

## Klondike

It was an August rain. Loud rain. Rain that hit the ground hard and slapped your head and ears and nose on the way down. Wet that penetrated your clothes and skin and just about everything else.

July had been a long time ago.

They were unloading the car of groceries. He was opening the trunk; the latch was stuck. Meanwhile, she was hopping from one foot to the other, waiting for him to open it, as if this movement could evade the raindrops. But her hair already stuck to her head in strands, and her shirt had become nothing more than a second skin.

The trunk door finally gave in, popping free in a movement so sudden that the door nearly slammed into the man's head. He jumped away with a barely audible yelp, but she noticed it, muffling her giggles behind her hand.

He motioned for her to take a grocery bag or two, as he himself grabbed the largest of them. There was only one left for her: one that had been cramped in the corner, the bottom sticky from the melting Neapolitan ice cream bars inside.

They were her favorite: Klondike and covered in a thin layer of chocolate. You always had to start eating from the strawberry end, that way chocolate was left for last. She always intuitively knew which end held strawberry and which chocolate. He somehow fumbled with it, managing to bite from the end so that you got a taste of all three: strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. He lied that he liked eating it that way better.

She took the sticky bag and ran to the house, leaving him behind lugging the larger bags, two in each hand. One of her flip-flops fell off while she was running, flying off in a flash of hot pink. It landed in front of the man, and he muttered some less than kind words as he leaned over to pick it up, stuffing it under his armpit.

Eventually, she reached the house and turned back to look at him, only then noticing her missing sandal under his arm. She laughed and wiggled her toes around in the grass, mud now dotting her painted-white toenails.

“Hurry!” she screamed, still laughing. “The ice cream is melting!”

He didn't bother answering, merely shaking his head at her. But she kept teasing at him, undeterred.

“I've been standing here forever!”

“If you move any slower you'll melt into a puddle!”

“No one ever told me August could be this rainy!”

Finally, he reached her, intentionally slowing down when he was a few feet away, so that she ran to him and started pulling his arm. The flip-flop slipped out from under there, and he stopped to pick it up again, only throwing her into another fit of giggles.

“We might as well stay in the rain forever now! Can’t get any wetter than this with the speed you’re going at!”

Provoked, he raised one eyebrow and sat on the ground right in front of her. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at him from above, and he looked up and gave her a sheepish grin.

Without missing a beat, she dropped her single bag of groceries and jumped onto his lap, plowing him down onto the grass. His back slammed onto the mud and he groaned, unheard above her shrieks of glee. Shrieks which only grew louder as he wrapped his arms around her stomach.

“Stop it! You’re tickling me! Stop!”

He eased his grip and she exhaled loudly. With a neat spin—that flung off her second flip-flop—he swung her next to him, so that they lay next to each other, wet bleeding through their flimsy t-shirts.

He turned his head to face her, and she did the same. She was beaming and he mirrored her exactly.

“Rita, I’m so wet.”

Another giggle. “Maybe we should go inside then.”

“Oh, really?”

And so he stood up, picking up all four shopping bags with one hand, and used the other to heave her off the ground. Finally standing, she grabbed the bag she was responsible for, then slithered her free hand into his pocket, fishing out the keys to the house.

“Hey!” he protested, but she was already at the door, the keys turning in the lock.

After emitting a louder than necessary groan, he followed her into the house. He closed the door she hadn’t, and turning on the lamp that she had forgotten to. The keys though, she had dutifully dropped on the ground next to the lamp, something he discovered when he stepped on them after taking off his shoes. He cursed profusely and kicked the keys. They went flying.

But the sound of keys hitting the wall was masked by a loud thump coming from deeper in the house, somewhere like the kitchen, which was cozied in a room that opened behind their couch. A room that was most likely once a walk-in closet, yet now had had its doors removed so that it looked like a fitting extension of the parlor—if it had just been not as close to the couch.

