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Hide and Seek

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Hide and Seek

Abstract

The day Summer disappeared, you were at home, feverish and ready for the phone to ring. You'd been waiting for that phone call all morning, hovering moth-like around the old-fashioned landline in the kitchen. Your friends liked to tease you whenever you used the ancient thing; the chunky, mustard-yellow receiver tucked under your chin, the ringlet cord that you absently twisted between your fingers while you chatted. Summer always said that you looked like the picture of 1980s adolescence when you picked it up, like you should be teasing your roots and giggling over a crush. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

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Hide and Seek

The day Summer disappeared, you were at home, feverish and ready for the phone to ring. You'd been waiting for that phone call all morning, hovering moth-like around the old-fashioned landline in the kitchen. Your friends liked to tease you whenever you used the ancient thing; the chunky, mustard-yellow receiver tucked under your chin, the ringle cord that you absently twisted between your fingers while you chatted. Summer always said that you looked like the picture of 1980s adolescence when you picked it up, like you should be teasing your roots and giggling over a crush.

Now, however, it sat indifferently in its cradle, taunting you. Your head throbbed, the blood unnaturally hot beneath your temples. Your palms were damp, stomach clenched against an onslaught of painkillers. You radiated a halo of heat.

Outside, the morning hailed bright and crisp, mocking your migraine. Honeyed light spilled onto the lawn, illuminating everything with perfect clarity. Yellow leaves cluttered the ground like gold doubloons in a pirate's chest. The sun poured butter into your sink. You couldn't appreciate it, though; you were waiting for the phone call, the one that would mean you could finally stop worrying, crawl into bed and sleep like a hibernating bear.

Last night, Summer had called you and told you to meet her at the park. Her voice on the other end of the line was thin and dehydrated. At first, you were ecstatic to hear from your lifelong best friend, but the initial happiness gave way to dread. The two of you have communicated solely through handwritten letters since you've been in college; Summer relished the sweet sense of nostalgia that accompanied snail mail. A call was not a good sign.

The phone remained stubbornly silent.

You shuffled to the coffee machine, toes cold on the laminate floor, trying to distract yourself. You fumble for the hefty form of your favorite mug with one hand, pour black coffee with the other, the fragrant steam cloying against your cheeks. Past the unwashed window, a cluster of wooden wind chimes enshrine the concrete patio, flailing and buffeting each other in the autumn air. Your mother loves little decorations like that; painted glass, sanded driftwood, sculptures made of old car parts. Your dad teases her incessantly about her “tacky” taste, but that only encourages her. He’d comment on her garden gnome statuette, and the very next day he’d be confronted by two outside the front door, smirking from beneath their pointed red caps.

Brrrrrrring!

The sound of the phone startled you from your reverie. You slid the coffee pot back into the machine, taking a hasty swallow from your mug and wincing. It’s bitter and weak.

“Hello?” you lifted the archaic phone to your ear, relief swelling in your chest. Summer has called. She’s okay. It’s all okay.

“Is this Robin Harlow?” a man’s voice crackled on the other end of the line, deep and leathery and most definitely not Summer’s.

“May I ask who this is?” you responded cautiously.

“This is the Piper County Police Department. I’m sorry to interrupt your morning.”

Your heart plummeted.

“It’s alright. What can I do for you?” your voice had a cheerful tone, but you clutched the receiver with both hands.

“I was wondering if you had any information pertaining to the location of Ms. Summer Hayborn. Her mother tells me you are her best friend.”

“Location? She’s not at home?”

“No. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but Ms. Hayborn is missing as of this morning.”

A fresh wave of nausea jolted through you. You suddenly wished you hadn’t drank any of that coffee. You’d told Summer to stay the night, crash on the couch. No big deal. But she’d insisted on going home. Once Summer had her mind set on something, there was no diverting her.

“Robin?” the officer prompts. For a moment, you are in the park, watching her scrunch her freckled little nose at you; *I want to hide. You seek*. She can’t be denied. You opened your mouth, silence bounding into the receiver like an untold secret. Finally, you heard your own voice, detached and hollow.

“I have information.”

