

Fly Girl

I haven't thought about her in two days. Guilt guiding my feet, I climb the rickety wooden ladder to the attic, wipe the dust off the old oak chair that used to be in Papaw's living room, sit down. Her books loom like mountains around me. They haven't been touched since I moved them up here three years ago. A thick layer of dust paints the covers indiscernible, a reminder that life goes on, even though she doesn't.

Grabbing a book from the top of the nearest stack, I blow the dust off. From the light coming in the lone window, frosted with spider webs and the permanent fog of too many humid summers, I see that it's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. It used to belong to our older brother, Seth, but he passed it on to her when she was old enough to read it.

I clutch the book to my chest relishing the fact that she's touched this book, her shy hands have brushed over the title's raised bumps and, with no one watching, cracked the spine, ruffled the pages, smoothed the splintering edges. I flip to the middle of the book, pages stained by chocolate fingers and words underlined in red ink. I bring the pages to my nose; they smell faintly of her room, of unwashed clothes and peach perfume.

I reach for another book, wiping the dust off with the side of my hand. It's *The Feelings Book*, one of many American Girl books I gave to Emma when I outgrew them. I take another, *The Adventures of Tin Tin*. We saw the movie together in theaters when it came out; the whole family went. I remember I sat next to her. Her aura was brighter than the light cast by the projector, her laugh so easy and full, the tinkle of a spoon swirling tea grinds from the bottom of a teacup. That was right before he left, one of the last happy memories of us all together.

I flip to the inside of the hard cover. A scrawl of black ink, pointed letters forming words. A journal entry. My eyes devour the page, hungry for some unknown piece of her.

Dear Beyond,

I feel so far away from everyone. They all keep talking, but I don't know what they're saying. They

all think I'm lost in my own world but I'm just lost in theirs. Mom cries all the time, Dad says terrible things about her in front of me, and Sarah doesn't notice me until I'm leaving the room. It doesn't bother me that much, I guess. I like being alone. But it'd be nice to have a voice and it doesn't seem like I have one anymore. Empty space, a star that's lost its light, a footprint in the sand washed away by a tide that keeps rising, slowly carrying me out to sea.

I reread the passage so many times the words blur together; when I blink, something taps the paper. Salt smudging ink, staining her memory. I clutch the book to my chest so hard my knuckles turn white, and let her wash over me. The day she came home from the hospital, red and splotchy, swaddled in a white blanket. When she wrapped her little hand, the size of a half-dollar, around my finger and held me as she slept. Phillip Johnny Bob, her stuffed pink elephant. Baby Sally. I used to peer around the living room archway watching as she sang made up songs into the fan, marveling at her own sweet, alien voice. Walking through the grocery store, I'd hand her cans of fruit and soup to play house with while she sat in the cart. "She always had so much imagination," I say to the books, and - despite myself - I smile through my tears. I remember her smile. When she was young, it would outshine any lamp or overhead light in the room. She kept sunshine in her pocket; her giggles rattled from deep within, from a place the rest of us had long forgotten to indulge. First steps, hands clapping along to Dora the Explorer.

And then suddenly, she was a young woman with schoolbooks and skinny jeans, black fingernails and hair that hung in her eyes. Her laugh didn't ring as strong, her smile stretched, in vain, to cover large front teeth. She didn't walk with her head up, she didn't look me in the eyes. She opened her pocket and let the sunshine bleed out as shame rose in her cheeks.

I let my head, heavy with the weight of her, fall back against the chair as my body slides down. The light from the window has vanished; I pull the cord for the overhead bulb, exposed and stuttering. Wiping the snot and congealed tears from my face, I find *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* from the discarded books at my feet and open the cover.

Something happened. I'm really confused no ones telling me anything. mom, sarah, and seth are downstairs in the kitchen. I'd say there crying, but it's more than that. It's a gut wrenching cry, its scaring me. Dad didn't come home from work. Maybe hes late. I don't understand why there crying. Maybe someone died.

She was right, someone did die; we all did a little bit that day. Emma never talked about it. She put on this brave face of hers, one that betrayed no feeling and accepted no comfort. One that could not smile, too busy keeping her grip on the world from slipping through gritted teeth.

