

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention, High School Short Story Contest

Home

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I take deep breaths to try and slow myself down. It all feels fake. Everything feels fake. This never-ending loop of school, of waking up here, of seeing the same person in different clothes, different voices and different faces. It's nauseating. Just one person. I just want one person, a friend, a significant other, hell even a dog. I don't care. Just anyone to save me from this hole that seems to just get deeper and deeper by the day.

Tonight at dinner, as I sit with my mom, dad and grandma, I express to them my plans for the future. Mom (like usual) goes on this tangent about how bad it is for me (a Black woman) to be living by myself in a van. She brings up the statistics of how many women of color are taken off the streets. Her fear creates a state of constant pessimism. I mean, she watches the news all day every day, what do I expect? Dad shuts me down before I can even start, and ends with the classic "end of discussion" line. Then there's Grandma. The only sane one in this house, she loves my aspirations. I think mostly because of how much she sees mine in hers. She delves into this story of how she went to Tokyo, Austria, Egypt, and how she's never been the same since. But it's not enough for Mom to stop her cynical comments. I use the excuse of being full to return to my room. I lay on my bed scrolling through endless videos of van life YouTubers and searching for places I'd love to travel to. There's a place in Switzerland with snow alps purer than the touch of a newborn. A place in Italy where they have this huge museum full of the prettiest Monets. A lake in Surrey with the richest green grass and moss I've ever seen. Well...that I've seen through a screen. I just want change and a new perspective, though due to the reality that is my life, perspective shifts every day and life is ever-changing. But I want something different, something new. I just know something of the kind is out there. It's sickening just being here when I know it could all be different. The potential of it all mocks me and smiles on my face. Montana is dull, it's simple and it's plain. As I try to fall asleep, I ache. A place in my chest, between the lungs that are enclosed by the protection of my rib cage, below my vocal cords pounds for the feeling of satisfaction from the endless amounts of exploration this world has to offer, I just want to experience it all. If things were different, I'd leave right now. And never turn back. Sighing, I settle underneath the covers and shut my eyes.

"Violet, Vi!" A whisper wakes me up. Maybe I'm dreaming. I probably am. I lay my head back onto my pillow trying to configure the position I was once comfortable in. "Wake up."

I sit up and open my eyes. Only to be faced with Grandma. "Why are you on my bed? Why are you up?" I ask.

"Shhh, here, take these. Go out and start living your life," she places a pair of car keys and some money inside my hand. "Start your adventure tonight. There's no time like the present. Go." My spirit feels as if about to burst, like a step on a fragile layer of ice on a lake, not taking much for it to all be flooded and soon consumed. Flooding away the feelings of hopelessness, loneliness

and confinement and soon consumed with completion, contentment and freedom. "Thank you, Grandma, you don't know how much this means to me."

"I think I have a pretty vague idea." She arises from my bed and leaves the room. Quickly, I put on my shoes, grab a nearby jacket, and head out through my window. I unlock the door of the 1993 GMC Vandura my grandma has sitting in the driveway that she's owned since god only knows how long. She always promised she'd give it to me for my 18th birthday. And though that day isn't far away, she lets me drive it sometimes. I get into the car and start it. The further pounding coming from that place inside of my chest let me know that this was the right thing to do. Strawberry Guy, Peach Pit, Fleet Foxes and others mixed in between play into the night. I decide to satisfy one of my first adventures: going to Crescent Lake in Washington. It's only a six-hour drive. A couple of gas stops and a few Dunkin runs later, the sun slowly starts rising, creating this luminous painting in the sky. The golden oranges mix with the pinkish auras in the sky, reflecting feelings only bliss could compare. Coming to a halt at a red light, my phone buzzed, it was my mom. She sent a text wanting to know where I was at. Again that place in my chest speaks to me, but this time it hyperventilates. I wipe my hands on my thighs and re-grip the steering wheel. I should go home. But I'm already so far. I'm just gonna get home and get lectured anyways. The internal debate ceases and I start to approach the beach of Lake Crescent. As I walk down to the shore, I gaze at the diaphanous scene before me. The early sun's rays shine and reflect into the water making it gleam. I sit on a big rock where waves crash against it, just barely making their way to my feet. I let the entirety of everything sink in. The little adrenaline rush mixed with the euphoria of this place gives me a high no drug could. *I'm supposed to be here. I know it. It's all meant for me. It feels right, exactly how I knew it would feel. Of course, I—*

My peace of mind ends abruptly with the sound of fast-approaching footsteps. Water splashes and flies onto me. *Inconsiderate much?* I try to brush the drops off and look into the water trying to find what had caused the ruckus. Better yet, *who*. A boy pops his head out. I stare at him as he stares right back at me.