*

You were in kindergarten when you first met Summer. It was a boiling day in late August, and the playground in your neighborhood was teeming with restless children and their exasperated parents. You hid behind your mother’s knees, watching as the other kids swung like primates from the brightly-colored play equipment. Two boys with curly hair kicked at the ground from the see saw, and a cluster of children sat on the swings, pumping their short legs futilely. A few girls dashed around the playhouse, their sneakers kicking up sprays of wood chips. Sweat gleamed on every forehead, shirts sticking to chests, shorts plastered to thighs.

Your mom dislodged you from her clothes and gave you a gentle push. You whined half-heartedly in protest, but eventually wandered onto the playground, a wary explorer stepping into the jungle. You sought the shelter beneath the monkey bars.

“*He-llo!*”

A small, red face appeared suddenly before you, hovering upside down. You jumped backwards as the face began to cackle.

“Did I get ya?” it asked, its voice lilting with an accent that you’d never heard before. Later, you would learn that it was Texan.

The owner of the face was a little girl swinging from the monkey bars, dangling precariously by her knees.

“I guess so,” you said, watching in awe as she flipped her agile body from the bars and landed on her feet. She wore velcro shoes with cartoon dogs on the toes.

“Cool! Do you wanna try? I’ll teach you!”

You look at your mom, standing at the outskirts of the playground, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Okay,” you shrug, already enjoying the way her seafoam eyes light up with delight. She clambered up the ladder, and within moments was watching you from a crouching position on top of the monkey bars. She had a mop of frizzy red ringlets, her pale skin pinkening under the blaze of the sun. You liked her immediately; her enthusiasm, her red, upturned nose, her disregard for the rules and for your shyness.

Twenty minutes later, when you were laying in a pile of wood chips with a fractured arm, she ran to your mom and pulled her by the sleeve to the spot where you’d fallen. She followed you home, watched while your mom dialed up the emergency clinic, studied your tear-stained face with wide, frightened eyes. When you returned from the hospital with your arm in a plaster cast, Summer was waiting in your driveway, a nub of sidewalk chalk in her hand.

*

“Summer has a boyfriend. Or she did. He’s an asshole,” you told the police officer.

Papers rustle on his end, the click of a pen.

“Do you think he has something to do with her disappearance?”

“I know he does.” You didn’t mean to say it with so much conviction, not to a police officer. But when you thought about Simon’s thin-lipped, cigarette smirk, shivers combed your back.

“How do you know?”

You’d only ever met Summer’s boyfriend one time, but you didn’t need any more encounters to figure him out. And after what you had seen last night, you had all the evidence you needed.

“I saw Summer last night. She’s running from him.”

*

Summer broke all the rules. You learned quickly that she would do just about anything in the pursuit of fun. Being her friend, especially as a timid, obedient kid, was exhilarating. Possibilities unfolded at your small feet like an expanse of clouds. You and Summer spent elementary school whispering with your desks pressed together, swinging from the trees in the school courtyard, painting each others’ faces with your mom’s acrylic set, and sleeping in the living room at your house, laughing hysterically as you rolled across the floor in your sleeping bags. You got accustomed to being in trouble, but nobody ever suggested that you stay away from Summer. One look at the two of you doodling on eachothers’ notebooks, and they already knew it was impossible to separate you.

Every day after school, the two of you would head to the neighborhood park. You both laughed about the monkey bar incident (*I've been messing up your life since day one!* She'd giggle), although you swore your arm still ached whenever it rained.

Her favorite game was hide and seek. You did most of the seeking, but you didn't mind; she was so overjoyed when she scurried off to hide. There weren't very many places to conceal yourself in the playground, but she didn't mind. She only hid for a few seconds each time, waiting for you to walk towards the spot where she was lurking before she leapt out at you. She never failed to startle you, even after months. It would go on for hours: you'd cover your eyes with your hands, lift them, and there she was, clutching her stomach as she laughed at your shocked expression.

One day, you opened your eyes, and she was screaming.

"I don't want to go home!"

"Tough shit, kid. Move your ass."

