied out of the notes app on their phone.

DATES

July 7th 2021 - Last time I saw Sara

April 4th 2021 - New phone plan started, won't have data.

June 19th 2020 - Bought computer, account should have \$3000

Jan-June 2020 - Account should have around \$2000

June 22nd 2017 - Bank account opened

2012 - Try to exchange all the 2011 money for 2001 money.

June 19th 2004 1:05pm - birthday

This would get rewritten and expanded over time, but Dani knew that at some point their phone would get lost overnight, like all the pins and flair were lost from their backpack, and that would probably happen before April 4th, 2021. They decided to tie their backpack to their ankle overnight after testing the idea with an empty can and finding it still there in the morning, and considered doing this with more things, but sleep was hard enough to come by, so anything that really mattered they'd try to keep in their backpack, and always be connected to it. They found it hard to define the things that mattered when all that mattered to them was making it back to—

July 7th, 2021, was the last day of an entire week spent with Sara, before she left the country. Dani tried to plan how to tell Sara how they felt. It was hopeless, but they certainly fantasized. July 7th, they'd immediately just come right out and say it, and maybe she'd jump their bones. Then they'd do the same on July 6th. Hell, maybe they'd stay up all night and they'd get even more time with her. Lather, rinse, repeat. They hoped *that* might be involved as well.

Dani missed Adrian, and their dad, and against their better judgment, they also missed their mom. They never spent more than a week away from the family, and now, they'll probably never see each other again. That raised the question, once they get back to Sara... what then? They proclaim their love seven days in a row, then what? They'll already be two years older overnight, that might have to be it. *Is that the end game? Share my love with Sara, then be gone forever?* With that, they realized that each morning, waking up at Sara's house, they're going to have different hair than Sara would have seen when they went to bed the night before. They convinced

themselves that they had a habit of sleeping in super late that week, so they could hopefully claim that they had a hair appointment early that morning—each morning. They just got back before she woke up. They would be sure to get a fresh cut and do something fun with it the morning of July 7th, and on that day it wouldn't be a lie. They always wanted green hair, maybe this was the time.

Dani spent most of their days figuring out ways to make money and keep themselves safe ahead of time, daydreaming about Sara, and mourning the loss of Adrian. They avoided the thought of what comes after (*or before?*) their time with Sara. They would eat well, they would walk a lot, and do things they enjoyed. They would go see movies, they would play video games, and would give winning lottery tickets to needy people, in the hopes that they'd see the money the next day, even if they'd never know. But what they never did was hold a real conversation with anyone. It felt like a lonely dream, some sick confluence of nightmare and fantasy. They did their best with what they could, and the day finally came.

They woke up closer to 5:00 a.m. than 6:00, showered, and caught a bus downtown. They needed the best chance of getting a decent cut and dye immediately after opening, without an appointment, and that meant being close to as many salons as possible. It was a Wednesday, which was good, they weren't sure how they'd manage explaining on the weekend, but most would open between nine and eleven in the morning, so they immediately started calling salons, and got in for 9:30. First they texted Sara, just in case she woke up wondering where they were. They came out with a short leaf green undercut, and the best feeling they'd had in years. They arrived outside Sara's house just before noon.

The front door was locked, the parents were at work, but they were confident that the sliding door around back would be open. They took off their shoes before entering and when they stepped

through that sliding door a wave of emotion hit them. It had been two years since they last saw the inside of this house, and in no time at all, it would be the very last time. Something kept Dani from going upstairs to Sara. Maybe it was anxiety. It could have been fear. Perhaps it was just that desire, they felt a year earlier, to take in the gestalt, the tapestry, the confluence, everything that was Sara. They sat in the fraying couch where they watched more movies than they could count, and they scooched up to the TV, sitting on the floor, and looked at the old games scattered around, the same ones that had been there their entire life, the ones they played when they were much smaller, and didn't care about how they looked or how difficult they were, they were from their parents' generation, and were the first they'd played as well. Their childhood was littered with them. They looked at the family photos and could trace a history of Sara from chubby baby, to loudmouth child, to awkward adolescent, to passionately nerdy teen, to the girl who would be a woman honing her skills overseas in just a few days—the woman who would not forget about Dani, and would return, and like nothing had changed, everything would stay the same.

