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The Slide

by Lily Soper

Molly doesn't screw up. Her daily planner is as thick and detailed as my permanent record. Molly is not the problem child of the Michaels family. I earned that title through years of depressive episodes and psychological analysis. Each time that I was committed, each time I refused to go to school for weeks at a time, Molly was a rock. She mediated our family through therapy sessions. My advocate. Sitting in our living room together for a family meeting, I don't know if I'm ready to switch roles.

"Is it drugs?" asks my father, mustache bristling in the way it does when we displease him. It's hard to keep a straight face—as if drugs have ever affected Molly's performance in school. Arms wrapped around her legs, she doesn't look up from her knees to respond. Through her long black hair, covering her face like the girl from *The Ring*, her face is red. She's trying not to cry. I should probably be sitting next to her.

"Arnold," Mom puts her hand on his knee, ever the good cop. "Be gentle."

"She wasted half a year's salary by dropping out, Jill, how gentle can you expect me to be?"

"I didn't register for classes." Molly's voice is tense, towing the line between apologetic and defensive. "I didn't waste any money."

"Yeah, it's not like she dropped out halfway, she just needs a break. I mean sure, there's the money you gave her this summer when you thought she was going back but I mean, you probably would've given it to her anyway and she's probably just taking a year off anyway, unless you know, she isn't going back cause I guess then you would have wasted a ton but I'm sure—"

"Stop helping, Brynne." The apologetic tone in her voice disappears when she talks directly to me. I can't say I blame her. Molly makes a considerably better defense attorney than I'm making.

"I just mean you were responsible about it," I reply, voice small.

"What matters is that you are Okay." They taught Mom that line at the first psyche ward I was committed to. "Are you? Okay?"

Silence. Then tears. "I'm fine," Molly says through sobs. Is this how I look when I cry? Mom gets up to hug her. I don't want to be condescending but the sooner we're all crying together, the sooner Dad will admit defeat and the sooner Molly can go back to Bellingham with a refreshed outlook and a filled bank account.

"Molly, what happened?" I can't gauge if my dad is worried, exasperated, fed up or all of the above. Molly shakes her head but doesn't say anything, and I know it's time for support-o-sister to come out for play. My feet feel heavy taking the three steps it takes to reach the couch she and my mom are on. I place my hand on her back, and it's hot through her t-shirt.

When my mom tears up (not an uncommon occurrence) my dad (as per usual) gives in. We're group hugging and my dad says, "How can we help you?"

"I just want to come home."

Dammit, she's going to want her bedroom back.

...

Growing up might just start with pouring your wine into a glass instead of drinking it straight from the bag. I don't think it means having a fake ID your senior year of high school, but here we are. Hopefully Molly doesn't want her old ID back now that we live in the same town again. Felix would not be happy.

The line is long enough that if I weren't so excited to drink, I would leave. There's a little boy ahead of me in line, and I can't help but wonder how he can afford so many organic TV dinners. We make eye contact. Too many people patronize kids, so I hold to it: "Sup?" I ask.

"My mom says that stuff is evil," he says, gesturing to my pinot.

"Your mom is right. What grade you in?" I wouldn't bother trying to make conversation if his mom was here. Another high, douche-bag teenager is the last thing she wants little Billy (I can only assume that's his name)

exposed to on a Wednesday night.

"I'm nine." That isn't what I asked him, but I can go ahead and assume that means third grade. He doesn't strike me as someone who gets held back, but I can only assume that to skip a grade he'd have to know how to tie his shoes.

"Your shoe's untied," I gesture towards his foot with my own. His sneakers have Lightning McQueen on them and I can't help but feel like if he was my kid he'd have way better taste.

"I know," he doesn't look down at his shoes, making a somewhat unnerving amount of eye contact. Where is his mother?

I nod. "Word."

"Kevin, are you bugging this young lady?" asks a voice behind me, and I quickly recognize this as code for "Don't talk to scary strangers buying booze on a weekday." I squeeze myself closer to the magazines (will Kim and Kanye ever be able to live in peace?) so his mom can return to the line. She's all thin and young and cute and I can only imagine that she and her husband have a daughter and a golden retriever to go along with Kevin.