Summer's dad loomed beside the tube slide, looking out-of-place. His head was buzzed, and his throat bore a faded tattoo of a snake eating itself. His metal-strapped boots crunched the wood chips like autumn leaves. Summer looked slightly green. She scrambled her way into the tube slide, her silhouette darkening the space she occupied.

"I told you not to come here anymore, and now I'm getting pissed."

You backed towards the playhouse; her dad looked like the type of man who wouldn't hesitate to punish a kid that wasn't his.

"Why can't I come here?" Summer chirped, her muffled voice emanating from inside the slide. Her dad's chest expanded, eyes narrowing.

“Who said you could ask questions? Get. The fuck. Out. I have shit to do.”

For a moment, there was silence. You watched the dark shape inside the yellow tube. Silently, you prayed that she'd move. Please, Summer, just this once.

“Okay, your way or the highway,” her dad shouted, throwing his arms up jerkily. You watched in horror as he bent down and stuffed his torso into the slide. The sight of his massive boots sticking out of the end might have been funny, if it hadn't been for the sickening thumping sounds that echoed in the tube as he dragged her down the length of the metal cylinder. In one swift motion, he emerged, brandishing Summer's ankles.

She dangled upside down, blood trickling upwards from her lip, tears sliding towards her hairline.

“Oh, shit. Now your mom is gonna be mad. Fuck.”

Her dad flipped her to her feet as easily as if she were a rag doll, clamping his hands on her shoulders. He rubbed at her mouth with the back of his hand, then wiped it on his jean shorts.

“Home. Now.”

After that day, Summer told you a lot about her dad. How he was mostly mean, but sometimes would get nice and make her feel bad for being angry at him. How he smoked rolled paper and stank, how he pushed her, pulled her hair, but took care to clean her up before she went to school. How he yelled. He seemed to hate her the most. She ran away frequently, almost always to your house. More times than you could count, you arrived home from school to see Summer cross-legged in your driveway, waiting for you, just like the day you met. Sometimes, you glimpsed the yellow rind of a bruise on her skinny bicep before she tugged her sleeves down.

*

“She called me last night, told me to meet her at the park.”

“And did this alarm you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

You feel like acid is eating at your throat, but you can't bring yourself to sit down.

Adrenaline is coursing through your veins.

“She never calls me. We write letters to each other. So when she called, I knew something was wrong.”

“And you met her at the park, right?”

“Yeah.”

“How was she then? Did she seem upset?”

“Very.”

*

By the time freshman year of highschool rolled around, you and Summer had given up hide and seek in favor of more grown-up things, like sticking googly eyes to inanimate objects, and making fun of pop stars, and dreading the Fitnessgram Pacer Test. Her hair darkened to an auburn. Her Texan accent faded to nonexistence. You started running in the mornings. You still congregated in the park after school, sometimes lugging your backpacks to the old playhouse and flipping through textbooks. She liked to find the most hideous photographs and point at them matter-of-factly, asking what your picture was doing in a book. You cackled together in the playground until it got dark.

Summer quickly developed another new interest: boys. In particular, one boy--

“*Jacob*,” she’d sigh, tilting her chin up dramatically, gazing to the heavens. You swatted at her, snickering.

“Oh my god, he’s such an ass!” you protested. Although you were laughing, you weren’t joking about that. Jacob was a senior, and six feet of pure, overgrown child. He was infamous for starting fights with kids in the hallways between classes and bringing water bottles of vodka to class. But it wasn’t just his shitty choices that put you off. He exuded a sense of aggression, untapped and unchecked. Summer thought his blue eyes were dreamy; you thought they were empty.

“But he’s hot, isn’t he? Lay off!” she shouted teasingly.

“Doesn’t change anything!” you pointed out. She tossed her hair, suddenly far-away and wistful.

“I’m sure there’s more to him than meets the eye. He just need to be fixed a little.”

You shivered slightly. You’d once heard Summer’s mom say that about her dad, before she got on a bus to who-knows-where. She’d been standing in your kitchen, scooping veggie dip out of a ceramic dish and chatting with your mom. *He’s a fixer-upper, that’s for sure.*

That year, when Jacob asked Summer to go to prom with him, you swore that you wouldn’t get involved. But it wasn’t long before he was her boyfriend. A boyfriend who didn’t like her leaving the house too much, or hanging out with people he didn’t know intimately, or going to parties or events. When Summer stopped eating, you called the school’s administration office anonymously.

