

"Fade"

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I shouldn't have woken up. Not today or yesterday or the day before. The sun went down. The sun came up. The moon did the same. People died. People were born. But nothing changed. Nothing changed since everything changed.

"How are you today, Claire?"

I stayed silent. I was trying a new tactic today in which I didn't lie to my therapist.

"Did you sleep well?"

The clock ticked, ticked, ticked, in the corner. Dr. Reeves pencil scratched over his paper. A tiny, almost microscopic gnat landed on a coffee mug on the mantle. It stayed there for fourteen ticks of the clock before moving on, oblivious in its tiny fly life.

"Claire, today I want you to tell me about Elony. What was she like?"

I looked over at him at that. He blinked, waited for me, sensed my struggle. I knew I shouldn't talk. But I wasn't going to lie today.

"Fun," I murmured, the word hanging in the air between us. "She was fun."

"Can you elaborate? What are some fun memories you have of her?"

I blinked now, my eyes brimming with tears. I drew my knees up and wrapped my arms around them. My arms were too thin now, too needle-pocked for my taste. "One time...we made snow angels. But it doesn't snow here and it was July. I was grounded, but Elony snuck in and then insisted I sneak out with her. I thought we were going to a party or somewhere but we hopped the fence to her house and right there on her front lawn we started making angels. She said something or I said something and then we laughed. We laughed so hard Elo proclaimed that she had to pee and always wanted to make yellow snow. Only it would be yellow grass or yellow bush. We ended up laughing so loud both of our parents came outside and I got grounded for even longer."

Dr. Reeves's mouth was still set in that thin line, but it quirked up a bit at the end of my story. "And bad memories, Claire? What is a bad memory you have of Elony?"

Two months ago, I could've mentioned countless fights, countless meaningless arguments. I could've mentioned the time I caught her dad sneaking out of my

mother's room and Elo didn't believe me. I could've mentioned the divorce and the three weeks we spent apart, blaming each other instead of our own parents. Two months ago, it would've all come to mind. But now everything changed. The only thing I could remember was the accident.

Sometimes I thought Dr. Reeves was a mind reader, because, through the sudden rush in my ears, I heard him ask about it. Ask about that night. I explained it before. To my mother, my father, Dr. King and Dr. Welsh and Dr. Lansing. I knew Dr. Reeves had it in his file. Knew my story. Again, I knew I shouldn't talk. But again, I wasn't going to lie today.

*"Clairedy is scaredy of the bear-dy in the air-dy," Elony was singing, off-key, but bubbly nonetheless.*

*"Elo is mellow like the fellow in the yellow," I sang back, my head propped up on Elony's shoulder. Her hair tickled my face when the wind blew but I didn't move it away because I liked the smell of her shampoo. It was fruity, maybe coconut. Elony was a coconut shampoo kind of girl.*

*"Yellow!" Elony suddenly exclaimed, laughing at our buzz word. Ever since the night we made snow angels, the word yellow made us snicker and snort. "Yellow!" she yelled again, startling a couple leaving the party. We laughed.*

*Elony and I were sitting in the grass outside of Dan Park's house. It was midnight, but closer to one. The party didn't live up to the hype, but we both didn't want to go back to our broken homes so instead we sat on his front lawn, away from the crowd, just me and her like always.*

*Elony had a red Dixie cup in one hand and something that I pretended was a cigarette in the other. I sat on her left because the wind was blowing her smoke away to the right. I took a small sip of my own Dixie cup, nose crinkling at the taste. Elony had already discarded five similar cups, while I was on my second. I rarely drank, the taste of alcohol acrid in my mouth, throat, and body. But Elony said we were celebrating tonight. Either celebrating the A I got on my quiz in junior Physics three weeks ago, or the fact that we managed to sneak away from our houses tonight. Or maybe just celebrating the fact that we could celebrate. Elony was funny like that.*

*Elony tossed her "cigarette" and stood up suddenly. She held out a hand to pull me up but ended up falling on top of me. Between groans of pain, we laughed. Someone called out something crude at the sight of our*

tangled limbs and, together, we both held up our equally crude fingers. I managed to dislodge Elony and then we were both standing. I felt dizzy, out of place on my feet, but Elo was steady and strong.

