

Noted

When he came downstairs into the kitchen, first light was arriving to the hills framed in the window above the sink. Against the coming amber he thought he made out snowflakes; couldn't be sure for the light. His father was crowding the coffee machine as the boy came into the kitchen. He watched as his father rapped the machine hard on the side with his knuckles and it sputtered to life. He muttered something the boy could not hear.

"It still snowing?" the boy asked.

The father looked out the window above the sink. "Little bit."

The boy paused a moment. "Sticking at all?"

"The haven't canceled school yet, if that's what you're asking."

The boy went to the cabinet, grabbed the cereal, stepped aside his father wordlessly as he doubled back to the fridge for the milk. He fixed his bowl and sat at the table and ate. After a while the father sat too, hunched over a steaming mug. "Leaving in ten minutes," the father said crosswise, before a long sip. The boy went to stand. "Wait," the father said. The first rays of sunlight had pierced the room. A thin snow continued to fall. The boy sat on the edge of his seat, cupping his bowl in both hands as if still making to leave. "What's been eating you?" Then, when unanswered, "I know something is wrong so just tell me what's wrong, okay?"

"Nothing." The boy's eyes remained locked to the contents of his bowl.

"Is it the boys at school again? Like last year?"

"No." Sullen. Rankled by the question.

"Dylan."

"No Dad," more forceful this time.

"Is it Sam again?"

"It's no one."

"God dammit –," bringing his fist firmly into the table, "– I hate it when you lie to me."

"I'm not lying to you!" He stood from the table.

"You're not telling me the truth. That's the same thing."

"I'm not lying."

"Then tell me what is going on with you. Quiet this morning and last night and the night before that and when you did have a word to say it was about the damn snow getting school canceled. Do I need to call someone to find out what's going on?"

"It's nothing, there's nothing."

His father stared at him. He took a long sip of his coffee, swallowed, and shook his head. "Be ready to leave in five," he said.

They didn't speak much on the drive in. His father drove often in silence, doubly so when mad. And the roads, just okay enough to not delay or cancel school, required some concentration. Dylan stared at the woods out the passenger window until they gave way to houses. Their cars eased in behind a line of others, a row of taillights shining like rubies in the wet morning.

"I just want you to know," his father began suddenly, turning, "if I get a call today that you got sent to the principal or something, because some asshole thinks you're an easy target – I'm just saying I won't be mad at you if you stand up for yourself. Okay? I know I'm hard on you sometimes but I'm just trying to get you to see what I see. You can't let someone ruin your life for you. That's something that is uniquely your own privilege. If someone's making your life hell you grow a backbone and do what you gotta do. Even if that means someone's gotta end up hurt. To learn a lesson. I promise I won't be mad. Just – they won't mess with you no more if you show em what's what, okay? I promise. Love you. I'll pick you up this afternoon."

He trudged to his locker, eyeing his every footfall to avoid the cracks between the tiles. In the morning bustle of the hallways he felt anonymous, safe. He wore a look practiced for hours in front of a mirror, a neutral but wilting expression designed, consciously or not, to avoid conflict. The affect crumbled as he approached his locker. A note had been taped over the handle, and before he could make out the writing or the signature he knew its author. He snatched it from the handle and crumpled it, stuffed it behind the textbooks at the bottom of his locker.

The classes that morning passed without much excitement. He thought frequently of the buried note. He'd not done his homework in math and the teacher shook her head at him in a disappointed acceptance when he told her as much, disappointed but not surprise. Commonplace news these days. She pursed her lip as she wrote a zero on his column in her homework clipboard. But largely the periods before lunch were uneventful. Lunch broke the pattern. He sat with the boys from the soccer team, as he'd taken to lately, enjoying the newfound repeal of his pariahdom. Really he owed it to Sam. Sam whom his father hated – whom his father only hated because of a bunch of things that happened so long ago, that did not matter now, that Dylan was liable to forget. Or wished he was liable to forget, as was supposed to be natural when things are forgiven. Sam and Dylan went to the same soccer camp over the summer, and through a small miracle became friends. Sam told Dylan to sit with them at the start of the school year, and now, he was one of them. Seventh grade off to a better start than he could've hoped for a year ago.

