

Escape

Introduction

Dear reader,

I have always wanted to be a writer, to tell stories, to create things, and to inspire people.

There was a time in my life when this seemed entirely possible. I had belief and everything seemed so worth writing down.

Then, I met somebody who changed my life completely and he gave me more reason to write than ever. Not only did I feel his stories deserved to be told, I also wrote because I wanted to remember everything about him.

And just as this somebody came into my life unexpectedly, so he left it. I didn't want to write anymore with him gone. It hurt too much for a long time, but everyday I recalled happy memories of this person so that when I was ready to write again, I wouldn't have forgotten a thing.

Finally, the day came when it was okay to write again. So, I found everything I had written before and then I wrote some more. I asked questions of others. I begged them to help me get the story right and they did.

The result is the book you hold in your hands. It's the story of when Matty Holt and Laila Jennings collided together and they traveled to surreal places feeling more alive than they ever had. It's a story of love, of sadness, of joy, and of hope. Now, I'm giving it to you. I hope this story makes you a better person like it did me.

I have to thank my parents for teaching me the importance of art, my children for being my drive, my husband for helping me to draft and publish this book and my best friend, Matty for being the subject of it.

Lastly, I want to thank you for taking a chance on a new author.

Much love,

Laila Jennings Stewart

One

"Laila Jennings," the teacher called from her spot in the front of the classroom.

“Laila Jennings,” she called out yet again. This time the frustration was evident in her voice. She did not like having to repeat herself.

But the seventeen-year-old girl still did not answer. Not out of rudeness or disobedience, but simply because she did not hear her teacher’s calls.

Laila was lost in a daydream. While her classmates willed themselves to take notes on Keynesian economics, Laila gave into her persistent imagination and instead was penning poetry about what it might feel like to leave her hometown of Richardsville, Pennsylvania.

It was not that Laila was terribly desperate to leave the only place she had ever lived. No, she wasn’t one of those ungrateful high school seniors who called their town lame every day for eight months only to find themselves waiting tables at the run-down diner six months after graduation. In fact, there were things she found objectively charming about Richardsville.

Laila thought the flower garden in the center of the town’s public park was the loveliest place to sit on a balmy spring day with a good book and the whisper of the bubbling brook in the background. Laila liked the sound of cargo trains rushing by every day on the tracks that split the town into two sides. She loved the Amish people with their curious old-fashioned looking apparel and vast, green farms from which her mother bought produce every weekend. And of course, Laila liked that it was small and quiet because she was a small and quiet girl.

However being the sort-of misfit girl she was, there were certain things she did not appreciate about Richardsville.

For example, the town lacked art enough to satisfy Laila’s existential and creative mind. There were no galleries to peruse paintings, no theatres to put on plays, and no large stages where musicians would come and perform.

Another thing that troubled Laila about her hometown was that there was no one to really talk to. Sure, Laila could have joined her fellow schoolgirls in the gossip they shared every day for the past six years, but she really didn’t want to.

Laila didn’t refuse to join in the rumor-spreading because she was morally better than her counterparts, but rather because she was really much more interested in herself and her thoughts than the weekly break-ups and make-ups.

What Laila truly desired was someone to listen to her thoughts on hot-button topics and someone who might have important things to say back to her.

Laila tried her best to find someone who could have those important conversations with her that were so rarely heard around high school cafeteria tables.

Although the girl was surely an introvert she didn't mind introducing herself to others. Laila found people very interesting and enjoyed getting to know new ones.

Throughout her three and a half years as a student at Richardsville High School, Laila had joined everything from marching band to academic decathlon. She made some companions who made lunch hours and hallway passings more tolerable, but she never found someone to invite over to spend the night or to whisper secrets to before class.

By age sixteen, Laila realized that to deeply know and be known was not an experience she would have while this small town was her world.

Alternatively, Laila leaned into her long-time loves of reading books until early in the morning, listening to music no one else cared for, and escaping into daydreams or creative activities whenever a fascinating thought passed through her mind.

The compulsion to daydream was very irresistible and a source of great comfort to Laila as it is to anyone who feels like they don't fit in. However, it was quite inconvenient to her learning when she found herself lost in thought during the middle of an important lecture or class discussion as she had in Ms. Fredericks class that day.

Laila was jolted back into reality by a tap on her shoulder from the boy seated behind her. She looked around and noticed that the entire class was looking in one of three places, at their notes, at Ms. Fredericks, or worst of all at her.

Laila felt her cheeks turn red. This was a situation she had been in before, being called on while not paying attention, but that didn't make it any less embarrassing.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Fredericks, what was that?" the girl asked hurriedly.

