Four Blue Windbreakers

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Aimee and I wear ours at eight in the morning—alone.

The night before, Mom had weaved Aimee’s lightning-blonde hair into a tight braid. But now in the morning light, Aimee looks like an albino Klingon or something, random hairs flying from her head like alien antennas. Her light blue windbreaker pulls tight along her bird shoulders as she slides into the passenger seat.

I freeze. “You’re not old enough yet.”

“I’m tall enough,” she yawns, reaching for the seatbelt over her head. “And that’s what matters in the law.”

“That’s not true.” I fling another backpack in the backseat. “Height doesn’t equate maturity. Don’t be stupid.”

She makes that face. I hate when she looks at me like that—eyelids fully receded, mouth closed tight. Like she’s expecting me to explode in her face.

I rub my nose, itch my nose, and scratch my nose until she looks away.

“We’re not supposed to say that word, Rachel.”

“Well, I said it. Now be quiet while I get the rest of the stuff.”

I pass through the sleeping rooms of our house one more time. I feel I am forgetting something, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. We have the tarp, sleeping bag, the food...

I pause in the doorway of Mom’s room. She is sprawled on her side of the king bed, a harlequin novel lifting and falling on her chest. She snores. I hate the sound.

Last night, she sat on the couch in her pajamas and started spouting advice as she pulled Aimee’s hair back in a tight braid. I think Mom was starting to realize the awfulness of her plan to force us to have fun.

“Don’t forget to text me when you get to the base of the mountain.”

I scrolled through my phone, focusing on nothing. “I will.”

“And don’t forget to refill your water bottles with the nozzles by the bathrooms.”

“We won’t forget.”
"And be sure to tie up the food."

"I won’t."

"What do you mean you won’t?"

"I mean I won’t forget."

Aimee strained to look back at Mom. “What if I get hungry in the middle of the night?”

Mom plastered on a smile and rubbed Aimee’s head. “Rachel’ll make sure you eat. I packed you hotdogs and chips and s’mores—”

“S’mores!”

“And you’ll have lots of fun.”

“But I already miss you,” whined Aimee. She warily looked at me.

“I won’t forget anything, Mom. Promise,” I said.

I am shot back into the doorway, looking at Mom sleeping.

Of course I have everything.

I grab the keys, a few extra water bottles, and lock the front door.

Then I unlock it and lock it again.

And again.

* * *

We weren’t the kind of family who liked Easter, so I’m pretty sure it was a Target sale that turned the set of four of us Christian. Dad, Aimee, and I awoke that April morning a year ago to find bunny chocolates stuffed in colored baskets alongside dumb windbreakers.

By the way Mom made us all try ours on and go stand in front of the bathroom mirror, and the way she came prepared with makeup already on at seven in the morning, I think she wanted this to be a moment. Or at least something different than us rubbing our armpits, experimenting on the sound of air and plastic.

Dad kept playing with the noise his zipper made, his chin folding into his neck. It sounded like a spaceship taking off. I said, “You look stupid, Spock.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It is illogical to speak that way to the half Vulcan that is keeping us all alive on this ship, Captain.” He turned to Mom and whispered, “These don’t seem very practical, hon.”

Mom paused her posing. Then, pinching her windbreaker at her waist, trying to see a shape through her plastic, she sighed, “It’s not about practicality, Mike. We all match, and that’s what matters.”
Aimee bounced like an idiot and beamed and twirled in the mirror. She told Mom we all looked like supermodels.

I think Mom read too many catalogs. She had probably seen a picture of a perfect family of four roasting plastic marshmallows over a CGI-inserted fire. Dad said you can tell it’s photoshop because the fires don’t cast shadows on their faces, so the models’ faces just look one-tone happy.

Mom insisted we go that summer, a set of four, on a camping trip in the California woods.

But we never got around to it. Dad got a promotion and Grandma Cheri broke her hip and in the end that summer Aimee and I watched Netflix on the couch the whole time. Then when school came around and Dad died in Vegas, shot twice in the stomach and once in the face under the jaw, we packed up our boxes of stuff and moved to Oregon. Just the three of us.

