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lindsay larson

Hello."

"Answering the phone today, are we?" Julia asks in a sarcastic tone.
"Absolutely, between the hours of eleven and twelve anyway. 'Lucy' starts at noon though, so then the phone comes off the hook."
"Are you still in bed?"
"Where else?" I can hear Julia clicking her tongue and I can see her shaking her head in pseudo-disappointment. "Oh, like you aren’t!" I shoot back defensively.

"As a matter of fact, I’m not," Julia proclaims, brimming with feigned pride. "I made it all the way out to the couch by ten-thirty this morning." I try to lift my free arm out from under my enormous down comforter in order to clap for her grand accomplishment, but somewhere in the middle of my mocking gesture, it feels too heavy. I am powerless to stop it from dropping back to my side.

"Forgive me if I don’t bound out of bed and do the dance of joy; I’m a little tired today. So, what’s up, Juj?" I try to sound enthusiastic about this morning’s conversation, although I know it will be the same as it was yesterday and the day before yesterday and the day before that.
"Well, not much really. I woke up super hungry and . . ."
“Yahoo!” I interrupt. “Waking up hungry is the best. Remind me again what hungry feels like.”

“Well, usually I’d be jumping for joy too, but I’m fasting today for a blood draw this afternoon. The good doctor said that if I ate anything this time, he’d be forced to keep me overnight under constant supervision. He says that I purposely keep trying to sabotage the test results. As if!” Julia says in her best Clueless voice. I never get tired of that impersonation; it’s one of those timeless things, like Disneyland and The Beatles.

“Oh, hey, before I forget,” I begin, sounding more excited than usual, “I found the funniest picture from Girl Scouts stuffed in an old notebook. We’re at the beach house and everyone is wearing their tiny swimsuits and I’m dressed in, like, full body armor . . . those faded olive green jeans I used to have and a long sleeve shirt. But get this, I’m carrying an umbrella.”

“And you wonder why I used to make fun of you so much. You were such a freak when you moved here. Well, you still are really. Wasn’t that the weekend that we made Melanie wear her underwear on the outside of her clothes?” The mental picture that came back to me made me start to chuckle and Juj could never resist playing for a laugh. “I think that was also the time we spray painted our . . .”

And so we started to play the memory game for the thousandth time because sometimes, that’s all we’ve got. And probably all we’ll ever have, I think to myself. As Juj rambles on about the ‘old days,’ I have trouble focusing. I miss seeing Juj tell these stories face to face. Her eyes are so big and expressive, her head softly shakes back and forth when she laughs, her bouncy hair always in that same disheveled bob. I remind myself for the thirtieth time that she doesn’t have hair anymore, but somehow Julia is not Julia without that coarse brown hair. Some days I can hardly remember what she looks like. I can’t believe it when I remember that the last time I saw her she was visiting me at school from a couple hundred miles away. Now she is just a baseball diamond and a catwalk away and they won’t let us get closer than a phone call. Mom used to say “life is never fair” when I was a kid, but I think that if she’d known how unfair it would turn out, she might never have said it. It doesn’t matter anymore; I don’t need anyone to tell me of the inequities of life. I want out as it is.

“. . . that was just the best,” Juj chuckles as she concludes her reminiscences. “Hey, Em, I’ve gotta go. I didn’t realize what time it was. I’ve got a date with the needle.”
"Give him my regards. You know what . . . don't. I'll see him soon enough myself."

"Okay, b . . . later." Juj tries to cover her slip, but I know what she was going to say. She doesn't want to be the one to break our no-goodbyes pact. She doesn't want to remember that there are such things as goodbyes, especially not permanent ones.

"Hello."

"Hey you."

"How in the heck are you, Juj? I was just going to call you, but . . ."

"Sure you were, Em. Do you even know how to dial on a touch-tone phone? You know my Mom saw your Mom at the store yesterday. Your Mom is spreading this horrible rumor that you actually got out of bed this week. I just thought that I should let you know, so that you can stop this before it gets out of hand."

"Cute. Real cute. Not only did I get out of bed, but Wahp and I went for a brief stroll around the cul-de-sac. I wanted to stay out longer but Wahp was just getting so tired. I was heading for the catwalk to revisit our hobo days, but he practically begged me to turn around."

"So you're still referring to your wheelchair as if it were a living thing? And you wonder why they make you go to therapy, you freak." I love it when she calls me that, it feels like old times.

"Oh, you should talk, you're the one who announced in your Homecoming speech that you were delivered to your parents by an alien spaceship from the Planet Vulcan. You were wearing the most hideous lime green excuse-for-a-dress I've ever seen." My grin is getting wider and wider as I remember how funny she looked next to the other girls in their maroon, navy, and black formals. "And anyway," I continue, "you were the one who came up with the hobo idea." We both laugh for a few minutes, thinking about how much trouble we got into for dropping all that garbage in the catwalk and pretending we were homeless. You just don't mess with the richest-city-per-capita-in-California like that, unless you want to become eleven-year-old criminals. We never did clear out everything; we left some miscellaneous booty underneath one of the loose bricks, promising to come back periodically and maybe even bring our kids sometime to tell them about our hellion days. It seems farther away now than it did when I drove cross-country for college. And the days of making promises seem even farther.
“Okay, so maybe I came up with the garbage caper. But at least I wasn’t the one who burned the lamp shade in that motel room, lit Ryan’s pine tree on fire, and burned all the plastic forks at Girl Scout camp, you pyro! And come to think of it, I never stapled my hair to the top of my head so that it would stay ratted during the ’80s dance either.”

“You know that would’ve worked, if . . . ” I am interrupted by my alarm clanging from across the room.

“Time for your meds, is it?” Juj knows it well enough.

“Yeah, it’s time to pick my poison.”

