

PLUTO

Olivia was a child of the nineties.

Rabies. Abductions. Fire—specifically the kind that came on suddenly, out of nowhere, and required a person to stop, drop, and roll. Drugs, and the people who peddled them. It was a very specific list of things she was taught to fear. Carefully nurtured throughout her impressionable years, prodded and stoked in all-school assemblies in the basement gymnasium of the old elementary school. Pre-marital sex, teenage pregnancy, HIV and AIDS. The list grew along with Olivia. Fire drills became bomb drills became active shooter drills. These were the threats lurking in her peripheral vision, gone the instant she turned her head.

When the D.A.R.E. officer stood at the front of the room and asked for their pledges, Olivia didn't hesitate in joining in. She passed the *Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Identification Kit* obediently on after taking her turn to ponder which colorful capsule she'd choose if she could only choose one. Light pink circles. Neon yellow ovals. Some kind of orange triangle with smooth, rounded edges. A suitcase of beautiful danger, filled with a variety of drug facsimiles designed to educate youths as to what a Barbiturate or an Amphetamine looked like—like candy, delicious. “Just Say No,” she and her classmates chanted.

Olivia understood these threats were real the way she understood she was at this very moment on a massive, blue planet spinning through The Solar System: with a general acceptance, an arms' length grasp of the information as it was spoon-fed to her. It all

happened—somehow, perilously—below her, around her, as it always had, always would, but never *to* her. It was this fact that she accepted above all else.

When she was six, Olivia watched *Peter Pan*—the one with Mary Martin as Peter—and felt something twitch in her stomach, deep down, almost so low that it was in her pelvis, to watch the Lost Boys mistakenly shoot down their beloved Wendy. Her hand moved from the communal popcorn bowl to her lap, where it stayed for the rest of the film, open in yearning. The way the boys were stricken to realize it wasn't a bird at all, but their own Mother. The way Wendy lay there. So helpless, so beautiful. How she wished she were Wendy, in a circle of concern, boys' tears over the arrow in her heart.

The very next day, Olivia dropped flat on her back on the playground. There was a layer of snow on the ground, and the event made little noise. She fluttered her eyelids for good measure before finding perfect stillness, eyes closed. Waiting for her rescue. Her back through her secondhand snowsuit was immediately damp, chilled. She could hear the sounds of recess as she anticipated the moment she would feel someone's concern for her, someone other than her parents. She stayed there, trying not to breathe, at least not too conspicuously. She thought she must look lovely, pink cheeks against white snow.

No one noticed.

She was a tiny, lesser planet in The Solar System, standing by as the big, beautiful Earth spun on, gloriously. Watching Ashley H. lose her grip and fall from the monkey bars to break her ankle and cry fiercely, the outpouring of love that followed. Flowers, a card signed by everyone in the class, a box of chocolates. Witnessing Abigail L. and her dramatic asthma attack, the way Garrett P. was assigned to sit next to her, talk to her, pet her on the back while the nurse was fetched. The concern in his eyes.

Olivia remained in the snow for a solid five to eight minutes before rolling over and rising—foolishly, awkwardly—to her feet. She witnessed her classmates having fun, a snowman nearly complete without her. Garrett P. presenting Abigail L. with the finishing touch: a stupid, droopy pinecone nose. Everyone smiling around the lopsided branch arms and crooked acorn smile, not once stopping to realize Olivia wasn't part of it. She was Pluto, the dwarf planet that would one day be stripped of its title, decidedly not a planet at all.

In fifth grade, second-hand cigarette smoke joined the list—before HIV and AIDS, but with a far bigger impression. The woman who led the AIDS presentation had made a great case against it—and for protected sex and all—but *she* herself didn't have *it*, so it didn't carry the same visual impact. She had some glossy posters and sad stories, but she was a walking success story: smart suit, hair smoothed back, bold red lip. The man—the smoking man—on the other hand, was *ugly*.

He began the presentation by asking Olivia's class how old they thought he was.

