

The one thing I remember from childhood is that I always felt like I was running out of time. I had a sense that with every passing day, I had fewer opportunities to enjoy life before I grew up and got lost in the milling crowds of talented and successful. For that reason, I chose to do all the painful, laborious things first so I could have time for fun later, a nice block of time between childhood and adulthood where I could be myself, and maybe go someplace special.

But of course, these plans never really worked out. I was consumed by the feeling that there was something I had to accomplish by a certain time, and it wasn't long before my entire life became a circular race where I couldn't stop to breathe. When I rushed to finish my homework, I had to learn sports and music, and by the time I finished that, I realized the desire to work harder and prove myself was addicting, and, as all things that are difficult to stop, increasingly painful.

When I was eight years old, and lost in the middle of all this, I met a girl who completely disagreed with me. She said that none of it really mattered, these practical yet trivial things about showing off every little detail and comparing yourself to strangers. She said she could fly, and that the feeling of flying is what really mattered. So once, I asked her to prove it and show me how to fly, and she said she didn't know how to yet, but that she might tell me one day if I could wait that long. I laughed.

I met her was during recess at my elementary school. At that time, I didn't have any friends; it was a phenomenon that other kids naturally gravitated away from me, as if I was emitting some sort of repelling signal. I could have been doing something perfectly mundane, and people would look at me as if I were an alien. At first, it hurt me badly, and I would spend my days staring longingly at groups of kids talking and laughing, dreaming hopelessly that one day I would be like that too. But over the solitary years, I got used to it, and became rather bitter and cynical. By the time I was in high school, I might have died of shock or ran away screaming if large groups of people suddenly wanted to be friends with me.

Back then, she didn't have any friends either. We were two lonely kids at the same school— it almost set up the perfect scene for a childhood friendship that would last forever, but of course, we already know that nothing works out that way.

During recess, she would always sit alone, curled up along the side of the blacktop, gazing into space. I used to hang around alone, too, and one day, I started to wonder if she was lonely like I was. I wondered if she wanted to talk to me.

When I couldn't bear it anymore, I went up to her. I was shy as ever and unable to say a word, but when she looked at me, I had the sudden premonition that we would get along. I don't know how that happened, because I had never really made friends before.

"Hi," I remember saying.

"Hi," she responded. "What are you looking for?"

At that moment, I might have said, "you," or to be more normal, "hey, we should be friends," but I just kept my mouth shut and grinned awkwardly.

We sat together that day, along the cool metal railings of the jungle gym. We didn't say much, but somehow it didn't feel uncomfortable or tense. For children, silence can be natural; it's one of the rare periods in life when people's conversations aren't dominated by etiquette and meaningless phrases.

"Did you know that the sky isn't really blue?" she asked, looking upward.

"Yes it is," I said. I looked at the sky, and sure enough, it looked blue.

"No it's not," she told me, "it only looks that way."

"Why?" I mumbled, expecting the kind of boastful scientific response that I would have tried to give. Her answer surprised me.

"Because there are those things that look one way, but they're actually another."

"Like lying?"

"No, they're not lying," she said passionately.

"That's what it's called."

"No, because I'm sure that the sky knows it's not blue, and it hasn't said anything. It's just because people look at it and say it's blue, and then that's what everyone believes, and it's not the truth."

I didn't know what to say. I stared up at the sky again, doubting that it had such complicated thoughts. "I guess so."

When we got to the later years of elementary school, the other kids started teasing us.

"They like each other," they'd say, giggling manically, when they saw us sitting together having a perfectly casual conversation. I really had no idea where they got that from, because even though I knew what relationships were and what couples did together, I honestly didn't think of her that way.

One day in class, a girl came up to me and said loudly, “I saw you kissing your girlfriend!” and ran back to her friends. It was a total lie, but I stood there, uncertain and red-faced, as the class stared at me. “Ew, no, that’s gross,” I declared, trying to sound emphatic.

Later that day, she walked away when she saw me. I followed her, feeling, for the first time in my life, like a total jerk, and I realized she was crying.

“Why are you crying?” I asked, though not totally oblivious.

“I hate you,” she sniffed.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said, having trouble keeping the whine out of my voice.

“I hate you, I hate you!” she said louder, turning away.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it.”

“I told you I hate you.”

“But…” I was torn with guilt for a moment, and then my instincts suddenly overtook me, and I walked over and grabbed her hand.

The look on her face was like nothing I’ve ever seen, a little smile brightening over her puffy eyes and the tears still rolling down her cheeks. She pulled her hand away, and my mouth fell open. I don’t think I’ve ever blushed like that before.

“What are you doing?!” But she was still smiling.

“I—I… nothing, I don’t know,” I stuttered.