"Sorry, did I splash you?" he asks, swimming his way over to my rock.

His long golden hair clings to his face down to his neck, and his eyes squint in attempts to avoid the sun, but what I attempt to avoid is his gaze. *He's really cute.*

"Yeah. Kinda." I shrug. I take a short glance at him as he runs his hands down his hair, slicking it back.

"You know, if you don't want to get splashed, maybe you should head over to the silent pool in Surrey. No one gets in the water there. And besides...you seem like a silent pool type of person."

Silent Pool in Surrey?

"You've been there?" I ask.

"I have, once. It was full of the richest greens I've ever seen in my life. Have you?"

I don't know who he is, or even *what* he is. But I like him. Curiosity consumes me. *I have to know more about him.* "No, I haven't."

Silence fills the space between us.

"I'm Max. Maximilian."

"I'm Delilah," I lie.

"Well, Delilah, get in. The water's great," he encourages.

I look down at my worn-down converse, skinny jeans and graphic tee.

"I'm good, thanks, plus, I don't have anything to wear."

"Hold on," he pushes himself up and out of the water onto my rock.

The sound of splatting water settles in my ears; I flinch back.

"I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere, Delilah."

"Didn't plan on it."

Max returns with a T-shirt in his hands. He hands it to me and insists on me wearing it. But no matter how much I protest, his spiel about how "good the water felt," and how it was tradition for people to touch the water once they first get here, or else their flesh will start burning, was convincing enough. *I don't believe the burning flesh part. I just admire his effort.*

"OK, turn." His compliance, in an effort to conceal my disappointing outcome of puberty, creates comfortability and trust. I sigh and begin to take my shoes off. "You can turn around now." He turns around and immediately runs into the water. Splashing me yet again. He encourages me to jump in as well, and I do. I do exactly what he does and jump in. The refreshing coldness of the water hits my body, relieving me of the heat the August-infused Washington sun has beamed me with. "See, doesn't it feel great?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess?"

I shrug. Then he splashes me with even more water. "Guess that," he smirks. "No, guess this," I splash him back. It turns into a splash fight, with the waves of the ocean pulling us up and down, apart and together. Eventually, we get out of the water and lay on the rock looking at the sun that's slowly starting to set, behind a cover of clouds. "So, where are you headed after this?" he asks.

"I don't know, what about you, you live around here?"

"I live everywhere."

"You're so edgy," I say flatly. "I know," he smiles. He suggests that we go out to a pier that he describes as "not far from here." I've got nothing left to lose. Besides, the rush from this one adventure needs to be supported by another. My phone rings loudly causing both of us to stand quiet. "You gonna get that or..." I reach into the pockets of my jeans and pull out my phone. "No, it's fine." I hit decline, and my mom's contact disappears from the screen.

We leave the beach and head to my car. Letting a stranger I just met at a beach drive me anywhere sounds dangerous and utterly nugatory, but essentially worth the risk. If I'm gonna die, at least it'd be with someone intriguing, and cute. And it'd save me from going back to that insane asylum for another couple of months.

He offers to drive since I have no idea where I am, so I let him. He plays his music and as soon as I hear that first acoustic chord I look at him. He must be a Fleet Foxes fan too. He's dancing and singing in his seat. I join him as well. We stroll down a boardwalk with a Ferris wheel and little shops. I spot a ring toss where the prize is a fish. Impulsively I grab Max's hand and drag him to the booth. I give the guy \$5 and in exchange I get a basket of rings. Max and I split them. I threw my rings out and got none. I then turn to Max, encouraging him, hoping he'd get at least one. Once he comes down to his last ring, he takes a deep breath and pauses before throwing it. It bounces over bottles and then lands around the neck of one. I look at him and jump up and down; he laughs. The guy hands me a cute goldfish. "What should we name him?" I glance up at Max.

