

Lost in Reality, a collection of short stories

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Honors Thesis

Fading

That morning, nothing was out of the ordinary – at least, not that I noticed. I knocked on his bedroom door promptly at 8:05am and let myself in, with a fresh Toaster Strudel and a glass of chocolate milk at the ready.

“Violet! Right on time, thanks for getting me breakfast!” he exclaimed, and began to eat the pastry in tiny little pieces.

Pushing aside many discarded t-shirts and hoodies on his bed, I sat down. “What’s up with all of this? Why are all your clothes out?”

“I just wanna look good today! Paul says we’re at a point in our lives where what we wear is starting to matter, and I want to matter.”

“So? What does Paul matter? He’s *your* age,” I pointed out as I started tossing a baseball between my hands, antsy about the mention of Paul.

“Excuse you, Paul is a whole five *months* older than me. He is ten and a half, which makes him my elder, which means I have to trust what he says!”

“Okay, okay, I get it! So... What do you wanna do after school today? We could play space pirates, we haven’t done that one in a while,” I desperately tried to change the subject.

Before he could even debate, Mom yelled, “Charlie, hurry or you’ll be late!” He slid his bag on his chair handles and quickly rolled out, with me hot on his trail.

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While we walked to the bus stop, he kept looking ahead while I asked him questions: *What are you gonna do today in art class? At recess, do you wanna play hide-and-go-seek or I Spy?* They all fell flat, as he ignored me completely.

He instantly perked up when he saw Paul round the corner to wait for the bus. Without a second thought, he zoomed ahead to catch up with *him*, leaving me behind in the dust. I maintained my pace, hoping to maintain my pride, and casually stood next to Charlie. He didn't even look at me, he was too invested in whatever Paul was saying.

"So, it's decided! After school, we'll ask our moms if you can come over to my house for pizza and video games tonight!" Paul said, clapping his hands together confidently.

*What?* What happened? This kid Paul was intruding on our plan to play space pirates! Well, I know he didn't *actually* agree, but Mom interrupted! He was probably going to say yes...

On the bus, Paul and Charlie faced each other, talking about some new TV show, while I was stuck sitting against the window. As soon as the bus unloaded their chairs, Charlie and Paul raced off to class, leaving me to deal with the traffic of kids with backpacks double their size.

By the time I caught up with Charlie in homeroom, every seat was taken. I was just glad Paul wasn't in that class, so I was okay squishing myself somewhere on the floor. I eventually found a beanbag chair stuffed between a kid with an eternally runny nose and another who constantly drums his pencils. Throughout the morning announcements, I kept looking over at Charlie. Even though he was being a jerk, I was still his Friend, and I needed to make sure he was okay – it's written in the code:

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Rule #72: Stay true to your Friend, even if they are being a  
jerk and/or mean.
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The rest of the morning followed a similar pattern: I would follow Charlie to class, he wouldn't save me a seat, I would squirm around to find a spot and would watch him the entire period to make sure he was doing okay.

Lunch was a hectic time any day, but it felt amplified that day. The table was stuffed to the brim, some kids were even standing around the table since the benches were overflowed (I was with them). Charlie and Paul were running the conversation, as they vividly told a story of what just happened in art class.

“Well, Charlie, he –“

“I didn’t *know* you had to –“

“But who doesn’t know that?!”

Apparently, it was a *riveting* story, but it was too loud, and I was too far to hear the important details.

Overwhelmed by the growing cackle of kids’ laughter, I went outside to sit on a swing. Charlie would be okay for a few minutes, I told myself. Gently swaying, I considered the day so far. Charlie has *never* ignored me for this long, usually he at least looks over at me for some reassurance at some point during the day. Slowing my swing, I realized the inevitable was finally occurring. I was fading from Charlie.

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Imaginary Friends, Inc. Survival Guide, Section 199-Z:

Fading is a natural process in this agreement, every child will eventually “grow out” of their relationship with their Friend. The best thing you can do in this scenario is support your child, they likely are going through a transition in life, and need you to complete it before they can entirely move on. The most important thing to remember: THIS IS NOT PERSONAL. Your child is not consciously forgetting you, it is a natural part of growing up.