* * *

I turn off at the wrong pass.

“That was wrong, Rachel,” said Aimee.

“I know. I saw it.”

I turn around. I focus on the road, my fingers straining white on the grip of the steering wheel, when I suddenly hear some plastic rustle. I glance over.

“Aimee, get out of the cooler!”

She balances the red cooler on her knees. “But I’m hungry!”

“If you ate before we left, you wouldn’t be.”

“You didn’t make anything.”

“If you’re tall enough for the front seat, you’re tall enough to pour your own darn bowl of cereal.” I catch her sneaking a brown square between her lips. “And stay out of the chocolate!”

“If I eat now, then I won’t be hungry later.”

“You’re not eating all our chocolate on the way up!”

“Fine!” She throws the chocolate back inside, hoists the cooler on her shoulder, and dramatically drops it in the back seat. “Whatever, Rachel.” She yanks a coloring book out of her backpack. My backpack. My old backpack. “How much longer?”

My gaze jolts to my phone propped on the dash. “About another two hours.”

I hear her grumble, “D’you think if we pulled over and stayed at a hotel, Mom would know?”
"It's a prepaid campsite, Aimee. We're going." I attempt a smile. "Besides, it'll be an adventure. Won't it?"

Forty minutes down the highway, she asks the question I know is on her mind.

"Did you remember your medication?"

I raise my eyebrows at the road. I feel the snake perpetually wrapped around my nerves begin to coil around my bones, tensing all my muscles. "Don't be a retard."

"That's a bad word."

"It's not if I say it. And of course I took my medication."

She shifts under her seatbelt. "But did you bring your medication?"

I flick the blinker. I am fairly sure we were supposed to go right a half mile ago. "I only need to take it once a day."

"Mom says you should take it twice."

Even after I change lanes, I click the blinker twice more. I do because if I don't, I feel like I am holding my breath and cannot breathe underwater and the world fades in the corner of my eyes and the snake around my heart devours me whole, so I click the blinker twice more than necessary to breathe.

"Well, Julie says I only need to take it once a day. And Julie’s the one who’s got a PhD, so I’m going to listen to her over Mom."

"Okay." I hate the silence that buzzes between us. "Did you bring your meds bottle to take it tomorrow?"

A cold feeling rushes under the sleeves of my windbreaker, crawls up my neck and down my back.

"Jeez, of course I did. I remembered. I have it."

"Can I check?"

"Can you shut up?"

We stop talking. I try to fight the mental image of the orange bottle still on my nightstand.

The car slopes upward under us like we’re on a rollercoaster. The road is getting thinner ahead of me, and now the stress is crawling to my head. The trees converge in on us, the skyline disappearing under their shade.

Oregon air is different from any other kind of air: wet in all the wrong ways. Like the air comes from the ground instead of the empty sky. That empty sky starts to disappear as we creep up the dirt mountain road.

Aimee pulls a Magic Treehouse book out of her backpack. Nonchalantly flipping through the pages, she straightens her back and clears her throat. She crosses her legs and pursed her lips
—like Mom does when she knows something is out of place.

Aimee is waiting for me to apologize.

I turn on the radio. I push the button three times. Mariachi music blasts from the speakers. I fumble and click three times and only end on static. Three more and it’s a fuzzy channel of pop music. Three more and I’m past it. Three back and I’m in the same place.

“Don’t worry, Rach,” she sighs. Her seatbelt snags as she leans forward. “I’ve got it.”

She presses it once, and it lands on the pop channel. We drive. I straighten my neck and refuse to thank her.

The trees are starting to converge. I try to lose myself in the Ke$ha song.

* * *

Dad and I would watch Star Trek on Saturday mornings.

He always awoke at least three hours before Mom, which gave him full control of the television until nine. I would pretend to trudge out in my pajamas, acting upset that I couldn’t go back to sleep. Lying, saying I’d had a bad dream or I was worried about school. Dad would pour me some Lucky Charms.