She sighed, and looked toward me as if she were looking at something very beautiful and far away.

“You didn’t have to call me gross,” she said quietly.

I remember walking home with my heart pounding, and lying in my bed that night thinking the strangest things. I tried to replay the way I felt, but I couldn’t quite grasp it anymore. I thought about the nervousness and the embarrassment, and the way she looked, and it made me squirm inside.

I have to admit that it was a little awkward from that day on, like there was always an unanswered call hanging between us. But at the same time, we were still close, and we would still talk every day and laugh, and discuss important things, though maybe a little more politely.

Then elementary school ended, and suddenly, we weren’t kids anymore. We began sixth grade, and it wasn’t long before I saw people holding hands and stealing kisses in the hallways, and just like I used to wish I could have friends, I dreamed I could be like that. And it only took

me about a second to think of her, and then a few hours before I started imagining things I probably shouldn't have been imagining.

I was truly ashamed, because she never made the slightest intention of liking me more than as a friend. But I have admit that a spark was ignited that day I held her hand, and it never went out again; even when she didn't say a thing, I knew I was somewhere on her mind.

There was this one middle school dance I went to, with a group of people I could count as friends if I wanted to sound cool but that I didn't really care for. I was scarred for life, but watching the girls dance and rub their bodies all over their dates was oddly mesmerizing, like looking at something I knew deep inside was wrong to watch, but not being able to look away. Of all things, that image stuck in my mind, ready to be explored and observed with a sort of morbid fascination. My mind wandered, and later when I went home, I thought of her, and I realized there was a distinction between wanting someone, and really liking them, and what it meant when you felt both.

It seemed like that would be the beginning of everything, but it wasn't. I should have known that like all the other plans in my life, this wouldn't work out the way I wanted.

It happened so that one day, I was sitting behind her in English and I had to poke her awake when she fell asleep and whisper the answer when the teacher called on her, and then next day, she didn't come to school. And not the next day, either, or the next, and then my mother told me my best friend was sick.

"Sick? Like, what kind?" I asked when I first heard.

My mom just shook her head and sighed.

"I shouldn't have told you about it so early. Maybe you're too young to understand."

"What?!"

"I'm sorry," she said, turning toward me. "I just... she won't get better."

"What?" I repeated, my head spinning. "Like, dying?"

She was.

And sometimes, even now, I tell myself that I should have seen it coming. It's almost like a dream, where the race is finally over, and I'm finally about to enter that place where I can be safe and happy for the shortest period of time, and then I blink and it all comes crashing down.

She moved away to get treatment, to a place where there must have been better doctors and better technology. I couldn't follow, even though I secretly wanted to, but I did go visit her

one last time. She was lying in bed when I saw, and she reached her hand out when she saw me. I took it, like one of those adults in movies, and when she looked at me, I realized I was crying. But I was barely crying on the outside, it was more a slowly breaking that happened inside me, something I've never felt before, like a small fire I never knew existed was fading out.

"Hey," she said, smiling.

I sat down beside her. "Hey."

"Don't cry," she whispered, so softly her lips barely moved, and I knew she did it so that no one else would hear.

I turned my head downward and tried to stop.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Who are you kidding?"

She looked at me with that same faraway look that she gave me once before. "I promise, I'm okay. Believe me."

"Really? Will you get better?"

"Yes, I will. They won't tell you that, they'll say I'm going to die, but... that's because they don't really know. They just look at the papers and stuff and act like they know everything, but just because they think so doesn't mean it's true. They don't know anything. Only I know that I'm okay, and they'll never believe me if I tell them so I won't say anything. But you will, right?" She tugged on my hand gently.

"Yeah."

I felt like I was looking at everything through a long tunnel, and everything was speeding by too quickly for me to bear. The tears in my eyes were threatening to overflow and I tried to control them and failed.

"Hey," she whispered, after a long pause.

"Hey."

"I can tell you how I can fly now."

"You remember that?" I choked.

"They say angels can fly."

"People can't turn into angels." I regretted being so rude the moment I said it, but she didn't seem to mind. Or maybe she just didn't care about things like that.

"I don't want to be. I'll be a bird, and I'll be in the sky, and... I'll come find you."

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why me?”

“That’s why I can fly. I can fly when you talk to me, I can feel it. I’m flying right now, you just can’t see it by looking, so you never knew.”

“I know.” At that point, I did.

It took me forever to realize that she had always known she wouldn’t live past her teens, even when we first met in on the playground when we were eight.

She moved away after that and a while later, I don’t know how long, I heard she died. I didn’t cry, and I didn’t see why other people did, and then I realized that I was the only one who knew she wasn’t really gone. She just turned into something else, out there in the sky that isn’t blue, flying around and looking for me.