Everything would stay the same.

"Hey," came a voice. "Oh wow, what? Huh. The hair makes you look older."

Dani was jolted out of their family photo trance, and with tears that had been falling for a while, they turned to look at Sara, the very same tapestry they saw everywhere in this house and so much more in the flesh. Her voice made their hair stand on end—it was the best song they'd heard in years. In sweat pants and a homemade crop top for pajamas, thick glasses, and their hair tied back, Dani found her to be timeless, perfect, and that image of her would stick with them forever. They couldn't believe that they woke up this morning so long ago and didn't just weep at the gestalt that was Sara. So, Dani said through sobs, "I love you so much."

Sara removed her glasses, made her way over, and pulled them in

for a hug and with as much confusion as concern, said, “I love you too.”

Dani shook her head and counted three big breaths into Sara’s chest and said, “Kiss me.” Sara’s hands fell from their back, and in a panic with eyes closed, they said again, almost demanding through their tears, “Kiss me.” And the hands that left their back found their way to Dani’s face to lift their chin, wipe their tears, and patiently wait for their eyes to open. When they did, Dani found two honey coloured eyes staring straight into theirs, and a genuine, loving smile.

“You kiss me first,” Sara said, and the response shocked Dani, not that they knew at all what to expect. A small gasp arose from Dani before Sara admitted she was all jokes by pressing her open lips to theirs.

Somehow their heart slowed while each beat felt more clamorous than ever. It was trying to escape—this was all too much. Some of those thumps were Sara pushing Dani against the wall, and their bodies consequently colliding.

“Just say if you need to stop, okay?”

Wide-eyed, Dani nodded in response, and the tears slowed.

Tongues preoccupied, Sara’s hands found their way to all the places that Dani wished they would, and she even knew to not touch their breasts, without it being mentioned. She led Dani’s hands slowly and purposefully, before they spoke.

“Can we take a shower?”

Sara laughed and said, “That’s a great idea,” then nudged Dani toward the stairs. “Go on,” she said, and as Dani led the way she gave them little spanks that caused them to hop and contort themselves into silly shapes. They both laughed and giggled, and the weight of everything Dani was dealing with had finally lifted. Everything felt all right, even if it would only be finite.

When they made it to the bathroom attached to Sara’s bedroom, Dani stopped outside the door, and watched Sara turn the shower on. “What’s up?” She said, almost concerned.

Dani shook their head. “No, nothing, I just needed to look at you.”

Sara turned red, and beamed, saying, “Oh yeah?” She pulled her crop top over her head revealing what Dani had seen so many times before, but now the context was different. Sara gave a mischievous grin and removed her sweatpants, as elegantly as one could ever remove sweatpants, and then her violet underwear. Sure, Sara’s breasts and belly, her shoulders and collarbone, they were all the subject of Dani’s admiration whenever they happened to be seen, and more rarely, her ass, her thighs, and everything therein. None of this was new, yet all of it was. This time Sara was specifically sharing these parts of herself with Dani. Their face softened with this realization, and something like relief could be seen upon it. Sara’s finger instructed Dani to *enter the goddamn bathroom*, so they did, and she gently helped Dani out of their clothes, lifting their shirt, unbuckling their belt and eventually pulling off their boxer briefs.

“You’re not wearing a binder today.” Sara paused. “You’ve been wearing one all week.”

Just like that, Dani had to come up with some other harmless lie while realizing that Sara had always been looking at them. She knew that their already small breasts were bound for most of that week, and they blushed. Somehow they didn’t expect her to be looking so closely.