"Less than most boys bug me!" She does not laugh at my joke. If I offer to tie Kevin's shoe, is she going to assume that I'm a predator?

"She's buying wine," he points to my Bota Box and I instinctively look anywhere but at the woman who might want to inform the cashier that I don't look old enough to drink. Way to be a goddamn narc, Kevin, have fun trying to get laid in high school with that attitude.

"It's my Friday," I lie. "Retail hours, right?" They've already turned back to their own cute lives that don't include stress drinking. The cashier laughs at a joke that I couldn't hear, and asks Kevin what grade he's in. He tells her that he's in the third grade.

The cashier doesn't laugh at any of my attempts at humor and I refuse to believe that Kevin's mom is funnier than I am. She accepts my fake so I can't complain, and I walk out of Safeway and into Felix's car.

"Shouldn't you be doing this with your sister?" I don't respond. "My house it is."

I pull out my phone, ready to compose a text to Molly. "I think she wanted alone time with Mom and Dad. I wasn't exactly helpful." It's somewhat true.

ME: what's up

"Yeah she's probably having a blast. Just so you know, my little sister is having her friends over and they are, indisputably, all insane."

The last time I was at Felix's house, a few months ago, was for Jemime's 8th birthday party and I got bit by three separate kids. "Let's go to the park for now." Passing a middle aged woman putting her shopping cart away (while in reverse, no less) Felix drives like he's in one of the racing movies I refuse to watch with him.

MOLLY: Mom and dad hate me so much.

"Jesus, Felix, there's no right turn." He turns right anyway and I tune out his rant of a response, probably about the systematic oppression of American drivers through unnecessary traffic laws. Usually, I like to time how long it takes him to (incorrectly) cite "Civil Disobedience" but I can't seem to take my eyes off Molly's text.

I could tell her that they don't, but I wasn't there and they might.

ME: do you want to drink wine at the park?

"The park" is more of a playground, surrounded by low-income housing and a retirement home. There's no parking lot, keeping it more-or-less out of bounds for our town's lazy cops; they're generally unwilling to get out of their cars and walk through the pine trees in order to bust anyone when there are so many easy targets hotboxing down Main Street. Molly showed it to me near the end of my freshman year. She was about to graduate with honors and went to celebrate with some friends. If I hadn't found the dub sack they had bought (from some guy who definitely was not graduating with honors) she probably wouldn't have invited me. Her boyfriend at the time thought it would be cute to get me high for the first time and I spent most of the evening on top of a slide, maybe six feet tall, too afraid to come down. Molly had to climb up and slide down with me, arms wrapped around my waist as if I was driving us around on a motorcycle and she was the one who needed my help to feel safe.

MOLLY: I'll be there soon.

Once we're back on a residential street, I pull the bag out of its cardboard box and stick the nozzle into my mouth, cradling it in my arms. Felix hates it when I hold the wine like a baby. He says it looks like I'm suckling at

my infants teat and it gives him a Freudian complex.

“Did you invite Annette?” Felix tries to sound nonchalant, which might have worked if he hadn’t drunkenly told me he was in love with her a week prior.

Unsure if he remembers the exchange, I feign ignorance. “Was I supposed to?”

He sputters, “Well no, I just thought she might want to come. To see you. I mean I think I heard her saying she was down to drink this year, but I guess she could have just meant—” I drown him out by turning up his radio, and through Taylor Swift’s nasal voice I think I make out him telling me to fuck myself.

When we reach the retirement home’s parking lot, he turns off the ignition and continues his sentence as if he had distracted himself. “She might have just meant at parties though. Shall we?”

Molly’s car isn’t in the parking lot yet and I should probably warn at least one of them that I’m with the other. It would be stupid to wait for Molly here. She knows how to get to the park, or else I wouldn’t.

The path to the park is treacherous to anyone over four feet tall. My hair gets caught in a tree, but it’s too late in the season for ticks so I keep going. At just over six foot two, Felix curses his lanky frame behind me, trying to keep up without blinding himself on a stray branch. Making it there at least a minute before he does, I head towards the slide.

