

Ding Dongs and Daisies

by Paige Ringelberg

“Oh come on,” I said, staring at her in disbelief. “He was all over you, how could he *not* be attracted to you?” My best friend, Daisy, shook her head and smiled, continuing to stare through the windshield at the dark road that lay before us, every now and then illuminated by a spooky, golden streetlight. We’d just come from a party where some cocky jock had been making eyes at Daisy all night. If only pale and skinny was considered intimidating in our society, then me glaring at the dude might have actually done something.

“Marcus Definition: ‘all over’ is apparently the same as ‘looked in general direction,’” she said, laughing. “I think you’re just jealous, Marky Mark.” I scoffed, quietly trying to decipher whatever it was that I was feeling. Annoyed? Probably. Jealous? Maybe, but why?

“Marky Mark,” I said, rolling my eyes. “That’s a new one. And not original. Mark Wahlberg had it first.”

I glanced out the passenger side window, noting the clear sky above and its many twinkling stars. Nights like these had become rare. The smoke from the wildfires had clogged up our horizons with rusty haze, turning our once clear blue skies into the orange ones of some dystopic, apocalyptic world. Love that. Totally love when movies actually get something kind of right for once. *Especially* love how accurate they are in depicting how easily humans can panic. That was probably scarier than all the fires, to be honest. I’d already witnessed some shocking acts committed by people who were just terrified. Daisy and I were trying not to think about that stuff to much. Why think of the world around you ending when you can think about *The Office* bloopers, disturbing opossum memes, and Mr. Bruner’s neck mole whom we had named Harold?

“Why *do* you care so much?” she eventually asked, taking her eyes off the road for a second to look at me. The light of a streetlight illuminated her hair for a moment, lighting up the already fiery locks into a momentary blaze.

Hm. Is honesty really the best policy right now? Even if it was, I wasn’t sure how to answer her. Were these confusing feelings all because I liked her? Like, *like*-liked her? I mean, this was Daisy we were talking about. My best friend. Best friend since kindergarten, when I’d stolen her fruit snacks and her response was to yeet an orange at the back of my head. That girl had quite the arm, even at five years old. Good times.

I’d never even considered her in *that* way, I don’t think. Only recently she’d started dating. I’d seen a lot of flirting on her part, even some kissing, and I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. Maybe it would help if I got some action every now and then, but apparently girls don’t find gawky dudes super desirable. Crazy right? Just can’t catch a break...

But did I actually like her? Was it just proximity and society trying to convince us that boy-girl friendships must always end in a romantic relationship? Or was it just... jealousy, like she said? I mean, us taking baths together and rubbing boogers on each other’s shirts when we were little was certainly a bonding experience, but not sure if it was to that level. Some days she felt more like a sister, and others... I could see and understand what all the guys whispered about.

“I’m probably just pathetically lonely,” I said, grinning at her to lighten the words. She snorted.

“Aren’t we all,” she mumbled. “And I don’t know why more girls don’t like you. You’re fuckin’ incredible. The whole package.” I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes. *The whole*

package, huh? I thought to myself. *When did awkward and conventionally unattractive dudes become the whole package?* But I digress.

“It’s a strange world, innit?” I said halfheartedly.

“Whatever happens, though,” she said seriously, enough to make me look back at her. “Whoever we end up with or wherever we are or whatever, promise me we’ll still be friends. Best friends. Through it all.” We pulled up to a stoplight and she flexed her hands against the steering wheel.

One funny thing about Daisy: she absolutely *loves* having “deep” conversations, and often out of nowhere.

One great thing about our friendship: despite our goofy history, we both knew we cared about each other more than anyone and anything else. In all honesty, I hadn’t ever cared that much about getting a girlfriend and making that connection, not when I already had an amazing friend at my side. One that would stick with me to the end.

“Promise,” I said, smiling a bit. “Of course. Easy peasy.”

The light turned green, and Daisy pressed down on the accelerator, a small smile on her face.

It’s amazing, really, how quickly life can go from good to bad.

We were rolling through the intersection when I saw a blinding flash of light. Then the semi drove straight through his red light and rammed Daisy’s side of the car at 65 miles per hour.