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I spent the rest of the day weighing out my options. In orientation they tell you fading will eventually happen, but they don't actually explain the process. How much time do I have left? Do I have time to pack – do I *need* to pack? Where am I going? Most importantly... Do I get to say goodbye?

While Charlie thrived as the captain of Jeopardy in history, I slipped away to an empty art room. I needed as much time as possible, and this was his longest class. Surrounding myself with happy things (glitter, markers, paint, the works), I began my farewell. Unsure of what the future held, I was sure I was going to say goodbye one way or another.

Dear Charlie,

Do you remember when you were six and we went to the carnival together? Mom and Dad were fighting a lot that week, but they made it up to you by taking us? I remember. I remember how determined you were to get a goldfish at the balloon popping station, but, to your dismay, you just couldn't get the dart to hit the balloon! So, instead, we went home and drew all kinds of fish and hung them around your room...

I have to leave, Charlie. I have to, even though I don't want to. You've grown up and I've had the pleasure of watching you for the past five years. I always thought I'd be with you throughout school, help you move into your college dorm, and help you get ready for your wedding! And, one day, I thought I'd hang out with your kids and draw fish and play Space Pirates with them. But our adventures together have been cut a little shorter than I imagined.

I have to go now, Charlie. But there's a few things I want you to remember, even if you don't remember me after all this. Don't forget to imagine sometimes! I know playing Paul's video games is fun and all, but a little old-fashioned imagining is good for your

health, trust me! Don't change who you are, I know you want people to think you're cool, but I think you're pretty cool as you are! And finally, it's gonna be okay. I won't be there for you whenever Mom and Dad fight, or whenever you get sick, so I *need* you to remember that everything will be okay in the end. Okay?

I love you beyond words, Charlie. And, even though you can't say it back, I know you love me too.

Love Always, Violet

I wrapped the letter in my hand-folded envelope and dusted it in glitter, hoping that even if he doesn't see the letter, he at least sees all the glitter I drowned it in. I slowly walked back to find Charlie, and reality finally settled in. I was *fading* from Charlie – my duties as an Imaginary Friend were ending, he had real friends and didn't need me anymore. I sat down at a bench near a water fountain, tightly holding the letter to my chest while I fought back the tears.

A tiny little girl, no more than a second grader, came skipping up to me. After she took a few generous gulps of water, she wiped her mouth and said, "What's wrong, why are you crying?"

Rule #43: Don't worry, no other children should see you. But if they do, ACT NATURAL!

All my training escaped my mind as I said, "Wait... You can *see* me? No one ever sees me!" After all, she was the first kid to *ever* see me other than Charlie.

"Well, duh! Who else around here has bright purple hair and is sitting here crying?"

I nervously tugged at my violet locks; Charlie wasn't very original when it came to naming me. "Sorry, you're right, I'm just used to being a bit more... imaginary."

Her eyes sparkled at that last word, and she immediately started digging in her pocket, clearly searching for something important. Out came a grubby hand holding nothing. She shot her hand out proudly, “For you! It will make you feel better!”

Enthusiastically, I played along, “Wow! I real *diamond*! Are you sure you can part with this? It seems very valuable...”

“Yeah, it’s a family heirloom! But, you deserve having it!” she shrugged and then skipped back to whatever class she should’ve been in.

I looked down at my outstretched palm with the invisible diamond and smiled. It felt nice to play again, and I’ve never had a girl before.

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When I finally caught up to Charlie at the end of the day, he was getting on the bus with Paul. I managed to cut my way through the line to walk next to him, even if he couldn’t see me anymore. I stood by him the whole bus ride home and walked in the grass while Paul and him took up the whole sidewalk.

“Alright, man, I’ll see you in like two hours if my mom says yes!” Paul said as he rounded the corner towards his house.

Charlie went home in a silent glee, I could tell he was really looking forward to hanging out with Paul that night. The whole way to his room, I debated trying to talk to him. If what they said in orientation is true, he no longer can see me, and he may not be able to hear me.

I sat on his bed while he spent the next thirty minutes cranking out his math homework. Looking down at my glittery letter, I knew this was the best time. He had plans, he wouldn’t even miss me when I left. I went over to his overflowing bookshelf and gently tucked the letter

in his favorite book from when he was younger, *The Monster at the End of this Book*. Even if he didn't see it immediately, I knew he'd see it eventually.