Sixty, she hypothesized to herself, which seemed like a safe guess based on the ages of her grandparents, their creased faces, and what she knew about mortality. Someone in the back simply yelled out *Old*, which wasn't very helpful or kind, but the entire room giggled, and the man managed a smile. It was a sad smile. Olivia felt sorry for him.

He was wrinkled, skin like crepe paper, and stooped. His entire body had a yellow tinge to it that made Olivia think of dingy curtains she'd once seen swaying on the highway in the back of a VW camper van: everything from his skin to the off-whites of his eyes, to his fingernails and the soles of his shoes. Yellowish. She assigned him a

musty smell. He spoke in pained, staccato phrasing, each thought cut short by the need to suck greedily from the oxygen tank at his side.

“You would think so—wouldn’t you?” he asked, and the room nodded. “Nope. I’m forty-five.” Now the room, especially the girls, recoiled. Forty-five was tangible. It was their parents or the volleyball coach with the beautiful calves. It was Olivia’s mother’s greying temples and the mid-life crises her father was accused of having. Forty-five was supposed to be middle age.

“And do you know—what this thing—weighs?” the man went on, a ring on his finger clinking against the metal tank. The class, now somber, was silent. The man sighed. “Heavy—on my heart.”

It was all very sad, morbidly poetic. A few classmates sighed, too. Olivia, however, had stopped listening. As the man talked about his lifetime of addiction and his battle with emphysema, patting the oxygen tank like it was his service dog and loyal companion, Olivia was off to Neverland. Thinking again of Wendy-bird and the Lost Boys, recalling their circle of shame and despair, and how much Wendy must have enjoyed their tears in spite of her pain.

At the end of the presentation, Olivia approached the sad, ugly man.

“Thank you for sharing your story,” she told him graciously. “Can I give you a hug?”

He hesitated, then offered a small nod and shuffled away from his oxygen tank to make room for their embrace, and Olivia wrapped her arms carefully around him, the faraway smile still on her lips.

“You know Smoking Man?” the sixth graders chattered, later. “Olivia *hugged* him.”

“She said it was like hugging a little kid.”

“She said she could feel his ribs.”

“Ew,” everyone agreed. It was gross—but also kind of, inexplicably, cool.

For days, Olivia could smell the man’s mustiness in her hair. For days, her classmates regarded her with a kind of morbid fascination. The man’s trauma had become Olivia’s trauma. His yellowed skin and sharp bones—hers, too. It was the first time in her young life that she felt respected, or remotely important, and she realized: if she couldn’t be the person with the story, she could at least be a part of their narrative.

The weatherworn screen door clapped shut and Olivia bounded down the uneven concrete steps feeling pretty great about herself. She was young, capable, and attractive. Her new strappy wedges, while not the most practical footwear for dog walking, were absolutely adorable, and her bloat from a weekend of too much rosé had dissipated. It was setting up to be a perfect summer day in suburbia—not an ounce of humidity, so her hair was also cooperating—*and* she was a good person. Yesterday she had seen someone in need, and she had risen to the occasion. Now she was walking a super cute dog so its owner with the injured knee could stay home with her feet up. *Selfless*.

“Sweet pup,” a woman commented as she speed-walked by.

“Not mine, but thanks,” Olivia replied, adding, “Just doing a good deed.”

At twenty-three, Olivia measured her days in good deeds—and hangovers. Collecting people for their trauma like treasures, wrapping them around her shoulders like a cozy and comforting blanket. Drinking her evenings, and the occasional afternoon, away. Her drink of choice: gin and tonic. The homeless teen at the corner: *her* homeless friend,

David—she brought him soup once a week. The family whose house burned completely to the ground last April was her passion project, soon to be her closest family friends.

This was what led her to Cheryl.

Olivia absorbed the inside of the woman’s duplex with a mixture of obvious pity and veiled delight: the unfortunate layout, cramped and low-ceilinged; dim, depressing lighting; snow globes crowding the coffee table in summer. The walls looked like they were constructed from cardboard, and a folding card table stood as the sad centerpiece in the dining room. The situation was even worse than she had imagined.