The teacher subtly shifted her weight from one side to another as an expression of her disapproval.

"Please, read back your notes for the class, Laila," the woman instructed in a monotone voice.

"Oh, yes," Laila nodded while on the inside she panicked.

Ms. Fredericks always asked one student to give a summary of their notes at the end of class, but of course Laila had no notes to give a summary of.

"I'm sorry, my notes, they, ummm... I'm having a hard time making sense of them," Laila mumbled. She hoped the teacher would skip over her, but instead Ms. Fredericks kept her gaze steady on Laila.

“Just read what you have written. I saw you scribbling during the lecture. You must have something down.” At this point, some of Laila’s classmates began to giggle, smirk, or catch glances with each other.

Laila’s heart rate quickened and her hands perspired. Laila didn’t know what to say so she sat staring down at her notebook wishing she could sink into the floor.

Ms. Fredericks walked to the third row where Laila sat. Her cream-colored kitten heels clicked with each step. When she stopped by Laila, the girl looked up at her teacher with a blank face and then back down at the words in her spiral-bound notebook. Laila wondered if the middle-aged woman got a thrill from embarrassing her.

Laila watched the older woman’s eyes in anticipation as they moved back and forth reading each word of the girl’s poem. Most of the students had lost interest in the charade now. They had all seen it before, but today something different was going to happen.

“Read it,” Ms. Fredericks commanded softly, but firmly.

“The poem?” Laila asked terrified hoping she had misheard her teacher’s order.

Ms. Fredericks was impatient so instead of a verbal answer, she gave a clear and visible nod. Laila hesitated for a moment. If she waited a second, she thought maybe she would wake up from the bad dream, but after a moment’s pause she accepted her reality.

The girl took a deep breath, coughed briefly and unnecessarily, then steadied her eyes on the first line of her poem. In a low, but clear voice she read the words as she had written them.

*Little town I can picture you now
White picket fences
Perfect lawns
Lots of trees
Little town where I used to run and hide
Now it seems you’re hiding from me*

*Little school I still hear your bells toll
Books and pencils
Late for class
Best friends that wouldn’t last
Little school where I was never that cool
It seems I’m much bigger than you now*

*Little house I’m sleeping on your couch
Flowered sheets
Wooden swing*

*Doggy door
Little house I don't belong here anymore
But I'm not ready to walk out the door*

*I packed my bags and left for the big city
Full of dreams and hopes I'd never see through
And so I came back to you
But somehow you weren't there
Little town where have you gone?*

*Where do you go when your town is gone?
What do you do when your home's not sweet?
I guess I've got to move on*

Much to Ms. Fredericks surprise, the class was quiet and respectful while Laila read her poem. Ms. Fredericks was slightly disappointed in this. She had wanted the student to be more humiliated, but instead there seemed to be an unspoken admiration for Laila's art amongst her peers. It was something Ms. Fredericks had never seen in her twenty-two years of teaching. Usually, even the oldest of students were cruel and teased each other whenever the opportunity arrived.

Laila continued to look down at the words on her paper after she had read them. She was glad that her classmates hadn't jeered or laughed. She assumed that they too had a dislike for Ms. Fredericks and didn't want to give her the satisfaction of making a student feel poorly.

For a moment, there was silence in the room after Laila had finished speaking. Then the teacher spoke, "Please take notes on the subject matter next class, Miss Jennings."

Laila nodded in a sullen agreement and then the bell rang. It was the end of the school day, so although Ms. Fredericks had not formally dismissed them; the students started chatting and packing up their belongings.

The unhappy teacher thought about admonishing the class, but she was too tired and knew that she didn't stand a chance against all twenty-five of their chattering voices and zipping of book bags. Instead she walked to her standard teacher's desk in the back of the classroom and secretively unlocked the bottom left-hand drawer. Inside was six ounces of whiskey she had been saving for a very stressful day. Once the last student was out of the classroom, she would take a long swig.

Laila left the classroom and walked down the stairs until she reached the ground floor. She looked down at her feet the whole time hoping not to run into anybody who had been in her economics class. All she wanted to do was go home, be alone in her room, and listen to the *Abbey Road* record her father had given her for her fifteenth birthday.

Laila breathed in a deep sigh of relief once she had made it out the doors of the red-brick school building. She had made it out without having to make awkward, embarrassing eye contact with any of her classmates and so she was happy.