I wanted to see him one more time, so I crouched next to him at his desk. I took in every little detail I could; his sloppy blonde hair, the way he sticks his tongue out when he's really concentrating, the sparkle in his green eyes when he gets excited. Gosh, I am going to miss this kid.

I slowly backed away, taking in even the smell of his room, a combination of fish food and Mom's Febreze. It's time, it will be okay. I close my eyes, not sure what to expect.

There's no white light. There's no pain. I'm just simply... gone.

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Imaginary Friends, Inc. Survival Guide, Section 200-A
(Starting New):

So, you've officially faded from your child. You didn't think this was the end, did you? No, no, no! It's time for a new assignment! Go out into your newly assigned community, and find a kid in need! Sections 200-B through 200-Z will appear as needed.

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I was standing in a brand new neighborhood, feeling different. I looked around, subconsciously searching for someone. In the distance, I heard a familiar high-pitched sound that made something inside me glow. My feet followed the direction before I could even think.

There were kids everywhere – swinging high into the sky, galloping away on plastic horses rooted in the sand, teeter-tottering as they bounced up and down... A grin spread on my face as I realized I had wandered my way to a playground.



I sat down on a bench just close enough to hear their infectious laughter, and simply enjoyed watching them at play. That didn't last long though, as I noticed a particularly small girl climbing her way to the top of the jungle gym. She swung herself around, and decided to hang there by her knees, viewing the world upside down.

While I watched her, I realized she was watching me too. Awkwardly, I went over to introduce myself, not wanting to be rude or creepy. Once I got closer, I realized why she was staring at me – it was the girl from the school!

“Well, hello there! I think I have something of yours...” I pretended to dig through my pockets to retrieve the diamond.

“My mother's diamond!” she exclaimed, and then jumped off the webbed metal. She gently took the jewel in her hands, and shoved it in her own pocket.

“Thank goodness I saw you again so I could return it!”

“Yeah! My name is Janey, by the way. What's yours?”

I hesitated. I don't know why, but I did. Maybe I was still waiting to find that somebody? Maybe I didn't have a name anymore...

“Um... What do you think my name should be? I'm in the market for a new one...”

“Ooh! I love giving people names! Maybe... Martha? No. Alice? No, you're not in Wonderland...” she went on for at least ten names before deciding, “I've got it! Louise!”

That glow inside me lit up again, and I watched the twinkle in Janey's eyes grow. Everything would be okay, just like I told Charlie.

### *A Day in the Life*

Sighing, I weave through the crowd of teenage bodies clustered in the World's Smallest Hallway. I keep my eyes down, so as not to crush any toes unnecessarily, and to avoid eye contact. Somewhere in the crowd, someone shouts my name, and I throw my head back to shout a "Hey!"

The classroom is only a few feet away (I think, I'm not very good at measuring distance) and I feel a new wave of anxiety hit. Now that I've survived the stressor that is Passing Period, I must endure two hours of AP Psychology. Maybe today we'll be watching a video, or Mr. Wesley will pity us as we're approaching finals and will make it a study day.

Rolling to a stop, I've hit a traffic jam. A bunch of freshmen with backpacks three times their size seem to think *here* is the best place to have a conversation – here, in front of the classroom door. I assess the situation, and unfortunately discover there is no way for me to squeeze between those stuffed Jansports.

"Excuse me, you're kind of blocking the door here."

They glance over at me, acknowledge my presence, and do the awkward side-shuffle. I mutter a thanks, and wiggle through the tiny hole they created.

Through the door, I discover a world of misery. The tables have been rearranged. Instead of the usual columns and rows facing the white board and teacher, the desks have been turned around to create perfect four-by-four squares. The confusion and irritation begin to settle – *Where will I sit? Has Mr. Wesley not considered me?*

As if on cue, Mr. Wesley looks up from his desk and sees me parked in the doorway. "Ah! Yes, don't worry! I've got your spot lined up." He points proudly to the table next to his, awkwardly angled against three other small desks.

Not wanting to get into a discussion about why I have to be seated next to him, I go over to situate myself in the corner and trap myself in with the desk. He gets up in front of the room and announces the group assignment for the day, how we have to shift through the textbook to find the 16 assigned vocab words and write a creative story about it.

