

## The Survivors Club

Ten was too many. When we were nine, we all fit. But then Rhoda came along and you just couldn't fit ten people on the walkway including two in wheelchairs. There wasn't enough room. But there she was, floating towards us like a seagull caught in a headwind.

"Internal injuries," Tom muttered. Tom couldn't feel anything below the waist, not even his dick reportedly. I had to bend down to hear him, and even then, my ear right next to his mouth, I had to ask him to repeat himself over the wind.

"INTERNAL INJURIES," he said.

I nodded. There was nothing outwardly wrong with her. She was blonde and pale. She probably didn't get out much, but she could walk. She was wearing a big lumpy sweater and I wondered if she had some broken ribs. You're not supposed to wear tight clothes with broken ribs.

Everyone else smiled at her and we went around introducing ourselves. You had to say your name, the date you jumped, and one thing you loved about life. I couldn't think of anything so I held my breath until it was my turn and then I shouted:

"I'M DAN. I JUMPED THREE YEARS AGO ON SEPTEMBER 5<sup>th</sup>. I LOVE..."

What? I wanted to say blonde-haired girls but I didn't know if anyone would laugh. So I went with dappled sunlight on the bay in the morning. Rhoda smiled at me.

She jumped last year on July 4<sup>th</sup> and loved the first fallen leaves of fall. I thought she should have waited to jump until the winter if she loved fall so much, but I didn't say so.

After that we did the usual rounds: one thing you did last year that you were proud of, one thing you were looking forward to next year, and one thing you want to change going forward.

Rhoda was proud of graduating from community college, looking forward to her new job, and feeling lonely. She looked down at her sneakers and said she hoped our group could help her.

No one mentioned the article, but everyone had read it. You could tell. We all thought a little harder about our responses, as though we were at a table read for a play. None of us really knew our parts yet, but we were ready to act like we did.

We were all supposed to walk back to the toll booth together, even if you lived on the Marin side like I did. The walk was part of the therapy. You had to feel the wind pushing you to one side and the group pushing you back. But I walked ahead, breathing salt and exhaust, pulling the collar of my jacket up against the chill. I didn't look like the others, so if you were passing in a car, you might not think I was part of the club at all. For one thing, I was only twenty-two. Everyone else was pushing fifty. Except Rhoda.

I looked back and saw Rhoda closing the gap between us. She was hugging herself and her cheeks and nose were red.

She asked why we didn't pick a day in the summer.

I didn't know. I told her the leader of the group, Kim, had picked New Years for, you know, the symbolism. No one ever argued.

"Well I'm going to suggest we meet in the summer. The bridge is nicer in the summer."

"You'd know."

She fell back and I walked faster. I didn't look around until I reached the toll booth and saw my mother's sedan, parked neatly by the exit. I waved at the group over Rhoda's head as we pulled out of the lot and zipped over the bridge.

I was standing on the ledge, outside the guardrail. I could almost see the two orange towers looming up beside me, curving into my pupils like the rust-colored pincers of a primordial crab. I couldn't hear the traffic, only the shush and sigh of the waves.

I held my breath. I was weightless. I was at the top of a water slide waiting for the signal that it was my turn. But suddenly I was looking at myself from above, and there was Rhoda, standing just a few feet away but obscured by fog. I knew it was Rhoda in that way we have of knowing something so certainly in dreams without really seeing it at all. Rhoda tipped forward slightly as I turned to her, and I reached out to catch her but then I lost my balance. As soon as I started to fall, I woke up.

Of course, my therapist thought this was a good sign. She said it was healthy for me to work through my experience, even if I was sleeping. She said my mind was taking care of my body. Then she asked if I had sexual thoughts about Rhoda.

I googled Rhoda that night, locked in my bedroom with the light on. I tried 'Golden Gate suicide Rhoda,' I tried, 'July 4 suicide,' then just 'suicide survivor Golden Gate Bridge,' but no Rhoda. I saw the article. I saw a Dan, even a Tom, then farther down a Kim, but no Rhoda.

I checked my email. Kim always emailed the group after the meeting, promising better times ahead and urging us to enjoy our new lease on life. My inbox was empty except for "Welcome to 2018, Survivors." She would have emailed everyone and yes, there, the first name in the 'to' line because she was the last to join: Rhoda Greenberg.

I composed my email and closed my computer. I opened my computer and closed it again. I opened it again and hit send, then went to lie down. We lived on the bay and at night you could see the yellow and red lights of a thousand cars all the way across. My bed used to face the water, but after I jumped my mother put me in the back with a view of the garden.