Laila pushed the afternoon's events out of her mind. They were embarrassing, but they were in the past and so she chose not to dwell on them. That had been something her grandmother taught her to do since she was a little girl. "Leave the past in the past and live in the present," she would tell her granddaughter as they baked chocolate chip cookies together or planted bulbs in her flower garden.

The teenage girl in her coat, gloves, and hat looked around at every house and every tree she passed on the three block journey from her high school to her home and looked for something unique or interesting about it.

She noticed how the two-story on the corner of Spring St. and Forest Ave. had put up precisely fifteen blow-up Christmas figures including an elf this year which was new. She admired the poinsettia flowers in the old widow's ranch a few houses down from her own. Most of all, she liked the way the snow looked different on every tree it fell upon.

Laila's life was not always fun. Sometimes it was the opposite of fun, but Laila believed that even if things weren't fun they could still be beautiful and so that's how she saw the world.

Two

Matty was popular. It wasn't difficult to figure out why. The boy, who was days away from his eighteenth birthday, had everything other people wanted.

He was smart, but not in a know-it-all kind of way. Matty studied to please his "Type A" parents who married after meeting in law school, but he didn't have to work as hard as some of his peers because he was born highly intelligent. He would be accepted into every college he applied.

In addition to being clever, he was also athletic and good-looking. As a member of the soccer team and as track-and-field captain, Matty was fit and toned, but not overly muscular. His hair was thick and dark brown, the same color as his eyes. Matty's face still had a distinct boyishness to it, but his jawline was defined and sharp. He had been the recipient of many adoring giggles, stares, and whispers from his female classmates since around the time he turned thirteen. He almost always ignored them.

The thing about Matty that probably made him so likeable was his smile. Matty's teeth and lips were nice, but what made Matty's grin so entrancing was the sincerity of it and the warmth behind it. When Matty smiled at someone, they felt like he was embracing them in a big bear hug and telling them that everything was going to be okay.

What nobody knew about Matty's smile was the irony of it. Matty loved to make others happy and so he dutifully smiled and laughed with each person he met. Afterward, whoever had conversed with Matty would usually walk away standing a little taller and feeling more optimistic than they had before, but Matty would feel the same sadness he felt every day.

Matty had what most people would consider an ideal childhood. He grew up in a pleasant American small-town. His mother gave birth to him when she and his father were in their early thirties. Both his parents were educated, financially-stable, and loving.

He lived in the same large house since the day he was taken home from the hospital. He was an only child but always had the companionship of cousins, teammates, and school friends to bide his time. His family attended Richardsville 1st Methodist Church where he participated in Christmas pageants and summer camps until his teen years.

Matty had no reason to be unhappy, but for some reason at fourteen years old he began to feel depressed.

It started slow for Matty. He didn't feel as hungry at mealtimes as he usually did and he felt a little extra tired. Matty couldn't understand why but he forced himself not to think about it. He was too busy training to become Richardsville's hometown hero to get caught up in such things.

Then, a couple weeks passed and Matty started doing something he had almost never done since he was little boy. He cried.

The first time he cried was on Monday when he found out he had gotten C's on two of his history assignments. He thought to himself that it shouldn't bother him, but it did. When he came home from school that afternoon, Matty went up to his bedroom, collapsed on his bed and cried into his pillow case.

Matty felt so ashamed for crying even though it was in the privacy of his bedroom and his parents weren't yet home from work to hear him.

Matty believed that boys weren't supposed to cry, at least not audibly and for as long as he had. Perhaps, a few tears with the passing of a close loved one was acceptable, but a boy crying for receiving poor marks was inappropriate.

The worst part of all for the ninth-grader was that he couldn't understand why he was feeling so upset. Bad grades were unusual for him, but not unheard of. He had gotten C's before and even a few D's on assignments in the past and it hadn't bothered him like this.

Because Matty felt his feelings were illogical and because he wanted to be a "man" like his father and uncles, Matty made a resolution to hide what was going on inside of him from everyone, even his sweet mother who he was especially close with.

Matty assumed that eventually the unexplainable feelings would vanish, but he was wrong. Over the next six months, things got worse instead of better. The feelings he had of sadness and loneliness turned into dangerous thoughts and showed up at the most inconvenient times like on the end-of-the-year class trip to the amusement park.

Matty liked most rides and rollercoasters except for the SkyDrop. That was the one ride he wouldn't go on, but of course all of his friends wanted him to ride it with them.

"Come on, Matty. It'll be fun," his pal, Finn, had teased him good-naturedly.

"Yeah, Holt! Don't be a wimp," another chuckled playfully.

Matty had succumbed to peer pressure before on instances of party games like Truth or Dare, but he was not giving in this time.