Still, this new position was not without its pitfalls. "So Dylan," Sam said as he placed his tray down and climbed into his seat. "I saw a little something on your locker this morning." Everyone was turned to listen; some snickered.

Dylan shrugged. "What'd you see?"

"Looked like a note to me." Sam eyed a few friends before looking at Dylan again. "A love note. From a certain special someone. A certain special someone named Casey who's always staring at you in gym." From the end of the bench, one of their friends made kissing noises. The table erupted in laughter.

"I already told you guys a million times, I don't like her," Dylan said. "I don't even know why she wrote me that." His friends continued to laugh.

“I know that you don’t like her. Buuuuut... I’m pretty sure she likes you.” A fresh round of guffaws.

The others saw fit to chime in. “She’s such a weirdo!”; “I think she’s more annoying than weird, actually,”; “Have you seen the shirt she’s wearing today?”; “How about her MLP backpack?” Each eliciting another peal.

Dylan’s fists were balled tightly. He could feel his throat squeeze. Everything was hot. He wanted to say the perfect something but words weren’t coming, never came in these moments, and he took it silently instead. He looked away and from he across the room he saw Casey, stock still, holding her tray and staring. He imagined she knew intimately the details of the scene she watched, and darted his gaze to his food.

“We’re just messing with you, dude,” Sam said. He slapped Dylan on the back playfully. “You don’t need to take it personal. Just funny to imagine someone like you with someone like her.”

Dylan finished his food in silence. Conversation turned elsewhere. When he was done he cleared his tray and dropped it off, told the teacher he needed to use the bathroom. When granted permission he took to the hallways, but at the first split he veered left rather than right, and beelined for his locker. No one else was in the hall. He cracked the door and knelt. Behind the textbooks heaped at the bottom of his space his hand clasped finally over the note he’d stored there this morning, and he stood and stuffed it into his back pocket in a single furtive motion before shutting his door.

He doubled back the way he came. At the split he took the correct hallway now and made for the bathroom. When he entered he found, to his dismay, a pair of dangling feet beneath the panel for first stall, and Dylan bent slightly to study the shoes. “Alex?” he called.

“Who’s that?”

“Dylan.”

“Oh. Hey man.”

“Hey.”

He locked the second stall door behind him. He pulled the crumpled note from his pocket and held it between his lips momentarily, sat down and removed his pants so as to remove the potential for suspicion from his friend one stall over. Then he took the note and opened it. Cautious not to make noise uncrumpling the paper.

Hi Dylan, it began. The dot on the i in the shape of a heart.

I just wanted to say hi and see how you were doing. And also to see if you were going to the Winter Dance, because I’m going with Kirsten and Kristen and we all thought it would be cool if you were going too. I miss last year in English class when you sat right in front of me. Mr. Barrett was always so funny how he always got mad at me and never at you when we got caught talking! I miss laughing about that with you. Anyway, it’s cool if you’re not going to the Winter Dance but if you are I’ll be happy. If you are, just write our codeword somewhere on this letter and give me it back and I’ll know you’re going to go.

She’d signed it with a heart and her name. He held the note again between his lips, hoisted his pants, flushed, and slipped the note back into his pocket. He had not thought about their codeword in months and its reappearance in his consciousness brought back other memories temporarily repressed.

As he arrived back in the cafeteria lunch was almost over, and in short order he found himself in the hallways again, now thronging with other students, all chatting, him silent, making his way to his afternoon classes, and wondering why she had to do this to him.

Later, in the locker room while changing for gym class, he told Mr. Jones he didn't feel well and wanted to sit out. Mr. Jones grunted his indifferent approval. Through the winter the classes stayed in the gymnasium so Dylan, off to the side, sat on the pullout bleachers and watched his classmates attempt to learn basketball. Sam was good already. Adults were always calling him a natural. Dylan watched the rest of his friends struggle to keep up, miss shots, lose the ball. After some minutes of watching he saw Casey say something to Mr. Jones, rubbing her elbow. Mr. Jones nodded and indicated towards Dylan and the bleachers, and she nodded back and started heading his direction. He paid great, deliberate attention to the basketball until she sat down next to him. "Hey stranger," she said. She had drawings done in pen ink running the length of her right forearm up the back of her hand and wore a black teeshirt underneath the requisite gym attire.

