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LOST BOYS IN WONDERLAND

The lights from the fire engine flashed against the tree trunks and brick buildings that loomed over us. We stood in the rain, the orderlies in their scrubs and us in our pajamas. Our oversized t-shirts stuck to our wet skin; the hems of our sweatpants were splattered with mud. Someone whined that he was cold. Someone else started barking, sharp punctuated yips. One girl ran around catching raindrops on her tongue.

The hospital looked like the campus of a posh private school, tall oaks and manicured lawns, flowerbeds with azaleas and hydrangea bushes. Marcus stood between two orderlies, shoulders slumped and jaw clenched. He dragged the back of his left hand across his nose, wiped the snot on his pant leg. He started the fire with an orange Bic lighter. We all had to stand in the rain. We all could tell he wasn't sorry. I looked up at the coal-dark sky and laughed.

The room was vibrating. I could feel it in my hair follicles. I turned my head and watched sound ripple. Marcus's bare feet slammed against the padded door.

"Fucking bastards! Fucking pigs! Let me out, you motherfuckers!"

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breath.

"He's just some dumb state kid." Brady strummed his guitar. It only had three strings, but he liked to think he'd mastered the three he had.

"This isn't like some foster home. They don't just send state kids here unless, you know, like something's wrong with them." Tiffany tapped the side of her head, rolled her eyes up until I could only see white.

My journal was open in my lap. In neat, straight lines I wrote: *I do not belong here* until my hand cramped and the tremor returned. I had filled three pages. Tiffany asked if I was writing a story about her.

We had spent three days guessing why Marcus was there. He didn't wear his diagnosis like some of us. He didn't have the pale white lines of a cutter or the thick, puckered scarring of a failed suicide attempt. He didn't have the ticks of Tourette's. He didn't talk to people we couldn't see. He wasn't anorexic.

"I'm telling you. He's a throwaway. They're just keeping him here until they can ship him off somewhere more permanent. Trust me. I know the type."

Brady liked to think he was well versed in the ins and outs of the system. His father was a psychiatrist and his mother a psychotherapist. He blamed them for his sexual maladjustment, his multiple personalities, delusions of grandeur, and prolonged periods of clinical depression. He blamed them for caring more about other people's kids. He told Tiffany and me that he'd checked himself into the hospital. He could walk out any time, but he was choosing to stay and get straight.

When I was ten my mom drove a spaceship the color of shiny dimes. It held seven passengers and had the kind of windows that vented open an inch and a half, enough to stick your nose through but not an arm or leg. The windows looked like half moons. We never had seven passengers. Monday through Friday we traveled thirty-one miles to a school where I learned the art of raising mealworms, the practicality of a Box Step, and a love for inventing foreign languages that resembled hieroglyphics. I practiced embalming worms and considered changing my name to

Tutankhamen. I spent a lot of days in the nurse's office because I didn't have any friends, but it was easier for me to say I had a stomachache than I'm lonely. I lied. I had some friends, but they were boys. Boys with Band-Aids on their elbows and dirt under their nails. Boys who carried hacky sacks like multicolored hand grenades and tucked long strands of hair behind Dial-scrubbed ears. Remembering is very much like lying. My memory is a game of Mad Libs. Adjectives become verbs, become nouns, become adverbs. I learned the Box Step but not how to follow. I learned how to lie but not very well. I developed headaches instead of stomachaches. I cried when people touched me. I cried harder if I loved them. The windows looked like half moons and for thirty-one miles I tried to remember how to release the locks and let myself fall.

In the dark I heard Tiffany sucking on the ends of her hair.

“What do you think his dick tastes like?”

“What?”

The buzzing in my ears sounded like a million angry hornets, their iridescent wings flicked my eardrums.

“You know? Brady. What do you think his dick tastes like?”

I didn't turn to face her but I could feel her eyes burrowing into my skull.

The beam of a flashlight flooded the room, scanning across our faces like a wandering lighthouse – once, twice, three times. Tiffany said they scanned three times to make sure we were still breathing. Bed checks were every two hours. The ones on suicide watch had to sleep with their doors open.

“Go to sleep, Tiffany.”

I watched a pair of antenna emerge, a small, slender body flew out of my right ear.

“He says when we get out, we can like be together or something. You know, like a couple.”

I willed the smudge of yellow and black to sting her.

Tiffany said she was named after the 80’s pop star. Her arms were covered with black rubber bracelets. When she talked her arms flapped like skinless chicken wings. She pulled at the cracks of her lips, leaving strips of herself on the linoleum floor.

“Sometimes I watch you when you’re sleeping. Does that freak you out?”