"No," he said kindly but without leaving room for argument, "you guys go on though. Have fun. I'll just wait over here on this bench."

His friends shrugged in defeat, assured Matty that they would be back soon, and then rushed, laughing toward the ride. Matty sat down. He felt alone sitting on the park bench watching as a group of girls from his class walked by taking selfies with their cotton candy.

"I don't fit in," Matty thought consciously for the first time. It wasn't true, of course. His friends would be back in a matter of minutes and they would want to hang out with him because they liked him, but Matty didn't think that or believe that.

As a hot wave of anxiety swept through his body, Matty began to think about all the reasons why he didn't deserve friendship. He remembered the time he had lost the soccer game for his team by missing a crucial shot. He remembered when he had messed up reading the opening prayer at church. He remembered that his teeth weren't perfectly straight and that he had an unusual red birthmark on his arm.

It was then, in those fifteen minutes of innocent waiting that Matty first started to dislike himself and to believe that he was a loser.

His friends greeted him cheerfully when they returned from the ride. Matty put on his smile and pretended like everything was perfectly fine. The crew of freshmen boys then agreed to stop for ice cream. Matty spent the rest of the day going along with them, riding bumper cars, posing in silly ways for the photograph on the water flume, and convincing everyone that he was having fun.

But on the inside Matty was miserable. He wanted to go home and be alone. His heart felt constantly heavy from the sadness that weighed upon it. Matty felt real pain, but he was a good actor and so his best friends, Finn, Colin, and Jake were completely unsuspecting.

Soon after the trip, Matty's freshman year came to an unceremonious end. He was glad too because acting like he was happy every day, when he wasn't, was wearing him down. At the same time, Matty was not as excited for summer vacation as he had been in previous years.

The days of jumping into swimming pools, riding bicycles, and catching fireflies without a care in the world seemed long gone from him now.

Matty felt a little better after a few weeks of sitting alone in the sunshine and taking long walks on the mountainside behind his home. The constant pressure to perform academically and athletically was relieved at least for a little while.

However, there were still things that bothered him like when he woke up in the morning, looked in the mirror and saw one too many pimples on his face. Or when a thought about the girl he liked with the red hair and the handsome, older boyfriend popped into his head.

Then, there were the thoughts about the future and the past that were usually quite upsetting. Matty had a bad habit of lying in bed at night and replaying every embarrassing incident or failure he had had in his fifteen years until he was so worked up he would have to go downstairs and run on the treadmill until he was so tired, he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

While trivial regrets of the past haunted him at night, the mention of college, a career, or a girlfriend was enough to send Matty into a flurry of worry and anxiety. Like most kids his age, he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life.

He hadn't a clue where or what he wanted to study after high school. He worried that he wouldn't ever know and would end-up doing something he hated for the rest of his life.

Matty also felt behind his peers in that he had never had a girlfriend or even gone on a date. Of course, he wasn't really interested in that yet, but that's what made the whole thing more frustrating. He worried that he would never mature enough to ask a girl out and give her the attention she deserved and that he would die alone and lonely.

The truth was that many girls had crushes on Matty but he knew that those girls were only attracted to him on a superficial level. If they knew the real Matty with all his insecurities, they would run and hide.

Matty's parents finally realized something was wrong with their son on the family's annual week-long trip to the shore. It was a time of year Matty usually looked forward to, but not this season.

For the first time in his life, Matty felt nervous about leaving his house overnight and being away from the town which was so familiar to him. Plus, he wasn't in the mood for playing pranks with

his cousins or listening to his grandparents tell stories of their childhoods. Life just felt too heavy and too dark for all of that.

Matty briefly considered asking his parents for permission to skip the trip and stay home by himself. He would prefer thinking and pining away in the woods in solitude to playing beach ball and getting sunburn. But he quickly discarded the idea. His parents wouldn't understand.

As the family of three drove to the shore with boogie boards and fishing rods in tow, Matty didn't chatter the whole ride down. This was the first sign to his mother that something was not right. Her son had always had so much to say before about plans to learn to surf or stories from trips past. This year he was quiet. He listened to his own music through earbuds for almost the entire duration of their journey except for when he slept and dreamt they were driving back home.

His father was surprised when they stopped for food and Matty declined his father's offer to treat him to a large chocolate shake, one of Matty's favorite guilty pleasures. Matty had told his father he wasn't in the mood.

Throughout the vacation, Matty tried to be the chipper, outgoing boy he once was for the sake of his younger cousins, Max and Maverick, twins aged eleven who admired Matty in every way. Most of the family didn't notice anything was different about the teenager because he tried his best to act like there wasn't.