I turn to my forced group, and notice they've already divided up the content among themselves. Part of me is grateful, maybe I don't have to do any work! The other part is the most annoyed I've been all day (including my interaction with the freshmen): why didn't they consider me when they divided the work? Well, I know why, they think I'll be too slow and they won't finish as fast.

Stewing on this for about five minutes, I make my decision. I stick my earbuds in and pull out my laptop – I'll do the entire thing myself. Picking out my playlist while the online textbook loads, I make my game plan. First, I'll hit up the glossary for the generalized definitions, following up in the chapter if needed for better examples. Then, I'll outline the story to be about a high school girl who is stressed about a midterm paper, perfect since this unit is about stress and anxiety. Before I know it, the story will have written itself!

Everything seems to be going according to plan for about an hour. Then, my right hand begins to tremor. No, no, no! I still have 6 more terms to define, and my character needs an inciting incident! I take a deep breath and allocate myself one song for a break. I rest my head back, and let my hands fall limp on my lap. The muscles' twitching starts to slow, but they take their sweet time and before I know it, it's been ten minutes. I look around, and see the groups around me focused and typing away furiously as they beg to finish soon. Knowing I'm not even halfway done, I glance at what was supposed to be my group. They're working on a Google Doc,

and they have 14 of the 16 terms used and highlighted in their story, they'll be done in thirty minutes max.

I take a deep breath at get back at typing, despite my aching fingers. I make a new goal: I will finish writing the definitions and make the best of an outline I can, and at the end of the period I'll show Mr. Wesley and ask if it can be an accommodation where I just turn in the outline. After all, the outline is the next best thing and I need to turn *something* in to show my past two hours' worth of effort.

The bell rings, and like the stampede they are, everyone rushes out to lunch. I take my time saving my document and closing my tabs while I wait to speak with Mr. Wesley. He's out in the hallway laughing with another teacher, and I'm trapped behind the jumble of desks that were made as everyone pushed them haphazardly while they left.

"Mr. Wesley! Can we speak of an accommodation, and can you help me get out please?" I'm forced to call for backup since he wasn't coming on his own time.

"Oh, yes! Of course!" He shoves the tables with their attached chairs out of the way, and lifts my desk away from my cornered prison.

"I was hoping that for today's assignment I could just submit an outline? You see, it took me the full two hours to find the 16 terms and the outline, and I don't know how much longer I'll need to write the full story..." I trail off, waiting for his response.

"Why didn't you work on it with your table group?" I hate that question.

"Well, I'm not quite sure they knew I was in the group because of how my table was angled for my chair. And after you announced the assignment, they had already divided everything up and didn't leave me anything. So, I thought I could do it all myself."

My explanation is followed by uncomfortable silence as he considers, and my stomach starts to growl. Hearing my body wanting to leave, he grants me the accommodation, “Just promise me next time you’ll try to advocate for yourself in front of your peers.”

I nod and head off to lunch, hoping my eager stomach can hold on for a few more minutes. The halls are empty by now, so I’m able to zoom down to the cafeteria. Similar to Passing Period, the cafeteria is a place filled with oblivious and hungry teenagers, all focused on getting a chicken patty sandwich or a slice of cardboard pizza. I once again weave my way through the masses, desperately searching for an opening. Luckily, I pack a lunch so I don’t need to deal with the lines, but I still need to find a table. Every day I hope to find a new one open, but that never works for me with the benches attached. I end up at my usual spot with a cut-out specially made for me. I sit there and pull out my PB&J, glaring at the blue ADA sticker that’s supposed to include me but only creates a barrier.

I can feel them staring. They try to hide it, but their eyes still... wander.

*Macy Jo*

I was sitting in my language arts classroom, nervously tapping my pencil, when I heard the announcement. Well, I'm always in language arts when the announcements play over the speakers, but this time I was *listening*. They had just finished the week's lunch menu when they began to read the advertisement for the first annual talent show.

My ears perked up, as they listed the possible performances that would be accepted: magic shows *bleh*, singing *bleh*, dancing *never in public*, *blah blah blah*, comedic monologues, *blah blah blah*. I stopped listening after comedic monologues. I could feel the wheels in my mind spinning at 100 miles per hour; I'm hilarious, who wouldn't want to hear a performance of my jokes?!