She couldn’t sit still, fingers dug into scalp; feet tapped the floor, eyeballs rolled around in their sockets.

“Before I was here I used to sleep all the time. I’d like fall asleep and wake up someplace totally different, like different towns and shit. Do you believe in aliens?”

She said she was a natural blonde, despite dark roots growing out of her part. She kept her hair twisted at the back of her skull; the loose strands that fell around her face were greasy and sucked on. Her front left tooth showed signs of rotting and the rest were light grey.

“Guess how many stitches? Like thirty. I thought my arm was an envelope, so I fucking opened it. Bad trip. Woke up and thought I’d gone swimming. My own fucking blood. That’s how much a body bleeds. Truth.”

At night she crawled into the shower stall and talked through the crack in the wall. The boy on the other side did the same. They

said they were in love. He wrote her ballads on a guitar with only three strings. They were all set to the tune of *I Think We're Alone Now*. Depending on the day, he responded to the name Brady, Stephen, David, or George. She said only Brady knew her deepest level. She said she had eight.

“I didn’t see anything. I mean, I almost died, but I didn’t see anything. No lights, no angels, not even my dead brother. What do you think that means? Do you think that’s bad?”

My eyes were closed.

“Do you believe in souls?”

I could feel her watching. It was beginning to feel normal.

“Marcus, do you want to share?”

We sat in orange plastic chairs. We pulled them into a circle in the shared space outside of our rooms. The walls were the color of coffee ice cream. There was no natural light, just florescent tubes buzzing. We chewed our cuticles, jiggled legs, tugged at hair and picked at the crust of our scabs. We sat cross-legged, arms crossed, fingers laced behind skulls, tongues cemented to the roofs of our mouths. We said head-bobbing words like: “forgiveness,” “acceptance,” and “commitment.” We said nothing but flipped off the therapist with her beige suit and French twisted hair.

The new girl stretched out on the couch across from the pay phones. No one told her that she had to share the couch during group. She rested one ankle on top of the other and stretched her arms above her head. If it wasn’t for the burn along the side of her face you might have called her beautiful. In group she had shared that her worst day

was giving a blowjob to a seventy-year-old man for crack. She paused before she said this like she had multiple “worst days” to choose from.

“I drank bleach,” I said. “I guess that was my worst day.”

“Marcus, do you want to share?”

The group therapist was young. She did not wear a wedding ring. She wore sensible shoes, black with one-inch heels. She painted her nails in clear polish. She insisted on making eye contact. Her eyes were hazel, but more green than brown. On the days she couldn't come her replacement was a therapist named Carl. He wore dark colored shirts, sweat-stained beneath his armpits. When he talked he stared at the floor. Sometimes he stuttered.

Marcus stared at his white, secondhand sneakers. They were missing their laces. All our shoes were missing their laces. He shoved a finger up his nose and dug. He looked at what he pulled out and flicked it. Nina, the anorexic, pulled her legs up and wrinkled her face. You could see every part of Nina's vertebrae when she bent over. She was required to drink two bottles of Ensure a day. She said this was progress. Two weeks before, it was only half a bottle. She was still not allowed to use the restroom without supervision. She said this was a violation of her basic human rights. She said her father was a lawyer and he was going to sue the hospital if she couldn't piss in private. I thought her shoulder blades looked like knives. She had a tattoo of a rainbow on the back of her neck. She told me when she gets out she was going to add a pot of gold.

“Marcus, you should use a tissue if you need to blow your nose.” The therapist handed him a tissue from the box at her side. Marcus

stared at the tissue but didn't take it.

"I didn't need to blow my nose. I needed to pick my nose."

In kindergarten there was a boy who lived in a small white house with weeds that came up past his shoulders. He carried his lunch in a brown paper bag. He had holes in his shirts and dirt on his elbows. On the bus no one liked to sit next to him. He picked his nose and flicked the boogers on the back of the seat in front of him. We called him Frog because his eyes bulged out of their sockets. He told me he had a kitten named White but it died.

"You're fucking disgusting, Marcus, you know that?"

I turned my head slowly. My eyes lagged behind the movement of my head. I fought the weight of my eyelids to stay awake.

"Brady, please express yourself using appropriate language."

Brady rolled his eyes.

"Your appropriate and my appropriate – different animals."

"Woof."

There was a girl in our ward that thought she was a dog. She had been living in a condemned building since she was six. Construction workers had found her curled in a corner, sucking her thumb. She whimpered in her sleep and kicked her legs like she was running. She and Marcus were the only two people who had single rooms. Late at night she howled at a crayon drawing of the moon. She had taped it on the wall where a window should have been. She growled when she wanted to be left alone. She preferred to sleep on the floor instead of her

bed. She bit a nurse when the nurse tried to take blood. She didn't comb her hair. Tiffany called her Rat's Nest. The rest of us called her Beth.