"Wait here," she said, crumpling up her Dixie cup and tossing it in the small pile of red we left on Dan's lawn. I watched her walk into the house, body swaying, as if she were dancing to music. How she could make drunkenness look graceful was beyond me.

I suddenly felt alone. I shivered, looked around at the small groups of people outside but saw no one I knew. The dizziness persisted and I remembered the other reason I never drank; I was a total lightweight.

A car went by on the street in front of me, blasting a song that I knew but couldn't identify. Of their own accord my arms raised above my head. I swayed to the memory of the song, but it wasn't enough. I felt like I was floating. Like gravity had given up and nothing was keeping me grounded. I began to spin. Around and around I spun, feeling light and free. I was aware that people were looking at me, watching and judging and laughing. But I smiled and spun and sang a few bars of the song.

"And this is why I love you," a voice said behind me. I spun and opened my eyes to see Elony watching me with a smile and a light in her eyes like she meant every word. And I think that was why we'd been best friends for so long. Because she could say things like that and be absolutely serious.

"And you know why I love you?" I asked, spinning around again, a laugh bubbling up in my throat. "Because you never let me look like a fool alone."

Elony giggled, something I only ever heard her do with me and with Pat the Destroyer—"The" ex-boyfriend. She sighed, as if she were really bothered but a smile danced on her face as we locked hands and spun together.

"I just diied in your arms toniight," Elo belted as if she were in a karaoke performance.

I laughed. "It must've been something you saaaaid!" I finished, our spin tapering off to a crawl. On my last spin, my eyes snagged on a flash of color. I stopped, blinking as I saw a boy in blue, dark skin, dark eyes, around our age, watching me with a strange intensity. And though Elo was the obvious beauty choice between us, he spared her no more than a cursory flicker of a glance. I might've felt flattered, but the way he was watching me made the bubbliness in my stomach rise and settle like a stone in my chest. I turned away, back to Elony, who was

draining the last of my Dixie cup. She crushed it in her hands and declared we were leaving.

As we linked arms and walked up the block to the car I threw a glance over my shoulder, searching for the boy in blue, but he was gone.

"I'm driving," I stated, pulling the keys from Elo's hands and starting the regular battle we had.

"Puh-lease. You drove here."

"So? It's my car."

"So? I'm cooler than you."

"Yeah, but I'm smarter," I threw back, laughing.

"I recycle."

"No, you don't."

She shrugged as we reached my Kia Rio. "Well, I think about recycling."

I rolled my eyes, giggling, but forked over the keys. I'd only gotten my license a few months ago. And we both knew that Elo could outdrive me, drunk, high, or blind.

I always thought that I'd know the day something truly bad would happen. That in my heart I'd be able to feel it, at least a little. Feel it enough to know that I should've insisted on driving. Or insisted on seatbelts. But I felt nothing more than faint nausea from the beer and the spinning as I slid into my passenger seat. Felt nothing more than the pounding bass of my stereo as Elo cranked the music and peeled away from the curb.

We were two blocks away, out of Dan's neighborhood, and surrounded by trees when Elo suddenly turned the music down.

"Claire," she murmured, looking as grave as I'd ever seen her. "I...have to tell you something...something really serious."

My heart thudded at her tone and my nauseous feeling intensified. "Okay..."

She gestured for me to lean closer, her eyes holding mine instead of the road. But it was empty, save the occasional abandoned plastic bag and a lost shoe.

I leaned in, her familiar face and the window behind her the only thing I could see. Very somberly Elo admitted, "I just saved a bunch of money on my car insurance by switching to Geico."

As she hooted at her own joke, I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding in and scowled. "I thought you were serious, Elo. That wasn't funny. I thought you had cancer or something."