The best part? They finished their long list of acceptable performances and then announced the prizes! I'm just a fifth grader with 50 cents to my name from the Tooth Fairy last week; any kind of free thing is a good thing. But these prizes... were *priceless*. First place wins three free homework passes! That could get you out of any assignment (less than 25 points) and expired at the end of the school year. Those things were myth, legend, folklore that the big kids said existed, but it was never proven.

I didn't listen to what second or third prize was, because my heart was set. I was going to create the *best* comedic monologue this school has ever heard and win those passes!

The rest of the morning was a blur, I couldn't stay focused knowing that I would be able to get out of doing three homework assignments once I win. My nurse, Ms. Becky, must have noticed my head being somewhere else, and she questioned me while prepping my daily meds.

"What cha thinkin' about, Macy Jo?"

“Aw, nothin’. Just scheming as usual” I joked. Ms. Becky’s really nice, she takes care of me during the day while I’m not with Momma, and I trust her to know when I need help.

“Always scheming... You gonna audition for the new talent show?” she chuckled as she slid on the purple gloves.

“How’d you know? What gave me away?”

“Well, all day you’ve been jotting down jokes in your handy dandy notebook, so I figured that, or you are just really having a funny day!”

That made me giggle, I guess I wasn’t being as sneaky as I’d thought. She had the medicine ready, so I opened my mouth wide as she slowly pushed the strawberry-flavored goo in.

She wiped the excess off my chin and slipped off her gloves, tossing them and the rest of the trash away. “Well, *I* know how funny you are, and it’s about time everyone else gets to know, too!” She opened the door, and followed me out the bathroom as we headed to the next part of my day, *lunch!*

I parked my wheelchair in the cutout at one of the cafeteria’s bench-style tables as Ms. Becky cut up my pizza for me. When she finished, she placed everything within arm’s reach for me, and then sat at a different table so I could talk with my friends. Just as she left, all my friends showed up and I simply could not contain my excitement.

“I’m gonna audition for the talent show!!” I blurted before they even sat down.

“Well, yeah, we figured as much! You’ll do anything to get out of homework! But what are you gonna do? You don’t have any talent” Alice laughed as she sat across from me.

I gasped, “How dare my self-proclaimed BFF mock me? I have *loads* of talent! I am going to do a comedic monologue!”

She took a bite of her sandwich, contemplating what I just said, “What even is a monologue? Just you talkin’? They don’t need a show for that, they could just sit in on math class!”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the disrespect. I looked over at Matthew, who seemed extra quiet. “What about you, huh? You auditioning?”

He shrugged, “I dunno. I guess, I was thinking of doing a magic trick or two...” he pushed around the spaghetti soup the lunch ladies claimed was edible.

“That’s great! What kinda tricks do you know??” I didn’t even know Matthew was into magic, this was exciting news.

“Um, well, I know the bunny-in-the-hat trick, but Dad won’t let me have a pet... I know the rainbow-scarf-in-the-thumb trick!” he lit up as he was thinking of ideas.

Alice called his bluff and waited while he desperately shoved napkins up his jacket sleeve, and then he *magically* pulled the napkins out of his thumb.

We paused for a while, finishing our variations of cafeteria food and chocolate milk, when I suddenly had a realization. “Hey! I got a *great* idea! We all should audition, and if one of us wins, we split the prize! Best case, we all win first, second, and third and split *all* the prizes!”

“Really?” Matthew was so excited he almost spit his milk.

I nodded intensely and turned to Alice. “Whaddya think? You could sing!”

The bell rang, and before I knew it, Ms. Becky was by my side again, ready to take me to my next class. I looked at Alice expectantly, and she just stared off into the distance. “Well, decide today and let us know tomorrow!”

While the rest of my class went to PE, I got to go to the library. Usually this was a time to work one-on-one with Ms. Becky on the assignments I needed help with. Like making a solar



system model or writing a paragraph. I get tired easy and can't move my arms a lot, so she just does what I ask and glues or writes what I need. But today was different, today I needed to start writing my material!

I looked through the notes I wrote throughout language arts and social studies, reviewing the comedic genius I had already forgotten. I sat and stared at the notebook for a while, but nothing sparked my creativity. I looked at Ms. Becky, who was busy reading some book with a dark cover and a word I couldn't read.