“Yeah, I was hurting, it was honestly irresponsible of me to be wearing it that much.” Even if it was a lie contextually, it was retroactively true.

“Please be kind to your body,” Sara said, stepping into the shower, and leading Dani in behind her.

Dani watched as water flowed down her face, soaking her long hair, and catching like crystals glittering her entire body, highlighting every curve, every blemish and every inch of perfection. “I will,” they said, “I promise.” Sara pulled her hair back, and wiped the water from her face, and Dani continued, this time trying some

of Sara's boldness for once. "That doesn't mean *you* have to be kind to my body."

Sara's laughter filled the steamy bathroom as she pulled Dani under the shower water with her.

Both parents would arrive home around 5:00 p.m., so after five hours they would have to, at the very least, be more quiet. Dani was scheduled to be picked up by their dad at 7:00, and that would be weird. But Dani didn't let that cloud their mind—the lovers continued to share themselves with each other until they couldn't.

In the car heading home, Dani's dad complimented their new hair, but warned that their mom wouldn't be as pleased. They hadn't considered this situation. Everything stopped with Sara in their head. But as it turns out, Dani would get one more night with their family, even if their mom would be upset. They could dodge a lot of the other questions, since they had old clothes with them at Sara's house, so everything they were wearing was era appropriate, and a new look would stand in the way of some of the other curiosities. That wasn't even the tenth feeling of relief Dani had that day.

"Do you really like it?" Dani asked.

"Are you kidding me?" he responded. "Kid, it's so fucking *you* that I love it with every fiber of my being."

Dani deflated. They cracked themselves open, on the pavement beneath the tires, and their yolk and white simmered and hardened in the sun.

This was who they were leaving behind. Why wasn't this the kind of thing they remembered?

"I'm neither here nor there with the hickies though. You should probably hide 'em from mom."

Dani whipped the car visor down and examined their neck in the mirror to find not just one, but seven hickies on their neck. *Hah. You should see the other guy*, they thought.

“Ohhhhhh, balls. Thanks.” They paused and said, “I love you, dad.” Their one-hundred-and-twelfth use of the word that day.

“I love you too, Dan.”

Dani smiled, “It’s weird without the ‘I’.”

“Yeah. It is. Sorry,” he laughed.

They arrived home, and Dani couldn’t help but think about how, in around nine hours, they’d be awake and heading back to Sara. But this *really was* it, the last time they’d get to spend any time with their family, and it was unexpected, so they redirected their thoughts, which was easier than they expected. Tomorrow they knew what to expect when professing their love to Sara, they felt more themselves than ever, they had a moment with their dad, they’d get to see Adrian, and no matter what their mom said or did couldn’t bring them down from the high they were riding.

Entering the kitchen, their mom was finishing up making some fettuccine alfredo, and she shouted, “My god, you look like a punk ass boy.”

Dani beamed, knowing that it was both malicious and her way of loving, and they wouldn’t have to deal with that kind of thing from her anymore after this. “*Thank you.* That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Their mom laughed, a genuine laugh, and Dani couldn’t parse its meaning.

As their dad entered the room, Adrian was sitting at the TV watching a cartoon, and for a moment Dani wondered why, after a year, he wasn’t as happy to see them as they felt to see him—but realized it had only been a week for him.

“Hey, is there a game tonight,” Dani asked.

“It’s probably just starting,” their dad answered, and excitedly made his way to turn off the cartoons.

“Could we have dinner and watch the game, then maybe watch a scary movie after Adrian goes to bed?” It was a suggestion the aging

foundation of their house had never heard from them. The creaking floorboards, and rickety pipes quieted, and hell, the whole town of Season's Juncture, British Columbia, fell into a requisite calm.

"I think that would be nice, sweetie," their mom said.

"Yeah, I'm down," their dad added as the large bearded man on the TV theatrically finished singing the anthem, and he unmuted.

