

Cluster

The girl next door's name was Kat.

Her family had a willow tree in their backyard that was large enough for some of the branches to droop over into ours. I didn't see very much of that tree when I was a kid because I spent most of my time indoors, and when I did go outside it wasn't out back. Still, whenever I saw those branches, I thought they were beautiful. Exotic, almost, the way they swayed in the wind, like a wedding veil.

One night my parents had me go out into the backyard to take a look at our fence. Stray cats and raccoons and even one of our neighbors' chickens, somehow, kept finding their way into our yard, and my parents wanted me to find the hole they were coming through so that I could patch it up.

When I passed the willow tree, I heard something muffled and rhythmic from the other side of the fence. I realized that it was crying, and that it was Kat. For a moment, I stood still, trying to be silent, and stared between the fence cracks.

"Kat?" I asked. My voice was soft enough that I wasn't sure whether or not she'd be able to hear it over the wind.

But she still answered: "Yeah?"

I exhaled. Then, I moved up to the fence and crouched down, facing the planks. I could see, that Kat was sitting down with her back to me on the other side. I reached upwards and grabbed a willow branch, rubbing the leaves between my fingers.

"What's up?" I asked.

I plucked a leaf off the branch and crushed it, leaving a green stain on my skin.

"I don't know," Kat said. "Nothing really."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "Sure."

Silence fell between us. Kat wasn't crying anymore; she made no sound at all. I wondered what she was upset over, and whether or not I was allowed to just ask her what was wrong.

I rocked back and forth on the balls of my feet. "If, uh, you want to talk—"

"—you'll be there for me if I want? Sure, all right, man," Kat said. I heard her stand up and walk back towards her house. For a while, I stayed there, crouched at the fence between our backyards, a broken willow leaf in my hand. Then, I stood up, and kept looking for the hole. It helped me forget about the exchange that had just happened.

I made a couple of circuits around my backyard before I gave up; by that point, I wasn't even sure that there was one in the first place. I hadn't finished my homework, but I justified going to bed early by telling myself that I needed sleep because of a math test the next day. Still, I managed to waste around an hour browsing the internet on my phone before I fell asleep.

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A few years before I found Kat crying in her backyard, she had said to me, as we crossed paths on our way to class, that I was her favorite. I didn't know how to take the remark. If she was joking, was I supposed to laugh along? If she was patronizing me, how could I get offended? And if she was being serious, I wasn't going to say something stupid back, like, "You're my favorite too."

The mechanics of our relationship were simple, almost Newtonian. Even though she lived next door, we didn't speak very much, besides short greetings in hallways. These would, without fail, cause my lower stomach to clench and release. I followed Kat with my eyes when she walked into classes that we shared. In those rare occasions when we spoke in a group, I snuck glances at her after I told a joke to see if she was laughing.

The morning after the night I found Kat, I was walking to class with a friend when I saw her coming in the opposite direction. Part of me wanted to pretend to be too engrossed in conversation to notice her. But instead, I looked up, waved, and said hello. Kat smiled and waved back, like everything was normal.

The day passed uneventfully, with classes keeping me busy enough that I didn't think about the night before. After school was over, I stuck around in the library to get some extra studying in. Even though I hadn't slept much, I had done all right on my test, but there were still some things I had missed that I wanted to look up. I was around halfway through when Kat came up to me.

"Hey there," she said.

I looked up from my notes, and took a glance from side to side to see who else was around us. The library had mostly emptied out by now.

"Uh, hey," I said. "What's up?"

Kat shrugged. "Just saying hi."

"Right," I said.

I wiped my hands on my thighs and motioned with my head at the seat next to me. "You wanna, uh, study?"

Kat giggled. "Oh, you're so cute."

I laughed in a way that, hopefully, would be perceived as sarcastic. "Thanks."

Kat took the seat, but started checking her phone instead of pulling out anything school-related. I waited for a few seconds, seeing if Kat wanted to talk about anything, but when she was silent, I went back to work.

We stayed like that for some time. I let myself grow more absorbed in studying to distract myself from Kat's continued presence at the table. When I wasn't writing, I started twirling my pen between my fingers, which I didn't do when I was alone. People began to file out until Kat and I were the only ones left. As the sky outside dimmed, the artificial lighting of the library began to take over, casting the room in a colder, harsher light.