I thought about all the inside-jokes my friends and I have, and all the jokes I've heard over the years. Something tricky about comedy, I've learned, is that you shouldn't make jokes about something people can't help. The Twins sometimes throw low blows at Matthew, making fun of his quietness. I can tell they're tempted to say some comment at me and my chair, but Ms. Becky's always lingering and they back down.

Instead, I want to write jokes that make everyone laugh *and* feel good!

Before I knew it, I had filled three pages with knock-knock jokes and puns galore. Right when I was going to force Ms. Becky to listen to them all, the bell rang, and it was time for recess.

Recess is a complicated time for me. Most of my friends want to *physically* play – on the swings, the jungle gym, the slides – the entire playground is built for kids to run around and climb on. So, I find the ones who don't want to spend the next half hour hanging upside down or bouncing a ball higher than any of our heads. Usually that's Matthew, and sometimes that's Alice, but today she saw me and nodded toward the swings. Looks like it's just me and Matthew.

We settled in under the big tree that provided plenty of shade. We sat there quietly for a little, enjoying the warm late-April air and a break before heading into our last few classes. After a while, he broke the silence.

“Do you know anyone else who’s gonna audition for the talent show?”

“Nah, I haven’t really talked to anyone about it other than you and Alice. Why, you know anyone else?”

“Well, a couple guys in PE plan on being mimes, but I don’t think they’re gonna do that well. And I heard the Twins are planning some ballet routine...” he mumbled that last part.

A shiver ran down my spine when he mentioned those two girls.

The Twins, Sasha and Iris, are the Queen Bees of the fifth grade, a.k.a. the principal’s daughters. It wasn’t going to be a fair fight; the principal is one of the judges of the show! They *always* got their way – they dominated class games and were mean to anyone who was different than them.

Matthew sensed my unease, and attempted to comfort me, “They haven’t announced who the other judges are, though. Who knows? Maybe it’ll be Ms. Becky!”

I gave him a weak smile, already rethinking the whole plan to do a comedic monologue. If the Twins were likely going to control the show and the winners, maybe I shouldn’t even try.

“Hey, weren’t you brainstorming jokes in your free period? You wanna read them to me?”

We spent the rest of recess going over my jokes, and even thinking up some more tricks for Matthew. Maybe we did have a chance after all.

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Mr. Phil lowered the lift and let me off the bus, telling me to have a good night.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Phil!”

“See ya, kiddo!”

I zoomed up the ramp to my front door where Momma was happily holding it open. I went in, spun a few circles on the towel to clean off my wheels, and stopped to let her give me a kiss and hug.

“How was your day at school, MJ?”

“It was great! And guess what! There’s gonna be a *talent show* and I’m gonna win!”

She laughed as she helped me take off my jacket, “And what talent are you gonna show?”

“A comedic monologue” I announced proudly.

“Oh, really? What jokes do you have?”

“I brainstormed all day and here’s what I have...” I dug through my side bag where I shoved my notebook and read her the jokes I came up with during my free period. When I was done, she was quiet.

“Well?! Whaddya think?” I was slightly out of breath from reading all the jokes and with the excitement of it all.

A moment passed before she said, “I think we need to go shopping this weekend. If you’re gonna perform jokes at that high of quality, you need a high-quality dress. Don’t you think?”

She hugged me and gave me a big kiss on the cheek. I ate some apple slices as a quick snack and then went to my room to finish my math homework and brainstorm more jokes in case more creative genius came.

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On the bus ride the next morning, I had a gameplan at the ready. I was going to take a detour on my way to language arts to Alice’s social studies classroom to ask if she was willing to

go in on the plan with me and Matthew. Then, when she said yes, I'd get us to meet at recess to go over each other's acts and see what needed adjusting. It was Friday, so I'd invite them to come to my house over the weekend if we needed to work together on anything. Then, by Tuesday night's auditions, we'd be ready to take the talent show by storm! It was *fool proof!*

When I met Alice outside her room, she seemed flustered. She was dodging my questions, which started off easy with a simple "How are you?" And when I finally brought up the talent show, she said we could talk at lunch and ran in her classroom.

I turned to Ms. Becky for guidance while we went back to language arts. Did she get weird vibes from Alice, too? Did I say anything weird? Did she think Alice wanted to do the show? Ms. Becky didn't provide much input, she just encouraged me to wait till lunch before getting myself worked up. It was fair advice, but still didn't stop my mind from wandering.