Adrian pouted at the suggestion of not being allowed to stay up for a scary movie.

Dani enjoyed the evening, the food was great, the game was exciting, their mom was well behaved and didn't mention the hickeys that they failed to hide, and seeing the joy of the whole family together made them sad about leaving all over again. When the hockey game was over, they took their already sleepy brother up to bed and spent some time chatting with him for the last time, before heading downstairs for the movie. It was a conversation that would live with them to this day.

Their mom usually just ignored movies when they were scary. So, Dani chose the original Friday the 13th film because it's not all that scary by today's standards, they know of their mom's secret love of Kevin Bacon, and with the limited time given, they found it to be a thematically relevant story for the situation—something they could leave their mom with.

They spent the duration of the movie in a distant memory from childhood, snuggled up to their dad, one last time. When the movie finished, their mom looked shook, but that could just have been the surprise finale.

"Mom?"

"Mhm?" She replied face down in her phone.

"Dinner was great." Their mom looked up from the phone and smiled. "I love you."

After a moment of shock she said, "I-I love you too, sweetie."

Dani exhaled slowly and said, “Goodnight, guys,” and went up to their room.

Stifling tears they looked for anything that could be useful, anything they had lost in the last year, and specifically anything they just couldn’t bear to leave behind. The room was somehow unfamiliar. It was so *lived in*, unlike everything they had known for the last year. They found their previous phone that would work for two years after April 4th, when the current phone stopped working—it had been recycled at some point that year and had returned. There were dangly Nintendo figures hanging from hooks on the ceiling, the same figures that they’d lost from their backpack, so they returned them to their rightful place dangling from the zippers for the last time. They pulled pictures from their mirror frame and put them in the backpack. Pictures of old friends, family, and innumerable pictures of Sara. Most of which were already on their laptop and their backup drive—they pulled their backup drive from a cup on their desk—but if anything ever happened to the computer, *and it would*, those physical pictures would be all they had left. At some point, computers won’t be able to read that backup drive and the complex .png and .jpg files on it. *When were those invented anyway?* And that laptop is not going to live forever, especially not being carried around in a backpack constantly. Dani didn’t want to think about that. Like many things, they wanted to turn that corner when the road led them there, so they packed up everything in their bag, and they slept in their own bed for the last time.

They woke early on July 6th, snuck out of the house and made their way back to Sara. If Sara could be criticized for anything, it would be predictability, but Dani thanked every goddamned god for that. Each preceding day, Dani would have to tell Sara that they loved her. And every time they got to do it a different way, and *every single time*, Sara responded in kind.

In those seven days, Dani revealed their love for Sara seven times, and seven times Sara returned a kiss. When their time was up, Dani realized they had the unique opportunity to experience the reveal several times. The first time was tearful. The second time was playful. The third was with a furtive touch. The fourth time was with uncharacteristic confidence. Dani came away with the feeling that they had missed out on so much. Even though they spent more than seven days in the throes of passion, making love, fucking, and making the most of every possible memory together in those seven days; they knew that this girl who so confidently loved them without question, really loved them just the same for *much longer* than they knew. *It could have been so different.*

It was around four in the morning on July 2nd, the night of the 1st, when Sara fell asleep, and had Dani done the same, they'd have found themselves in Sara's bed on the morning of June 30th. Dani quietly packed up their things and steeled their heart. With their backpack waiting by the sliding door, they watched Sara's chest rise and fall with her breath as she slept, and tried to take some part of her along for the rest of whatever life had in store. *Any time is as bad as any.* They tiptoed out of her room, and padded down the stairs. Before sliding the door open, they gave one last look to the games scattered on the floor, the memories on the wall, and the table that held countless meals between unsuspecting lovers.

And that was it.

The door slid open, they picked up their bag, and the door slid closed.

In their reflection on the glass was grief, and joy. The weight of loss and love. And beyond their reflection they thought they saw Sara. They turned and walked away.

