

## Benny

My room at the summer house has a built-in radio, sunk right into the wall. Mama says this was very fancy back in the days the house was built. All the radio's finishes are brass, and the speakers are the size of my palms. I've seen its twisty kind of dial before in Grandpa's old pick-up truck, from when I was really little, the truck that didn't even have seatbelts.

Mama needs to write this summer. Her friend Carol who's loaning us the house said that over and over as they drank wine in our little kitchen at the new apartment: "Judy, you need to take the summer and get back to writing. Just get it out. Process everything."

I guess that means she'll write about me. Since I'm the cause of *everything*.

I fold my clothes into the dresser and tuck my suitcase into the wood-paneled closet. It's better when I'm tidy, at least. My hairbrush and barrettes and toothbrush and toothpaste and my pills all fit in the cabinet with the mirror in the bathroom. You could look in these rooms and not know I was here.

When everything is put away, I go out the sliding glass door and walk down to the dock, where the sun is shining on the lake water, making patterns that slip away before I can get hold of them in my mind.

"Casey!" Mama calls from the house, that stressed edge in her voice. I'm not even doing anything, just looking. I turn and wave back at her, hoping she'll leave me with the sunlight for a

minute. I'm listening, I'm listening. I won't argue if she tells me to come in. I don't want to go but I won't argue. I am not going to have any fits this summer.

I make myself smile big, and finally Mama goes back inside.

#

That night, it's hard for me to sleep. It's quiet in a weird way in this house, with no neighbors sharing our walls. I look around the room, memorizing the shadows, so nothing will surprise me out of the corner of my eye. Moonlight glints on the brass of the radio in the wall, right above the bed.

I sit up and run my fingers over the buttons and the dial. I flip the power switch, jumping a little when the static sound spills out of the speakers, fumbling to turn the volume down, quiet, quiet. I twist the dial like Grandpa used to do, waiting for a clear sound to rise up out of the gray.

When I hear a snatch of a song, I try hard to put the dial in just the right place to make the static fully fade. It's a really old song, but famous, one that everybody knows. The Beatles, I think. "*Images of broken light which dance before me like a million eyes...*" I sing along for a minute, but barely, under my breath.

And then there's another voice. Not the song, and not me. It sounds like it's also coming through the radio. "*Nothing's gonna change my world...*"

It sounds like a boy. About my age, eleven or twelve.

I lean in, listen hard. He doesn't know all the words, or doesn't care, singing "bum bum bum" instead of the right thing half the time. I wonder if someone at the radio station is messing up, not realizing they left a microphone on. But when the song ends, no new one starts. There's a shuffling and a record scratch, then the sound of someone picking up a guitar.

“Enough of the Beatles, let’s give the crowd what they’re really here for!” And then the boy’s voice makes cheering sounds. “Here he is, folks—it’s Benny! Benny the Jet!” He strums the guitar and sings some nonsense—he’s terrible, but you can tell he’s having fun.

I get up and go to the sliding glass door, looking out over the lake at the few other houses we can see from here. Maybe we’re getting a crossed signal from somewhere close, someone with some recording equipment, or a CB radio in a boat. But everything is just dark.

My reflection in the glass of the door looks weird and pale, and a chill runs down my back.

Benny could be a ghost.

I try to tell myself it’s a dumb thought, but it keeps feeling possible. He could be the ghost of a kid who died here, a long time ago, when the music he’s listening to was new, maybe.

Kids do die. I know that as well as anybody.

I slowly step back to the bed. Benny is mostly just humming now, practicing some chords, I think. I put my mouth close to the radio speaker.

“Hello? Benny, can you hear me?”

He keeps on messing with his guitar. And after a few minutes, the static starts up again. I twist the dial back and forth, but I can’t get Benny back.

#

The first time I got a really bad headache my teacher said I was probably just dehydrated. She sent me to the school nurse, who gave me a cold juice box out of a little fridge, with a wink, like it was our secret. I did feel special, sitting in the front office watching other kids go by,

seeing in their faces that they wanted to know why I didn't have to be in class. I pretended that the juice box helped. I didn't want the nurse to be annoyed with me, after she'd been so nice.

It was a few more headaches before Mama and Daddy started to worry that something might be wrong. Really it was when I started throwing up a lot. That's always when adults finally believe kids aren't faking it.