He sighs and puts an arm around my shoulder saying, "Jermy." We walk away from the game booth and continue our stroll down the boardwalk with Jermy. As we near the end of this trip, we sit eating generic over-priced funnel cake at the end of the boardwalk, letting our feet dangle above the water that the night sky reflects above. My phone buzzes and I ignore it. Then it buzzes again, and again. I grab it and check the notifications. All my friends were texting saying that I'd been reported missing. My lock screen hasn't even seen these many texts on my birthday. I just put my phone on silent and turn it face down.

"What's up, all day today you've been ignoring your phone. Is everything OK? Are you a fugitive? Should I be concerned? Jermy and I thought there were no secrets here?"

God, he's annoying. But in a good way. In the best way. It's cute that he cares. But maybe he cares a bit too much. I think I understand what they mean by, when you're Black you're never truly alone, now. Interesting. But then again, it's been the most somebody's cared about me in a while. I don't want to keep things from him, he doesn't deserve that. I know he doesn't.

I explain my situation to him and after hearing everything his posture slumps in response. "Sorry, I should've been honest sooner I know." "Your name's not even Delilah?" He looks up at me.

"I mean, Violet's still a flower too," I break eye contact after holding it for no more than three seconds. *Wow, I just really had to mess things up, didn't I? Good job, Violet, never been prouder.*

"You know, I did something similar last year, except—not to brag or anything—but I went to Hawaii." His face displays a stupid smolder. I couldn't respond with anything other than laughter and he joins me.

We talk about his trip to Hawaii, and he tells me about how he learned to hula and swam with dolphins. The way he talks about the culture had me hung on every word. My god, he is charming. If I didn't know any better, I'd run away with him. But I do know better and I don't think I can last out here more than a day. I don't even know him. But I like him.

And he's been nice so far. But this could all be a facade of a white man. I can't be a hashtag so soon. But the feelings that come from being with him are great; it's exactly what I need, but I need to go home, eventually. I somewhat miss my family. And school, if I miss too many days it'll affect my record. I still want to go to college. I still have other things I want to do other than just live out here recklessly. I'll die that way. I don't know what to say to Max. I don't want to say anything at all. I just want to enjoy my time out here with him while it lasts for however long it does.

"Sometimes I ask myself, is the reason I want to travel because it sounds like a really good way of escapism?" I shift the discussion.

"What's wrong with escapism?"

"I don't know, just running around trying to escape everything you don't like doesn't sound healthy."

"But why wouldn't you want to escape things you don't like?"

"Because I believe we all need to deal with things that come our way. If we don't then how will we ever prepare for the inevitable?" I'm literally such a hypocrite.

"Never thought about it that way," he says. After eating and continuing to walk down the pier with Jermy in hand, we head back to the car and drive with a compromise of no set destination.

I soon fall asleep in the passenger seat to the motion of the car. I'm greeted with the sun piercing directly into my eyes. I glance over to the driver's seat and see it's empty. Slowly coming to concern, I look around to try and pinpoint where we were, or at least where I was. Some sort of forest? A faint whisper of water brings awareness. I get out of the car and the whisper turns to a roar. My feet drop onto a firm sand-like surface. I look up at the huge trees that expand toward the sky resembling the color of their setting and the blue sky peaks through their leaves. Walking further down a trail I'm placed in front of a glorious towering waterfall. The loud sound of water rushing down consumes me. Lost in a gaze toward the ethereal sight, I stand there. "Good morning, glad to see you're up Vi," Max places a hand on my shoulder, snapping me back to reality.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"This is Panther Creek, my third favorite place to visit in Washington."

"Hey, why don't you put on some music in the van, no one's around. Actually, don't even worry about it. I got it." He runs back to the car.

I crouch down and trace my finger in the water. Soon enough sweet melodies fill the air, but the waterfall still overwhelms it all, and Max returns to me. He crouches down beside me, and with his finger, he draws *Max+Violet 4ever* in the sand. I smile looking at him with an undertone of sympathy; it's not gonna last forever. He walks down into the water, as he was wearing nothing but boxers. I watch him frolic among the base of a waterfall pouring behind him.