I can only remember fragments of what I saw. But I remember everything that I heard and smelled and felt. Oh yeah, I remember what I felt alright. There had never been anything like it in my life. There's no way to accurately explain to someone what it feels like to have your head slammed against the side of the car and feel like it's vibrating like a fucking gong, or have glass embed itself in your face, or your leg twisted and bent and shattered beyond repair, and more. It all happened at once. What was going through my head at that moment? Something like, *ahhhhhOOOWWWaaauughhguOWuaguhgauuh*. On repeat.

There was screaming, crashing, crunching, shattering, screeching. I could smell smoke and gasoline and hot pavement and blood. Blood has a surprisingly strong scent when there's a lot of it.

I saw flashing blue and red lights. I saw Daisy bleeding and broken beside me, her head caved in and bits of her brain leaking out to where my fingers lay. I saw my bloody hand desperately trying to reach her, trying to hold her broken pieces together. I saw the sterile white walls of a hospital. I saw the heart monitor.

And I heard the *beeeeeeeep* as I officially died.

The end.

HAHA just kidding.

I woke up in a hospital bed, drenched in sweat. My head was killing me like it never had before and I could hardly move, I felt so stiff. The corners of my eyes were crusty with

accumulated goop. It took me a few minutes to really wake up but, once I did, I saw that from right above my knee and down, I no longer had a right leg.

My first two thoughts: “Who took my leg?” and “Who is in control of the thermostat and why is it a million degrees in here?”

Basically, it was already turning out to be a pretty unfortunate situation.

“It’s about damn time,” a voice said next to me. I jumped and turned to see Daisy sitting in a chair near my bed, her legs and arms crossed, staring at me impatiently.

“You sleep like the dead,” she added, then smirked like there was some inside joke.

I stared at her. Could the accident have just been a nightmare? Was I currently *in* a nightmare?

“You’re looking... pretty spry for someone who was just in a car accident,” I finally managed to choke out. And she did. Totally fine. Even the zit on her nose that we’d started calling Jeffrey was gone. The fiery red hair was combed through, the orange freckles nicely dotting her ivory skin, and her hazel eyes looked alert. Me on the other hand... judging by all the bandages that were covering me from head to toe, I assumed I looked just a tad beat up.

“That’s because I’m better than you,” she said, still smirking.

“Um, hold on- ”

“Marcus, don’t you get it? I’m dead.”

Once again, I stared at her.

I mean... sure. Why not? Makes perfect sense, right? I definitely hit my head in the accident. I had to be hallucinating up the wazoo.

“No you’re not,” I said dumbly. “You’re literally sitting right here, talking to me.”

“I died in the accident,” she said, the smirk melting from her face. “I was on the side that the truck hit. There was no way anyone could’ve survived that. They barely saved you. Lucky booger.” I glanced pointedly down at my leg. Well, my *not*-leg. She chose to ignore that.

“They pulled us from the wreckage,” she continued. “We’d rolled a few times and landed upside down. It was a while before an ambulance could get there. Apparently they’ve all been pretty busy. My body failed way before they got there. You were pulled out and loaded into the back of the ambulance, and rushed to the hospital. They had to remove your leg because practically every bone in it was shattered to pieces. Wouldn’t have been worth it to piece it all back together.”

“I beg to differ,” I mumbled. “Also, how do you know all of this?”

“I watched it all happen,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’m a ghost, remember?”

Oh yeah, I’d somehow forgotten about that part. Or maybe I just refused to believe it. There was no way that Daisy was dead, and her ghost was sitting here having a little chat. My brain simply couldn’t fathom it. So, I didn’t bother trying to get myself to believe it. Part of me was scared of what would happen if I did believe it.

“I think I remember the doctor saying that you also broke your pelvis, a couple ribs, and are very concussed,” she added. “I’m sure there was more, but that was all a few days ago.”

“A *few days*?” I asked, confused. “What, have I been sleeping all that time?”