I pick up *The Feelings Book* and open the cover. I don't find any words that form a journal. Instead, they form the names of an imaginary class she once held in our garage: Sterling Kelly, Mickey Winkle, Sally Brown. We used to play together. I'd be the teacher and she'd be all of the students. The old hutch in the garage was our desk by day, and our bed by night. We'd take our Razor scooters and commute to work around the driveway. Attendance was our favorite because Emma could role-play every student to have a different personality. She'd twirl her hair or push up fake glasses on a hooked nose, dig at the bottom of her register for a husky, lumberjack's-son voice. I always thought she'd be a great actor, but she lost her fearlessness that she had then, bravery that let her run up to strangers and dance for them at checkouts. She locked her voice away when we moved, pushed it down deeper when her dad left, and only ever found it in these books that surround me.

I flip to the back cover to a sea of blue ink.

Dear Me,

I dont want to move to Virginia. Sarah told me today, on accident I should add. They werent even going to tell me until a few weeks before it happened. Mom said Im still at the age where I make friends easily, so Ill be ok. I guess she hasnt noticed that I dont have many friends at all. I dont know how to make them. Dad keeps talking about how beautiful itll be. Whatever. Sarah seems ok with it, but she always been perfect. Im gonna tell Jaelynn about it tomorrow. Shell flip.

And right below that, another entry, this one dated two days before we packed up the van and pulled away from 3993 for the last time.

6/19/10

I dont want to leave. My rooms packed up in boxes and all my old toys are at Goodwill. Schools been over awhile, I already said my goodbyes. I still dont want to leave Indiana. I like it here. The open spaces give me room to think. Virginia is so crowded and noisy. It smells like pine cones and gas. If I dont write again, I died in fiery car crash. It might be better that way. Less painful.

Shame making my fingers shake, I close the book. I let my head fall onto it in my lap, cool and musty against blood-rushed cheeks. She only lived in the space cast by my shadow. We stuffed her there, all of us. Put my awards on the fridge and handed her a baton: *dance puppet, dance. Don't you want to be like your sister?* She couldn't find a way out - I didn't give her one - so she let it swallow her. She embraced being unnoticed, and I embraced not noticing her.

The book falls from my lap as I wrap my bare arms around myself and begin to rock. Back and forth. Back and forth. I dig my nails into my skin until I draw blood, and then I push harder. My feet are stomping against plywood floor. Dust and pieces of wood fall from the attic ceiling and land in my hair. Muffled sobs escape clenched lips. "I don't deserve to make any more noise!" I shriek to the walls. More dust lands in the bowls of my collarbones. "Emma will never have her turn," I whisper to my feet, rocking myself again. "I can't believe I didn't try. I watched her struggle and didn't do a goddamn thing about it!" I reach out and punch a pile of books, hear them collapse, pages ripping. I blink through dust rising and falling, remember how she'd leave the room every time I entered it. Wouldn't say a word, covered her teeth with her hand. "I let her alone because I thought it was what she wanted." It was easier than making time.

I think about calling Seth, letting him know what I found. I'm overwhelmed by the depth of my discovery, the memory of her voice flying away as I sprouted my wings. Her words scribed across the books of our childhood.

I reach for the phone I brought up with me, but I can't do it. I let my arm fall, feel the words dissipate. My voice is gone. I can feel it spreading out in my chest, pressing up on my skin trying to get

out. Can't. It grips me to my chair, won't let go. I grab another book from the pile. *North of Beautiful* by Justina Chen Headly, a book I gave her for her eleventh birthday.

Dear Beyond,

School was terrible. I hate it here. Someone knocked the books off my desk when I got up to use the bathroom. Everyone laughed at the "goth girl." I didn't even wear black today. Lunch was worse. I spilled chocolate milk down my shirt. I was already sitting by myself. No one will ever sit with me after this. A girl named Sybil did sit with me on the bus. I guess she was ok. We didn't talk. I just want to go home.

I want to shove all the books to the farthest corner of the attic and forget about them. I want to kick and scream and rip the plywood walls apart and let the dust fly in my eyes. I want to run to our old house, pound up the stairs, trip on the hallway rug like we always did and throw open her bedroom door to find her on the bed writing in one of her books. I want to run over to her and scoop her up into my arms and feel her heart beat against mine. Feel the confusion in her hands that push me away so I can grab tighter, so tight she feel my words in her bones. *It gets better.* Smooth her soft brown hair against my chest, rock her back and forth. *It gets better. You just have to hold on.*

I pull another book from the pile, not even bothering to dust this one off. Inside, she's crossed out the title: *The Amazing Days of Abby Hayes*.