I told my mother I had invited a friend from the group over. She had picked up a mug for tea but then put it down quickly. Her long black dress rippled a little.

“Did we read about him?”

“Her.”

My mother poured her tea. She said nothing but her eyes were unfocused. She must have been picturing me cutting the cake with a blonde bride, then pushing my two-year-old son on a swing, then driving the seventeen-year-old up the coast to Stanford after Labor Day.

Rhoda came over a week later. She hesitated on the threshold, peeking inside with her whole body. My mother flapped around her, offering tea or coffee, asking for her jacket, complimenting her long blonde hair.

I buttoned the cuffs of my dress shirt and wished I was wearing a t-shirt.

“Daniel, honey,” my mother encouraged, “Show Rhoda the new basement.”

The basement was the only other room without a view of the bay, but we did have a flat screen, and I sat down in front of it, one arm over the back of the leather couch with my legs open. I closed them immediately. Rhoda sat on the other end of the couch at the very edge. She addressed the blank television:

“Your mom seems nice.”

“Thanks. So why do you wear that big sweater? Did you break a rib when you jumped?”

She blushed and said yes, a few ribs and an ankle. She had been paralyzed for a week afterwards too, but that was only shock. I told her I had been in shock too, but I broke six ribs. She said she knew, she had read about me.

I asked why there weren't any articles about her. The *Chronicle* loves survivors.

Her parents were rich. They didn't let the reporters know her identity.

But I didn't understand. My mother liked reporters. She sent the last one flowers after he published “The Survivors Club.” He had interviewed all nine of us separately a few months ago. Apparently, we each told him that the moment we jumped, we regretted it.

I couldn't tell what time it was in the basement, but eventually my mother came downstairs to tell us she had made dinner and that Rhoda was welcome to stay. Rhoda was on her feet. She had to be up early for work the next day and she lived in Oakland. She lingered on the threshold again, waiting for something.

A week later, we got another email from Kim. She announced that our next meeting would be on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the midpoint of the year, in the middle of the day, on the midpoint of the bridge. She said that it would allow us to reflect on the year and make significant changes in our lives before the end of that year, when we would meet again.

I wondered what Rhoda had told her.

I imagined her email: overlong, apologetic. Kim would have written back: Dear Rhoda, I hope you're enjoying life as much as I am.

I wrote to Rhoda again and again. I checked my email every night. I put the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July on my calendar. I made it through the last semester of high school, and I dreamed about her once a week. She was always there, entering from stage left just as we had rehearsed.

I packed my jacket away with all of my college things in boxes in the garage. I wore t-shirts and jeans and lay in bed staring at the garden.

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, I walked across the bridge at a quarter to noon. My hair stuck to my forehead and my shirt stuck to my back, but the wind kept me cool enough to wish I hadn't packed all of my sweatshirts. Sausalito winked at me, flashing through my cool-guy aviators so that I saw neon spots when I looked away.

Half a mile later and there was Tom and then Kim and then a few others, but no Rhoda. It was exactly noon. I looked behind me, and I looked over Kim's shoulder, and then again in both directions. No Rhoda. She had missed her entrance.

We went around and said what we were proud of so far that year, what we were looking forward to in the second half of the year, and what we hoped to change. The nine of us repeated our new motto: No Regrets. Then we walked back to the toll booth together.

That night I checked my email and there she was.

She had written several paragraphs asking how I was and what the session today had been like and whether or not anyone had complained about a second meeting in the summer before she got to her point. She wanted to apologize. She hoped I would understand. She had been lonely, stuck in her apartment with no friends at work and she thought about jumping all the time, only then she read "The Survivors Club," and she read about how we had each felt regret the moment we jumped. Well she couldn't jump after reading that, of course, but she kept

thinking about how we were all joined together forever by that shared regret. We, those nine lucky people who had hit rock bottom and made friends out of it, and that was all she wanted, really. She wanted to be a survivor. Couldn't I understand?

I considered falling out of love with her, but of course I didn't. She thought I was special. She wanted to be a survivor and no one had ever wanted to be me before. I looked out at the garden and imagined the shape of the bridge looming over and around me. I saw the red and yellow lights flickering between the guardrails and the elegant swoop of the tower lines that look so light from the ground but are actually as thick as tree trunks. I saw the bay on one side and the ocean on the other. I saw the sun dip the hills in gold.

The gate had opened for me too, once.

[End]