She nodded. “A lot’s happened too,” she said. “You know all those fires that have been going on?” I made a sound of acknowledgement. “Well, now we’re surrounded,” she said, standing up to walk over to the window looking outside, which I suddenly noticed was lit up orange from outside. And I also remembered that I was sweating buckets, it was so hot.

“Surrounded?”

“Yep. The winds got super bad and whipped the wildfires into a frenzy. They’re moving so fast and covering so much ground that the firefighters can’t keep up. All the staff gathered the patients who could walk and talk and got them out of here yesterday. But you, and some others... they deemed a lost cause.” I felt my mouth pop open.

“That’s fucking rude,” I said.

“Well, you weren’t waking up.”

“It’s still rude.”

“People are panicking,” she said, shrugging. “The skies are clogged with smoke and over 10,000 homes have already burnt to the ground. Everyone’s taken on the ‘every man for himself’ mindset.”

I felt panic rising in my chest: this deep, powerful, and ancient feeling, threatening to overwhelm me with fear and hopelessness, just as it had to so many others before me. I hadn’t quite grasped the seriousness and terror of the situation – the fires, the panic, everything – until it was right here staring me in the face.

Daisy sure knew how to paint a dismal picture.

I stared out the windows. I could barely see the far end of the hospital's parking lot. What few cars were still there were covered in orange flames, melting the tires and shattering the windows. I watched as a streetlight toppled over and landed on the hood of a BMW with a silent crash.

To put it simply, things weren't looking too good for ya boy Marcus.

"Why are you still here, then?" I asked, slowly stretching out my arms. They were stiff but functional.

"I'm *dead*," she said, though I really didn't need or want the reminder. "My parents are too, actually. Our house was one of the 10,000. But it's all good. I'll be seeing them soon." She paused. "Not sure what's going on with your family, I'm sorry. I haven't heard anything about your neighborhood, but maybe they got out okay." I could tell she had no idea and was just trying to make me feel better. We both knew what the odds were. But, nonetheless, I still appreciated her trying.

"I want to stick around for a bit, though," she said, smiling. "Things were cut a little short between you and I, and...well, I'd like to see how you attempt to get out of this situation." I rolled my eyes but grinned. Sure, I was in the midst of an apocalypse with about a 0.004% chance of survival, but Daisy still had the ability to joke and lighten my mood.

But then I looked at her, really looked at her, and the reality of the situation finally set in. She looked very very real, but something about her, other than the subtle flawlessness, was off. I looked through the windows of my room and into the hospital hallway. It was almost completely dark, the only light shining in from the hellscape outside.

This certainly was unfortunate.

“I’m sorry you died,” I murmured. She looked at me and nodded, staring at her hands. She’d talked about herself and her family dying like it was no big deal, but I could see she was hurting. Perhaps no longer physically, but emotionally...I couldn’t imagine.

“Not sure if I really had a plan for my life, but I know it definitely wasn’t this,” she said. “But I’m glad I was able to spend my last moments with you, at least.” I smiled. Ah Daisy. Always the optimist. Even when dead.

“It ain’t over yet,” I said, forcing myself to sit up. My body cracked and popped so much it sounded like someone had put bubble wrap under me. “Anything you want to do in this final hour?” My hands were shaking. A small voice in my head was screaming at me to get up, to escape, to survive. The other part simply couldn’t see it happening. We were surrounded by flames. My best friend was a ghost. My family was likely dead. And the entire hospital had been abandoned. Not exactly great odds. Besides, it wasn’t like I could just walk out. Having only one leg kind of hindered that activity.

“Well,” she said slowly, a mischievous smile creeping onto her face. “I found a vending machine down the hall that has individually wrapped Ding Dongs, which I happen to know are your absolute favorite. And there happens to be a wheelchair right there.” I grinned back, suddenly and strangely feeling a sense of hope.

That girl. She knows me too well. My everlasting love for Ding Dongs – pieces of heaven in the form of cream-filled chocolate cakes – was one of the hallmarks of our friendship. It all began in sixth grade when Daisy learned that I’d never had one before, so she made it her mission that day to find me a Ding Dong. We skipped school, ran across town in search of the pastry, and weren’t able to find one until we came across a derelict gas station that looked to be

on the verge of abandonment, other than the singular employee who plowed through cigarettes like a starved man finding cheeseburgers.

