

Passaic

Nathan claims he was sober when I got the call. I didn't believe him, I never do. But this time it wasn't his voice that convinced me otherwise, it was the lack of his voice at all.

"Do you know Nathan? He told me to call you. 24 Belford Drive, Passaic. I think he needs help."

Nathan only remembers me after he's finished forgetting everything else. Sometimes I think he keeps my number hidden under bottles. That way he only thinks to call me after he's drained the last of his liquid plane ticket. It doesn't matter where he goes, but when he gets there, I'm who's called to sniff out his trail. I am the dog he whistles to when he's found something, something white but dark and shaped in finger-pad-sized capsules. It's a curse, but one I've cast on myself. I know Nathan well enough to know why he calls even while the phone still rings. And he knows me well enough to know I'll always pick up.

My foot is attached to the gas pedal. Garden State Parkway markers fly past in flickers of green and yellow. I forget what a stoplight is. The GPS warns me to get off at Exit 155 and as I flick on my turn signal, a text message banner flashes on the screen.

Mom - Come home now.

Mom - Turn the fucking car around, Amelia

Mom - You need to let him go.

I speed down the ramp as the sign screams Passaic. It's louder than my phone's ringtone, the vibrations sending it dancing in my car's cup holder. I attach my eyes to something else, anything else, the bare trees, the disheveled street signs, the glowing yellow of the McDonald's

somehow still open. Buzz after buzz after buzz, and when it finally stops ringing, I look down, the number of missed calls mocking me. Thirteen of them and one text.

Mom - Don't bring him back here.

I turn onto Belford Drive and turn off my phone.

I'm eight, he's ten, and we're sitting at the kitchen table about to be nine and eleven. Mom just left the room with a growl to douse the cake knife in another round of boiling water. "Harry, I told you to take the cake out of the freezer earlier. This thing is like a brick." We laugh because when Mom gets angry her voice cracks and we think it sounds like a bird. Dad yells something back about a camera from the other room, his words muffled by walls and rushed shuffling. Nathan looks at me and there's an animal in his mossy eyes that's been uncaged. I haven't lived long enough to understand what that means. He sticks his fingers in the vanilla frosting, changing my name from Amelia to Elia, the blue dye from the fancy script writing I can barely read to a cobalt smear. I turn to him like he's committed a crime.

"What? Mom is taking too long. Why wait?" Nathan paints his face with innocence.

"But you ruined the cake!"

"No, I didn't. You can still eat it." He licks the cream off his fingers with a mischievous grin.

"But look!" My voice comes out as a whine as if the smudging of my name has erased my identity entirely. "You messed up my name."

“So? Your name is gonna get eaten anyway.” Nathan plunges the same two fingers he was sucking on only seconds before right back into the cake. Elia turns to Ia. I treat this as a tragedy.

“Now it’s really ruined.” A sob lodges in my throat. But I swallow it down. Dad hates it when we’re sad on birthdays.

Mom returns holding a bigger knife. “Let’s see how this works,” When her gaze finds the cake all the muscles in her face grow taut. She turns to Nathan and I think her eyes are about to shoot lasers. “Nathan. Go.” Mom doesn’t say where because her son has been sent to his room enough times for the extra words to feel redundant. I watch my brother stand up from his chair, his face drenched in indifference and his mouth still bleeding blue, exit the dining room. Nathan waves as he leaves and our eyes lock a second before he disappears up the stairs. His semi-frosted face sends me a smile.

When Dad comes back with the camera he doesn’t ask about the cake or where Nathan is, in the same way, a puzzle with two pieces can only connect with each other. We drag ourselves through “Happy Birthday” although none of us feel like singing. I pick at my corner of cake untouched by Nathan’s hands, wondering if it was worth it.

The erasure of my name is the only remnant of his presence.

A woman in a black turtleneck and ankle-length skirt stands under a dying street light. A small house, windows flickering with late-night T.V. programs, protrudes beyond the bushes behind her. She turns towards the car as it slows to a stop beside the sidewalk, her face engulfed

by round glasses with bright brown frames. Hair, curled and held back by a band, waves in a brisk whip of wind. Nathan is next to her. All the air leaves my body at once.

He's sitting on the curb, inky black hair dipping into the pools of purple under his eyes, looking at me like a promise. Nathan's shirt is tattered and stained, it could be blood, it could be ketchup, but I can tell by the cracked glass of his faded irises that he doesn't remember how he got here. A navy blue suitcase lies on its side next to him. After I put the car in park, I exit the car, offering a polite yet strained smile to the woman, and open the trunk.

"Put it in."

My speech is sharp, the blade of it cool against the simmering of my skin. I don't look at Nathan any longer, I'm not sure if I can, and approach the woman with a reluctant swallow. In the corner of my eye, I see Nathan stand, grab the worn handle of his suitcase, and drag it to the trunk of my car.