“I don’t want to disclose my name, but I am almost certain that Jacob Hyde has drugs in his locker.” You hung up quickly and listened to the blank pitch of the dial tone, heart thundering.

The next week, Jacob was transferred to a different school. The rumor mill reported that he had been busted for coke. You watched in guilty agony as Summer cried for a couple of days, but she regained her weight, started smiling again. Her eyes were still distant.

She didn’t run away from home anymore. She had learned not to argue with her dad, or fight back. Once, you saw him push her against a staircase and storm into the living room, breathing heavily into the end of a cigarette.

“When is he going to stop doing this?” You followed his hulking form with furious eyes. When you turned back to Summer, she was expressionless.

“He’s not. This is how life works. It doesn’t scare me anymore.”

“Then what does?” you asked, incredulous. You could still picture her first grade self in your mind, trembling lips, scrawny arms wrapped around her knees. Now, she was considering your question with squinted eyes.

“If he was good to me. Then, I think...I’d be terrified.”

*

The police officer on the phone was scribbling your description of Simon’s car on a notepad. A black Ford F-150 with red underglow. He was so proud of it. When you’d met him over the fall break, he’d been intent on showing you. You’d watched him saunter around the raised cab, slapping the warm metal proudly.

“Could you come down to the station, Robin? I’d like to get a formal statement, let Missing Persons talk to you a little more in-depth.”

“Of course. Should I leave right now?”

“Yes, please. Time is of the essence.”

*

You and Summer ended up going to different colleges, despite your best efforts. You wanted to stay in-state, saving up your money by living at home. She just wanted out. The summer before freshman year, she was filled with the kind of yearning for the outside world that you only associated with prisoners. You would catch her in the middle of a conversation with her pale green eyes drifting and unfocused, glass bottles bobbing in the sea, and you realized that she was already gone.

After she moved into her new dorm in California, she’d started writing you letters. It was more romantic that way, she’d said, more fanciful. Every week, you’d find an envelope full of Summer in your mailbox, her looping scrawl covering sheet after sheet of looseleaf, the paper smattered with stickers and doodles. You held the letters against your chest, blinking away the sting of heat in your eyes.

I have a boyfriend, one of the letters proclaimed, and he’s perfect, I think. He grounds me.

What she meant by that, you later discovered, was that he controlled her.

Summer met Simon at a fraternity party. She went out each weekend, hair loose and lipstick smeared, hunting for free beer. Simon was a tall, muscled frat brother in a rumpled suit.

He fed her popcorn in between kisses, then brought her upstairs with him. They started dating a week later.

You read her letters carefully. Summer told you about their fights, which were frequent. He threw her Himalayan salt lamp at the wall once. She stopped going to parties, started hanging out with his friends. Each letter from her made your throat tighten with anxiety. There was more, you could feel it. You were back in elementary school, and she was sitting on the pavement outside your garage, lips knotted into a pale line, massaging her forearms and telling you that her dad had only yelled at her, it was fine, he just yelled a little bit, and now she was here.

Last night, when she called you, you knew that she was running again.

“Robin?” her breath crackled like static through the phone.

“Summer? What’s going on?”

“Nice to hear from you too,” she tried to joke, but it fell flat. Her heart wasn’t in it.

“Sorry. It’s just--”

“I know. Listen, I’m coming home tonight. I need to see you.”

“Is everything okay?” Of course not. Why would she be coming home if it was? Stupid.

You pressed the heel of your hand against your eyes, trying to clear your vision.

“Yeah, I just...I need to get away for a little bit. I’m already on my way. I’ll see you in an hour.”

The kitchen was dark, veiled with watery light from the street lamp outside. The microwave clock reads 12:13 AM. You glanced into the shadowed living room, the couch where you’d been half-dozing strewn with crocheted throw pillows. Sometimes, when you missed

Summer more than usual, you'd sleep in the living room instead of your bedroom. There, you could almost see her, chin tilted towards the window, eyes glinting mischievously.