Then we would watch. Captain Kirk would always try to act braver than he actually was. When people think of the original series, most of them only laugh at William Shatner’s announcer voice and bad acting, but it is so much more than that. There was an elegance in the way Captain Kirk approached problems: unyielding, confident. A lost prince searching for his kingdom.

At least, that’s what Dad would say.

Whenever the Enterprise left a planet, off to scurry into deep of space, a sense of loss filled me. I asked Dad one day why they couldn’t stay.

He bumped my shoulder. “That’s what they do, space explorer. They travel to places no man has gone before. They don’t go places to stay. Only to discover.”

* * *

We finally find the turnoff for the campground.

The parking lot is barricaded by sliced logs, and the front wheels of our car bump one when I pull into a spot too fast. A smile spreads across Aimee’s face.
“Finally.” She packs her bag. “Should I bring my book?”

I shrug. “Sure. You’ll probably have time to read it.”

The car off, I start to feel much better. The tension cramping my muscles to my bones starts to fade, and I feel I can breathe easy. The path to the site is just ahead.

Opening the door, the chill surprises me. I forgot to account for the altitude, but luckily my windbreaker is barely warm enough.

Pulling open the back door of the car, I swing a school backpack over each shoulder. Sleeping bags swing off their bottoms, tied on with rope from the garage. I carry the cooler in both hands.

“Aimee, can you get your backpack and the tarp?”

I hear her feet stop moving on the gravel. “We’re not bringing a tent?”

My arms ache enough already holding the cooler. “We’ll sleep under the stars,” I say. “It’s more fun. It’ll feel like we’re sleeping in outer space.”

“But what if I want a tent?”

“And it’s a half mile walk to the spot. Do you want to carry it?”

“But don’t we need a tent to technically go camping?”

I think back to those two weeks I was a Girl’s Scout. “Not if you want to have fun.” I force a smile, though neither of us buy it. “Come on!” I start for the trail, anxious to get the bags off my back.

She scurries behind me.

The road is not well-marked, and I can feel every ridge through the rubber of my sneakers. Over rocks, through ditches—ten minutes in, I regret ever coming. Due to Google Maps not knowing which way is up while I was driving, it is already past noon. No way we can go swimming in that lake Mom found online.

“Why didn’t Mom come?’’

I roll my eyes. Mom told me that she needed to finish some housework. “She lost her windbreaker.”

“No she didn’t. It’s in her closet.” Aimee kicked a rock. “Kinda hard to miss.”

I sighed. “Uncle Joe is going to stay over.”

Aimee leaned back in her seat. “Oh. Does he not want to see us?”

“No, he probably wants to see us.”

“Then why can’t we stay?”

I itch my face twice. Then I itch it again. “Because we’re not invited.”
The chilly air bites through our windbreakers.

Aimee asks with an elevated tone. "You know, it's good Uncle Joe is coming to visit."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just know it's good."

"That's stupid. Don't say anything unless you have a good reason."

"It's not stupid. It's not like they're going on a date."

I stare ahead. "I didn't think they were going on a date."

"Then why isn't it good?"

I curve forward, shifting the weight of my backpacks to my neck—if only for a moment.

"Uncle Joe is an ass," I say.

Aimee's light-up shoes shuffle to a stop. I keep walking.

"What did you say?"

"Look, Aimee. We're in nature. Everything's beautiful, and there's birds and deer. So can you shut up about Mom and Uncle Joe and just enjoy it?"

She stops talking. After a few minutes, she starts sniffing.

I pull one of the backpack straps tighter on my shoulder. No way I'm falling for that.

"I'm hungry," she says.

"And we're almost there," I say. "Almost. Just a few more minutes."

* * *

The shooter's name was James. According to STAR magazine, friends called him Jim.

I can't imagine any of his friends knew his favorite color, though. Feel like that's friendship 101—you can't be close enough to give someone a nickname unless you know their favorite color. His "friends" probably just liked their words about James a few centimeters away from the newest gossip about Ryan Reynolds.

If Jim really accumulated so many friends, they would know his favorite color. And they would have told him not to shoot my Dad.

