

The bottom of Ivy's dress caught the breeze as she and Dom walked by the lake at sunset. Sophomore year of college was beginning in two weeks, so Dom asked her if she wanted to hang out one last time before the chaos of school began. She had a chocolate ice cream cone in her left hand and a purse hanging off her right shoulder. She was wearing spandex underneath her dress, so nothing would've happened had the wind tried something with her. She couldn't help but think of Marilyn Monroe in that moment. But her dress wasn't white, and her hair was nowhere near the stark blond Marilyn wore. It hung down in braids that reached just below her shoulder blades. Marilyn had something to flaunt, and the prospect of her dress flying up was enticing for most. Ivy was nothing to ogle at. Her face had a fraction of the amount of makeup compared to Marilyn's, and her chest was Nebraska in comparison: flat.

Dom's rainbow sherbet was melting in the heat; streaks of green and pink raced down his hand. His skin was just as golden as the sun reflecting off the gentle waves. Ivy preferred walking closer to the lake because she could see his face in the sunlight. His freckles emerged in the golden light; his hair glistened a golden-brown no painter could create. And Ivy liked it. She didn't have to squint to make up for the backlight of the sun. But she could also turn her head see the water and the ripples clearly without a six-foot-one, way-too-sweaty-for-how-long-we've-been-walking human in her way. She got the best of both worlds by walking next to the lake.

*But do I?* She thought.

Yes, the lake was beautiful. It reflected the light and cast silhouettes and bullshit like that. But it also smelled like fish and goose poop. And it's not like they were on a beach running with sandals in their hands. She wasn't holding onto her floppy hat; he wasn't trying to push her into the water as a playful joke, and she wasn't pulling him in with her so they could both get wet from the waves crawling up the sand. No. They were coated in a sticky layer of dried sweat and mosquitos were starting to emerge. Yes, she was walking next to a guy she enjoyed being around for the most part, but it wasn't like that between them. Ivy didn't picture her life with a guy like Dom, so she'd told him no when he asked her out on a date.

She didn't tell him no right away, though. Dom stood in the hallway outside Ivy's dorm room for ten minutes trying to convince her to sit outside with him while he shot a basketball. They had only been at school for a week and a half and didn't have much homework. She didn't know him *that* well. But she was tired of sitting on her futon watching Netflix while her roommate came and went with her friends. So she followed him outside and watched him dribble and shoot on the court just outside their dorm. She asked him questions like *where are you from?* and *what's your major again?* He told her about the time he burned his elbow while trying to fry an egg when he was home alone for the first time and about how he failed his driver's test three times and barely passed on the fourth. He talked a lot. Ivy sat on a picnic table as he made and missed his shots. She eventually joined him on the court, though she wasn't any good. He tried teaching her proper form and everything, but she didn't care to learn. She embraced that she was bad by pretending to be good, smack-talked like a pro. He didn't let her off easy. She jokingly dribbled around him, but he stole the ball and attempted to dunk on her at every opportunity. He asked questions like *what are your hobbies* and *what do you want to be when you grow up?*

She told him she didn't have any and that she'd always wanted to study whales. He stopped dribbling and looked at her.

"Whales?"

She shrugged; told him she'd always been fascinated with underwater life. "There's a whole other world down there, just below the water's surface."

He smiled and told her that he'd always wanted to go sailing, and that if she ever needed a sailing buddy, he could be her guy. He turned back and shot the ball and missed. She nervously laughed, told him she'd consider it. She never thought about having a sailing buddy. In her mind it was just her, the whales, and the open ocean.

They talked until the sun started going down. They decided to call it quits just as Ivy was getting lucky and made some shots. He walked her to her room on the second floor and stopped at her door. He was the first person at college she told anything more than her name and major. And she liked that... *maybe*. He made the new place feel less like a prison and more like a home, even if it was only for a couple of hours. They leaned against opposite sides of the door jamb and talked about 80s music and the crap food at the dining hall for another half an hour. He looked down at his feet just as the conversation came to a lull. Ivy mirrored him.

"Thanks for hanging with me, Ivy." His words had some weight to them. It felt like he was grasping for more to say, but silence was all he could find. It made Ivy's heart drop an inch.