There were a lot of doctors. A lot of scans of my brain and the tumor in the very inconvenient spot. They were not optimistic. This is what you have to say: "not optimistic." You can't say you're pessimistic; that's going too far, even if it's the truth. Mama and Daddy cried a lot, and they told me to hold on, and they sold our house to pay for everything, and they fought a lot about money, but they found a doctor who would go to the inconvenient spot in my brain. She dug in, and she fixed it.

Except I came out sort of broken after that.

#

I shake the cereal box at Mama and slam it down onto the counter. "What is this?"

She looks at me over her coffee cup. "What do you mean?"

"Why aren't there pancakes?"

"We have cereal."

"But it's vacation. We always used to have pancakes the first day of vacation!"

"Casey, this is not vacation. This is just life in a different place for a little bit."

"No! Goddammit!"

Later I will know I shouldn't yell like this, and I will wonder why I was so mad, even though they've explained it to me again and again. There's damage now, that causes mood swings. Extreme reactions. Aggression.

I throw the open cereal box on the floor, and it scatters everywhere. I scream at the top of my lungs: "Fuck you! I won't eat it!" And I run back to my room.

I lay on the bed and cry, because I yelled at Mama again, because this isn't vacation, and because I couldn't even go one day without having a fit.

#

I'm not ready to go back out there and face Mama. She will leave the cereal for me to clean up and she won't say anything about the fit, but she'll seem sad and tired in a way she never did before I was sick. I decide to try the radio again, because it's lonely in here and I don't think it's true that ghosts only come out at night.

I twist the dial back and forth, getting nothing but static for a few minutes, but I don't give up. And then it happens—Benny's voice! I suck my breath in and try to stay calm.

"We were gonna go fishing, but Dad said a storm is forecast, so we can't go today." He pauses for a moment. "I know, it sucks. I'm missing soccer for nothing."

It sounds like he's on the phone. Do ghosts talk on the phone?

"But he also said we can go to the bait shop so we can try live worms. It's so gross, I can't wait."

A rumble fills my room. Outside, gray clouds are gathering.

"Oh crap, thunder! Okay yeah, talk to you later. Bye."

Benny hangs up. I stare at the sky as drops of rain start to hit the sliding glass door. And Benny, settling in for his own stormy morning, starts playing music again. A weird country guy with a low, crumbly voice.

At that moment, I notice a cabinet in the corner of the room, the one I stacked my books on top of, and I remember what it actually is. It's a special kind of cabinet—when you open up the top, there's a record player inside.

I open the bottom door on the cabinet and pull out about a dozen records that are tucked inside. I've only really seen these in movies. The paper covers smell like the old library at school before they built the new one.

“The Man in Black, really? Do you even know who that is?”

I stare at the radio. It's a second voice coming through, a man's voice.

“Whatever, Dad. I can read the cover, right?”

I look down at the record album in my hands, read along as the man says the title out loud:

“*Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*. A classic choice, beansprout.”

And this whole time, my heart keeps feeling smaller and smaller in my chest.

Because I know that voice. That's Daddy's voice.

#

In a book I read once, it talked about infinite other versions of our reality. Other dimensions. I read a lot of books when I was sick and sometimes it's hard to remember what was real stuff and what was just part of a story, but I look this up and it turns out to be true—lots of

scientists believe in other dimensions. Math that is way too hard for me to understand tells them that they must exist.

In this dimension, I haven't seen my dad in person in almost a year. He took me to lunch on my last birthday, when I turned eleven, and when we got home he told me he wasn't coming in and would be going away for a while. I knew that meant they were getting a divorce. I'd been waiting for that, but I still cried a lot. "I'm sorry, beansprout," he said, looking straight ahead through the windshield, not at me. "Life doesn't always go the way you hope it will."

The Daddy-voice that comes through the radio is so happy. Even in the summer heat, his voice makes me picture him in a Christmas sweater. He and Benny sit and listen to music together, talking, Daddy telling stories, laughing. I listen to them for almost an hour before they get up and leave the room to go get something to eat. And then I don't know what to do and I start to feel a little crazy. I find my cell phone that I'm only supposed to use for emergencies and I call Daddy's number.

"Casey, what's wrong?" He sounds annoyed.

"Nothing. Nothing really, I just—"

"If nothing's wrong, I can't talk right now."

"Well I wanted to tell you about the lake house we're—"

"Your mom told me. Make some friends or something while you're there, okay? And try to be good."