"I saw him pacing up and down the street from the window. A few other families in the neighborhood were thinking of calling the police. But I didn't want it to resort to that so I came outside to talk to him." The woman's voice is smooth, thick, and sweet like honey. "I immediately knew he wasn't dangerous. Just a little lost."

Lost. I think about the animal behind Nathan's eyes, the one he cages but never locks. Maybe he is lost, or maybe he's just hiding, but I know for a fact that his entire life he's been running. How far do you have to run until you're no longer running away from something, but instead towards something else?

"Thank you for looking out for him."

The woman smiles at me, which strikes me as strange because there's nothing to smile about right now. Regardless, I mirror it back, my lips moving on their own accord. Her hope is contagious.

"You're a good sister."

I look down, the praise making my skin feel too tight. Sometimes being a good sister feels like all I am. Despite my phone being turned off and in the car, I can still hear it ringing. The slamming of the car trunk tears me from my staring contest with the concrete. Nathan walks from the trunk to the passenger side door and enters the car, closing the door behind him. No "thank you," no "goodbye" and once again I'm responsible for covering for his rudeness.

"Thank you, again. For calling me."

The woman watches Nathan through the passenger window, the hope glowing in her eyes almost suffocating. I wish I could tell her to stop.

"No problem at all. He insisted that it was you."

The statement sinks like a rock in my stomach. It's not a surprise, if anything it's supposed to be a compliment, but it just makes me feel sad. I decide not to acknowledge it, for fear that it might tear me open.

"Have a great night." I try to make my voice soft and sugary like hers but it just tastes bitter. With a forced smile, I make my way to the driver's side door, not looking at Nathan on my way around. When I enter the car, I take the key from the lanyard around my neck, put it in the ignition, and buckle my seatbelt, the movements feeling robotic and cold. Nathan doesn't say anything.

My phone stares at me from the cupholder. I need to turn it on to use the GPS to get out of Passaic, but the decision feels like a betrayal. Reluctantly, I power up the device, waiting for the notification of more missed calls to haunt me. When it finally comes to life, the screen is blank, and a sick part of me almost wishes it wasn't.

I pull away from the curb, the woman still watching from the sidewalk, letting the driving playlist from my phone fill the car's silence.

I'm ten, he's twelve, and the ocean speaks a language I don't understand. We're at the beach and I'm squinting through sunlight as Mom layers my already strawberry-colored skin in globs of sunblock. Clad head to toe in sunburn-proof swimwear, Dad is seconds away from hissing at the sun. Nathan is digging a hole in the sand with his green shovel, every so often spraying nearby sunbathers with sprinkles of sand. A woman made of wrinkles tells us to move. Despite the complaints, Mom and Dad don't say a word.

"C'mon Mellie, let's go swim!" I'm dragged to my feet by a pair of coarse, grainy hands. The book I'm reading falls to the floor. "We'll play Over, Under."

Over, Under is a game between us and the sea. The ocean holds us in its arms and sends a wave. We have two options. Go over the wave or under it. The decision will either save us or wash us to the shore like twin tumbled shells.

I hate this game and Nathan knows it. Mostly because it's a team game, we're supposed to work together. But most memories of Over, Under are filled with sore limbs and the taste of sand. Nathan will scream over as he goes under, staying above the surface just long enough to

watch me jump to my doom. The wave rolls through me. I end up betrayed, although not by the wave.

“I don’t want to.” I drag my feet in the sand, hoping Nathan will slow.

“Mellie, don’t be a baby. It’s fun! And I’ll look out for you like I always do.” His eyes are hungry although I don’t know exactly what for. But I’m finally old enough to have a suspicion.

“I don’t want to, okay? I always lose.”

“You won’t. I promise.” Nathan looks too alive and it scares me. “And if I’m lying you can have my dessert for the next week. Deal?”

I don’t care about dessert or the ocean, or the way my parents haven’t noticed we’ve left the umbrella. I just want to trust something. There’s comfort in consistency. And right now, Nathan feels more predictable than the sea.

“Deal.”

It’s been eighteen minutes and neither of us has spoken a word. Nathan is slumped in his seat, his long limbs laid out before him. My existence in the car feels like it’s fading, despite being the driver, as if his presence will erase me completely. The quiet is thick and awkward but heavy with redundancy.

“Can we stop at Wendy’s?”

The question awakens me from my dread and for the first time since we started driving, I turn my head to look at him in disbelief. A few different responses bounce around in my brain, most of them encompassing the idea of “Are you fucking kidding me?” But I can’t bring myself to fire any of them.

“No.”

For a moment I think he’s going to fight me on it, but his drunken haze has dulled all of Nathan’s edges and for once, I’m thankful for it.

“Where are we going?”