Perhaps they thought he was a little quieter and less silly than the year before. That was to be expected though because he was growing up. But his mother saw and remembered all of the small things that were different about her little boy, like the way his laughter sounded more forced and less free. The way he slept much more than usual. The way his eyes looked glazed over during a card game and the way he had to be constantly reminded when it was his turn to play. And when it seemed Matty didn't even try to win the family sandcastle building competition.

One night, Matty's mom asked him to walk along the beach with her to watch the sunrise just the two of them. She wanted to be alone with the boy she felt like she was losing. Matty agreed. He wasn't excited about getting up early, but he loved his mother and he didn't want to make her sad.

Matty and his mom set out before any of the others awoke. Matty held a plastic water bottle. His mother had a warm cup of coffee.

They walked slowly across the dunes. Matty's mother looked up at her son who was a few steps ahead of her.

He was taller than her now. She thought back to when he was a baby and she held him in her arms. She longed for a moment to hold him like that again, to have him be little, to have him need her.

Things seemed much simpler in those days. Matty's mother knew how to comfort him when he was crying. She fed him and he smiled. She sang to him and he laughed. All Matty's mother wanted to do was comfort him now.

For a while, they strolled along in silence. Matty felt at ease. He adored no one more than his mother. While being alone was his preference lately, Matty didn't mind her presence. She had a peace about her that made him feel safe.

"I like this," he said with a smile, the first genuine one his mother had seen in awhile.

She smiled back and felt her throat grow tight. She was an easy crier but she wouldn't, not now. Instead, she reached out and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I like it too, Matty," she said. "I'm glad you came with me."

"Would you have gone without me?" he asked.

His mother laughed. "No, but it is beautiful, isn't it?" she said gazing out at the soft peach-colored sun that glowed just above the horizon and the water that glistened below.

"It is," Matty whispered. Beautiful wasn't a word he had used to describe the world recently, but he wasn't lying. The sun was beautiful, and so was the reliable sound of waves crashing, the feeling of soft sand under his feet, and the moment alone with his mother.

It was so beautiful; he sat down to take it all in. His mother followed her son's lead. And so they sat with their feet where the tide ended looking out at the endless sea.

"I love you," his mother said, still wondering how her only baby had grown before her eyes.

"I love you too," Matty replied, keeping his gaze steady ahead of him.

"Matty, is something wrong?" his mother asked quietly with fear that she might offend her son with the question.

Matty shook his head. "No, why would you think that?"

His mother hesitated. "You've seemed a little off, that's all. I don't know. Maybe I'm just imagining something. I only want to make sure you're happy," his mother said while drawing a heart in the sand Matty couldn't see.

Matty nodded. Part of him wanted to spill everything to his mother. He knew he could. But what if it broke her heart? Worse yet, what if it broke his pride?

“Are you happy, Mom?” he asked, trying to get the attention off of himself before he began to cry.

The question threw his mother off guard. Of course she was, she thought. But her own happiness seemed so trivial ever since the day she found out she had conceived Matty. She had wanted to have a baby for so long, but couldn’t. If only Matty knew the countless prayers he had answered! Simply being a mother brought her a kind of joy that surpassed mere happiness.

“Oh, Matty,” she sighed. “You really are the sweetest.” Matty blushed at the compliment. His mother continued, “I always have joy because I have you, but as your mom I can only ever be as happy as you are.”

There was quiet for a moment as Matty considered his mother’s words. If she could only be as happy as he was, then she really couldn’t be that happy at all. Matty knew that his mother deserved to be happy. It wouldn’t be right of him to be the one who limited his mother’s happiness, he thought.

Matty knew it was time for him to tell her the truth, but he was afraid. Closing himself off from others and bottling up his feelings had become a lonely, but comfortable lifestyle. What lay ahead of him would be open, honest, and vulnerable and it would hurt for a while before things could get better because Matty would no longer be living in a sense of denial.

So, he took a deep breath, dug his toes further into the sand and prepared himself to tell his mother what the last six months had really been like for him because he loved her.

“Mom, I don’t know why,” Matty stuttered, “but I just don’t feel the way I used to. There is no good reason for me to be unhappy but I am, constantly. Everything is too much for me to handle and I feel like I’m a big screw-up. I can’t do anything right. None of my friends understand. Everything is so uncertain. I can’t stand it. All I want to do is be alone, but then I’m just so lonely I can hardly bear it.”