STAR reassured that Kenny Chesney was fine. The first bullet missed him. His security escorted him out immediately to a special little room they apparently have under the Bowl. A guard jumped on Kenny to save him—just in case. The movement sprained Kenny's pinky. He couldn't play the guitar for two months after.
I didn’t read the rest of STAR magazine’s report.

Because the editors had only so many pages, and they needed to get in the article for Ryan Reynolds, they only had two pages covering the victims. Their deceased Facebook profile pictures, gray and fuzzy—people who were smiling who are no longer smiling. They had little fun facts, like favorite movies and television shows.

My Dad was the only trekkie who died, because Uncle Joe didn’t die.

If Joe was brave enough to die with Dad, there would have been two trekkies in that magazine.

* * *

We arrive at the campsite three hours after I tell Aimee to shut up.

I have grown used to the gnawing straps on my back. When I drop the cooler, my arms burn at the released weight.

At least, I think it is the campsite. It’s shaped like a moon, with only a few rocks and twigs strewn over somewhat even dirt.

The sun is low in the sky, disappearing behind the countless trees. I drop my luggage and go to cool off in the woods before I murder Aimee and her stupid braid that is falling apart and her scrunched eyebrows and wide eyes that are scared that I’m going to yell or something. And her silence. I hate her when she waits for me to snap.

It’s getting cold. It’s like the air is bipolar or something, not making up its mind.

When I catch my breath, I come back to find her sitting on a downed tree trunk, rummaging through the cooler.

“Let’s make hot dogs,” she says.

“Well, first we need to gather sticks for fire. You go right, and I’ll go left.”

I find a log that vaguely resembles a person lying down. I drag it back to our site. In the half-light, the shards of sun splinter on the forest floor as day melts into night. Aimee has a few small sticks in her hands.

“How do we light it?” she asks.

“Easy,” I drop the log. “Throw the sticks on top.” I pull out the matches.

Strike, strike, strike.

It isn’t catching.

Aimee sits across the sticks, watching.

“How do we light it?” she asks.

“Does Mom not like her windbreaker anymore?”
“Huh?”

“That could be why Mom didn’t come. Because she finally realized it’s really ugly.”

A smirk cracks my face. “I don’t know. I hope she realized how heinous these things are.”

The flames on the match tickle the stick, but none of the embers live long.

Aimee asks quietly, “Do you think she still has Dad’s?”

I scratch too hard on the matchbox. The match snaps and my knuckles scrape the sandpaper.

“No. She probably donated it with the rest of his clothes. It was too new to keep, anyway.”

My heart speeds as it grows darker. The cold now hangs over us, temperature dropping by the second. Occasionally, a fire will catch an edge of a stick, live for a moment, then die away.


“We don’t need fire,” I say, dropping the matches. Aimee is right; I don’t have my medication, and I should not stress myself out.

“Wait. Of course we do!” she is suddenly angry. “How else are we going to eat?”

“Well,” I rustle through the cooler. “We can eat the hot dogs raw.”

“We’ll get sick!”

I pull my earlobe three times. “They’re already baked. Cooking is only a formality with hotdogs.” I tear the plastic with my teeth and pull out the cold dogs. My fingers prick in the meaty water. Laying the strings of hotdogs on the cooler lid, I rip apart the hot dog buns.

“Come on, Aimee. We should eat all these so we don’t have to tie them up for the bears.”

“No.”

“It’ll be fun.” I am losing my patience again.

She pulls her knees up to her chest. “This is the opposite of fun.”

I laugh loud, thinking it will change her mind. She only looks at me quizzically. I eat three cold hot dogs.

Eventually, Aimee chooses a bun and starts pulling apart pieces, placing crumbs slowly on her tongue.

* * *

“What is that thing Spock says? Before a journey?” Mom asked Dad across from the kitchen table. It was the morning he left for Vegas.

I piped up. “It’s live long and prosper, Mom. He literally says it all the time. Even trolls on the Internet know that.”
Dad raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, sure. Even, uh, trolls know it. And the fairies in the radio know it as well. And Rachel’s other imaginary friends who live in electronics.”