We'd almost given up hope. Our spirits were low. Our hopes almost shattered. We'd decided that this gas station would be our last stop before heading back home. We hurried inside, halfheartedly searching the shelves for just one Ding Dong. The man behind the counter watched us curiously, clearly ignoring the "No Smoking" sign that hung crookedly on the wall. He blew out a silver stream of smoke then rasped, "What you kids looking for?" I glanced at him warily, but behind the cloud of smoke I could see tired but kind eyes. I shuffled over to the counter and looked up at him (I was ridiculously short in middle school... guess things haven't changed that much since then, but I'd like to think I've gained a few inches). "Well, my friend and I are on a quest, you see," I said. I saw Daisy smile at me out of the corner of my eye.

The man leaned forward on his elbows, peering down at me curiously. "A quest, you say?" he said seriously, "Well how may I assist? Or is this a secret quest?"

I made a show of looking around to make sure there weren't any eavesdroppers, then whispered, "We are in dire need of some Ding Dongs." He blinked, probably wondering if he'd heard me correctly. Daisy poked her head out from behind a shelf.

"I'm not seeing any, comrade," she announced. I felt my shoulders slump.

"Because you're not looking in the right place, kid," the man said, straightening and putting out his cigarette. "Did you think a quest could really end so easily?" Daisy and I glanced at each other, unsure. He got up and moved from behind the counter, hurrying to a room further down the wall. I walked over to Daisy and we waited quietly, listening to the rummaging and rustling coming from the closet behind the counter. Soon, he came out holding a large cardboard

box in his arms. He set it on the floor before us and said, “This is our last box of Hostess treats. There may, or may not, be a Ding Dong in there. It’s up to you to find it.” We both smiled at the man, then tore the box open and furiously searched through it. Twinkies, HoHos, and Snoballs galore, but nary a Ding Dong was to be seen. That is, until we reached the very bottom and Daisy squealed with delight.

“Marcus!” she said, holding the Ding Dong out in front of my face. All three of us cheered in victory, the man laughing a deep and rough chuckle.

“Go on, Marcus,” Daisy said. “See what you’ve been missing.” Maybe I should have savored the moment a bit longer. I should have thanked Daisy and the man for all their help, and said that the real reward, the real treasure of this quest, were the memories I made along the way.

Nah. I just tore open the crinkly packaging and sunk my teeth into the Ding Dong. And boy...maybe life-changing is too big of a description, but it was life-changing. Something about the mixture of moist cake and creamy deliciousness was enough to bump Reese’s out of the number one spot.

And thus, the story of the Ding Dong and the Gas Station Man came to a close. We never saw him again after that day. We wanted to go back and visit him, but the gas station had officially closed down and he was nowhere to be found. But we never forgot him. Even all those years later, as we were sitting in a hospital that was surrounded by flames, one of us a cripple and the other a ghost, we had a moment of silence as we remembered him and that amazing day.

Sure, the hospital was turning into an oven, but hey, at least there were Ding Dongs nearby. “Okay here’s the plan, Dee,” I said, turning my attention to the IV at my side. “I’m gonna figure out a way to absorb as much of whatever this numbing stuff is, hopefully it’s

morphine or something, as I can so I don't feel *anything*. Then I'm gonna crawl over to that wheelchair, put my stumpy ass in it, and find those Ding Dongs. Because if I'm going to die in this place, I want it to be when I'm holding a Ding Dong." She smiled, but it seemed sad. Like me, she knew the situation was unbearably bleak. But we weren't the type of people to succumb to hopelessness, no matter how tempting it could be. Gas Station Man certainly wouldn't want us giving up.

"You're insane," she said. "You're gonna die high off your ass."

"I've got literally nothing to lose Daisy," I said, my head suddenly feeling like it was floating on my shoulders. Gotta love druuuggss. "This is a stupid situation. Might as well take it in stride and have a little fun." With that, drugged up on something mighty strong, I rolled out of bed and landed heavily on the floor. Daisy snorted.