With only two functional swings, a merry-go-round, and a jungle gym consisting of a metal bar dome, it’s no surprise that I’ve never run into an actual child here. It’s either that or because I’ve never seen the park in the light of day. It’s possible that we’re the reason parents won’t let their kids out to play after dark.

“Thanks for waiting for me, asshole,” Felix grunts, out of breath. He takes his usual spot on top of the jungle dome, and gestures for me to toss him the bag. It never works, but I take another chug and try anyway. It falls under the dome and he has to crawl inside to grab it.

“Bryne?” I recognize Molly’s voice, but based off of Felix’s panicked expression, he doesn’t, and hides the bag behind him.

“I’m up here, Molls,” I call down, and she emerges into the street lights illuminating the little playground. If she caught her hair in the tree, you can’t tell, but considering how graceful she is, she likely ninja rolled through the rough bits of the trail.

“Oh...Felix. Hey.” Molly uses the famous Michaels inflection that we use when we want someone to know that we don’t want them there.

“Molly, hey. It’s good to see you,” Felix flashes the wide-eyed look he gives me when I try to rope him into uncomfortable situations. “Oh hey, Annette is calling, I better get this. I’ll be right back.” He tosses me the bag on his way past the slide and back onto the trail.

He isn’t coming back.

“You invited Felix?” she’s trying not to sound offended, but her giant green eyes have always been too animated to mask her feelings.

“He was just kind of there.” Not only a blatant lie, but a stupid one at that. “Hey, do you remember the time you and Jack got me high here?”

Molly laughs, scrunching her eyes shut in embarrassment. “Oh God, Jack. I don’t remember the last time I even thought of Jack. Did you know he got in trouble for selling weed, like two years ago?”

“Not entirely surprising, from what I remember of him. Hey, do you remember when I climbed up here and I was too scared to come down for hours?”

“It was like ten minutes,” her laugh sounds genuine for the first time since she came back, “but yeah, I do. Do you remember how you couldn’t stop turning your wrists in circles?”

“You told me I would get arthritis!”

“That was the only way you’d stop! It was a white lie.”

“Oh yeah, like when you told me the black flecks in french vanilla ice cream were ground up snails?” Our giggles die down faster than I want them to, and I should probably fill the awkward silence. “So what happened?”

She doesn’t answer at first, kicking the gravel around to trace out a circle. Once it’s finally perfect, she kicks more sand over it. Then, “I guess I’m moving home.”

Tapping my foot on the metal slide, the sound echoes. “I mean at school.”

She walks so casually towards me that I don’t know if she even heard me. Without saying anything, she

holds her hands out and I can only assume she wants the wine. I take a few chugs before handing it over and she takes it to the right swing. We both know that's the one that doesn't squeak. Requiring elegance I will never have, she pumps her way to a full swing with the bag in her lap, only taking sips when she's above the bar. After a long gulp of pinot, she says, "I kind of thought you'd have my back the other day."

So she noticed that. "I didn't really know what to say."

"Something along the lines of 'give her a break' probably could have helped." Molly isn't just the better kid, she's the better sister.

"I guess I probably could've thought of that." I want the wine back, but not enough to ask for it. I check my pockets for my one hitter, and realize I left my weed in Felix's car. I guess I could text him, but there's a ninety-nine percent chance that he's already smoked it all. Bastard. "It might not mean a lot coming from me though."

"Who else is it going to come from?" She jumps off the swing at a height I wouldn't have dared try when I was prepubescent and in gymnastics, and begins to pace. She's never felt comfortable sitting down; even a swing is too stagnant for her. This is the point where I should apologize, but I don't and she doesn't press me. After an uncomfortable amount of silence, she finally answers my question. "It just...wasn't working. I don't know. Did mom tell you that I got three C's last semester?" I shook my head. "I just kept waking up, and I knew I had to go to class and I just...I'd just stare at the fucking ceiling. My therapist says I was taking it too seriously, but I don't know. I mean, honestly, what's the difference between anxiety and laziness when the end result is the same?"

"You're asking the wrong girl." I reach out for the wine, and Molly climbs up the ladder. Situating her legs on either side of mine, she hands me the bag. She wraps her hands around my waist and I feel like I'm a freshman again. "Wanna slide down?"

"Not right now," she says, resting her head on my shoulder.