Matty’s mother felt grief. She was glad her son had been honest and she was determined to help him feel better, but it still stung to hear that her baby was hurting. She wondered if there was anything she could have done to prevent Matty from feeling this pain.

“Matty, love, I’m so sorry,” his mother cooed, rubbing circles on his back with the palm of her hand. “You know your dad and I love you so much. You’re our whole world, Matty. We’re going to do whatever it takes to get you feeling better.”

Matty nodded and rested his head on his mother’s shoulder like he used to do when he was a little boy and she was reading him bedtime stories. Her words had comforted him, but they didn’t take away the sadness or the fear of the future.

“I’m sorry,” Matty whispered as his mother petted his wavy, thick hair.

“Don’t apologize for your feelings, Matty. It’s okay. I’m so glad you told me. I was missing your jokes and your smirks and your singing in the shower, but now we have a chance of getting those things back.”

Matty felt a tear roll down his face. He wiped it off quickly hoping his mother hadn’t seen it, but she had.

“You know,” she whispered in the kindest, gentlest way a woman ever had, “crying is thought to be weak, but I think those who cry openly are the very bravest of all.”

Matty couldn’t hold it in anymore. Weeks of pent-up feelings came pouring out as tears on his mother’s cotton tee shirt. Matty’s mother was proud of him. She knew there is nothing more frightening for a man than to admit he is not okay.

“Thank you, Mom,” Matty said gratefully after he had cried all he could.

“You’re welcome, Matty. Try your best to keep your chin up for the rest of the trip if you can. There’s only one day left. Then, we can sort everything out with your father when we get back home.”

“I can do that,” Matty responded dutifully.

“It looks like it’s finally morning, now,” Matty’s mother said because the colors of the sunrise had faded into a light blue sky and a bright yellow sun.

“Yeah,” Matty agreed.

“Come on,” his mother said, “Let’s head back. Your grandfather will be up soon and he’ll like me to get breakfast ready.”

With that the two walked back to their rental. Matty felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but he knew there was a very long, uphill hike ahead of him.

Escape

Introduction

Dear reader,

I have always wanted to be a writer, to tell stories, to create things, and to inspire people.

There was a time in my life when this seemed entirely possible. I had belief and everything seemed so worth writing down.

Then, I met somebody who changed my life completely and he gave me more reason to write than ever. Not only did I feel his stories deserved to be told, I also wrote because I wanted to remember everything about him.

And just as this somebody came into my life unexpectedly, so he left it. I didn't want to write anymore with him gone. It hurt too much for a long time, but everyday I recalled happy memories of this person so that when I was ready to write again, I wouldn't have forgotten a thing.

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I have to thank my parents for teaching me the importance of art, my children for being my drive, my husband for helping me to draft and publish this book and my best friend, Matty for being the subject of it.

Lastly, I want to thank you for taking a chance on a new author.

Much love,

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One

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"Laila Jennings," she called out yet again. This time the frustration was evident in her voice. She did not like having to repeat herself.

But the seventeen-year-old girl still did not answer. Not out of rudeness or disobedience, but simply because she did not hear her teacher's calls.

Laila was lost in a daydream. While her classmates willed themselves to take notes on Keynesian economics, Laila gave into her persistent imagination and instead was penning poetry about what it might feel like to leave her hometown of Richardsville, Pennsylvania.

It was not that Laila was terribly desperate to leave the only place she had ever lived. No, she wasn't one of those ungrateful high school seniors who called their town lame every day for eight months only to find themselves waiting tables at the run-down diner six months after graduation. In fact, there were things she found objectively charming about Richardsville.

Laila thought the flower garden in the center of the town's public park was the loveliest place to sit on a balmy spring day with a good book and the whisper of the bubbling brook in the background. Laila liked the sound of cargo trains rushing by every day on the tracks that split the town into two sides. She loved the Amish people with their curious old-fashioned looking apparel and vast, green farms from which her mother bought produce every weekend. And of course, Laila liked that it was small and quiet because she was a small and quiet girl.

However being the sort-of misfit girl she was, there were certain things she did not appreciate about Richardsville.

For example, the town lacked art enough to satisfy Laila's existential and creative mind. There were no galleries to peruse paintings, no theatres to put on plays, and no large stages where musicians would come and perform.

Another thing that troubled Laila about her hometown was that there was no one to really talk to. Sure, Laila could have joined her fellow schoolgirls in the gossip they shared every day for the past six years, but she really didn't want to.

Laila didn't refuse to join in the rumor-spreading because she was morally better than her counterparts, but rather because she was really much more interested in herself and her thoughts than the weekly break-ups and make-ups.