"That looked like it hurt," she said. "Wish I'd gotten a video of that."

"Daisy I can't feel a damn thing," I said, pushing myself onto my stomach. "Besides, who would you show it to? Post it to your heavenly Snapchat story?" Then I began crawling, squirming, whatever you want to imagine me doing, toward the wheelchair in the corner.

I feel like everyone's wondered at some point in their lives: how would I react in the face of an apocalypse? I don't think I ever, in a million years, could've guessed that I would be minus a leg, severely concussed, drugged up on whatever the hell was in that IV, wheeling my way through an abandoned hospital with my dead best friend skipping beside me, on a hunt for Ding Dongs.

Maybe it was all just a fever dream. Maybe my subconscious was giving me a show before I passed into the void. Not sure how I felt about it.

“Down this way,” Daisy said, pointing down a long hallway that was only faintly illuminated by the golden glow that streamed through the windows.

“If zombies start coming out,” I said. “I quit.”

“Damn okay,” Daisy said. “I met one earlier and he was really excited to meet you, but apparently that’s no longer possible.”

“Shut up, Dee.” I still tensed up every time we walked/wheeled past a dark room or hallway, just in case.

The heat I’d felt when I first woke up was nothing compared to what I felt in those hallways. Sweat dripped into my eyes and I found myself gasping for air each time I pushed the wheels of my chair. I felt horribly weak, and even though the pain had been momentarily stamped down by the drugs, my head was still swimming deliriously and my whole body was trembling. It was a wonder that the smoke hadn’t yet infiltrated the building, but I knew that once it did... Even drugs and a strong desire for Ding Dongs weren’t going to keep me moving.

“What was your plan?” I eventually asked, mainly to distract myself from the fear that kept threatening to overwhelm me. “For life?”

She glanced down at me then stared off into space, deep in thought. “Well,” she said, starting slowly. “For a while I was thinking the Common Path: college, job, marriage, kids, etc. But before I died, I was starting to realize just how stupid that is. How boring and so *not me* it is.” She paused and I waited. I had a feeling Daisy was about to get existential as fuck.

“We’re told all our lives that if we don’t find a job, we won’t survive. If we don’t find a partner, we’re going to be miserable. If we don’t follow the Common Path, we’re failures. But... why is that the only option?”

“I read somewhere that someone did some kind of study or something and asked a bunch of little kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. A lot of them said things like astronaut or author or teacher or veterinarian, whatever. Then they asked teenagers and compared that to what the little kids said. Almost every single one of them said something along the lines of ‘I want to be happy.’” She finally looked at me.

“I found that so incredibly sad. Somewhere along the line, we give up these dreams of going into incredible careers. Maybe we were told that those dreams were unattainable, that we should be realistic. Maybe life had just bogged us down so much that, honestly? We don’t care what we do, as long as we end up somewhat happy somewhere along the way. Or, I don’t know, maybe I’m looking at it too negatively. Maybe people are realizing that having a career isn’t the one thing that makes life worth living, so our dreams are no longer going into incredible careers. I don’t know.

“But we’re told to decide which school to spend four years of our lives at, somewhere that will shape the adult we eventually become, at *eighteen*. At twenty-two, we’re expected to choose a career that we will dedicate our lives to until we retire, however far in the future that may be. Our lifespans have gotten so ridiculously long, so *why* are we deciding how our lives are going to unfold *right now*? It doesn’t make any sense to me.

“What happened to just living? Why is it all about surviving, being successful, making money, and doing things better than everyone around you? Why can’t we just…live? And be human? And go on stupid adventures for Ding Dongs?”

She went silent for a few minutes, her eyes glazed over as she retreated into her thoughts, as she so often did.

“So…your plan?” I asked. She grinned at me, returning to the present.

“Who the hell knows? To live, and see where life dragged me.”