He hangs up before I can say anything else.

#

I sit out on the dock and watch the sunlight patterns on the water.

I wonder if Benny goes to my school. If he's had the same teachers as me. Except he'll be in the right grade, not a year behind like me, from missing so much school. I wonder if he has my room at our old house, the one we had to sell. I wonder if he plays with my old cul-de-sac friends, who don't invite me to their sleepovers anymore.

I wonder if he's ever been sick.

A little boat cuts across the water, with a boy who looks maybe fourteen at its outboard motor, and another boy and a girl who look a little younger with him. Their life jackets are unbuckled and hanging open. They probably think it looks cooler that way.

The younger boy points at me, saying something to the one at the motor. They slow the boat and turn, coming toward me. "Hey!" the girl yells as they get close. I wave, because I don't know what else I'm supposed to do. The older boy cuts the motor and they drift up close to the dock.

"You a vacation kid?" he asks. We're not on vacation, but I know what he means.

"I'm here for the summer."

"All summer?"

"Yeah."

"Well that's okay I guess."

The younger boy smiles slyly. "It's okay—if you take the jump."

I look around at their faces, confused. The girl rolls her eyes.

"It's this dumb initiation thing they made up. Vacation kids have to do it if they want to hang out with us."

"Do I want to hang out with you?"



She laughs, but the boys look annoyed. I learn their names are Hunter, Tanner, and Grace. Their parents run the only cafe nearby. And it seems like they're the leaders of the few kids who live around the lake year round. On Sunday afternoons after church they all meet up at what they call the Pine Cliffs, at the north end of the lake.

"If you jump from the highest cliff, then you're in," Tanner explains, though I pretty much already figured that out. I don't agree to anything, but Grace taps my number into her phone before they leave. She says she'll text me on Sunday.

As they speed away, Mama walks down the dock behind me.

"Are you making some friends?"

"I guess, maybe. The girl seemed nice."

She gets a look on her face that's part hope and part worry. The last time I saw that exact look was right before I had my surgery.

#

The next day is clear weather, and I guess Benny and other-Daddy left early for their fishing trip, because I can't hear anything but silence over the radio.

Okay, I do know I could be crazy. Hallucinations, right? That's a thing people with broken brains sometimes get.

I'm about to switch the radio off when I hear humming. It gets louder as whoever it is walks fully into Benny's bedroom.

"What a mess."

Mama's voice. That confirms it—she's there, she's with them. In Benny's world, Mama and Daddy are still together.

She starts singing quietly. “*Que sera, sera... whatever will be, will be...*” I sink onto the bed and listen as she walks around, I think picking up Benny’s clothes that are scattered around the room. Boys can get away with being so messy. I look around at my room, perfectly neat, and my cheeks start to feel hot with anger.

It’s just my broken brain. It’s just my broken brain.

I run out of the room and down to the den, where Mama sits at her laptop.

“What would you have named me, if I’d been a boy?”

Mama looks at me for a second, and I think she’s going to tell me to get out and let her focus, but then she leans back in her chair, almost smiling.

“We didn’t really think about names until after we already knew you were a girl.”

“You must have had some ideas! What do you think you would have picked?”

She considers. “I probably would have named a boy after my grandfather. His name was Benjamin.”

#

Hunter and Tanner and Grace and their friends splash in the water around the Pine Cliffs like they’ve never had a problem in their life. I lean my bike on a tree and walk slowly down to the shoreline.

Okay. I can be normal, I can make new friends.

Grace waves to me, and Tanner swims closer, giving me his smug smile.

“Gonna jump or not, new girl?”

A couple of kids are doing flips off of a rocky ledge that’s maybe fifteen feet above the water. But that’s not what he means. There’s a little path that leads up to a much higher ledge,

more like 40 feet, and not jutting out as far. You'd have to really throw yourself off the end to make sure you had a safe distance from the rock wall.

“No problem.”

Tanner grins. I take a deep breath and slip out of my sneakers and the jean shorts I'm wearing over my swimsuit, throwing them into my bike basket, then head for the jump.

When I reach the top of the path, I can hear them all below in the water, but I can't see them, and they can't see me. I wonder if it's better not to look down first. I could just run and fling myself over the edge. My muscles feel stiff. I realize I don't even know how deep the water is. I haven't actually gone in the lake yet at all. I think the last time I went swimming was two years ago, at Sophie's birthday party, the last one before I was in the hospital.