The woman had hobbled to the door, bringing with her the meaty smell of pot roast mixed with dog food. “Thanks for coming,” she mumbled. “I don’t even know you—”

“I know,” Olivia cut her off, smiling. “But I want to help.”

The woman looked baffled, but relieved. She leaned heavily on a cane, and her swollen and bandaged left knee nudged against her right, nudging her into bowlegged unsteadiness. She was in no position to walk her dog today—or anytime soon.

Olivia gestured to the lumpy bandaging. “What happened?”

The woman adjusted her weight, grimacing. “Maple here.” Olivia noted the dog lumbering out from a corner of the small room. “She pulled me down. Chasing after a squirrel. Now I got this hematoma something or other. Can’t even bend my leg.”

Olivia crouched and the dog approached. She scratched her behind her ears. “You’re not going to try that with me, are you?” Maple looked appreciatively at her with wet eyes, pushing her weight against Olivia’s fingers. “You’re a good girl.”

“You’re a good person,” the woman said. “What’s your name?”

“Oh, right.” Olivia stood, remembering. “I’m Olivia.”

“I’m Cheryl.”

“Nice to meet you, Cheryl,” Olivia replied. “See? Now we know each other.”

When Cheryl smiled, she revealed a gap where her two lower incisors should be. Her dark hair was stringy, greasy, pulled partly back with a scrunchie—and it was this scrunchie Olivia found most upsetting. The other details she could see of Cheryl’s life plucked at her heartstrings—the Glade plug-in and its futile attempt to mask the thick smell of mildewed carpet, the textured unicorn prints à la Lisa Frank, the t-shirt *Lone Wolf* worn unironically—but the scrunchie needled Olivia in the gut. It was a gesture in which she sensed effort and, therefore, felt the deepest despair. Cheryl had opted for an upgrade—not a run-of-the-mill elastic but a maroon, velvet scrunchie—and the truth remained: Cheryl was a person for whom life was and would continue to be hard. Her attempt at beautification and betterment, that scrunchie, started and ended there.

“You want me to pay you or something?” The woman’s eyes were weary, and her cheeks trembled. “I can’t pay you.”

“You don’t have to,” Olivia assured her. “Let me help you—no strings attached.”

Again, Cheryl looked baffled, perhaps even a bit suspicious. “Why?” she asked.

“I guess it’s a little strange,” Olivia admitted with a laugh. Her mother had told her as much. “When I saw you yesterday,” she went on, “it looked like you needed a friend. With the dog and the leash and the cane and that bad section of road with no sidewalks...” She trailed off.

“Thank you,” Cheryl finally said.

“No,” Olivia asserted. She accepted the leash, and the attached dog. “Thank you.”

Maple *was* a sweet pup—some kind of sandy-haired mutt with black markings on her face that reminded Olivia of a German Shepherd, but with the floppy ears and sausage-like body of a loafing lab. She had sad eyes and a saggy belly that swished side to side as she walked, along with her nipples—black and sagging too. She was reluctant to walk with Olivia, stopping often to look longingly behind her at Cheryl’s face framed by the screen, and Olivia tried to pull her along without seeming like she was pulling too much.

Olivia didn’t have much experience with dogs.

When Maple stopped to poop, she dedicated her full body weight into dragging Olivia off the road and onto a pristine lawn, sniffing in seemingly every direction. She tucked her hips just as the breeze shifted, and Olivia got a blast of artificial berry scent from the purple poop bag in her hand, and loose stool. The combination triggered Olivia’s gag reflex and she tasted last night’s margaritas at the back of her tongue, sour mix too sour the morning after. She thought of the conversation with her mom upon leaving the bar. She should have known better than to call home after so many drinks.

“You’re walking *whose* dog tomorrow?” her mom had asked. Olivia could hear Dateline in the background, her dad’s gruff voice as he provided his own commentary.

“A lady who lives behind me,” Olivia told her. “You know the cul de sac with the crappy driveway?”

“The housing complex?”