Elony just shook her head, chuckling. "I wouldn't tell you I had cancer in a moving vehicle, Claire-dy-cat." Her teasing smile lit up her eyes as she looked away from the road once again. "Besides, I'm indestructible. You're not getting rid of me that--"

And that's when it happened. A sudden pop from underneath my car had the car swerving, veering sharply off the road and into the ditch that separated man and nature. My hands grasped the dashboard and Elony screamed something at me and I screamed something back and my car flew and flew and tumbled head over tails before falling with a terrible, unnatural crunch of metal.

Just sitting there I knew something was wrong with me. My legs were starting to go numb, and the car seemed too hot and I could taste blood in my mouth and red trickled down from my hair. It hurt to move my neck, but the silence in the car was deafening and I had to see Elony.

She was slumped sideways--like the car--her head leaving red streaks across my window and the white airbag. Her arm was bent at an aberrant angle. Her eyes were open in silent panic, her mouth open in a silent scream. But she was alive, and so was I. I knew we had to get out of the car but it hurt too much. Hurt to move and hurt to think.

In the distance I thought maybe I heard the sound of sirens, but it might've been the ringing in my ears.

"Claire," Elony suddenly gasped, the word sounding wet, as if she said it underwater. The sound was wrong, all wrong, I knew.

My vision started blurring, black winking over everything. Still I tried to comfort her. "Shh."

"Claire," Elony said again from underwater, just as the pain consumed me and she faded to black...

Dr. Reeves was silent throughout my story, but when my voice petered out he made another notation on his pad of paper. He already knew the rest. Knew I woke up alone in the hospital two weeks later, with a tube down my throat, IVs in each arm, and without my best friend.

"And so she died?" he asked, watching for my reaction. Smart man. The first time someone asked me this, I left four long scratches across her face and had to get my medication adjusted.

But now I simply blinked, waited for the inevitable.

"Is she alive? Do you still see her? Is she here with us now, Claire?"

I drew my arms tighter around my legs. "It's the truth," I said instead.

I had to give the man credit. Instead of saying "I'm sure it is, Claire." or spouting off medical jargon to try to explain my story, Dr. Reeves shrugged his shoulders and looked at me as if I was the one with all the answers. "What's true to you is not true to others, Claire."

It struck me that he might've just spoken something completely obvious yet completely correct. "You're saying the truth is relative?"

He shook his head and my hope died in my chest. "I'm saying that the truth requires proof. You say it happened but where is Elony? Where's your proof, Claire?"

"I don't know," I whispered.

"Did she die? In your head?"

I stayed silent, my teeth chattering as I shivered. This was why I shouldn't have talked.

They tell me I'm crazy. That she never existed. That we never went to Disney together and that we never made snow angels. They say she's all in my head. Elony was a delusion. A fantasy. My truth is not their truth and their truth is what's true.

But I'm not crazy. I'm not a paranoid schizophrenic. I didn't dream her up to cope while I was in the coma. I just wanted to go back to the way it was before everything changed. Back to when Elony still existed and everyone else knew. I wanted to go back to when everything was true. But I couldn't. The line between realities had been blurred. As I sat there, shivering in Dr. Reeve's office, I began to wonder, as I often did: Is the truth still the truth when you're the only one who believes?

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When I got home, I stared at the house across the fence. A house I must've been in thousands of times. It looked exactly the same as it did before the accident. Yellow and cheery, with white trimming and a blue door. The gutter was crooked and one of the roof shingles was in danger of falling off because of an unfortunate accident when we were nine that resulted in Elony's broken leg. The left upstairs window still had that minute crack in it from the time I attempted to throw stones at Elony's window.

But no. They said the Howards lived there. Lived there for twenty years, three years longer than I'd even been alive. The gutter had been knocked out of place by the movers years ago and they simply never fixed it. Birds

must've dislodged the shingle. Mr. Howard's grandson threw one of his toys at the window last year and the crack appeared.

But why was it that I could navigate those halls, quickly and efficiently? I knew that they needed a new water heater and that the pipes shook in the winter and that in one of the bedrooms there was a strange series of spackled X's on the ceiling that Elony claimed was because her room was X-rated.