I threw a dry Cheerio at Dad. It bounced off his big cowboy hat.

“I’d rather have Internet friends than go to some dumb cowboy concert where everyone pretends to drawl.”

Aimee looked up at Mom. “What does ‘drawl’ mean?”

Mom pushed a hair from Aimee’s face. “It means, well...like when people talk funny.”

“Like how?”

I watched a light fill Dad’s face. I knew it would happen. He leaned across the table at Aimee. “It means,” he rumbled, “L-l-like th-th-this.”

She shrieked and threw her hands up. “Daddy, that’s scary!”

Expression sullen, he dropped back in his seat and took another bite of his apple.

Mom patted Aimee’s head. “It means;” she tried in a gentle southern accent, “You talk like this. Live long and prosper, Dad.”

Aimee perked up. She tried to mimic Mom. It was pathetic. “Live long and prosper, Dad.”

Dad grinned. He then turned to me. I rolled my eyes.

“Live looong and prospeeer, Dad.”

*I * *

I slide my sneakers across the dirt, feeling for the biggest rocks. It is practically pitch black around us now, and the light of my flashlight quivers as I seek out the biggest stone. I shove them out of the way, and lay the tarp. It is officially cold now, and I have zipped my windbreaker all the way up to my chin. It still makes the Enterprise noise.

The two sleeping bags rolled out, I call to Aimee. She is sitting on her own on that log, turned away from me, straining to read her book in the dark. She is probably still moping.

“It’ll be warmer in your sleeping bag.”

She shuffles over, not looking me in the eye. Both of us forgot to bring pajamas, so we will be sleeping in our hiking clothes.

“I hate you,” she whispers.

I ignore her as I throw the contents of a cooler in a trash bag, tie a rope around the top, and hoist it over a branch. I used to be like Aimee—if only a little. I used to say mean things I never meant.
I step back. Everything in the camp is in its place. The tightness in my chest begins to pull apart, the snake always seizing my nerves releasing his grip.

Sure, it's much colder without a fire, and the hot dogs did very little to curb my exhaustion from the unexpected hike searching for the site. But I did everything I was supposed to—even if the dark trees looked like men standing around us, watching, waiting to close in.

I drop into my sleeping bag and lay on my extra sweatshirt like a pillow. I am finally beginning to feel the warmth of my bag when I hear an inorganic crinkle join the noises of the night.

“Aimee?”

I turn to face her. She is completely swallowed by her sleeping bag. She looks like an animal caught in a cobra’s belly.

A little louder. “Aimee, what are you doing?”

Then I hear the strangled muffle of her crying.

I leap to my feet and scramble over. “Aimee!” My breath catches as I unzip the side and throw open the tongue of the bag. I point the flashlight in her face.

Suddenly shocked, she starts a low whine, muffled by the sound of something in her throat. By the solitary light of my flashlight, I see it.

“Dammit!”

I grab her arms and peel her out of her tin foil sleeping bag. The insides run slick with melted chocolate. I drop her and inspect it.

“Frick, Aimee! That was a real smart thing to do.”

She cries in her hands, her small body shaking, the chocolate drying like blood on her hands.

“What did you want? To be an ice cream sandwich for some bear?”

Her sweatpants and arms are covered in it, already hardening on her skin in the cool night. I look into the woods. The bathroom is far away, and I’m not sure which direction it is. The trees stare hauntingly back.

“Why’d you have to go do that, Aimee? Are you happy now?”

She shudders on her own spit. “I-I just wanted.” She cuts herself off with a gasp. Her cheeks swell a beet red color.

“Fine, calm down!” I scratch my head three times, my face three times, my head three times, my face three times, my head three times—

“Stop touching yourself!” she screams suddenly. “You’re always touching yourself, Rachell!”

“I can’t help it!”
“Yes, you can!”

“No! I can’t!” I scream hoarse.

The trees are practically curving in half in the wind. I press my hands against my forehead.