Dear Beyond,

What is beyond? There has to be more, a life parallel to ours. What if death isn't death? What if it's a way to the next life, the only thing that separates your pain now from your salvation later. Not heaven, but a place where we can be anything we want to be with no God to answer to. We think the answer is to stick it out, and if we do, we'll be rewarded. What if the real answer is to give up? Same reward, only you get it sooner. All those storybooks with characters that keep going through all the crap that keeps happening to them, only to come out stronger than before and ready for life? Those stories make me feel broken. I can't come out stronger than before. I can't come out at all. I'm in the middle of a pitch black forest. Every time I walk, I smack into a tree. My vision isn't clearing this time. Maybe the moral of the story isn't the message we've always focused on. Maybe it's something else.

I see her sitting in her room propped up against the dozen pillows crowding her bed. She's

imagining herself happy, able to do anything she dreams, never being held back because we moved, her dad left, or even gravity. She's thinking about the beyond. She might even be smiling, letting her big goofy teeth show.

I stand up for the first time in hours, stretch my knees. They crack. More dust falls. I bend over the pile of books, searching the spines for a title I gave her. I find one near the bottom, *Jinx* by Meg Cabot. I coax it out, gently, so the pile doesn't topple. It isn't as dusty as the others and I see the woman on the cover. Strong shoulders, long curly brown hair: Emma in another life.

Dear Beyond,

I think it's time I admit what I've known for a while about my dad. He's a bad person. He hurt Mom in a way that she'll never be the same. He chose another family over the one he already had. I wasn't enough. I was a reminder of what he did. I think that's why he moved to Texas. There was something final in the hug he gave me before he drove away. The last word, and he wanted to be the one to say it.

I got a birthday package today. It had two shirts I'll never wear in it. Nothing else. He hasn't called in two weeks. To be honest, I don't think he will.

“NO!” I shout at the book, throwing it at the wall. It hits the window, glass shattering. Dust falling. “You never told me,” I cry, burying my face into my knees. Cold air comes in through the window, surrounds but doesn't touch me: anger, too hot in my veins. “You carried that pain around and never once asked me to help shoulder your burden. God,” I whisper, fists balling, “what if you did and I just refused to take it?” I let myself fall to the floor and stare up at the ceiling, watching the dust float. “I don't know. It's all so far away now, Emma.” I can barely bring forth her face from memory, the round cheeks and deep brown eyes. Secret eyes. Hurt eyes. Why didn't I see that in them before? It was always there.

I was never there.

Another book. I reach for the nearest one with strained fingertips. Slide it to me, lift it to my face. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows pt. 2*.

Dear Mom,

You try, and I know that. You have no idea how to talk to me. I know that too. If I wanted to talk, I would. I've been silent for so long that I prefer it now. I don't like hurting you, and I never mean to. And I know you don't mean to hurt me either. You'll never know this, but I'm glad you're my mom. You've always cared, even when you've been hurt yourself. Sometimes you pull away from me when things are happening in your own life, but it's not like I try and stop you. I don't blame you for what my dad did. I don't blame you for anything. I appreciate you for always trying.

Dear Sarah,

You were always torn between wanting to do the right thing and doing the right thing. I think you always meant well, but it didn't always translate. There was a long time when I admired you. I thought you could do no wrong. I thought if only I could be you, I'd be happy. But there's only one Sarah. She's great. I wish she'd been closer to me. I know she tried. I made it hard. I haven't heard from you in a month, and probably won't for a while. You're busy writing, being the successful one of the family. I'm happy for you. Really. Part of me wishes it was me, though. I always wanted to be admired by you. I spent a long time trying to be noticed. Funny, I'm noticed so much more now that it's already too late.

I don't blame you either. I don't blame Seth. I hardly know him, but in a pinch I know my big brother would pull through for me. I appreciate you both for being in my life. I appreciate the love you tried to surround me with, even if it was misguided.

If I still had love inside myself to give, I'd give it to the three of you.