“Yeah,” Olivia mumbled, as the scenery swirled. She cursed her second tequila shot.

“Uh huh. That one.”

“Okay, but *why*? I thought the firm paid you well.”

Olivia worked at an accounting office in town, filing papers and answering phones. It wasn't the job she wanted, of course not, but it allowed her time for her good-deeding, and time to figure out the rest of her life.

"It's not for the money, Mom," Olivia stressed. "I wanted to help. She—the lady—" Here, she had grappled with the name—"Cheryl. I don't think she has anyone else."

"You're walking her dog and you don't know her name?"

"I just said it," Olivia snapped. "*Cheryl.*"

"Honey." Her mother sighed. Even through a drunken haze, Olivia could detect her disapproval. "I get it, I do. Everyone wants to feel important—"

"Whatever, Mom." Outside the bar, Olivia had rolled her eyes noisily, out of habit as much as to overwhelm the truth in her mother's words—because wasn't this why Olivia behaved as she did? Helping Cheryl, she helped herself; two drinks in, she felt important. After three, she could imagine herself all of the things she wasn't and would never be: beautiful; interesting; the type to draw a crowd. The rings in her eyes, her double vision, could be the rings of Saturn. "Gotta go. Bye, Mom." She could be anything at all.

Maple finally finished "doing her business," as Cheryl called it, and Olivia stooped to collect, turning her head to the side to capture whatever fresh air came her way. It was a nightmare: streaks of light brown shit clinging to fresh cut grass, impossible to pick up or contain; but she made a grand show of the process—a dog poop pantomime—in case anyone was looking. She succeeded only in smearing it around, in the grass and on the berry-scented bag, and wondered if this particular good deed was worth it.

Then Maple saw the squirrel.

As the dog lunged, as Olivia lost her balance, teetering on her too-tall shoe, it hit her. A memory. She was young and low to the ground, and her hair was long—not because she preferred it that way, but because her mother did. She was barefoot, spinning and spinning. Feeling weightless, joyful. Feeling free. And it didn't matter if anyone was watching her. She didn't care about anything other than the air tickling her skin, the debilitating dizziness about to disarm her. She fell, giggling, to the grass to watch the world go on spinning without her—but only for a moment. Then she was staggering to her feet to do it again, and again, and again.

Olivia felt her ankle bend at an inhuman angle, sensed bone giving way. The ligaments growing taut, then straining—then *snap*. She hit the sidewalk. She didn't even attempt to stop the fall. She was aware of the leash still in her hand, the sharpness of the pain, the feral sound she made as she cried out. Maple's low growl. A car slowing, then stopping. A voice.

“Are you okay?”

And another: “Call 9-1-1.”

Maple bowed down at her side. Whining, contrite. She licked Olivia's wrist.

A young man materialized on the sidewalk where Olivia had fallen. “Hey,” he called. As he knelt beside her, hair swept low over his brow, his eyes and his voice were tender. “Are you hurt?” he asked.

Olivia's right shoe had come off in the event, relocated—somehow—to her cheek. She could see quite clearly: the heel was absurdly high. Her ankle throbbed, and her elbow was scraped to raw. The man's eyes were blue. Olivia managed to prop herself up and gaze at his face, and felt deep pleasure melding with the pain.

For her twenty-three years, nearly all of it, Olivia had wanted to pull others into her orbit. To be the feature of her space. Because wasn't its gravitational dominance what earned a planet its status? Wasn't this the moment she had longed for?

"I saw the whole thing out my window," the young man told her. "Man, you went down hard." He was close enough that Olivia could see crumbs clinging to the corner of his mouth, as if he had been eating a sandwich and abandoned it for her. "Are you hurt?" he asked again.

Olivia looked to the crowd that had gathered, encircling her. Pity and delight. Multiple people had their phones out, at the ready. A woman had plucked Maple's leash from her hand and was holding it limply, already bored.

"Yes," Olivia told the young man. "I'm hurt." She lowered her head to his lap, and waited for the ambulance to arrive.