"Can I ask you something?" Kat asked.

I looked up from my work. "Yeah, what's up?"

"I was just thinking about something you said, back in freshman year." She was still browsing her phone.

We had talked more—a lot more—back then than we did now. I wasn't sure why. The easy explanation was that we had had more classes together, but there was something else too. If I had wanted to, I could have put in a small amount of effort to keep talking to Kat, even if we had less time to spend together. I just didn't. I was fine only watching.

"What did I say?" I asked.

"We were talking about suicide. Do you remember?"

I stared at Kat for a few moments. I didn't remember that conversation positively. "Kind of, yeah."

"You said that it was selfish."

I lowered my gaze, taking a few moments to examine the wood grain of the table. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Why not?"

“Because it’s wrong, it’s...I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“Why’s it wrong?”

With any luck, Kat would take the pleading look I gave her to mean that I was uncomfortable with the situation. “Look, I don’t think I understood what *they*, people who are suicidal, think. Whether it’s selfish or not doesn’t matter. I just can’t say something like that.”

Kat was looking up from her phone now. She gave me a thin smile. “That’s funny. I didn’t know that you’d changed your mind about that.”

“I mean, I’ve been wrong about a lot of stuff.”

“Oh, come on. You’re, like, the smartest person I know.”

That, I knew, was a total misconception. I tried to tell Kat as much, but she waved me off. The problem was that I knew exactly why people always said that about me. I had spent too much time trying to make witty, incisive observations about the world around me, too much time viewing life and other people as problems that I was poised to solve. Even my own self-awareness that this was the case didn’t stop me from doing it.

What I really wanted was for someone to tell me that I was full of shit.

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Because I went to a private school on the other side of Silicon Valley, the drive from my house to school took around thirty minutes if I left an hour early, meaning that every day I would waste another thirty minutes on campus before class started. I couldn’t leave any later, because that would double my commute time and I’d show up late.

Every day I was stuck in traffic was the same. I could remember the same details: the red headlights and white taillights flowing past each other, the rhythm of my windshield wipers, drumming my fingers against the wheel, frustration.

I heard the news a few months before talking to Kat in my backyard. When I did, I was stuck in traffic. Besides the news, my memories of that day were the same as of any other day.

It was on the radio. Some kid, whose name they did not broadcast, had been killed when he'd walked in front of the Caltrain. They said it seemed intentional, and that it bore similarities to a number of suicides which had occurred in that area over the past year. They went on, talking about concerns like media overexposure and some steps that the kid's high school was taking to try and prevent more suicides. They transitioned to a routine traffic report after a few minutes.

What was I supposed to feel? I didn't know the kid and I probably only knew one or two people who did. What struck me at the time was how gruesome it was. Between how much I disliked the rainy winter weather, and that I would have to make four lane changes across heavy traffic to get to my exit, what I thought was that it seemed like a messy, shitty way to die.

After talking to Kat in the library, I thought differently. Had she heard the news as well? Maybe she had been stuck in the same traffic as me, on the same highway, with eyes for nothing but the road ahead. What had she thought of when she'd heard what had happened?

Kat and I began to speak more. We talked about how her dance team was going, or with what video games I'd been wasting my time. When we spoke, I kept remembering our conversation in the library, and what had happened by the willow tree.

I began to walk around in my backyard without any real purpose. My parents viewed my new habit strangely, but I told them that I was just letting my mind wander. Every time I went out there, I would find my eyes drawn to the fence between Kat's house and mine. The silhouette of the willow tree dominated the view. I always wondered whether or not I would find Kat back there again.

Maybe I saw something wrong in Kat that nobody else, as far as I knew, did. I had no way of knowing if I was alone or right. Maybe it was my imagination: the product of a sick, chauvinist mind that wanted to find weakness in the object of its infatuation.

Kat had to notice that something was off about me. Not only were our conversations more frequent, she had suggested that we talk on the phone, or even over Skype. She said that it felt more personal, but I only felt more exposed. I did, however, get to know more about Kat. Even though I lived next door, I'd never seen the inside of her room. I wouldn't have known that she had a stuffed animal collection, or that her room was meticulously organized, or that the walls were lavender.