Tell me. If I am crazy how do I know these things?

"Claire," my mother hissed, her patience with me running thin. The doctors said I'm crazy. My mother said I want attention. I followed her inside. I don't know what to believe anymore.

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My brother thought I was funny. He loved Elony stories. It was the only reason I talked to him now. When he called me crazy, I knew he meant it with love.

"Tell me the snow angel story again," Greg demanded, bounding into my room and bouncing onto my bed. He didn't even seem to notice that I was rocking back and forth, whimpering and whispering for Elony.

My mother hated when I told Greg about Elony. So I told him the story.

"Yellow bush!" he exclaimed, his laughter echoing with Elony's laughter in my head. But her laughter was a memory, not a fantasy. I thought I knew the difference.

Crazy.

Mental.

Insane.

Until it happened, I didn't know what those words really meant.

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My mother called me for dinner. Elony took one of my senses with her when she left, so food was tasteless now. But I went downstairs anyways because it was not an option.

Before two months ago, I barely saw my mother for three years. My father divorced her after she cheated with Elo's dad and she ended up moving to upstate New York. Greg and I saw her on Thanksgiving, Easter, and for two weeks in the summer.

But tonight they both had their rings on and my mother leaned in and kissed my dad before taking her own seat. He smiled faintly as if this were an everyday occurrence.

"Eat up, Claire," my dad muttered through a mouthful of corn. I loved my dad. Even if he did think I was crazy. But I also resented my dad. Because he didn't remember Elony.

"You heard your father, Claire. Eat." At the blank look on my face, my mother added, "If you don't, you know what'll happen."

I knew. My mother would take me back to the psych ward at County General and have them shove a tube down my throat. So I ate.

"Now, now, Pamela. No need to go there," my dad countered softly, showing me that he was on my side.

"Tell that to Claire. She's the one who insists on..."

I tuned out the rest of her dramalouge. I loved my mother. But I resented her more. Even if they said it was all pretend, I knew what she was capable of. She could ruin lives, break apart friendships. I saw and I knew.

"The corn looks like yellow snow," Greg snickered.

My mother's spoon clattered noisily on her plate, and I avoided her eye and the look of disappointment and fury in them. "When are you going to give it up, Claire?!" she yelled, her patience frayed like the cut ends of a rope. "When are you going to admit that it's *all. In. Your. Head?!*"

My chair tipped back as I stood, and it clattered to the floor with a loud *thwap!* I took a tip from therapy and stayed silent as I moved past her and ran upstairs. It was times like these that I hated Elony. Hated what she was doing to me. No one believed me. Everyone thought I was crazy. Elony made me crazy. Elony made me want to end my life countless times. The expression 'it's better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all' only worked if the person you lost was real.

Once in my room I stalked to my dresser, where an array of pill bottles were scattered the way my bottles of nail polish used to be. Or was that in my head too? I picked up the latest batch prescribed to me and popped four in my mouth. I went to my bed, laid down, fully clothed, and began to rock.

*You're not getting rid of me that easily,* Elony started to say, her very fitting last words to me. I cursed

Elony as I slipped down into my drug-induced stupor, slipped down, down, down into a daze where even Elony Daniels could never reach.

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I don't know why I did it. In retrospect I knew that this would land me back in the psych ward for examination. I'd get a new prescription for a condition I didn't have and I would barely be able to open my eyes for several hours a day.

But it was too late. I was already here. Strangely, Dan Park's house looked very different without all the Dixie cups scattered on his lawn. It seemed a lot more empty. I didn't know what I was looking for. A clue maybe. Dr. Reeves would've said I was regressing. Looking for clues like I did the first month. He would've said I was back in the first stage of grief. Denial. But for the most part, I never left denial. Just had many brief stints with the second stage--anger.

Dan Park's mom threatened to call the cops on me the next time I showed up at her house. At least, that's what I assumed she was saying in her very frantic Korean. But it didn't matter if she caught me today. I could just plead insanity.