“Alright.” I start pacing. The blackness envelops us, chews us, swallows us up. I take a breath and try to sound calm. “We’ll get through this. It’s fine. It’s good. We’ll just put the sleeping bag up with the food in the tree. That way if a bear comes it’ll eat the bag and not you.”

I look down to see chocolate spread on her arms and sweatpants. In this light, it looks as black as the ground. I cough.

“Can you lick it off?”

She shakes her head, shuddering a hiccup.

“Alright, stop crying, dangit. That’s not gonna fix anything. We need to be rational about this. Dignified.” I put my hands on my hips.

She wipes her eyes. “If we sleep in the car, would we be safe?”

I look into the dark woods. I can see no path.

“No, the car’s too far. The bear’ll eat you on the way. There has to be another way.” I look her up and down. “Can you sleep in your underwear?”

“No! It’s too cold!” she shrieks, covering herself preemptively, like a full-grown woman on a blockbuster poster. The empty woods around us scream as the wind shifts the trees.

Rustling once, rustling twice, rustling thrice. Rustling once—

“Fine.” I am not too comfortable with her in her underwear, either. It is too cold, anyway. I finally admit to myself that our crappy family windbreakers are useless. My teeth chatter.

Scratch my head three, two, one.

I feel like running, screaming, taking off the nearest branch and biting it in half.

I know that we are running out of time. I swing the white light of the flashlight to my clean sleeping bag. “You can sleep in my sleeping bag.”

“With you?”

“Sure. We’ll snuggle. It’ll be fun,” I throw on a smile as cheesy as anything. “Just like when we were little.”

“Rachel,” she sobs and drops her head in her knees for a long time. Finally, she utters, “I don’t want to be eaten by a bear.”

“You won’t, Aimee. That never actually happens.”

Neither of us believe me.
“Besides, I’m a teenager, which means I’m so smelly it’ll cancel out the chocolate smell.”

“That’s not how it works,” she says. “Not even you smell that bad.”

“Trust me, Aimee,” I listen to the steadiness of my own voice, even though I taste the lie. “I’m in Biology, and I just learned this. It’s called pheromones, and it’s in our sweat. As a teenager, it means I can cancel out smells. Now, come along.” I feel like a witch luring a child. “We wanted to sleep under the stars, so let’s do it together.”

On shaky legs I move back across the campsite to my single sleeping bag. The radiance of my flashlight dips into my eyes, temporarily blinding me as I wiggle into my sleeping bag. I open the top flap. “Aimee,” I say in a sharper tone. “We’re doing this.”

She wipes her nose and crawls on the tarp. Still gasping and crying, she edges herself into my lap. I work hard not to touch my face as she coils up her limbs and slips her feet inside. I reach past her for the zipper and shimmie it closed. The bag is barely big enough for both of us. We both lay down, squished next to one another.

I point the flashlight at the trees to our right. The largest ones. The shadows move.

“Rach?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I please have some water?”

I fumble around over my head until I find the cold, plastic bottle. I bring it over my head and hold it above us.

“Thanks,” she sniffs. She takes it, props on an elbow and takes a few dry swallows. I can hear her hiccups as she tries to slow her sobs. She gives the bottle back to me, and I returned it to its place. I clutch the flashlight in the arm wrapped over her, still looking.

She won’t stop crying. My heart hammers in my chest, and I brush my nose, brush my nose, brush my nose. My gaze flickers at every leaf movement, twig crack, and whispering howl.

“Aimee, you’re going to be fine. Aimee, I am here to save you.”

“You can’t fight a bear,” she whimpers.

“No.” And then I state the obvious—the terror that I have been intentionally hiding from myself. “The bear will kill me first.”

“The bear doesn’t want you. You’re not covered in chocolate.”

“Bears can’t tell the difference. It’ll eat me first because I’m bigger, okay? That will give you time to run away. So if a bear comes, you’ll have to make a break for it into the woods.”

“But I don’t want to see you torn apart by a bear.”

I swallow. “Yeah, well. You’ll just have to go to therapy for that. Because the bear will get me first. Do you believe me?”
A pause.