Marcus shot his hand into the air.

"Yes, Marcus?"

"Can I go to my room?" His hand was still raised above his head.

"Not right now. We haven't finished group."

Marcus's hand slapped his thigh. I felt the sting across my face.

"But I don't have anything to say!"

The therapist straightened her back and elongated her neck. She found the orange seats as uncomfortable as we did.

"That's fine. You can just sit here and listen."

"But I don't want to."

I jotted down: *Neither do I* in my journal.

"Marcus, you know the rules."

Leticia breathed through her open mouth. There was a rattle in the back of her throat. I could see the vibrations in snaking ribbons around her body. Her folds spilled over the edges of her chair. She held her bulging stomach and willed the child she had lost to return.

Leticia's cousin Benjamin was six foot four. His family wanted him to play basketball but Benjamin preferred video games. Benjamin's father called him a good for nothing. Benjamin's mother called him her sweet angel.

After school Leticia went to Benjamin's house. Her parents worked third shift jobs. Her aunt and uncle made sure Leticia did her homework and got to bed by 9:00PM. Leticia's house was one house away from Benjamin's.

Eight months ago, Leticia went to Benjamin's house and her

aunt and uncle were not home. Leticia laid out her homework on the yellow kitchen table. She heard explosions in the living room. She asked Benjamin if he wanted the extra Ring-Ding left over from lunch.

Eight months ago, Benjamin raped Leticia. She watched her homework papers flutter to the floor. She watched her pencil roll off the table and under the stove. She closed her eyes and imagined what it would feel like to fly. That month, Leticia did not get her period. She knew what this meant. She'd gotten an A in health class. When she told her parents they shook their heads, told her the baby was her boyfriend Ronny's. Not Benjamin's. They told her she had to have it. They told her not to mention Benjamin again. Every day after school Leticia went to her aunt and uncle's. They gave her extra food at dinner and watched her swallow pre-natal vitamins with large glasses of milk. Benjamin told her she was getting real fat.

A month ago, Leticia drank a handle of whiskey and a bottle of aspirin. She lost the baby. She named him Peanut. Sometimes her face twitched and she flopped on the floor like an elephant seal. The doctors told her she was lucky to be alive.

"Sometimes I still feel him. I hold him real tight, like this. I tell him all about the life we're gonna have. He swims inside me like a fish. Sometimes I see him in my dreams. Sometimes we fly."

"Fuck the rules." Marcus teetered on the edge of his chair, his fists pounding his thighs.

"Language."

"Fuck your language. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Marcus stood and gripped the back of his chair with both

hands. We had seen this before. He was about to go full-blown nuclear. Blood dripped down the wall in front of me, long, sticky rivulets. I closed my eyes. *That's not really there.*

“Marcus I need you to sit back down.” The therapist placed her notepad and pencil on the floor next to her. She emphasized down with her hands like she was talking to a puppy.

“I need you to shut the fuck up.”

I opened my eyes. The wall was red. It was seeping onto the floor.

Dan, the day orderly, who was built like a pro linebacker, approached the group. Marcus scanned back and forth between the therapist and Dan.

“Don't you touch me, you faggot!”

“Marcus, if you can just calm down, Dan doesn't have to do anything.”

“Yeah, right. You think I'm stupid or something? You think I'm retarded?”

Marcus lifted the chair off the floor. Dan took a step closer. The chair flew over the head of Beth who started to howl. Dan sidestepped, the chair clattered, Dan's arms wrapped around Marcus's shoulders, pinning Marcus's arms to his sides.

My feet were submerged in the thickness of it. My ankles were wet.

“Don't touch me! I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!” Marcus's left sneaker flew off his foot, his legs kicking wildly in the air.

Dan wasn't even sweating. Marcus looked like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum in his father's arms—small, frail, hysterical. Dan walked calmly toward the padded room. Beth let out a low growl. Leticia was crying and rocking in her seat.

“I hear you, Beth. That dude is psy-cho!” Brady leaned back in his orange chair, interlacing his fingers behind his neck. He winked at Tiffany.

“Totally,” said Tiffany.

“Lang-rage,” said Brady.

Tiffany giggled.

We lined up at the window, three rows deep and watched water pool in mulch. Recreation time had been cancelled. It was raining in the gymnasium, the result of a leaky roof. Legs that wanted to run buckled, feet fidgeted, toes became restless. Marcus leaned his forehead against the glass.