Like every other time though, Dan Park's house was just Dan Park's house. Nothing led me to any startling conclusion and Elony never popped out of the shadows. I got back in the car and made my way home.

Two blocks later though I stopped, my stomach churning as I remembered where I was. Trees surrounded me, closing me in, quickening my breath. I pulled over, careful of the ditch, and tried to steady my breathing. I had pills for this, but none that I could take and still expect to drive afterwards.

My head swam and my eyes watered, and I might've closed them if my eyes hadn't caught a flash of color in the woods. I sat up, eyes zeroing in and trying to focus on one thing and everything all at once. I saw it again. Blue. My throat was tight as I blindly reached for my door handle and stepped out of the car.

"Hey!" I called out, hoping against hope that I wasn't really crazy. "Hey!"

The figure stopped, halfway hidden behind a tree. Behind me, a car zoomed by, unconcerned by the crazy girl on the side of the road. But in front of me I saw him. Same

dark skin, same dark eyes, same blue shirt. But while the last time he'd looked at me with a lingering intensity, this time a hint of fear was in his eyes. Fear and...*recognition*? He turned, his legs braced as if ready to run.

"Wait!" I cried out. "*Please wait!*"

To my surprise he did. I slowly walked around the car, to the passenger side where the ditch loomed wide in front of me. There would be no crossing it. Perhaps that was why the boy came closer too. If he wanted to run, I couldn't stop him.

He studied me in silence for a long moment, looked up at me as if waiting for me to speak. So I did.

"Hi...I mean...Well...Hi. I'm Claire."

He nodded in greeting, but stayed silent. Was he, too, a figment of my imagination? Was I still at home, drugged and oblivious? Or was I here, now, real?

"I've seen you before, haven't I? Somewhere?" I asked, pretending I didn't know the exact date, the exact place, the exact moment I saw him.

The boy's lips pursed as if he was deciding what to say. "Yeah," he said, his voice surprisingly deep and sure. "You were at a party a couple months ago."

He couldn't have known what this news would do to me. He couldn't have known that as soon as he said that, that I would fall to my knees with a cry and tears would blur my eyes.

They said I was crazy. They said Dan Park never had a party. That it was seven o'clock in the evening and I was on my way to a family dinner in town when I got a flat tire and my car flipped into the ditch. That I was the only one in the car.

The boy in the blue looked angry, as if he was cursing something. I wondered if it was me. It didn't matter. He had answers. Answers I desperately needed.

"Please," I whispered, unsure if he could hear me across the ditch. "Please, you saw her? You saw Elony?"

He was shaking his head rapidly. "I'm sorry," he intoned. "I can't help you. I'm sorry."

And as opposed to everyone else who said that to me in the past few months, I could tell he meant it. He started backing away, eyes fastened onto me. I couldn't let him go. Not without knowing.

"Wait!" I screamed, begging, pleading, imploring. "Tell me you saw her. Please! Just tell me I'm not crazy!"

He shook his head again sadly, turned away. A low keening noise began to leave my mouth. The boy stopped.

Spun. "There's more going on here than just you and your friend," he called out to me, his eyes somber and hesitant. "Don't let yourself forget. But wise up. You keep talking about people who don't exist anymore and more than just the psych ward's going to take notice. You won't be able to find her if you fade, too."

And with that, he turned and took off into the woods, vanishing into the trees. I might've called out for him to stay if one word hadn't been snagged into my head. *Anymore*. He said people who don't exist *anymore*.

I might've still been crazy. The boy in blue could've been all in my head like they say Elony was. Proof. Dr. Reeves said truth needed proof. But was this boy just the last resort of a crazy person? The boy in blue was either my proof or he was just another way to prove I was crazy. Even I couldn't tell this time. But I wanted to believe the former. So I did.

I stood up from the warm concrete, dusted my knees off and slowly made my way back into the car. My breathing was strangely steady with my new resolve. I would have a new tactic in therapy tomorrow in which I would lie shamelessly to my therapist. Because now the boy's other words were stuck in my head--two in particular. Find her.