By the time lunch rolled around, I decided the worst-case scenario included Alice moving to a different school, meaning she obviously couldn't do this school's talent show. It would make me sad if this was true, but I had a pen-pal in the UK so I was confident I could maintain a friendship with Alice no matter where she was moving.

When she finally sat down across from me, I stayed quiet and let her speak first. Whatever it was was obviously upsetting her, so I gave her space. Well, I *tried* to give her space. She didn't say anything for the first minute, and I couldn't hold it in after holding it in all morning.

"What's wrong with you? Why don't you want to do the talent show with me and Matthew?" I blurted, startling her a bit.

"You don't understand..." she trailed off, stalling by taking a bite of her PB&J.

“What I don’t understand is what you won’t tell me! How can I not understand something if you won’t even try to tell me?”

She chewed slowly and quietly. Eventually, after a dramatic gulp of milk, she said, “I’m doing the talent show with Sasha and Iris.”

*The cafeteria fell silent. Everyone was looking at us, sensing the tension. The blood was rushing from every part of my body into my face, heating up my ears first and then my nose. I felt my eyes grow hot and watery, the threat of tears edging closer and closer.*

I looked around. Everyone was carrying on with their lunch, like Alice hadn’t just betrayed two years of friendship with two evil names.

“I was gonna tell you! They asked me immediately after it was announced, since they’re in my social studies class. We’re in the same ballet studio so they know I can dance... Besides, it’s not like you could dance with me —” she cut herself off, realizing the low blow.

I sat there, silent and hurt. I always joked about Alice being my self-proclaimed BFF, but she really was my best friend. And for a friend to make such a mean comment... I didn’t have anything to say to her.

“Look, I’m *sorry*. What was I supposed to do? I didn’t know you’d want to do something with all of us! I thought you’d do something on your own to get out of homework by yourself...”

Matthew sat down, oblivious to the harsh conversation he just sat down in. “What’s up, guys? Do we have a plan for how we’re gonna dominate the talent show?”

“Oh, Alice does” I bit my tongue, stopping myself from saying anything more. I didn’t say anything else the rest of lunch, forcing Alice to catch Matthew up on the betrayal.

The next few classes were boring, but I made sure to turn away from Alice whenever we were sat together in class. Ms. Becky noticed my different behavior but didn't ask, she knew I'd tell her when I was ready.

I finally let it out at recess. I asked her if we could go lay down on my mat in the restroom instead of going to play. After she laid me down, I started to cry.

"Oh, Macy Jo... I could tell something was wrong, what is it?" she rubbed my shoulder.

In between jagged breaths I tried my best to explain, "Alice is gonna do a ballet routine. And I can't dance with her and the other girls..."

Ms. Becky nodded in understanding, not making me say anything further. I had been working with her since I was in kindergarten, and she understood my frustrations whenever my friends forgot to include me.

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I managed to pull myself together enough to get through the rest of the day in silence, including the bus ride. Somehow, Momma knew by the time I got home and was ready with open arms.

She picked me up and sat me on her lap, and we sat together on the couch as she stroked my hair, "Now, tell me what's wrong. You were smiling while saying goodbye to Mr. Phil, but I know something's off."

I was too tired to cry over it again, so I said simply, "Alice isn't my friend anymore. She's doing the talent show without me, and with the Twins."

She was quiet for a moment, letting me sit in her comfort. After a while, she began to ask me the details, ending with, "Do you think she hurt you on purpose? Do you think she knew how much this would hurt?"

“Well, no... But that doesn’t mean I have to explain it to her! I’ve known her since I was eight, that’s two whole years together! Isn’t that enough time to understand a person?” I almost whispered the end.

“Just because you understand people’s feelings doesn’t mean everyone else your age is like that. You have to understand that people don’t always think of others, but that doesn’t make them mean or bad...”

We’ve reached this conclusion several times, and each time it frustrates me. I understand that I understand more things and more emotions than kids my age, but why is that my fault? Why am I responsible for other people’s understanding?

Momma gave me a big squeeze and sat me back in my chair, “Tell ya what, how ‘bout I make your favorite for dinner? We haven’t had a spaghetti night in a while.”