“How far down you think that is?”

A stray cat darted across the road, a flash of grey into chokeberry bush. Red rustled back into place.

“Not far enough,” said Brady. “You thinking about doing the deed?”

Socks dispersed, dragged across carpet. Legs tucked into chairs, feet into couch cushions.

“Nah,” said Marcus. He pressed hands against glass on either side of his head, fingers splayed. He peeled his forehead off the window, leaving an inkblot of steam.

“Elephant,” said Brady.

“Cunnilingus,” said Tiffany.

Brady flicked his tongue in and out between his lips. Tiffany giggled and elbowed my ribcage.

“I know what that means. You’re nasty, dirty, shitheads.”

Marcus, Brady, Tiffany and I turned in synchronized motion.

A small boy, striped t-shirt and elastic band jeans jutted a scuffed chin in our direction.

“What’re you, four?” said Brady.

“Five, fuckface.” The boy’s mouth looked swollen, purple and puffy. He spit out his words, hurled them at us like it took great effort.

Brady nudged Marcus with his hip.

“Didn’t know you had a brother. You’ve been holding out on us, buddy.”

“Don’t call me that,” said Marcus. Marcus looked at the boy, started at his feet and worked his way up slowly. I could see Marcus’ hands tremble.

“What are you looking at, faggot?” said the boy.

Marcus pursed his lips. Twisted, neck first, followed by arms and legs, eyes turned back to the window. He left the boy to us. The boy puffed out his tiny chest. He took the retreat as a sign of group weakness. One down. The boy pivoted, narrowed his dead fish eyes and pointed at Tiffany.

“You a lesbo?”

Tiffany snorted and squatted down, resting her palms on kneecaps, got eyelevel.

“Sweetie, are you lost? This is the big kids hall.”

“This is the retard hall.” The boy’s hands were white-knuckled fists; red crept up his neck in splotches.

“Jamie, there you are!” An orderly with a deep fried perm and adult braces scuttle-shuffled her way to us. Coffee drips patterned the front of her shirt. She noticed me looking, and brushed over the stains with chipped blue nails. She throat chuckled and shook her head, like she was remembering an off-color joke. “Jamie here needed a little break

from the upstairs ward, didn't you?"

"No, stupid. You needed to shake your titties in some asshole's face."

"Jamie. Language. Come on now, don't make me dock you. You already lost TV privileges." The orderly smiled at us; stretching violet lips over bulky mouth gear. "Too bad about the rain."

Marcus was plastered against the glass again, sixty-degree angle, forehead supporting body.

"How far down you think that is?"

Jamie's hair was long in the front, ends brushing eyelids, making him blink. He reminded me of someone. He reminded me of brown paper bags and dirt caked on elbows. He reminded me of white kittens.

"Tell the chink to stop fucking looking at me."

"Oh, she's not Chinese," offered Tiffany.

"Marjorie, TELL HER TO STOP LOOKING AT ME!"

"How far down you think that is?"

"MARJORIE!"

Marjorie, the orderly, glanced at Marcus and then at Jamie, bit her lower lip, drummed nails against wide thighs. She cleared her throat.

"Uh...does he need...should I get –" she stuttered and reached out a tentative hand in Marcus' direction.

I couldn't stop looking at Jamie. I stared at his chest. I had almost remembered a name.

"STOP FUCKING LOOKING AT ME YOU CUNT!"

A striped blur crashed into my body. Tiny fists pounded hipbone and sneakered feet crunched my socked toes. Jamie's spit landed in splatters across my jeans. I didn't move my arms. I stood. I took it. I

tried to remember. Faster. Jamie pulled out clumps of his hair and threw them at me.

“TAKE IT! TAKE IT! TAKE IT!”

“How far down you think that is?”

I watched brown tufts float between dust specks.

Marjorie pulled Jamie off and gathered him in her arms. “That’s it, Jamie! Enough! I didn’t want to do this. I really didn’t. But, you know, you haven’t given me a choice, have you?”

Jamie buried his head in Marjorie’s shoulder. I could see blood where hair follicles used to be, red beading on angry pink, on skin that would scab over and itch.

“You okay?” said Marjorie. She jiggled up and down like she was trying to soothe a baby.

I nodded my head. Brady yawned and cracked his neck. Tiffany practiced her concerned face.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it. Just been through a lot, haven’t you, kiddo? Poor thing.”

Jamie howled a muffled word like cocksuckers into Marjorie’s shoulder. My hip stung where he’d made contact. She turned and b-lined for the exit.