“Getting scared?”

I look behind me to see that Tanner has followed me up the path.

“No.”

“Come on,” he says. “We'll do it together.”

He strolls to the edge, and I follow. Looking down, the water seems far away. I feel a little dizzy.

“It's best with a bit of a running start.”

He takes a few steps behind me. I hesitate, eyes still on the water, inching back a little—when suddenly I feel his hands on my shoulders.

“Hey! Stop!”

He's laughing, trying to push me over the edge! I throw my body weight back instinctively, and we both hit the ground.

“Ow! Geez, I wasn’t really going to—”

I don’t even hear him. I flip around and just start punching and slapping, landing blows on his face and chest. His yelling sounds further and further away.

Then I’m riding home. It feels like an instant later. I reach our yard and throw my bike down, lay down in the grass, take deep breaths. As I calm, I notice my knees are skinned and my hands are dirty. There’s a flash in my head—Hunter pulling me off of his younger brother. Another—me running down the path, away from them.

And the kids’ voices screaming behind me, calling me crazy.

#

A kid has to be taught everything they ever need to know. I remember when I was little, it would take me a long time to learn some things. I didn’t know how to let my body take over, to feel the balance of the bike wheels, memorize the pattern of shoe strings, let myself float. I’d get there eventually, though. Because Mama and Daddy would patiently show me, again and again, until I trusted myself. And they’d tell me they were proud, even before I got it right.

They fight on the phone that night. It didn’t take long for Mama to find out what happened at the Pine Cliffs. Tanner’s mother showed up at our door, irate. I tried to apologize, but Mama sent me to my room. I don’t know what she said after that, but I guess she didn’t defend me, because now she wants Daddy to fly back to the city and drive up here to get me. He doesn’t want to do it. I think they’ll never stop arguing about who has to take me.

Benny and his parents are having spaghetti. They laugh so loud around the dinner table that the sound drifts down their hallway, into his room, through the radio, to me.

#

Mama and I are quiet around each other for the next couple of days. Daddy will be here at the end of the week.

I walk into the kitchen while she's washing dishes, her back to me. I don't think I can say what I want to say if she's looking.

"Mama. I'm sorry you're sad because of me."

She shuts off the water and turns, staring at me for a long moment. "Oh, Casey. It's not your fault. You know that, right?"

I know that if they'd had a different kid, they'd still be happy.

#

Benny didn't take the jump. I hear him, talking to his best friend at home on the phone, telling him that he did. That it was awesome, and that all the lake kids were so impressed with him. But that was a lie. He tells the truth to other-Mama, and he's upset, mad at himself for being scared, and worried the kids won't hang out with him again. She comforts him, tells him he was right not to do something dangerous, right to listen to his instincts. She says she's proud of him.

I wonder if I would have done it, if Tanner hadn't interfered.

#

Daddy will be here in an hour. My bag is packed. Mama is tense; she keeps pacing around the rooms of the house instead of settling in at her laptop like she normally would at this time of day.

This morning, Benny seemed cheerful again. He and other-Daddy and other-Mama talked about whether they wanted to go fishing again or drive out to a hiking spot they heard about. I don't know what they chose, because they walked outside before deciding.

Daddy will be here in an hour, and I'll never hear that happy version of their voices again.

My stomach feels tight and I'm clenching my jaw so hard my teeth hurt. I want to smash everything in this room but I can't, I can't. Please, let me control myself, this one time.

I finally hear Mama go into her office, and I dash out of the bedroom, to her purse where it sits by the front door. I take her keys and run to the shed where she locked up my bike. In a minute I'm rushing down the road, knowing where I'm heading before the actual plan has formed in my mind.

#

It's early. No one else is here yet.

When I walk to the edge of the cliff jump, this time I don't feel dizzy. My body is calm.

Benny has them now. But he has no idea how fast it can all go away. He's scared of a jump like this. Well, I've cheated death. This is nothing to me.

I back up a few steps, take a running start, and leap.

#

*Nothing's gonna change my world*

*Nothing's gonna change my world*

Worlds change whether you want them to or not.

#

The shock of cold—stinging pain all over my body—sinking, sinking.

Then kicking toward the light.

I gasp, swallow the air. Was that ten seconds or ten minutes? I don't know. All I know is that I did what he couldn't.

He has them, but I have one thing he doesn't have.

Every part of me bursts, but I'm breathing.