Dragging along his grocery bags, he made his way to the kitchen, turning on all the various lamps as he went. The last lamp he turned on shed some light on the mysterious thump, it illuminating Rita on the ground with the freezer door above her open and next to what was probably a frozen chicken.

“Oops,” she said.

“Rita!” he shouted, shoving her to the side in order to pick up the chicken and return it to the freezer.

“Wait!” She held up the box of Klondike bars. “You have to put these in the freezer too!”

“Jesus, Rita. You were in the house for a second before you managed to do something.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I was just trying to put the ice cream away but the chicken fell out!”

The corners of her mouth were struggling to remain upright, and her eyes were opened wide, so that he could see his stern face reflected in her brown eyes.

“Well, I guess that means there’s no room in the freezer then.”

He slammed the freezer door closed; she crumpled to the ground, bringing the box of Klondike bars down with her. Sitting down on the tiled floor like that, her hands possessively gripping the ice cream box, she stared up at her father, her eyes not glaring, but still refusing to tear. Uncomfortable with her intent gaze, he left the kitchen to the couch right outside, which he immediately sank into, stretching his legs out for a proper slump. He rested his elbow on the couch’s arm, his hand cradling his head and his fingers rubbing his temples.

Rita exited the kitchen too, after waiting five minutes, only to stand behind the couch for another five. She stood there stoically, looking at her father for a while, then shifting her gaze to right above his head, at the moon which shone through the large window in front of the couch. It was white and shone in the clear night; the rain had stopped.

Tentatively, she climbed onto the couch from the back, placing her foot on a nearby end-table to heave herself up and over. She slid down next to her father, careful to keep a centimeter distance between them, so that she didn’t even graze his arm. His head was still in his hand.

He was not moving, and did not seem like he would, so she poked his arm once, then two times quickly. Still eliciting no response, she bent down and slithered onto his lap, her face gazing up at his.

“Dad?”

“Dad, I didn’t mean to.”

“I won’t touch the freezer next time.”

“Dad?”

He lifted his head up and sighed. He shook his head and sighed again.

She sighed too, a long one where she was extra loud with puffed out nostrils. A sigh that was followed by a giggle. A giggle that was repeated after she could practically feel the smile emerging reluctantly on her father’s face. He chuckled quietly and shook his head once more, but this time it wasn’t followed by a sigh. Just by a peck delivered to Rita’s forehead.

“Oh, Rita,” he said and squeezed her arm with the hand that had been massaging his temples just a few minutes ago. They stayed on the couch like this, Rita smiling demurely up at her father the whole time, until he finally lifted Rita off his lap and stood up.

He stood in front of the couch, facing the window, and stretched, yawning. “How about you and I go watch a movie upstairs before bedtime.”

“Really?”

He turned around and nodded at her. “In my bed.”

With that she too leapt off the couch, clasped her father’s hand, and jumped up and down a few times before running up the stairs, which lay a few feet to the right of the couch. But halfway up the stairs her father screamed, “wait!”

She stopped suddenly and turned around, eyebrows raised at him in question.

“You forgot to put the ice cream in the freezer,” he said, his hands on his hips but his eyes twinkling.

She bit her bottom lip and her eyes flitted to the ground. “Oh.” Her eyes looked up and him again. “I kind of already did.”

“When?”

“Right after you left the kitchen,” she said. Then, softer, “when you had told me not to.”

He clenched his fists, and they both looked down at the ground. His hands returned to their task of cradling his head, but this time he also muttered, “just go upstairs and pick a movie.”

She nodded, and let out a soft “okay.” Quietly, she walked up the stairs, careful not to make even a creak, and headed to the second floor. At the top of the staircase, the hallway led to two doors. The one that did not have butterfly stickers peeling off of it was her father’s.

Before entering her father’s room, she went into her own, and dug under her bed for the crate of DVD’s she kept there. They were all her favorites, despite the fact they had all been sloppily discarded in the crate and few of the DVD’s actually matched the case they were in. But at that moment, none of them seemed to satisfy her, and she forgot why she even liked them in the first place. So she left her room empty-handed, having decided maybe just watching some TV would be best.