My mom’s text flashes behind my eyes. *Don’t bring him back here.*

“I don’t know.”

Nathan opens his mouth to respond but no words come out. He regards me with a roll of his eyes instead.

“Mellie—“

The nickname douses gasoline on the embers in my chest, patience running thin like oxygen.

“Nathan, stop. Where are we going?”

He scoffs, shifting his weight in his seat and rolling his eyes but I can tell he’s as surprised by my curtness as I am.

“I don’t know, you won’t tell me.”

“No, not right now. Not in the car. Us. Where are we fucking going, Nathan?” The question bursts out of me, swallowing his smirk. The tension, already layered and heavy, stacks.

“You’re my sister.”

It’s my turn to scoff. “No. I’m your chauffeur. Or your punching bag, or your excuse to do whatever shit you think you have the right to do.”

Nathan’s face freezes, the shock of my response silencing him. The open cages in his eyes rattle and I can tell he’s searching for the animal that’s no longer there.

“Don’t take me home.” Nathan sounds raspy.

His vulnerability is a bullet in my side, a weapon in his arsenal that I’m not used to him using. It takes a second for me to recover.

“And where is home, Nathan?”

He doesn’t respond. I think I’ve stolen all the words from his mouth. The past few days bleed over my thoughts, emptied wallets and empty beds, his dresser now a new makeshift desk for Dad. When Nathan disappeared he left a hole behind. And my parents, already so used to the weight of the shovel, didn’t wait to fill it.

“You. Wherever you go, I’ll go.”

Maybe in another universe, this would mean something to me. I’d recount memories of pillow forts, Christmas mornings, and pinky promises. Sure, two people can be home, but not when that home is burning and you’re the only person trying to put the fire out.

“That sounds like a threat,” I glue my eyes to the road, familiarity slowly seeping into my surroundings. We’re almost home, wherever that is. I think I’m driving to my parent’s house, but each turn feels like a decision made on a whim, like my arms and feet are choosing where to go before my brain does.

“Is it?” There’s a challenge in his voice.

A cord inside me snaps. I pull over on a suburban street and turn off the music, the crickets singing to the sound of our collapse. Nathan squints out the window, the slowing car tearing him from his drunken stupor.

“I’m tired, Nathan. I’m fucking tired. And I can’t keep doing this. Either you pull your shit together or I kick your drunk ass out of the car right now.”

I can tell he's thinking of a way out of this. I almost hear the gears turning in his brain. In my mind I'm shaking him by the shoulders, screaming, crying, driving this damn car into the nearest brick wall. Nathan regards me with an argumentative mumble.

"I'm not drunk,"

"But you're not sober either."

"Fine. Take me back to Mom and Dad's then."

He looks at me and I can feel his eyes dissecting the muscles in my face, pounding against the walls of my eyes. He's trying to get in. I think of smeared birthday cakes and hungry oceans and chins soaked in beer and spit. No more.

I put the car back in drive, my foot a little too heavy on the gas, and we're on the road again.

I'm sixteen, he's eighteen, and the music is loud enough to make us go deaf by fifty. The bass bleeds through the wooden floorboards, my feet vibrating to the beat along with the inconsistent stomping of high school parties. A kaleidoscope of colored lights dances along the walls, spiked cups of punch dying mouths and furniture crimson, the smell of bodies heavy in the air. A bra lays on the floor, baby pink and lacy with a ribbon, and for some reason, I can't stop staring at it.

Nathan is dancing or doing something that resembles it. His friends Will and Dimitri flock to him like a frenzy of hungry birds, shouts and shoving and laughter laced with liquor. I lean against the wall, nursing a Mike's Hard Lemonade, my first and only one of the night. I don't know why I'm drinking it, maybe because of peer pressure, maybe because I like how it's

trying to trick me into believing it's lemonade, but mostly because it warms my small body enough to convince me I'm not here at all.

I'm scrolling through Instagram, which is how I know I'm desperate. I swipe through Facetuned faces and carefully curated outfits, the faces of joyful strangers who are so-called friends twisting my insides. Fancy family vacations to St. Croix, reunions with matching t-shirts, Disneyworld with Mickey Mouse, and fireworks in bloom right behind a princess castle. Disgusting, yet I want it all. Dad says we're going to Wildwood again this year, Mom says we're lucky to be going anywhere at all, considering the number of tickets and bills that need to be paid on my brother's behalf. A text notification from the woman herself drops down over the face of a girl I went to kindergarten with and haven't seen since.

Mom - Curfew

I know. And I'm dreading leaving, not because I don't want to, but because Nathan will refuse to, and I'll be the one forced to tear him from the cup in his hands. I just text back "Ok."

My body detaches itself from the wall. I walk towards Nathan, pushing aside sweaty, skinny forms with my feet sticking to the stained ground. He doesn't notice me, not until I break his circle of vultures and yell over the cacophony of their cawing.