“Go take your Prozac, you need it.” She always tries to play it off, but we both know it’s true. I turn my head and look at the bright orange buffet that hugs my bedside. Pick my poison, indeed. I ceremoniously breathe out before swallowing my handful of pills. I flip on the TV to check the Sports Center highlights while I wait for my pain pills to kick in. When the umps make a bad call, I shout at the television, imagining that I can change the outcome. Really, I don’t even think I can change the outcome of my own life. But I never give up, on the Red Sox at least.

“Hello.”

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Emma, happy birthday to you!”

“I thought that we agreed that you’d never sing in my presence again,” I laughingly respond, when she finally finishes her off-key “and many more.”

“So, tell me, what exciting things do you have planned to celebrate the big one-nine?” Juj asks with genuine excitement in her voice.

“Oh, well, where do I start? First, I thought I’d do some resting and then some TV watching and then, just for a change, I’ll probably rest some more. And if I get really ambitious I might just go downstairs to watch the Laker game so that I can actually read the score off the bigger screen.”

“Whew, it sounds like your day is booked solid. Do you want me to get off the phone now so that you can get started?”

I pause for a while, pretending that I’m really giving it some thought. “Well, since it’s ‘Andy Griffith’ hour, I guess we can talk for a little while.”
“So guess what I’m having my Mom drop off at your house today?” Juj asks, sounding like she can hardly wait for my guess before blurting the answer out.

“Well, let’s see, it is my birthday and,” I slowly begin, trying to drag out the suspense as long as possible, “often on birthdays people tend to . . .”

“Okay, okay, I can’t take it anymore. Just let me tell you,” Juj finally interrupts. Juj can never keep anything to herself for longer than a couple of minutes. She doesn’t know what secrets are. “I looked all over my room; well actually, my mom looked all over my room until I finally found your official birthday hat. You know the one Christine and I made for you for our special ’70s flashback birthday celebration? Do you remember which . . .”

“Of course I remember. Are you kidding? That was the best birthday ever. Didn’t it say ‘Spank Me’ on it? I remember that one lady at Olive Garden who came up to me and said ‘Do they call you Spanky?’ and we all just sat there like ‘what?!” That was just the best night ever.” I can’t help smiling as I remember the details of my sixteenth birthday. I thought that if I never had another birthday that great again, the memories of that night would be enough. I really believed that once.

“Yeah, dinner was great, but the Land of the Lounge Lizards was even better. We finally forced you to go to a dance to find out how much fun they were, and every time you moved, the pin holding up your bell bottoms came popping out.” I can hear Julia huffing as she tries to stop laughing. As our laughter winds down, we ease into a calm silence.

“Em, when my T-cell counts get a little higher, promise me that we’ll go out and celebrate and you’ll wear your birthday hat.” Juj has a quiet hopefulness in her voice, not her usual blatant defiance.

“I promise,” I say, hoping that she will believe me.

“Hello.”

“What’s up, girl?” Juj asks, leaving little time for an answer before continuing, “Have you been keeping your phone unplugged or what?! I’ve been trying to call you for like ten days. I really needed to talk.” A pang of remorse shoots through my body when Juj says those words. She hardly ever wants to talk and I promised myself I would always be there when she did.
"Sorry. Last week was pretty bad and you know me, always trying to cut myself off from the human race whenever I'm feeling crappy." I have to use words like 'crappy' because Juj can't stand 'suicidal.' Perennial optimism is her creed; I think how much like my Mom she is.

"Anything in particular happen, or just general badness?" Juj asks, probably praying that I don't get too somber all at once.

"Actually it all started out kind of funny. I went in for my draw on Tuesday morning and Verna wasn't there . . . "

"I thought Verna worked every morning."

"I know, so did I. But they have this new girl, still wet behind the ears. Usually I won't let anyone touch my veins but Big-V, except the good doctor said I had to get the blood taken by noon, so I was trapped. Anyway, she is sticking around in my arm and she says that she's sorry, but they're all collapsed."

"Even your money vein?"

"Yep, even my beautiful money vein. So finally, she gets out this little pump thing with a needle attached and sticks it into the top of my hand and starts pumping."

"Ow! That is harsh."

"I got my payback though. It hurt so much and it just kept throbbing as she kept pumping and the room started spinning and the next thing I knew I was staring at her shoes and yacking my guts out."

"No way." Juj starts to laugh and I can hear her head gently hitting the phone. "You puked on the new girl."

"All over her little, white Keds."

"Now tell me again how a week that starts out like that could get bad."

"Well, the blood work came back: IgM skyrocketed, IgG plummeted." Julia is silent, which hardly ever happens. I think she realizes that our joyous reunion has just been pushed back indefinitely. I hope she does anyway, because that's not something I can tell her right now.

"That sucks," she finally says. The resignation in her voice makes me want to cry. Juj was not meant for sadness like this. Juj was not meant for any kind of sadness. I suddenly flashback to that picture from when she was named 'Spartan of the Year.' Nate and Michael were hoisting her up on their shoulders and we were all standing around looking up at her in awe.

"As long as we're sharing bad news, I might as well tell you that the chemo was a bust." This quiet statement abruptly shakes me out of my
memory. I know the words but I can’t seem to line them up in my mind. I feel the blood rush out of my hands, as the phone slides down my cheek. I quickly grab for the phone; I feel like I have to hold on to something. I try to think of something funny to say. We both like to laugh when we should cry. All I can think is how scared she must be. Juj has so much fear of death and I have so much fear of life. I always think that together we should be able to get through anything, but somehow we just end up in silence, lost in uncertainty. I cannot even see her face.

“Remember what it used to be like?” I finally begin to speak.

“When?” Julia wonders, anticipating what memory lane we will stroll down today.

“When we were alive.”