“Yes, Rach.”

“And I will be up all night,” I know it is true the moment I say it. There is no way I will relax enough to sleep now, “I will be watching the woods. So you don't have to worry about the bears. I promise. I’ll shake you if I see one.”

“Okay.”

Something moves to our right. I sit up and point the light at it. Nothing but trees.

“This is hell.”

“Aimee, you’re not supposed to say that word.”

“I know.” Then she curls her fingers into her face and starts a new wave of tears.

I look back at the woods, bracing for the next sound. “Aimee, it’s okay. I'll be in charge of saying those words. So don't worry about saying them.” I breathe. “This is hell.”

* * *

I wonder if this is how Dad felt when he was shot twice in the stomach and once in his head.

I also wonder if Dad felt anything at all.

A crucial part of me needs to know which song was playing, how many people were killed before him, how long he had to be scared, which bullet hit first, if it hurt like a papercut or a burn, and if anyone stepped on his hands as they ran over him and all those survivors bounced around like animals in a corral, dodging rain falling from hell.

The only thing I know is that Uncle Joe left my Dad.

Pretty quickly, actually. He would have had to bolt in order to get as far away as he did. Uncle Joe hid in the basement of the Bowl, which is stupid because turns out the shooter was coming from a window across the street. I think about how funny Joe must’ve looked, shivering in a supply closet, praying that God would save him, save him, save him—all the while the police were two stories above his head, scrounging for survivors, rifling through the bodies. Stepping on Dad’s hands.

Uncle Joe wasn’t there to stop them from stepping—or to say Dad might still be alive.

* * *

“Aimee?”
“Yeah?”

I pull a stray hair from her face. “I love you.”

She burrows into my stomach and mumbles, “You better.”

“Well, I do. Because I’m not running anywhere. I promise.” I force myself to stay lying down, instead of bolting into the woods. “But if a bear comes, I’ll yell ‘bear’ and you can run. Run as far as you can back to the car. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

Aimee and I squish together, the subtle glow of our body heat transcending our insufficient windbreakers and miraculously reflecting each other’s warmth. Like the Enterprise transponders pulsing each other.

The edge of the flashlight digs into my inner wrist as I hold it upright, scanning the trembling world around us. I strain my neck to keep my gaze level. Insects chirp. Twigs break. Things growl.

“Aimee?”

“Yeah?”

Taking a lone, deep breath, I manage, “If I die...can you tell Mom I love her?”

“I will.”

I drum my fingers against my hidden leg three times. I kiss Aimee’s cheek once. She doesn’t move, but her small hand reaches for mine. I hide it in my palm.

It hurts so much to sit up that, after a few minutes, I lean back on my crumpled sweatshirt. It cushions my neck as panic continues to well within me.

I don’t mind the fear as much anymore, though. Neither the panic nor I are leaving tonight, and that makes it more okay.

And, in that sleeping bag, I surrender. The snake coiling my bones and seizing my nerves unbites me, its fangs drawn from my neck and resting smooth on my collarbones. We’ll sleep together—him unlodged, weightless on my chest, as I listen to every sound of the night.

What seems like hours later, Aimee drifts off. She whistles with each breath, the sound emerging deep from her gut.

I nuzzle her forehead with my nose. She only stirs in her sleep.

Patches of the sky above trickle through the black branches intertwined over our heads. I kiss Aimee’s cheek again, scratch my face, then watch as the infinite blackness swings over us. Throughout the night, I catch glimpses of stars in unbalanced sets of three, swirling and twisting. And I find comfort consume my shaking frame as I watch the way those stars stumble their improvised shuffle against the backdrop of their depthless, unconquered universes.
Currently a senior in the English program at BYU, Mari Molen originally hails from Fountain Valley, California. She enjoys working in the library archives as a research assistant. In her freetime, Mari likes reading, cooking Japanese food, making dragon noises, psychoanalyzing strangers online, and speaking in the third person. Mari is not an android giraffe from Brooklyn, and asks politely for the parties involved in circulating those rumors to stop.