

Always Magnolia

An excerpt

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Some of us can't blind ourselves, can't rest in the fog, or dance in the rain. We are the ones who remember.

—Jericho Slater (?-September 15, 2014)

1.

I was there the day you nearly drowned. You were battling a riptide of rage, like you do, and as soon as I saw you storming through the scrub to the lake I knew something bad had happened. I wouldn't find out what until the day after you walked away from me on the railroad tracks west of the junkyard, and disappeared. Anyway, you walked right up to Putty and shoved him into Kyle—threatened to take his truck and put it in the lake. And Putty put his hands up and was saying, “Anything you want, man. Anything.” Because that's the way it always was with you and Putty; he'd do anything for you and I guess you knew that and that's why instead you took Ron's motorcycle and popped a wheelie off the little pier and we all saw what happened. We were all watching it the whole time but just didn't want to see.

It's mostly death that triggers you. It cuts you deep on the inside and your upset shows itself in violence instead of tears. You shot a rabbit once, at the junkyard, and the next day you beat up Randy White. When Mr. McCormick, lot fifty, died in his sleep and we all stood and watched the EMTs wheel his body out of his trailer on one of those rolling beds—we were all twelve that summer—a few days later you hit Casey Lawrence in the back with a shovel and chopped down the tree by the pool with an ax you stole from the Old Twins, lot twenty-nine. And all anyone talked about was how you stole the ax when you could have got one from the junkyard any time you wanted. When the trailer park mama cat, Ringo, was hit by a car—we were older that year, but it's blurry in my memory—you took a sledgehammer to Pat Dunn's bicycle a few days later. She didn't do anything about it; it was Bobby Jack Beaumont, after all. The darling of River Front Trailer Haven. You were loved and pitied and hated and feared and everybody knew that when something died...you would find a way to feel it in a way none of us could understand.

The bike fell on top of you as you hit the water and we all stood frozen for a few seconds, digesting it, and then the boys ran out into the lake, their gangly legs flailing up and over the surface trying to get to you. They dragged you out and you vomited in the sand and you couldn't stand up by yourself. You started thrashing around, glaring at all of us like a wild animal trapped in a cage. You wanted to know what the hell was going on and they tried to tell you. You vomited again and again and crawled through it.

“What is this?” you were saying. “What happened?”

Finally you sat up and went empty, like your body let you drain out of it, and then you were crying and mumbling and everybody panicked because they didn't know what to do with that. They put you in the back of Putty's pickup and drove you off to the junkyard and I was left standing on the muddy shore watching, because Ruby didn't want me to be within fifty feet of you. It wasn't legal or anything. Ruby said I could make it legal, said I could get an order of protection or something like that. It would say you couldn't be around me and I told her that was nuts.

They wanted me to come along. They waited for me to get into the truck. But I couldn't do it. I was thinking of all the other times you got into trouble, and I was the one to help, and it was sad that this time it would have to be someone else. But Ruby would say you brought it all on yourself. That's what she'd say, whether it's true or not.

You fell out of a tree when you were seven and broke your arm and the only one you'd let touch you was me. You leaned on me and I had my arm around you as we walked as fast as we could to the junkyard with you screaming in my right ear the entire time. Nobody cared that you cried then. We all agreed we'd have done the same. And then with your arm in a cast, you sat on Willa Fogarty's lap, she was lot fourteen until she had to go live with her daughter in Houston, eating cookies, over at the picnic tables by the pool. Everybody wanted the chance to comfort you, but I was there first.

When you were ten you almost suffocated after hiding in a refrigerator at the junkyard and you couldn't get the door open from the inside. You were lucky Kyle thought to look there first, but you came out screaming, flushed and sweating. You dropped to the ground and wouldn't let anybody near you but me. And I was the only one to stay with you, patting your back, when your dad came out and shot his gun into the air.