"Where should we meet?" You ask sleepily. But of course, you already know.

"The playground." She hangs up, and you are alone with the shrill of the dial tone.

*

A figure was perched on top of the monkey bars when you arrived, one leg bent, the other dangling laconically. There was only one working street lamp at the park, but you didn't need it to know that it was Summer. Without speaking, you ascended the ladder, the damp rungs chilled against your palms. Your arm ached almost imperceptibly with the memory of falling, and for some reason, you had the wild urge to laugh.

"Hey. Sorry for waking you up like this. I just needed to..." her voice slipped away as if caught in a strong tide.

"I know." You settled beside her, legs hanging over the bars. It was strange to be so close to her after months of separation. You were acutely aware of the smell of her shampoo, a floral coconut scent, as familiar to you as your mother's perfume.

"It's Simon. He's...I don't know. He's being kind of shitty lately, but I don't think I can break up with him."

You studied your sneakers swinging beneath you. You didn't need to look at her to see her pained face in your mind's eye: her eyes narrowed to slits, lips twisted.

"Why not?"

"I think...I think he'll be angry."

At that moment, a small car slinked past, tires hissing quietly on the pavement. The beam from the headlights flared across the two of you, the metal bars beneath you gleaming wetly. But that wasn't what caught your attention.

“Shit, Summer...Your face,” you breathed. The air snagged in your throat.

In the harsh glare of the headlights, you could see everything. Her left eye was swollen, puffed and pink as a marshmallow peep. A deep purple streaked across her cheek like a comet, leaving a trail of faded yellow. Her lower lip was split, chin and jaw sporting little patches of fungus-like green bruises. Images rushed into your mind, unbidden; Summer hanging by her ankles from her dad's fists, tiny and bleeding. Summer sitting cross-legged on your living room floor, drawing hearts on your cast with a sharpie. Summer with her cheek pressed against yours, sharing her dreams in a whisper, conspiratorial. *I want to live in the rainforest and protect the elephants someday. Or maybe I'll be a singer.* Your rage was icy and acid. She's still a kid, still a little girl with a sense of adventure that's too big for her body. She's your best friend.

You reached out towards her, aching to do something, anything. Stroke the bruises from her skin, knit her cuts together. The hollows beneath her cheekbones were carved in marble, angular and dark. You wanted to replace that layer of skin with a smooth, fat layer of love.

She flinched at your motion. You drew back quickly. You would never hurt her. Never. But her body was hyper-alert, watching with eyes of its own.

“Stay at my house. We'll get him.” What you meant was, *I'll get him.*

“I can't. I can't,” she dragged in deep, shuddering breaths, “If he even *suspects* I'm avoiding him...”

“Let him. He'll be in prison before morning.”

“No! I can’t do that.”

“Why not? Just come over. Please. I want to help you,” your voice broke, suddenly high-pitched as a child’s.

Her hand found yours in the darkness, shockingly hot and damp against your frozen skin. She squeezed hard.

“I’m staying in *my* house, in *my* town. I’m not running away anymore. I’ve spent too much time being afraid of men.” She sounded calm, certain, “I’m not letting him drive me out of my own life, Robin.”

You searched the darkness for her eyes, but couldn’t find them. You could argue, but that would only make her feel more alone. When it came to forcing her into something, you knew you didn’t have a shot. If she didn’t want to do it, she wouldn’t. Her stubbornness both frustrated and inspired you all your life; when you broke your arm, you told her to go home, but she looked at you with responsibility heavy on her eyelids. She said she would wait for you to come home first, and she did. She waited for hours.

“I just...I hate seeing you hurt,” you whispered lamely.

“I know. But I’ve got to fix it for myself this time. I don’t know what a good relationship looks like, Robin. I wouldn’t know one if it punched me in the face.”

You sat in silence for a beat, both kicking at the air with your muddy sneakers, watching the moths beat their feather wings against the street lamp. No matter how many times they barraged it, they couldn’t accept that it was unattainable. They couldn’t help but slam themselves into that burning wall of glass.