"Hey Casey." He gave her a weak smile. "What's up?"

"So you got my note?"

"Yeah," he said, casual, "I got it."

"So what do you think?"

He couldn't meet her eyes. "I dunno," he said.

"You aren't sure what you think? It's pretty simple."

"I haven't read it," he told her.

"Well why not?"

"Didn't have time, I guess," he shrugged.

She waited a beat. "Well do you think you'll have time by the end of the day?"

"Maybe. I guess so."

"It's important."

"You won't just tell me?"

"I did tell you. In the note. Just read it, you'll understand."

"Okay."

"Well, I'm gonna tell Mr. Jones my feel better, I think. Gotta give my all for gym call, huh?"

He laughed. "Elbow feeling better?"

"It wasn't really feeling bad in the first place." She waited for his response but it didn't come.

"I'll talk to you before I go home today, Dylan?"

"Yeah," he said. "Course."

The note stayed in his pocket the rest of the day, untouched. After the final bell he was walking to his locker with a friend when she caught up to him. "Dylan," she said, and his friend gave him a wide-eyed look and said, "I'll see you tomorrow, man."

He faced her as his friend left. "Well?" was all she asked.

"Well what?"

“You know well what. Did you read my note?”

“Casey,” he said. They stood off to the side of the end of day rush, “Why do you even like me? I don’t think I – well just why?” He itched to get to his locker. To leave. His father would be here to pick him up soon.

“I just know how good a friend you were last year, and I always thought you were kinda cute, and over the summer I know we didn’t talk much, but I thought once we were back in school, we would see each other again... I don’t know, I guess I just had a crush on you for a little while.”

He shook his head. Why him? Why now? It wasn’t like he had talked to her much this year, it’d been four months since the semester started, over half a year since the last ended. Wasn’t that a lot of time? Didn’t his indifference express its intentions clearly? And it had to be him, too, out of all of the boys, him who had so much more to lose, having recently gained a great deal, having since the summer the freedom to enjoy his classmates’ presence. His place in the world not yet inured to the power of rumor. “Casey,” he said at last. He wanted to go home, hated to make his father wait. “Just – stop, okay? Just – leave me alone from now on. I’m not your boyfriend, and I don’t want to be, and all the notes and staring and stuff are kind of annoying, and it makes other people think we’re going out or going to go out and I just don’t want people thinking that, okay? Did someone tell you I liked you? I mean maybe last year I–, maybe if you told me sooner it might’ve been different. But you can’t just assume you can keep dragging me into this fake relationship, or whatever you want to call it. I don’t want to be mean and we can still be friends a bit but I just want to be clear, okay? It’s not fair to me to make everyone think we’re together, is all I mean. I don’t think you did it on purpose or anything but I just don’t think that’s fair to me is all. I don’t hate you or anything, and I don’t blame you. I just want to be clear with you because I owe that to you. Right?”

The first teardrop starred her shoe. “Right. Okay. I’m sorry.” And she turned and fled.

“It’s okay,” he said. Then, to her back he called, “You still want to be friends though, right?” The hallways had all but cleared and he hustled on to his locker.

He threw his backpack in the back and climbed into the passenger seat. “Well I took your advice,” he told his father.

“Oh?” A sly grin as he navigated out of the parking lot.

“Yeah,” Dylan said. “I didn’t really want to do it but I thought about everything you’ve told me. And I think you’re right. You gotta do what you gotta do.”

The father nodded. “Doing the hard things that you don’t want to do but need to do is what being a man is. Taking care of the people who are making your life hell. Standing up for yourself. I’m proud of you.” They barreled down the road in silence. “Didn’t even get a phone call or nothing,” his father added after a moment. “You think I’m going to get one?”

“Nope.” He watched the snow fall.

“You must’ve been real slick with it. What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, really,” Dylan said.

“Sure, sure. I get it. I can give you some space.”

They drove on. Flurries once again began to gray the landscape. “Hey,” the father said. “By the way. Sorry I was so hard on you this morning. I just – I’m just trying to steer you right, okay? I know I ain’t perfect but I’m doing my best. Sometimes I lose sight of things. But I know what I know, is all.”

“I know. It’s alright, Dad. I think you actually really helped.”