As I strip into the same T-shirt he had given me the day before. I feel his eyes upon me. Compliance of any kind isn't needed. I want him to see me. He deserves to see me. I join him, walking into the water and swimming over to him. As he explains the possibilities of today, all I could think about was home. A couple of times I'm tempted to take pictures to send to my mom. She hates the outdoors but loves when I talk about them. I loved talking to her about stuff and laughing at our stupid inside jokes. Despite the constant pessimistic comments she made, she's still my mom. And my dad too, his serious and nonchalant acts were hilarious to me. And my grandma with the stories she'd tell about her experiences studying abroad with the many boyfriends she had in each country she visited. I miss them all. My family.

"We could go to an arcade? Oh—or maybe even surfing. Have you ever surfed before? You know what, don't worry about it, I'll teach you."

"Max," I start.

"Yeah?"

"I honestly think I should be making my way home."

"What? Why? I thought we were having fun?"

“We were—we are. It’s just, I have a family and school. I can’t stay forever, you know?”

“Let’s just enjoy today, OK?”

I sigh and say, “OK, Max.” We decide to get something to eat. Stopping at the first fast food place we see, we go in and sit in a booth seat in the back. He converses about how he’s been traveling since he graduated high school last year. He’s stowed away in ships, trains and even planes. He resided in motels throughout his adventures. “You know, by October I’m gonna go to the Philippines. You should come.”

“Max, I probably won’t be around by then. I’ll still be in school, almost in college,” I attempt to hint at the reality that is sure enough soon to come. He doesn’t respond. He just continues to slowly bite a single fry. We walk around for the rest of the day until we end up right back where we were hours prior. Panther Creek. We agree to camp there until whatever destination brings tomorrow. But I already had a familiar place in mind. The night soon casts over the sky and takes over the forest. Max and I lay on a blanket looking up at the moon and the stars.

“Max,” I say softly, “I think I should go home.”

“I don’t want you to,” he turns to me.

“I know and I don’t want to go either, but I have to,” I turn to him. He sighs and avoids my stare.

“Maybe you could stay just one more day. Just one.” He caresses my face with a single finger.

“I’ve met a lot of people Vi, and I’ve left a lot of people. But I don’t want to leave you. I see you. I want to keep seeing you.” I sigh and lightly trace the freckles on his face.

“I needed this, I needed you but now what I need to do...is go home, Max. I swear it’ll all lead to better things, for us. I’ll come and visit you. We can have road trips, fly wherever, go wherever. This won’t be the end of us. Max and Violet forever, remember?”

“You do know it’s not forever if you’re leaving, right?” I don’t respond. I stay there in that moment, with him, inconsistently building and breaking eye contact with those green eyes.

“What about Jermy? How’s custody gonna work?” He asks abruptly.

“You can have full custody if you want, you know, as a gift to remember me by. I’ll visit on holidays,” I laugh softly.

“About two weeks from now I’ll probably be in Berlin or something, looking at the most expensive paintings I know I’ll never be able to afford. You keep him.”

“His middle name could be Crescent. Like where we met. And his last name, Panther, where we left.”

“Jermy Crescent Panther. It has a ring to it,” I smile.

“Yeah, it does.” He pauses. “I’m really going to miss you.”

“We’ll meet again, Maximilian.” As we lay on the blanket, nothing more needs to be said. We just needed to cherish whatever time we had left, before it was soon just a memory. We look at each other. Intuitively we know. He reaches over and kisses my cheek lightly. I stand up and slide my shoes on.

“Aug. 1, noon, Crescent Lake. Be there, OK?”

“OK, Max,” I make my way to the car.

“Wait, Violet, your blanket,” he says. “Please, just keep it. You have my blanket and I’ll have Jermy. Seems fair, right?”

“It does.”

“Goodbye, Violet.”

“Goodbye Maximilian.”

I head to the car and I take deep breaths. It’s all real. Everything’s real. The loop has finally broken and I can return to start anew. I’ve been pulled out and greeted with a taste I always knew was on the tip of my tongue. My nostrils breathe new air and my body changes from experience. Finally, someone.