You walked her home that night, a damp mist clinging to your jackets. You offered to spend the night at her house, just to keep an eye on things, but she said that she'd already been enough trouble. At her front door, she turned towards you and gripped both your of hands. Under the warm porch light, her eyes looked glassy and sleepless, but earnest. You tried not to stare at the collage of pain on her skin; her arms, now visible, bore bracelets of bruises.

She gave you a weak grin and pushed a thick envelope into your hands. It was glossy with stickers, hundreds of Minnie Mouse faces beaming up at you. Each one was bedecked with doodled-on armor, mustaches, and afros.

“I thought I'd deliver this one in person.”

Right then, you could have talked to her for hours. You had the sudden urge to remind her of everything; the days when you would whisper together, co-write stories, play pretend. Remember when, remember when? You just wanted to check, to be sure she had captured those moments, too. Remember, Summer? Do you remember that summer?

The flicker of the television spilled from her living room window, onto the shrubbery beside you. Her dad was inside, ignoring the bruises, the cuts, the sunken eye sockets.

“Well, I should go. Thanks, Robin,” she turned towards the front door, then wheeled back around.

“Do you want to go to the park again tomorrow? Maybe...” she chuckled sheepishly, “we could play some good old fashioned hide and seek?” She giggled, but you can't bring yourself to do the same. Looking at this child in that battered adult's body, you suddenly feel very old, and very, very tired.

“I would love to.”

“Cool. I’ll call you tomorrow,” she beamed, disappearing behind the front door.

You sat in her driveway for a long time, watching the luminous wash of the television screen flicker over the bushes. Every car that drove past was a truck to you, a black Ford with red underglow. But he never showed up like you expected him to, shouting and ready to raise hell. After two hours, you crawled stiffly to your feet and hobbled home. You could feel an illness coming on from your stint in the freezing outdoors, a headache collecting in the back of your skull like old rainwater. You resolved to wait for that phone call the next day, the one that would tell you that Summer was safe, your best friend was free.

*

It took hours to get processed at the police station, but it was only a few more before a car matching the description of Simon’s truck was spotted in a town just out of state. You were sitting in the same bleached, sterile room you’d been questioned in all day when they gave you the news. Two people had been seen in the car: a young man with dark hair, and a small, red-headed female. The paper coffee cup you were holding crumpled in your fist. The officer who told you about the truck looked at you like you were an abused dog; pitiful, but still slightly dangerous.

“The police are on their way to apprehend him now. It’s almost over. He’s going to jail.”

They released you without warning into the razor-sharp sunlight with another paper cup of weak coffee and a bundle of assurances that they’d call if anything else happened. When you arrived home again, you stood in your kitchen for a long time, gazing at the mockingly cheerful yellow telephone. Your fever had broken, but you didn’t feel much better. Your stomach was still a sour knot, and you didn’t feel like eating. After a few more hours, you shrugged your coat

back onto your shoulders and headed outside again. You didn't want to miss that phone call, but you couldn't lurk in that kitchen for one more minute. You needed to breath.

At the park, everything was silent. Last night's mist had dried to reveal chilly sunshine, but to your surprise, no children ran amongst the playground equipment. No laughter echoed from within the tube slide.

Now, you sit atop the monkey bars, shivering slightly. The metal beneath you sparkles optimistically, so you squeeze your eyes shut. You should have stayed at her house. You should have insisted that she come home with you. You could have been a better friend. You could have been better.

You think about Simon, man-handling his truck down the highway, exhaust billowing from both massive pipes, and Summer, stuffed into the passenger seat like an asylum escapee. You wonder what's happening at this moment, and you picture the flash of handcuffs, the bellow of sirens, the carnival panic of the flashing lights.

You cover your eyes with your palms.

“One...two...”

When you lift your hands, she will be there. She'll be crouched behind the playhouse, braced to leap, beaming at the prospect of shocking you.

“Three!”

You snatch your palms away, gazing at the empty playground. You wait in stupid trepidation, ready for her to jump out at you, but everything remains as it was: motionless and silent, stagnant as a bad habit.