"Of course," she paused. "Thanks for asking me."

He kept searching, but all he could settle on was, "I'll see you later, then." It felt like his words didn't quite say what he wanted. But maybe Ivy read the whole situation wrong. Maybe Dom was just bad at goodbyes.

"Maybe you will." She smiled at her own maybe-joke and turned into her room. He walked away with his head hanging low. She didn't notice how fast her heart was beating until she was safely behind her closed door. Her thoughts jumped back and forth. *He likes you. No, he doesn't. He wanted to say something. You're reading too far into this. He's your sailing buddy now. No, he's not. You don't even have a boat.* She flopped onto her futon and covered her face with a pillow. Ten minutes later, a yellow light flashed from her phone. It was a Snapchat from Dom asking if she wanted to go on a date. Flutters in her heart told her to say yes, but flutters in her gut told her to say no. She said sure. But after a week and a half of avoiding him in person and telling him "I'm busy, maybe we can go next week," they decided to call it off and remain friends.

And here they were a year later, walking side by side, with ice cream on their tongues and silence between their steps. Just friends. She thought about jumping into the lake. She could walk into the weeds toward the lake, pretending she wanted to get a closer look at a duck or something and whoops, flip right on over and into the water, chocolate ice cream and all. She never learned how to properly swim, but she could hold her breath underwater for 2 minutes and 43 seconds, according to the last time she counted. Her family owned a cabin while she was growing up, and she spent every summer afternoon treading water by herself among the algae. She decided one day to work on holding her breath underwater. She challenged herself with a minute and gradually lengthened the time. The longer she went, the longer she escaped the world of air. She liked the

world of water. It wasn't completely quiet, but the sloshing in her ears at least muffled her parents' screams from the house.

But jumping into the lake meant he'd freak out and take off his shirt and shoes and dive in after her because he liked being the hero of every situation. And he'd grab her by the waist and slop her back onto the path. Then he'd definitely do mouth to mouth, which was basically like kissing her. And he'd probably think of it that way too. That's not what she wanted. *Right?*

"The sunset's really nice tonight." His voice and the slurp of his sherbet brought her back to the path with him.

"Yeah, so's your ice cream." She smiled and gave him her napkin. They both giggled.

"I'm a child, I know." They both smiled. He was probably the more mature one. He was the one who had a job, even if it was just at the front desk of their dorm. He was the one who made sure they stayed on track while studying no matter how hard she tried to procrastinate. He was the one who talked her off the edge when she found herself in tears eating ice cream after she failed her stats exam. Even if she tried to go into the weeds near the lake, he'd probably tell her to be careful not to slip. He'd probably try to grab her hand or something too. His hands were probably clammy.

Dom had almost drowned the summer before their freshman year, a story Ivy learned the first night she met him. It was 8 PM on the first night on campus. Ivy sat on her floor sniffing and sorting through photos to hang near her desk. Her roommate had already left to hang out with her high school friends, so she was alone. She played music from her laptop and paced around her new room. A knock on her door made her jump. She glanced to her open door to see a guy leaning against the jamb wearing a basketball jersey, khaki shorts, no shoes.

"I thought I heard REO." He had droopy eyes and his words melted together. When he smiled, he revealed straight teeth held in place by a retainer. He was a bit drunk. She could tell. Her brother talked like that whenever he decided he'd had enough of his life and took to their parents' liquor cabinet or his beer and vodka stash under his bed. She was shocked this stranger in her doorway knew the song, but he told her he *fucking loved* 80s music. She recoiled a bit at the f-bomb, but she told herself this is what college was: strangers doing strange things in close quarters. She told him her name was Ivy; he said his was Dominic, but people called him Dom. She was a bio major; he was math. Ivy told him that was cool, and they sat there in silence. Dom broke the awkward tension by casually mentioning he almost drowned that summer. Her eyes grew wide, and he proceeded to tell her about how his brother pushed him in the river near his house back home and his foot got caught on something. "I was underwater for like a minute and a half and I was coughing up water when my brother finally jumped in and saved me. I'm so *fucking* glad I didn't need mouth to mouth from his stupid ass."