She was already snug under the covers and a second quilt she had thrown on when she heard her father’s loud steps coming up the stairs. While hurriedly lowering the TV volume, her father entered the room, with two Neapolitans in his hands, one unwrapped and already bitten.

Slowly, she sat upright and reached for a bar, which he handed to her silently. Not breaking their gaze, she unwrapped the ice cream bar completely, so that the bar now lay on the center of the wrapper in the palm of her left hand. She stared at the ice cream bar for a second, turned it around in her hand, then bit into it.

Smiling, she proudly showed him the bitten ice cream bar, revealing the strawberry she had bitten into. "I did it right!" she boasted.

He nodded.

"How'd you do?" she asked through more bites into the ice cream, gesturing with her head at his half-eaten Neapolitan.

He let out a half-hearted laugh. "Totally fucked up. I bit into the chocolate side first."

Her mouth fell open. "But you're supposed to save that part for last!"

"I know," he said, and climbed into bed next to her, on top of the covers. "What're we watching?"

"Oh, just some cartoons." She picked up the remote and offered it to him. "You can change it if you want."

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter to me."

They watched the cartoon, close enough so that they were still technically watching together, but their bodies were on opposite sides of the bed. Rita had sunken deeper into the covers, so that only her head peeked out. Ever so often she would glance at her father, to find his eyes locked onto the TV, his body still on top of the covers, with one leg hanging over and his foot resting on the ground, as if he might suddenly spring up and leave at any moment.

The silence was ultimately broken when he let out a satisfied groan after finishing the Neapolitan.

Rita glanced at him again. "They're good aren't they?"

He nodded, eyes unmoving.

Rita took another bite of her Neapolitan. "I'm sorry I kept touching the freezer."

He did not respond for a second, but then grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. He patted the part of the bed next to him, and she edged closer to him, dripping ice cream as she moved.

They lay there, now closer, though still not touching, nor looking at each other.

"It's difficult," he said. "Sometimes you make it difficult for me."

He paused and waited until Rita whispered a "yeah."

He resumed. "I can't always have you running around and making a mess. I can't handle that."

Rita had stopped eating her ice cream, and a puddle of ice cream was starting to form on the covers on top of her chest. The puddle grew until Rita finally noticed it and started frantically wiping at it, which she only stopped once she noticed her father had stopped talking.

Encouraged by her attention, he once again continued. “It’s fun for you, but it’s just so hard for me to control you, and you’re not helping.” He looked at her, at her now solemn face. “I just need your help, okay?”

She nodded and kept nodding, avoiding making eye contact with her father while her head shakily kept bobbing up and down. Her father finally put his hand on her shoulder, and she gradually stopped nodding, now staring at the foreign hand. Slightly calmed down, she started to finish off the Neapolitan, but it was nearly all melted now, and some dripped onto her father’s arm.

He yanked his hand back and scowled. “Jesus, Rita, see?” Rita began to inch away but a glare from her father stopped her. “Goddammit I know I’m not perfect, okay? But I’m trying at least. And I really, really can’t say that you are. I just wish—”

“Stop! Okay? Please, stop!”

He did, but his hands found their way to the familiar site of his temples, and began massaging them harshly, painfully. His fingers were digging into his temples and his eyes were squeezed shut. When he opened them he dared a glance at Rita, who had moved back to the other side of the bed. Rita froze when she caught his gaze, her hand stuck midway between the edge of the bed and the nightstand, where she was about to put her licked-clean ice cream wrapper.

“Fuck,” he said softly, eyes closed. Then, louder, eyes open, he asked, “do you—do you want another one?”

Rita shook her head. “We only bought one box. I can’t have two a day.”

“Oh, God! We can afford ice cream. Jesus, if it makes you feel better I won’t have one tomorrow, okay!” Rita’s eyes widened. “Just have a second ice cream bar if you want one!”