“Jesus Christ, the drama!” Brady threw a hand over his brow like an overwrought woman. “Come on, babe. Let me play that song for you.”

Tiffany’s concerned face broke. She winked in my direction, blew me three kisses. I didn’t catch them. I let them fall.

“You have to forgive them. Even if they’re monsters, right?” Marcus rolled his head to look at me. His cheeks were slick, eyes bloodshot. He sniffled.

I nodded my head. My neck split at the spine, head broke off, suspended somewhere above my shoulders. My medication made my head levitate. From near the ceiling I watched Marcus slide down the window to the floor. He was bent at all the wrong angles. I grabbed the top of my head and tried to anchor it.

“How far down...”

I stopped up my ears, plugged fingers in holes. I walked away before he could finish. *Far.*

The officer secured handcuffs around Marcus’s tiny wrists. His body shook; tears and mucus ran down his face.

“They’re going to kill me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” His eyes frantically searched the room, looking for someone to accept his apology.

In an hour my parents would be there to discharge me. I would go home to a house with flowerboxes in the windows. I would go back to a school with perfectly straight desks. I would be a good girl. I would eat all my peas.

Marcus was going to a juvenile detention center in Worcester. Marcus would be given an orange jumpsuit that many other boys had worn. He would wear his orange jumpsuit until he turned eighteen. After that he would be on probation until he turned twenty-one.

Marcus’s shoulders heaved up and down. He craned his neck forward and let his head drop. I wanted to reach out and touch him. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t think he was a monster. I wanted to tell him that he was just a kid. But we were not allowed to touch other patients and all I could muster was:

“It’ll be okay,” which we all knew was a lie.

“Marcus, do you want to share?”

Marcus licked his lips slowly. They were chapped, his lower lip split open and bleeding. He sucked on it, drew his whole lower lip into his mouth.

“I’m getting arrested today.”

Brady’s head snapped to attention.

“And what is that bringing up for you?”

Marcus wrapped his arms around himself and squeezed.

“I guess...well, you know, I’m scared? I mean, the thing, what I’ve done...a lot of people...people hate me.”

“And what are you scared of in particular?”

“You know, of getting hurt. You know, that they’re gonna hurt me.”

“Shit, man. What did you do?” Brady leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

Marcus hesitated. He rubbed the edges of his sneakers together.

“My neighbor’s baby...I.”

“Yes, Marcus?”

“I...I touched it.”

“Jesus, fuck!” shouted Brady.

Leticia held her elbows and rocked her invisible Peanut. Beth whimpered and got on all fours, tried to cram herself under her chair. Nina drew her arms into her oversized shirt like a turtle. The new girl yawned and massaged her puckered skin. Tiffany picked at the scars on her arms.

“I want to remind everyone that we are not here to judge. And what is said here remains here, right?”

The therapist made sure to make eye contact with each of us. Brady balanced his chair on its back two legs and rolled his eyes.

“So, you’re okay that this thing touches babies? That’s okay with you?”

“I’m asking you to respect the rules of group, Brady.”

“I’m not Brady. I’m David.”

“Well, the rules apply to you too, David.”

“Fuck the rules. I mean, seriously, how many of you actually feel sorry for this piece of shit? Did you like it? I bet you fucking liked it. I bet you’d do it again too. Man, you deserve what’s coming to you. You fucking deserve it.”

I was sweating. I could feel droplets running down my back. I tilted my head and watched ants cover the ceiling, crawling over each other, over fluorescent lights like a panicked mob. My throat was burning. When I stuck out my tongue it was covered in a black swarm of moving bodies. I gagged, felt acid hit the back of my throat. I pinched the inside of my arm where it hurt the most. *Just breathe. It’s all in your head.*

Marcus was fifteen the day he was arrested. His top lip was covered in peach fuzz. He had a habit of thrusting his neck forward when he walked. During visiting hours, Marcus sat in his room holding a pillow to his chest. During phone privileges, Marcus occupied a payphone and held the receiver to his ear, listening to dial tone. Sometimes he pressed the buttons of the keypad until his time was up. He liked *The*

Simpsons. He wanted to play the saxophone. Marcus was one the first time his mother's boyfriend molested him. The only pet he ever had was a goldfish he carried home from school in a Ziploc bag. He named it George after the monkey in those books his teacher read. Marcus was molested until he turned eleven. His mother refused to throw her boyfriend out because he was good to her. Marcus didn't know his biological dad. He used to tell people his dad was an astronaut who traveled to the moon. Marcus's mother didn't go to his trial. When asked, she told people she didn't have a son. Marcus used to dream of being a firefighter. He said he wanted to save people.