We hadn’t made much progress. It was a large building, and of course we just *had* to be on the complete opposite end as the Ding Dongs. There was also a lot of debris blocking our way: overturned chairs and tables, scattered papers, unoccupied gurneys, and plenty of other miscellaneous flotsam. It wouldn’t have been so difficult if Daisy could’ve helped move stuff. But she just snickered as I grunted and cursed, wheeling my bulky wheelchair through the haphazard obstacle course.

And the heat was just getting worse. We’d passed a room that’s windows had succumbed to the flames, and fire was flooding the room. I closed the door to try to contain it (I don’t know man, even in a hopeless situation it felt like the right thing to do), burning my fingers on the door handle. So now I was concussed, crippled, broken, *and* burnt. I was shocked that I was still functioning at all.

I couldn’t feel the burn, only a little extra warmth (which I seriously did not need more of at that moment), but the skin still turned a lovely cherry red.

“You should’ve put sunscreen on,” Daisy observed.

“Right, cuz sunscreen keeps away the burnsies,” I said seriously.

“We should keep moving or you’re gonna get more of the burnsies.”

Suddenly, a dog barked, the noise echoing through the empty halls. Daisy and I glanced at each other, confused. I was about to ask if I’d imagined it, but the dog barked again.

“Where is that coming from?” I asked.

“Stay here a sec,” Daisy said. “It’ll be faster if I just find it first.” Then, without waiting for a response, she silently ran off to find the source. I sighed and sat back, enjoying the floaty feeling in my head and knowing that even if she came across some flaming zombies, she’d be totally fine. One, because she was badass Daisy, and two, because she was already dead. What more could happen to her?

Quicker than I expected, she came back with a dog in tow. I stared in shock as the dog – a floofy golden retriever – followed and looked up at her with a slobbery grin like it could see her. I was suddenly questioning everything and wondering how much I was hallucinating. Or dreaming.

“Not sure how the dog can see me,” Daisy said, smiling hugely. She’d always had a soft spot for golden floofs. “But I’m not complaining! Wish I could pet him. I can’t believe people just left him here though!” The dog trotted up to me and laid his head in my lap, gazing at me with chocolate brown eyes. He looked pretty healthy, which I guess wasn’t all that strange if the hospital had been abandoned not that long ago. He just stuck out like a sore thumb amongst all the flames, darkness, and destruction. A little ray of happy sunshine in a hurricane. I patted his

head then checked the tag on his collar. It read, in miniscule print, *Eddard Stark, second son of Rickard Stark, the Lord of Winterfell.*

Sure.

“How’s it going Ned?” I asked, and he wagged his tail in response.

“He was all by himself in a patient’s room, barking out the window,” Daisy said.

“Luckily there wasn’t any fire yet, but the windows were starting to crack. And I guess he could hear me, because I called him and he came running over.” I nodded, still petting Ned. His tail was wagging, but his eyes were sad. I sighed and pressed my head to his.

“You and me both, bud,” I said.

“Uh, Marcus?” Daisy said, her voice suddenly wavering. She was looking behind us, her face even paler than usual. I turned and saw thick dark smoke pooling into the end of the hallway and creeping towards us. Even in the darkness, I could see it, especially with the glow further behind it growing brighter. The fire was entering the building and heading straight for us.

“Shit, we gotta go,” I said, my heart pounding. “Daisy, hurry!”

And off we went. Daisy sprinted silently beside me as I furiously wheeled my chair forward with Ned running on my other side, looking far too excited.

My arms were on fire (not literally, just, you know...they’d been through a lot) and the morphine wasn’t enough to hold back the pain of all the injuries I still had. The floaty feeling quickly changed to the dull and slightly delirious sensations of a concussion, and my leg felt like it had been chopped off only a few hours ago. I spared one more glance behind me and saw the smoke drawing closer and closer, and through it all I could see orange flames illuminating the

end of the hall, turning everything it touched to black ash. It suddenly occurred to me that it was very likely there was oxygen and plenty of other extremely flammable substances that were stored in this building. Things that might explode and cause more damage if the fire reached them. We were running out of time.