"Hey. Time to go. Curfew soon."

It's only then Nathan looks at me, and despite being drunk, or high, probably a little bit of both, his sweet, dazed expression turns sour.

"Fuck curfew."

I knew he'd respond with something like this. A curse of being both behind the leash and collared to it.

“You can complain about it in the car.” I grab him by the arm and drag him toward the door. Luckily he lets himself be pulled, either too tired or drunk to fight back. It’s not until we make it to the lawn, center stage for intoxicated onlookers, that he shakes me off.

“Mellie, we’re eighteen. Why the fuck do you still care about curfew?”

“I’m sixteen. And because we still live with Mom and Dad who will lose their shit on us if we’re not back on time.”

Nathan kicks an empty red solo cup on the ground. “Maybe at you. You’re like their bitch or something, always running after me, doing their dirty work.”

The statement sinks into me and once I’ve absorbed it I know it will be impossible to forget. He’s right, in a sick way. Me who buys the groceries, me who calls the plumber, me who wrangles my brother when he throws temper tantrums at a party full of drunk teenagers. And for what?

“We’re leaving. You’ve had enough, anyway.” My fist curls around his black beer-stained T-shirt as I stomp toward the car. Nathan looks side to side, obviously embarrassed by our performance, but he makes no effort to change the scene. When we get to the car I shove him into the passenger seat, slamming the door behind him. I check the time. 10:48. No, 10:49.

By the time we get home, Nathan is passed out, his head dropping on his shoulder and beer-flavored drool dripping down his chin. We make it into the house at 11:07. Mom is asleep on the couch and Dad is asleep somewhere else, probably at his desk over his keyboard and his monitors still on. I don’t bring Nathan up to his room. But I do check to make sure he’s there thirty minutes later after I’m done getting ready for bed.

He’s there. But a part of me wishes he wasn’t.

It's not until I drive past our usual turn that Nathan realizes we're not going home. Not that where he lived ever was for him. He didn't live there, not really. Just a house full of static and skeletons, me being one of them.

I press harder on the gas pedal.

"So we're not going home?" Nathan attempts nonchalance but his composure is cracked and I can hear himself pouring through.

"You aren't."

Maybe for the first time in his entire life, Nathan expresses fear. He wasn't expecting this, not now and not from me. With every turn of the wheel, my strength surges. *Mellie, Mellie, Mellie.* I'm taking back my name, my life, and my own presence in this damn car.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

I don't answer.

"Mellie?"

Blue frosted fingers. Over, Under. 11:07.

"Amelia. Answer me."

I take the next left, the turn sharp but the look I shoot him sharper. The roads are empty and the speed limit sounds more like a suggestion.

The cages in my eyes are open and it's time for us both to meet what's inside.

Nathan nags me a few more times, frantic 'where are we' and 'you've lost your fucking mind' but I don't stop until we've reached his destination. A bulky building with white walls visible through large windows. Pedestrians and discharged patients walk expressions sad and

swollen like a bruise. Still swimming through whatever drug-induced daze he's in, it takes Nathan longer than it should for him to realize where he is. But not nearly as long for him to retaliate.

"Is this some sort of fucking joke?"

There's an edge of laughter to his voice and this is how I know he's not just taken off guard, but scared. I hear the phone ringing, not now but an hour before, the sight of "No Caller ID" sending me spiraling, sinking, knowing, what was waiting for me even if it wasn't his voice on the other end. Hunched over my desk, scrambling to finish homework, knowing a pile of dirty dishes was still waiting for me in the sink downstairs and yet I still picked up.

I'm done picking up.

The car comes to a screeching halt at the emergency room entrance. I don't even put the car in park, my foot attached to the break like a leech.

"Get out."

Nathan sees me for the first time. Sure, he's looked at me before but now fate is knocking and he's forced to listen. So he turns to me like he always does, a prayer written on his face that he's too used to being answered to.

I repeat to myself again, if only to keep myself sane. I'm done picking up.

"You're insane."

"And you're out of time."

He scoffs, a breath of air forced through his tired and abused lungs. "What makes you think I'd stay?"

His words sting but not like they used to.

“Because you have nowhere else to go.”

The words taste like mountains. I don't know if they've truly come out until Nathan shatters. That's how I know he'll do it. Nathan will get out of the car, and his face in the rearview mirror will be its gasoline. I'll arrive home fifteen minutes later, decide to skip the dishes calling out to me from the sink, and head to bed without checking my school email, or my phone. Maybe I'll be awake if the front door opens. But I won't deprive myself of sleep to listen for it. And maybe it'll be the second thing I remember in the morning instead of the first.

I'm eighteen, he's twenty, and a cage once opened finally closes.