What had she been doing that night in her backyard? Why had she brought up that conversation we'd had years ago? Why was she talking to me more? We circled around these questions, drawing closer and closer in a spiraling, dizzying dance.

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I began to notice other strange things.

There was this girl, named Jessica, who sat behind me in English. She was blonde, which was easy to notice in a school where most everyone had black hair. I'd never had a conversation with her in my life. But one day, around the time that Kat came up to me in the library, she stopped showing up to class.

I probably wouldn't have noticed anything if it weren't for the fact that nobody actually knew why. All anyone said about it were the stupid rumors that high-schoolers came up with: she was in drug rehab, or she'd gotten pregnant from some one-night stand. Even though I didn't know Jessica myself, we had some mutual friends, but when I talked to them about it, they didn't know what was going on either.

During one of our Skype calls, I asked Kat, "Hey, you know Jessica? In our grade?"

Kat blinked. For a few seconds, I couldn't tell if she hadn't heard me because of a bad connection, or if she was taking her time in answering. Then, she asked, "Which one?"

"I don't know her last name. White girl, blonde hair? She hangs out with..."

"Oh, *her*," Kat said. "Yeah, I know her."

There was a pause as I sat there, trying to decide whether or not to push harder. Kat's head floated on my screen, waiting. She shifted in her seat and started playing with a lock of her hair. But despite this show of nonchalance, her eyes were locked on the camera, watching me. I wondered what she was trying to discover.

Kat said, "Why do you ask?"

I shook my head. "She just hasn't showed up to class for the past few weeks. I was just asking if you knew anything."

"Huh," Kat said. "You know, I haven't seen her around much either. I didn't know if anybody else noticed."

"Uh, it's a big school, I guess."

Kat smiled. "Sure is."



The way she smiled, the games we were playing with each other—all of it only frustrated me. I had suspicions. Was Kat hiding what she knew about Jessica because she had gone through the same thing, or something similar? If so, revealing what she knew about Jessica would expose her own secrets as well.

“Hey, Kat? We’re friends, right?”

Kat’s eyes widened. “Of course we are!”

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One night, my dad sent me out into the backyard again. He hated cats and he’d seen one out back, so he told me to go chase it away. Somehow, he hadn’t figured out after more than a decade and a half that I, unlike him, loved cats, so I went out to try to befriend it. It was hiding by the willow tree, slinking its body in and out of the low-hanging branches. I stooped low to get it to approach, but it only shied away. Somewhere, I’d read that for cats, blinking slowly was a sign of friendship, so I tried doing that to signal that I came in peace. It only stared back.

Footsteps approached from the other side of the fence. Startled, the cat leaped away.

I turned. Even if someone looked through the cracks of the fence, I doubted that they could see me in the dim lighting. For a few moments, I waited, deciding whether or not to announce my presence. Then, I said, “Hello?”

There was an exclamation of surprise from the other side of the fence. “Jesus, what are you doing there?”

It was Kat’s voice. “I dunno,” I said. “You know this is my backyard?”

I reflected that even though it was my backyard, it was still Kat's tree. Either way, once again, I felt like an intruder on something private. My heart began to beat faster.

I said, "Look, if you want me to go, I'll go."

I waited for an answer, feeling the wind brush the willow branches across my face, hearing crickets chirping from the creek out back. I could think about very little. Then, she answered, "No, stay."

I wondered what her face looked like on the other side of that fence. Now that I was only inches away from her, it was striking how different her voice sounded when she was almost whispering, as if afraid to be heard.

"Why're you out here?" I asked.

The fence creaked as Kat leaned against it on the other side. "Alone time," she said. "My mom comes to check up on me if I stay inside, so here I am."

If she had wanted to be alone, I didn't know why she hadn't just asked me to leave in the first place. I glanced back at my house.

"You know, I get that you're trying to be friends," Kat said. "I guess I'm sorry that I was a bitch to you the first time we were out here."

I shrugged my shoulders and sighed. "I'm not sure that I can accept that apology. I don't think you did anything wrong."

Kat paused, as if she were thinking. Then, finally, she said, "Thanks."