The buses would start running in an hour so they just walked in the direction of their motel, and caught a bus for the last four blocks. There they would have to decide what would come next.

As of now, they never did decide. They never felt it was an option. It is June 19th, 2004.

After years of consideration, they thought they would die today. But the universe was not so kind. A thirty-six year old Dani watches from across the street, as their parents, now eleven years younger than them, meander into Season's Juncture Memorial Hospital, mom looking ready to pop. In just a few hours, they will be born. A man kindly stands several feet away as he lights a cigarette, and they look over to him. A scent with which they are well acquainted transports them eighteen years.

"Can I have one of those?" they ask.

"Oh, sure." He pulls one out of the pack, and hands it over. "What brings you... to this sidewalk?"

"I thought I'd take up smoking."

"Yep, I can help you with that." He chuckles and gives them a look, concern creeps onto his face. "You, uh, you doin' okay?"

Dani gives the question some thought and says, "Honestly, at this point, I'm not sure I've ever been okay."

The man watches Dani take a long drag of the cigarette and he tells them, "You... you feel free to talk to me if you feel the need to. Okay?" He turns his gaze to the sky as he too takes a drag. Dani looks over to him.

"Do you come here often?" they ask.

"Pretty much every day for the last few years or so."

This makes Dani smile, and they exist in silence for a moment.

"Can I ask you something?"

"I'm an open book, go right ahead," he responded.

"What do you do when life gets out of your control?"

"Damn, uh... I try to see where life is taking me. And if it's a place I don't want to go, I put a stop to it, and try to move in a different

direction.

“Have you ever thought of killing yourself?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. But I’ve always told myself that I would sooner drop everything, and leave my life, than actually kill myself. But I’d be lying if I said there were no moments where I felt completely without hope. Is that how you’re feeling right now?”

“No, I don’t think so, actually.”

“I’ll stay with you as long as you need me too.”

With that Dani puts out the butt of their cigarette and says, “It’s okay, thank you. Thanks for the smoke,” and emphasizing the ‘I’, they continue, “I will see you again.”

* * *

In the year between Dani leaving home, and returning home for one night, Dani found Adrian to be so much more childlike than they remembered. Tucking him in, he could have been a baby. This wasn’t the ten year old boy who single handedly saved their eighteenth birthday, this was a nine year old that needed help pouring juice and tying shoes. He still wet the bed sometimes. *So much changes in a year.*

“It’s no fair.”

“You wanna watch some scary movies, eh?” Adrian nodded angrily in response.

“When you’re twelve or thirteen, we’ll watch lots of ‘em together. Okay?”

Adrian glowed at the idea of watching horror movies with Dani. “Really?”

“I...” they paused, “I sure hope so.” Adrian laid his head down. “We can watch a bunch, and then dress up for halloween together as our favorites. A sibling duo.”

Adrian cocked his head, and said, “sibling.”

“You know what—”

“I know,” he interrupted, “But you used to say brother and sister.”

“It’s complicated,” Dani responded with what was intended to be gentleness, but came across as sadness.

“Would you rather be my brother?” He asked.

Dani laughed and asked, “Would you *like* me to be your brother?”

“Well,” he thought for a moment, “I want you to be who you are, but I also want to be able to easily tell everyone how friggin’ awesome my brother or sister who lets me watch horror movies is.”

“Well, I’m not *letting* you any time soon.” Adrian rolled his eyes, and Dani continued. “I’d love for you to call me your brother. But,” they turned to look out the bedroom door at the halls that once felt immense when they themselves were Adrian’s size, but now felt like home, even if they feel too small, like the breath was being squeezed—“ask me again tomorrow, and the day after that.”

“I can do that,” he said, suddenly appearing to be the ten year old from a year in the future, or the thirteen year old entering highschool, or maybe even the eventual father that would have a similar conversation with his kids decades from now. Honesty and genuineness never failing to escape his lips.

“I love you.”

-Arcade Link