What Laila truly desired was someone to listen to her thoughts on hot-button topics and someone who might have important things to say back to her.

Laila tried her best to find someone who could have those important conversations with her that were so rarely heard around high school cafeteria tables.

Although the girl was surely an introvert she didn't mind introducing herself to others. Laila found people very interesting and enjoyed getting to know new ones.

Throughout her three and a half years as a student at Richardsville High School, Laila had joined everything from marching band to academic decathlon. She made some companions who made lunch hours and hallway passings more tolerable, but she never found someone to invite over to spend the night or to whisper secrets to before class.

By age sixteen, Laila realized that to deeply know and be known was not an experience she would have while this small town was her world.

Alternatively, Laila leaned into her long-time loves of reading books until early in the morning, listening to music no one else cared for, and escaping into daydreams or creative activities whenever a fascinating thought passed through her mind.

The compulsion to daydream was very irresistible and a source of great comfort to Laila as it is to anyone who feels like they don't fit in. However, it was quite inconvenient to her learning when she found herself lost in thought during the middle of an important lecture or class discussion as she had in Ms. Fredericks class that day.

Laila was jolted back into reality by a tap on her shoulder from the boy seated behind her. She looked around and noticed that the entire class was looking in one of three places, at their notes, at Ms. Fredericks, or worst of all at her.

Laila felt her cheeks turn red. This was a situation she had been in before, being called on while not paying attention, but that didn't make it any less embarrassing.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Fredericks, what was that?" the girl asked hurriedly.

The teacher subtly shifted her weight from one side to another as an expression of her disapproval.

"Please, read back your notes for the class, Laila," the woman instructed in a monotone voice.

"Oh, yes," Laila nodded while on the inside she panicked.

Ms. Fredericks always asked one student to give a summary of their notes at the end of class, but of course Laila had no notes to give a summary of.

"I'm sorry, my notes, they, ummm... I'm having a hard time making sense of them," Laila mumbled. She hoped the teacher would skip over her, but instead Ms. Fredericks kept her gaze steady on Laila.

"Just read what you have written. I saw you scribbling during the lecture. You must have something down." At this point, some of Laila's classmates began to giggle, smirk, or catch glances with each other.

Laila's heart rate quickened and her hands perspired. Laila didn't know what to say so she sat staring down at her notebook wishing she could sink into the floor.

Ms. Fredericks walked to the third row where Laila sat. Her cream-colored kitten heels clicked with each step. When she stopped by Laila, the girl looked up at her teacher with a blank face and then back down at the words in her spiral-bound notebook. Laila wondered if the middle-aged woman got a thrill from embarrassing her.

Laila watched the older woman's eyes in anticipation as they moved back and forth reading each word of the girl's poem. Most of the students had lost interest in the charade now. They had all seen it before, but today something different was going to happen.

"Read it," Ms. Fredericks commanded softly, but firmly.

"The poem?" Laila asked terrified hoping she had misheard her teacher's order.

Ms. Fredericks was impatient so instead of a verbal answer, she gave a clear and visible nod. Laila hesitated for a moment. If she waited a second, she thought maybe she would wake up from the bad dream, but after a moment's pause she accepted her reality.

The girl took a deep breath, coughed briefly and unnecessarily, then steadied her eyes on the first line of her poem. In a low, but clear voice she read the words as she had written them.

*Little town I can picture you now
White picket fences
Perfect lawns
Lots of trees
Little town where I used to run and hide
Now it seems you're hiding from me*

*Little school I still hear your bells toll
Books and pencils
Late for class
Best friends that wouldn't last
Little school where I was never that cool
It seems I'm much bigger than you now*

*Little house I'm sleeping on your couch
Flowered sheets
Wooden swing
Doggy door
Little house I don't belong here anymore
But I'm not ready to walk out the door*

*I packed my bags and left for the big city
Full of dreams and hopes I'd never see through
And so I came back to you
But somehow you weren't there
Little town where have you gone?*

*Where do you go when your town is gone?
What do you do when your home's not sweet?*

I guess I've got to move on

Much to Ms. Fredericks surprise, the class was quiet and respectful while Laila read her poem. Ms. Fredericks was slightly disappointed in this. She had wanted the student to be more humiliated, but instead there seemed to be an unspoken admiration for Laila's art amongst her peers. It was something Ms. Fredericks had never seen in her twenty-two years of teaching. Usually, even the oldest of students were cruel and teased each other whenever the opportunity arrived.