"Sure. Can I ask you something?"

After a moment, Kat said, "Okay."

I suddenly became aware of her breathing, slow and heavy, barely audible over the wind rustling through the willow branches, or the steady drone of cars passing on the street in front of our houses. Carefully, I eased my back against the fence. I almost expected to feel her warmth pressing against me, but there was only wood.

“Back then, when I said that thing about suicide, and I said that it was selfish, which is wrong...”

I leaned my head back.

“Did I hurt you?”

Kat snorted. “You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t know if you hurt me or not,” Kat said. “What you said stayed on my mind. I always wanted to ask you to explain why you thought that, what made you want to say that. But it was a long time ago. I didn’t think about it too much before, you know, recently.”

“Recently?”

“I mean, it was all over the news...”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Do you know it’s happened before?” Kat asked. “A kid from the same school, a few years ago.”

“Really? The same way?”

“Yeah. A girl. It wasn’t too long before we had that talk, actually.”

Another portion of the picture became clear. “Is that what made you ask me?”

“Yeah.”

There was so much that I still didn't know: about Jessica, or why she didn't want her mom to check on her, or what was behind the half-smiles she had perfected in delivering. If I asked her, I'd only get fragments of a story. I craned my head around to look behind me, through the gaps in the fence, at the back of Kat's head. Her hair, blowing in the light breeze, was barely visible.

Kat turned around, and our eyes met through the fence. "What're you looking at?" she asked.

I looked forwards again. "Nothing."

She snorted again. Upon reflection, I'd never heard her do that before tonight.

"Can I share something?" she asked. "I don't know if it makes sense, but..."

"Go ahead," I said.

As I waited for Kat to start speaking, a light in my house blinked off. I could hear fewer and fewer cars passing outside, and the chirping of the crickets grew louder. I tilted my head back to look up at the night sky. As a kid, I'd always looked for stars, in stubborn defiance of light pollution, but all I could ever find were the blinking red lights of planes slowly drifting across the blackness.

Kat's voice brought me back to our conversation. "So, fun fact, girls are more likely to overdose to kill themselves than guys. Guys use guns and, like, hanging, I guess. Maybe it has to do with aesthetics."

"Aesthetics?" I asked.

"Yeah. Like how Annabel Lee died. With poison, the body just...melts away. So I was thinking, years back, when I heard about this girl, who killed herself with a train...I was kind of impressed with her for going against expectations. It's just so messy, and nobody can look away from something like that. I

was proud of her for not dissolving. I was happy that she didn't go quietly. Don't you think that's a sick thing to think?"

As she spoke, I imagined Kat's face: eyes closed, serene.

"No," I said. "It's not."

I heard Kat exhale. "You really think so?"

"Yeah. You shouldn't have to feel bad about the way your brain works, right?"

"I guess."

We both sat in silence for a while. I closed my eyes and imagined an invisible hand that moved through the Valley, snaking through the mess of highways. Every once in a while it touched someone, affecting them in some way—silencing them when they would otherwise speak, turning them away from places they once enjoyed—but nobody said anything because they couldn't see the hand. It was only when someone got snatched away that anyone noticed.

"Hey," Kat said. "Thanks for talking."

"Of course. Thanks for letting me listen," I said. "Are you okay?"

"I will be, eventually."

How long would that be? She could have meant minutes or years. I thought about asking her, but I decided not to—I figured that she had already asked herself the same thing.

"I'd hate to bring up another weird memory," Kat said, "but remember when I called you my favorite?"

"Yeah." I felt a bit of heat rush to my cheeks. "I didn't really know what you meant."

“I meant it.”

My chest fluttered when she said that, which embarrassed me, even though I was the only one who could know that it had happened. I tried finding a way to respond, but I realized that Kat wasn't really waiting for an answer.

There were probably more romantic places to appreciate the blank night sky, but a backyard fence wasn't the worst. The fragrance of dirt and Kat's shampoo filled my nose as I took a deep breath of the night air.

“You wanna talk again?” I asked. “Like this?”

“Yeah,” Kat said. “Someplace else, though. My butt's kind of sore.”

“Sure,” I said, biting back a laugh. I let my back slouch against the fence, closed my eyes, and relaxed.