“It’s fine! I don’t want one, really.”

“Okay then,” he shrugged. He gave a hard look at Rita, scrutinizing her open face. “We should go to bed then. Shoo to the bathroom and brush your teeth.”

Rita jutted out her bottom lip pleadingly. “Do I have to? I’m tired.” Not letting her father reply, Rita’s suddenly widened. “Hey, maybe I could sleep here with you!”

Her father sighed. “Why not?”

He stood up and began to take off his clothes, stripping down to his boxers, prompting Rita to do the same, so she was just in her underwear and an undershirt. Both ready, they climbed under the covers at the same time. Once he saw her turn on her side, he turned off the light and closed his eyes.

Not more than five minutes after they had both closed their eyes there was a loud crack of thunder, and hard rain started to pitter-patter on the roof once more.

“My flip-flops!” Rita exclaimed.

Her father grunted.

“I left them outside! They’re going to get all wet and muddy!”

Her father pulled the covers up higher. “Who cares, they were already muddy.”

“But just on the outside, not on the inside where I put my feet. They’ll be ruined now.”

“We’ll get them in the morning.”

Rita sat upright in bed. “No, no! It’ll be too late. I have to get them now.”

He grunted once more.

Rita pulled off the covers and began to put her jeans back on. She buttoned them and stood up, tip-toeing to the stairs.

He turned on the lights and Rita stopped in her tracks and stood up straight.

“I’m going to get my flip-flops.”

“Oh no you’re not. You’re staying right here.”

Rita clasped her hands together. “Please! I need to; I do!”

“No!” he yelled and stood. He marched to where Rita was standing, right in the doorway, and grabbed her arm, dragging her back to the bed to sit her down. “You asked to sleep with me and that’s what you’re going to do! No going in the rain, no touching those goddamn flip-flops!”

Rita looked up at him, at his eyes that looked black in the shadows of the room, but that she knew were brown. She remembered they were brown. The same brown hers were.

She dropped his gaze and nodded, heading back to her side of the bed without being prompted this time. He went to his respective side and turned off the lights.

“Goodnight.”

They fell asleep quickly, and this time undisturbed until another crack of thunder woke Rita’s father up.

He lay there, now awake, and then shifted onto his back, so that he was not facing the wall but rather looking up onto the ceiling, with its patches of light coming from the openings in the blinds. Lying there, he could hear Rita’s soft breathing, the whistling of air as it passed through her nose.

He turned to Rita, then, and could make out the covers rising in synchrony with her breathing. She was nothing more than a lump in the covers, a child-shaped lump with some curled locks spilling out.

In that moment, at nearly two in the morning, he reached out for her small body. He reached for her hand or her arm or maybe just to pat her shoulder. But the bed creaked as he moved and he stopped. He listened for her breathing to make sure she had not been awakened,

and she had not, so he reached for her again, but the bed creaked again and he stopped. He sighed and pulled back his hand. But lying there, alone, he could not fall asleep and decided to leave Rita to head downstairs.

About an hour later a loud thump from downstairs woke Rita. She sat up in bed, breathing quickly, and looked to her left to see the covers in disarray and her father missing. Not wasting a second, she jumped out of bed and ran downstairs to where the thump had come from.

“Dad!” she screamed, running around the first floor. But the lights were off and, in her frenzy, she rammed her toe against the couch, the one in the living room in front of the kitchen. “Ow, ow, ow!” she screamed even louder, and, with one hand clutching her foot, she turned on a nearby lamp. A lamp which shed some light on the mysterious thump.

There, hopping around with her hand cradling her foot, Rita found her father sitting on the kitchen floor eating a Neapolitan below the open freezer door, next to what seemed like a frozen chicken.

Her father looked up at Rita. “Look!” he said, and proudly showed her his ice cream bar. He was grinning from ear to ear.

“Chocolate!”