When you picked a fight outside the middle school and ended up against seven other kids, Kyle and Putty had to drag you out before they killed you, or so they tell it. We missed the bus because of it and had to walk home along U.S. 1, and you leaned on me the whole time. We were fourteen that year. The shoulder of my best blouse was stained with blood from your nose and it never came out. But you didn't cry that time. You'd stopped with the crying by fifth grade. So, I get that everybody was scared when you nearly drowned and the tears started flowing. But they knew I couldn't help you; not this time. I wasn't supposed to be with you anymore. I wasn't the one.

We all grew up together at River Front Trailer Haven. Every one of us. Putty Coot—Harold really, but he'd hit you if you called him that, and you never did—started mowing lawns before he was in high school and he has a solid business that includes landscaping; his uncles own that nursery on U.S. 1. Kyle Bickell works at the bar down the way and spends most of his time getting into some kind of trouble or other. You'd know all about that if you could remember. Mary Stahl got married last year and has a baby. Ron Wilson, whose bike you drowned, was the only one of us to go to college and he came home a year ago to start up an aluminum siding business with his brothers. As for me, well, Celia told me the bait shop was mine, while Ruby would get the laundromat. You worked the junkyard with your dad. You and I used to joke that we were no different from the filthy rich, inheriting our family businesses. But I understand now that you might not want to take over the junkyard after all.

Putty was your best friend until that day at the lake. If you ever remember, maybe you'll understand it, but I don't. Ruby says they were all scared and I told her sure, I could see Kyle—he's

a drunk jerk-off most of the time anyway—and Ron, who, to be honest never really liked you, and even Mary. She liked you well enough, but I can see how your behavior could scare a person off. But not Putty. He was supposed to be like a brother to you. He was the one who made sure everybody stuck by you after you hit me last year. Because there was something wrong in your head, he told us. You didn't know how to relate in this world with its sickness and pain. That's what he said. In a speech like. And we all decided he was right, even me. You couldn't help yourself and we had to stick by you, we had to stick by one another, all of us, no matter what. Because we were the trailer park trash nobody else wanted. Us against the world and all that. And then you go a little bit crazy and Putty is gone. They were all gone. But me.

It was because we were always together, the half-dozen they called us, that I couldn't see forcing you to stay away from everybody just because we had a problem, you and me. And I didn't want to lose my friends, either, so I told Ruby I wouldn't do it—go to the judge, I mean, and get protection. And even though the time had long passed, the bruises all healed—Ruby took pictures when I was too upset to stop her but I found them and burned them—Ruby still worried, still told me to be careful when she knew you'd be around, still warned me you'd kill me one of these days. She's a good mom, if a little overprotective. And just so you know, she doesn't believe you did anything wrong and she hopes you'll come home soon. Honest. But I don't think she'll want you to come home to me. Not yet. She still watches me, sideways like.

Anyway, the boys, and Mary, carted you off to the junkyard and I was standing next to your vomit and I picked up the keys out of it. Three little keys. One of them was tiny, like a luggage key. Celia had one, that time she went up to Tallahassee to see my great Uncle Cyrus, she borrowed a suitcase and it had a tiny little lock on it with a tiny gold key. And Ruby said, "Ma, what you got to lock it for?" Because Celia was riding up with my Aunt Jewel and who would care if Aunt Jewel saw her underwear? But Celia said, "It's there. Why not use it?" She used this same logic with pills and cigarettes, and drinks younger men put in front of her when she went down to Sandy Jakes; but don't you be thinking my grandma is a drunk or anything. You'd know if you could remember. You love Celia, almost as much as I do.

The other two keys were small too, but thicker. You vomited the keys on the sand, Jack. Do you remember? I should take this opportunity to apologize for not giving them back to you right away. But I didn't know. I didn't understand. I know it might not make sense to you, but I was afraid if I gave them back, you'd remember everything all at once and our lives would be the way they were before and I'd have to stay away from you like Ruby wanted. And I was afraid of the truth. Because who swallows keys and then vomits them up again? I washed them off in the lake and carried them home. And when Ruby came in from work, the first thing I said was, "Bobby Jack nearly drowned at the lake today."

She dropped onto the sofa, kicked off her sneakers and said, "Don't do it."

"Don't do what?"

"Let him be."

My face burned hot. She knew.