She laughed because a stranger was telling her this story as if they'd been friends since kindergarten and because she knew she could've lasted way longer without the threat of drowning. She let him continue telling drunk stories until his friends grabbed him to go out.

Dom looked at her. The sky was turning pink, and his skin was softening. The look in his eyes was softening too. The lake was becoming stiller and softer as people were docking their boats for the evening. He finished his cone, wiped his mouth with the crumpled napkin, and looked down

at his feet. He was grasping for something again. In the silence between them, he was searching for the words he couldn't say in person almost a year ago. Her heart started sinking into her stomach.

He sucked air in through his nose, "Hey Ivy, can I ask you..."

"Oh look, a duck." If she was going to jump, she had to do it now. She shoved her cone stub and purse in Dom's hands and made her way off the path into the weeds. She tried to pretend she was just casually looking for a duck—like she wasn't running away from him or his question—but her desire to get away took over. She disappeared into the weeds before Dom could grab her hand or stop her and say something she didn't want to hear.

She soon was at the lake's edge. The small ripples lapped onto the slimy rocks she stood on. She thought back to the cabin and how she'd sit on the edge of the dock, breathing. *Inhale. Exhale.* She'd close her eyes and let the sun warm her eyelids. *Inhale. Exhale.* She'd take deeper and deeper breaths, pushing air out and sucking more in every time. And when she'd hit the point where her brain felt like it was coated in a thin layer of cold air, she'd put her hands on her stomach and physically push all her air out through pursed lips until her body shuddered. Then she'd suck in all the air she could and slide herself into the water. She'd plug her nose the moment before her head submerged, and she'd let herself find suspension in the water. Then she'd give herself a moment to listen. The water pulsed around her. The pressure in her ears modulated the laps of the water and muffled everything going on above her. She'd hook her foot on the bottom of the dock and let her mind drift as the natural rhythm of the water pushed her to and fro. She pretended humpbacks and bowheads and blues and belugas swam circles around her. She pictured herself at thirty-four, riding in a boat with binoculars and waiting for whales to breach and say hello. She wondered what kissing someone felt like, what holding hands with a boy that liked her felt like. She imagined what it would be like to hear the words *I love you* from her father, what it'd feel like to nap on the couch nuzzled into his shoulder. She imagined what it'd be like having her brother next to her, holding his sober breath and her hand—imagining his ideal world alongside hers. The world of water gave her space to live an ideal life. And then the burn in her lungs would draw her out of her mind and up toward the world of air. She'd break through the surface with a gasp of air she wished she didn't need.

She turned over her shoulder to look for Dom. The weeds blocked her view, but she could hear rustling and his voice asking her *how in the fuck* she saw a duck that far into the weeds. She breathed deeper and deeper, waiting for her brain to get cold. She pushed on her stomach, took a deep breath, then slid herself off the slimy rock and into the lake water—making a tiny splash so Dom would hear. She didn't get the deep breath she wanted, but it would have to do. She used her arms to counter the water pressure and to lower herself down until she found a jutting rock she could hook her foot on. She listened to the water around her. The gentle sloshing and pulsing of the water calmed the pounding of her heart. Before she let her mind get away from her, she heard a muffled "IVES!" come from above.

Ives.

He was the only person who called her that. He asked her if he could at the front desk during one of his afternoon shifts. She had already been sitting on the wooden chair across the desk from him for an hour, and they were giggling—probably about some meme he showed her. He looked at her so sincerely and asked, "Can I call you Ives?" with his well-aligned smile. She didn't

know how she felt about it. She'd never had a nickname before, not even from her family. "Well, then it's done." He pulled out his phone and changed her name on Snapchat, "Your name is Ives, now." Her heart fluttered, but the gut flutters quickly took control. A nickname was a kind of attention Ivy wasn't used to.

Every Wednesday, without fail, Ivy would pick up a ham and cheese sandwich for Dom and a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich for herself. She'd bring it to him at the desk, and they'd eat lunch together. Dom always made sure some popular 80s band underscored their conversations.

Ivy found herself in that chair at that desk while submerged in the lake. The gentle synthesized piano riff of an REO song softly played in her mind.