-Beyond

I'm approaching her door. I'm begging myself to turn around, to get back in my Honda idling outside and drive away. I'm scared of the silence, of what I'll find. My feet won't listen. I'm turning the brass knob. I'm pushing the door open. The cat darts out between my feet. I see her, the belt I watched her buy at Target a week ago around her neck. Below it, I see a twinkle, her Dr. Who TARDIS necklace I bought her for Christmas. I feel my knees give in to the shock. Eyes that stop seeing. Pounding in my ears. Emma, is that you? I reach for the sound. I'm on her bedroom floor clutching my knees to my chest when Mom finds us. I don't know how long I've been there. Tears pool like blood where my face lies on the cold wood floor. I hear a mother's heart break, a sob that still bursts forth

from the faceless swarm of my nightmares. Ambulance lights, neighbors gathering, a fruitless search for a note of any kind. Sobbing that doesn't stop, not for months. An empty casket. Shovels. Ashes scattered from her bedroom window.

Her books in my attic.

The kind of crying where my breath staggers out before me like jagged peaks, my chest straining to suck more air into can't-get-enough lungs. Ribs that shake the floor beneath my oak chair. Cold wind through the broken window slapping at my exposed neck. I shake my head back and forth, grind my fists into my knees until I'm back in the attic. I blink through the blur, force my hand to reach out and take another. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller, the tattered copy of my favorite book I gave to Emma when she turned fifteen.

I have this memory of Sarah. It's my earliest memory. The corn is taller than we are, and we're wading through it, like adventurers wading through quick sand. You find the way out and grab my hand. We're running barefoot over hard soil and rotten corn husks. We're near the swing set in the backyard. You tell me you want to teach me how to swing like an adventurer. I don't trust you at first, but you calm me down. I want to be able to trust you. You're pushing me higher and higher. Lean back! you shout. I'm too scared, so you show me how. It's like you're blasting off to the moon! you yell from the air. I want to go to the moon too. You push me higher and higher. Slowly I lean back. I imagine I'm flying, I'm a spaceman, I'm the rocket. I'm anything I want to be. I didn't stop pretending until I realized that you weren't pushing me anymore and my swing was slowing down. It's dinner time, you said. I was okay with going in for the day because you taught me something that's gotten me through so many hard things: how to look for impossibilities, the little things in life that everyone else overlooks. An impossibility is just an excuse to dream.

I call Mom and Seth to let them know what I've found, but only when I'm ready to share Emma. I look through every book, cover to cover, and read every word she ever wrote between them. I hide the books with messages I don't want them to see, words that would hurt rather than heal. I repair the window with duct tape, and sit in that oak chair every day after work. I don't read the books or the notes within. I sit with Emma, just the two of us. She knew I'd find her journals, that I'd insist on keeping her old books even as Mom bagged them up for Goodwill. "It's wrong," I told her, "you can't

heal by getting rid of her.” I held her shoulders steady while she wept into my hair.

Mom hasn't smiled this much since before it all happened. She reads each journal with careful deliberation, touching each word as she speaks it aloud. She imagines Emma's still with us, telling us what she only ever told the inside covers of the books we gave her. I feel her sitting cross-legged on the plywood floor, watching us with warm eyes. Forgiving eyes. She has on her big brown combat boots and my skinny jeans. It smells like peach perfume.

Seth flies out from Nashville to be with us. He doesn't hurt like Mom or I do; the pain he feels is remorse for his baby sister and, as a new parent himself, the ache of losing a child that his mother will live with for the rest of her life. Seth's daughter, Emma Mae, lights up the dingy attic with her smile, just like her namesake.

It'll always hurt. Emma didn't know that. I don't want her to know that. Seth, Mom, and I, we're still here. We aren't empty of her, not since the journals. It's like part of her came back to us, pushed all the grief out our throats and filled the voids in our hearts. Somewhere in the beyond, sheathed in golden stars, her hands aren't covering her mouth anymore. They're busy holding the handles of her swing as she pumps higher and higher, soaring through the stars like a spaceman. She's the rocket. She's the orange cream in every sun that sets over the corn fields we chased each other through. She's free from loss and abandonment, failure and broken voices. She can be anybody, go anywhere. For now, she's sitting on my attic floor, surrounded by the tombs of her pain and the family that never stopped loving her. And when she's ready to go, she'll get back in her TARDIS. Mom and Seth and I will be here when she does, our arms around each other, squeezing. We'll see a light in her eyes. “It's okay,” I'll tell them, “she's much happier out there than she ever was here on the ground.”

And we'll watch her fly.