“There!” Daisy shouted with relief. And there it was. After we turned the corner, it was like I’d actually died and found heaven right away. There, at the end of the hall and wedged in another corner, was the vending machine. The orange light from the fires outside shined through the windows surrounding the machine, giving it a golden halo.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered, managing to grin up at Daisy. With something akin to reverence, we approached the vending machine. And there they were. Ding Dongs, among other treats, in all their individually wrapped glory. I almost started crying.

“Got any change?” Daisy asked, smiling down at me. In response, I grabbed a vase that sat on a nearby table, dumped out the fake flowers, and smashed it as hard as I could against the glass. Ned barked in surprise, hiding behind my wheelchair. The glass in the vending machine shattered and I managed to reach inside and grab a couple Ding Dongs.

“Here Ned,” I said, unwrapping one and setting it on the ground in front of him. “Might as well see what you’ve been missing all these years.” He immediately started snapping it up.

This time around, I didn’t rush. As Daisy watched with a knowing smile, I unwrapped the packaging and took a slow, deep bite of the pastry. I sighed. Not only did it taste just as amazing and delicious as ever, but it also tasted of better times. Times when I wasn’t severely injured. Times when my best friend wasn’t dead and we’d spent our afternoons goofing off and enjoying each other’s company, not running from flames that were inevitably going to ensnare us.

“How is it?” she asked.

“*Immaculate.*”

I finally had my Ding Dong.

“Well Marcus,” Daisy said. “This was fun.” I turned to face her and she was smiling sadly. She looked different, somehow. I couldn’t figure it out, then I realized that she was fading. What had once seemed completely solid was now closer to a thick mist, getting thinner and thinner by the second. I was losing her.

“Wait,” I said, my voice cracking. I hadn’t thought that far ahead yet. But I wasn’t ready to permanently lose her, be without her forever, live in a world where she did not exist, none of it. Until that moment, I don’t think I’d really accepted the fact that she was dead. She had still seemed so real, so full of life. Even though my situation was about as horrible as it could get, this was the worst part of it all. Watching Daisy fade away. Watching her like that scared me more than the flames ever could. It threw everything into clarity, a wide new perspective. I came to understand that there’s a worse pain than losing a limb, succumbing to the smoke, or drowning in flames. It’s grief. Heartbreak. How so very *human*.

She nodded. “Thanks for one last adventure buddy,” she said softly. “I think this one tops them all. Gas Station Man would be proud. But that was it. It’s time for me to go.” I shook my head. All the pain had come back, but it was nothing compared to what I now felt growing deep in my chest.

“You’re my best friend,” I said, tripping over the words in my haste. I wanted to say everything before it was too late. Not many people had opportunities such as these, and I wanted to make it count. “You always have been. You’re the- you’re the best person I’ve ever known.

You made everything worth it. Thanks for sticking around as long as you did.” She smiled. She was almost completely gone now. “Couldn’t have said it any better,” she said, her eyes still bright despite her vanishing body. “My greatest accomplishment was having you as my best friend.” She glanced at the windows, watching the flames licking at the glass. Tiny cracks were starting to spiderweb across the corners. The heat was getting unbearable. My throat was dry as sandpaper and the smoke was burning my eyes. But all I cared about was Daisy Dee.

“I might see you soon,” she said sadly, quietly. “Love you Marcus.”

“Love you too Daisy.”

And then she vanished. Gone.

Ned sniffed the spot where she had been standing.

Now, more than anything, I wished I’d never found the Ding Dongs. Then, maybe Daisy could have stayed a little longer.

A sob escaped from deep in my chest and I clutched at my hospital gown, trying to hold myself together. Ned put his head on my knee and looked up at me. I shook my head, the tears flowing freely down my cheeks and chin. *Goddamn it. Goddamn it.* Why did any of this have to happen? *Why?*

The fire in the hallway was now only twenty feet away and the smoke was thickening. I coughed, struggling to breathe. But I patted my knee and Ned jumped up onto my lap, tucking his head under my chin. It was nice to not be entirely alone.

It all happened at once.

The windows behind me shattered and the flames spilled in, just as an explosion rocked the foundation somewhere beneath me.

I held Ned tighter as the flames enveloped us and the floor beneath our feet crumbled and we fell, down into the heat and darkness.