*I can't fight this feeling any longer.*

Dom sat across from her, smiling his retainer smile and creasing the splatter of freckles across his nose and cheeks. She was at the desk where Dom almost started a fire because he forgot he was cooking a pizza. She was at the desk where they discovered they had a mutual love for dill pickles and a mutual hate for grape jelly. She was sitting at the desk where he opened up about his grandpa's death, how he died in a car crash when he was driving Dom to a basketball game when he was eleven. She was sitting at the desk where Dom told her he was thinking of joining the army, or maybe the seminary, or that maybe he would drop out of school for a semester and backpack across Europe, and that she should totally come with him, and they could even make a stop to see some whales before they came back. She was sitting at the desk where he'd show her funny memes and videos to make her feel better after a rough chemistry test or a weekend at home when her parents weren't talking to each other or her brother called and asked if he could crash on her couch for the week, completely forgetting that she lived in a dorm that prohibited alcohol. It was at that desk that Dom told her he liked her eyes because they were either blue or green, depending on what she wore that day, and any guy would be so damn lucky to have her as a girlfriend because she was one of the most caring girls he'd ever met, and whatever path she chose to go down in life, she'd find success because she was so full of passion; that she was beautiful; that he loved her as a friend.

Just a friend.

*What started out as friendship has grown stronger.*

She told herself that she didn't actually have any feelings for him. She told herself that the heart flutters she got when he called her Ives or when he laughed at videos of babies falling weren't anything compared to the gut flutters she got when he talked over her stories or when he would go out drinking with his buddies. She told herself she didn't need a hero in her life, and a hero is all Dom cared to be for her. *Right?* She told herself that any ounce of care or friendly affection he showed was only because he was buying time to ask her out again. He just wanted to save someone. *But did he?* It didn't feel like it when all he did was tell his stories. *But do you even tell him yours?* It didn't feel like it when he sometimes got too drunk and knocked at 2 AM, so he could cuddle on the futon with her and try not to puke. *But you let him do it.*

*I only wish I had the strength to let it show.*

She never talked about her family with him. She never told him that her dad worked so much she would go days without seeing him. She never told him that her mom used to play REO or

Styx or Foreigner or Journey on cassette tapes in the car when she drove her to and from school, and how that was the only time she really saw her mom smile. She never talked about her brother, and how he was eight years older than her. She never told him that her brother had to get his stomach pumped when he was seventeen and she was nine, and that's why she swore off drinking and why she didn't want to celebrate Dom's 19th birthday with him and his buddies. She never talked about the days at the cabin where her parents would be fighting and her brother would be lying on the sand in a drunken stupor, and how she'd submerge herself underwater for 2 minutes and 43 seconds over and over and over again so she could live in a world where dads say *I love you* and brothers hold your hand. He didn't know her the way she needed him to. And she didn't let him.

*I tell myself that I can't hold out forever*

Her lungs started to burn. She didn't move.

*I said there is no reason for my fear.*

Her body was fighting against her mind. She needed to leave, but she hunkered down.

*'Cause I feel so secure when we're together*

She felt someone grab her waist and tug at her foot. Her body shuddered. Whoever loosened her foot started pulling her through the water toward the surface. As they broke through, her body convulsed and gasped for oxygen. The grip around her waist tightened. Her eyes were still closed as the water ran over her face and her ears readjusted to the pressure difference. Before she could say or think or do anything, she was dragged out of the water and carried through the weeds and set her down on the path. She leaned over her body, coughing and crying. The ringing in her ears soon subsided.

“Holy fuck Ives. Are you okay? What the fuck happened? Are you hurt?” Dom was squatted in front of her: shirtless, shoeless, water beading across his hairless chest. He tried to find her eyes, but she avoided his gaze. The sky was still pink, but everything looked a little fuzzier. Water dripped from every inch of their bodies and pooled on the pavement around them. Her dress gathered at her stomach, making her spandex visible. She didn't care. She slowly started to regain a natural rhythm of breath, but she was still crying.

“Ivy. Ives. What happened? Talk to me, are you okay? Ivy...”

*I can't fight this feeling anymore.*

They sat there for a while. His questions eventually turned to “It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay. Just breathe...” He reached his hand out and placed it on her rounded spine. *Inhale. Exhale.* She kept breathing—still crying, still quiet, REO Speedwagon still playing in her head.