I nodded and let her busy herself in the kitchen. I went back to my room and sat at my desk, filled with sticker sheets given to me by Ms. Becky, a couple fractions worksheets, and a *ton* of pictures of me and Alice and Matthew.

The three of us met back in third grade; Matthew and I were paired up in homeroom, staring at each other, unsure of who would speak first. Then Alice came. She was originally paired up with... Suzy Thompson, maybe? But she saw Matthew and I suffering in the awkward silence and said we should be a trio. Poor Suzy was forced to join a different trio, but we had Alice.

She boldly stuck her hand out, “The name’s Alice. What’s yours?”

Matthew awkwardly shook her hand and introduced himself, barely above a mumble. I stared at her hand, unsure of how to tell her I couldn’t reach that far away. I stretched as far as I

could, maintaining eye contact and hoping for the best. It took her a second, but she figured it out and covered the distance between, gently shaking my small hand.

Alice was the one who made the initial move, who introduced herself, who bridged the gap. So, I'm allowed to be mad at her for assuming I can't dance. I dance! Momma and I have dance parties all the time while she helps me get ready in the morning, and I went to the Spring Fling dance a couple weeks ago! While the Cupid Shuffle might be a bit of struggle, I wiggle and sway!

Momma called that dinner was ready, I could smell the delicious marinara sauce brewing along with a new idea to win back Alice.

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I spent the weekend picking out a great audition dress with Momma, along with some new sparkly Converse to pull the whole thing together. We talked everything through, from me struggling in math on fractions, to thinking of how to best approach Alice.

That Monday, I knew what I had to do. Part of me wanted to do it like how they do in the movies, with a flashy musical breakout. But realistically, I knew that wasn't possible. So instead, I practiced a little speech in my head to be sure to hit every note.

When I saw her in the hallways before lunch, I tried to give a warm look, not necessarily a smile, but something to let her know I was okay.

As I waited for her to join us, I ran a quickened version of the speech by Matthew, "Does that sound fair?"

He pondered and said, "I think so? I mean I understand how she didn't realize what she did until it was too late... But I also understand you being upset that she didn't know... Man, this is complicated!"



“Yeah, but I think it’ll be all sorted after this.”

Alice sat down at the cafeteria table, keeping her eyes low and mumbled, “Hey.”

We sat in silence for a bit and, Matthew, sensing that I was gathering my courage, started to ask Alice a few questions about our spelling test at the end of the week. After they finished quickly quizzing each other, it was my time.

“Hey, Alice? I was thinking about what happened last Friday, and I want to talk about it.”

She nodded her head, signaling me to keep going.

I took a deep breath, “Well, now... I know you probably didn’t mean to hurt my feelings when you decided to compete with the Twins, and that’s kinda okay. But what *really* hurt me was when you said I can’t dance. I don’t think you really know how much that hurt me...”

She was staring down at her hands in her lap, nodding.

“I just kinda thought you of all people would know what would sting the most, and then when you said it, it felt like you betrayed my trust. But I know you probably didn’t mean it like that, you just meant I’m not in your ballet classes so I can’t dance like *that*... Right?”

Alice looked up and quickly said, “Of course! My words just get jumbled sometimes, especially when I’m anxious, and it all happened so fast and I didn’t know how to fix it! I’m so glad you understand!”

She wiped her hands on her napkin and ran around the table to give me a hug. I hugged back as best I could with the weird side-angle, and leaned my head into her shoulder. She pulled away but stayed close, “So, we’re good?”

I nodded, and we hugged again quickly. Once she sat down, I moved on to business.

“So, does everyone wanna hear my jokes I finalized this weekend?”

Over the weekend, Momma helped me finalize my jokes into a monologue rather than a list of jokes. So, I made it a story of my life there at Jefferson Elementary, all the jokes about the cafeteria food, how silly everyone looks to me hanging upside down on the jungle gym, and a few inside jokes that only Alice and Matthew would fully understand. When I got to those lines, they were hysterical! They couldn't believe how slyly I snuck those in, and that I was going to read them in front of an audience.

I laughed when they clapped at the end, and felt myself blushing when they praised all the details. Maybe I did have a chance at winning. And maybe I would split my three free homework passes with them, even if they don't share their winnings with me.