Laila continued to look down at the words on her paper after she had read them. She was glad that her classmates hadn't jeered or laughed. She assumed that they too had a dislike for Ms. Fredericks and didn't want to give her the satisfaction of making a student feel poorly.

For a moment, there was silence in the room after Laila had finished speaking. Then the teacher spoke, "Please take notes on the subject matter next class, Miss Jennings."

Laila nodded in a sullen agreement and then the bell rang. It was the end of the school day, so although Ms. Fredericks had not formally dismissed them; the students started chatting and packing up their belongings.

The unhappy teacher thought about admonishing the class, but she was too tired and knew that she didn't stand a chance against all twenty-five of their chattering voices and zipping of book bags. Instead she walked to her standard teacher's desk in the back of the classroom and secretively unlocked the bottom left-hand drawer. Inside was six ounces of whiskey she had been saving for a very stressful day. Once the last student was out of the classroom, she would take a long swig.

Laila left the classroom and walked down the stairs until she reached the ground floor. She looked down at her feet the whole time hoping not to run into anybody who had been in her economics class. All she wanted to do was go home, be alone in her room, and listen to the *Abbey Road* record her father had given her for her fifteenth birthday.

Laila breathed in a deep sigh of relief once she had made it out the doors of the red-brick school building. She had made it out without having to make awkward, embarrassing eye contact with any of her classmates and so she was happy.

Laila pushed the afternoon's events out of her mind. They were embarrassing, but they were in the past and so she chose not to dwell on them. That had been something her grandmother taught her to do since she was a little girl. "Leave the past in the past and live in the present," she would tell her granddaughter as they baked chocolate chip cookies together or planted bulbs in her flower garden.

The teenage girl in her coat, gloves, and hat looked around at every house and every tree she passed on the three block journey from her high school to her home and looked for something unique or interesting about it.

She noticed how the two-story on the corner of Spring St. and Forest Ave. had put up precisely fifteen blow-up Christmas figures including an elf this year which was new. She admired the poinsettia flowers in the old widow's ranch a few houses down from her own. Most of all, she liked the way the snow looked different on every tree it fell upon.

Laila's life was not always fun. Sometimes it was the opposite of fun, but Laila believed that even if things weren't fun they could still be beautiful and so that's how she saw the world.

Two

Matty was popular. It wasn't difficult to figure out why. The boy, who was days away from his eighteenth birthday, had everything other people wanted.

He was smart, but not in a know-it-all kind of way. Matty studied to please his "Type A" parents who married after meeting in law school, but he didn't have to work as hard as some of his peers because he was born highly intelligent. He would be accepted into every college he applied.

In addition to being clever, he was also athletic and good-looking. As a member of the soccer team and as track-and-field captain, Matty was fit and toned, but not overly muscular. His hair was thick and dark brown, the same color as his eyes. Matty's face still had a distinct boyishness to it, but his jawline was defined and sharp. He had been the recipient of many adoring giggles, stares, and whispers from his female classmates since around the time he turned thirteen. He almost always ignored them.

The thing about Matty that probably made him so likeable was his smile. Matty's teeth and lips were nice, but what made Matty's grin so entrancing was the sincerity of it and the warmth behind it. When Matty smiled at someone, they felt like he was embracing them in a big bear hug and telling them that everything was going to be okay.

What nobody knew about Matty's smile was the irony of it. Matty loved to make others happy and so he dutifully smiled and laughed with each person he met. Afterward, whoever had conversed with Matty would usually walk away standing a little taller and feeling more optimistic than they had before, but Matty would feel the same sadness he felt every day.

Matty had what most people would consider an ideal childhood. He grew up in a pleasant American small-town. His mother gave birth to him when she and his father were in their early thirties. Both his parents were educated, financially-stable, and loving.

He lived in the same large house since the day he was taken home from the hospital. He was an only child but always had the companionship of cousins, teammates, and school friends to bide his time. His family attended Richardsville 1st Methodist Church where he participated in Christmas pageants and summer camps until his teen years.

Matty had no reason to be unhappy, but for some reason at fourteen years old he began to feel depressed.

It started slow for Matty. He didn't feel as hungry at mealtimes as he usually did and he felt a little extra tired. Matty couldn't understand why but he forced himself not to think about it. He was too busy training to become Richardsville's hometown hero to get caught up in such things.

Then, a couple weeks passed and Matty started doing something he had almost never done since he was little boy. He cried.

The first time he cried was on Monday when he found out he had gotten C's on two of his history assignments. He thought to himself that it shouldn't bother him, but it did. When he came home from school that afternoon, Matty went up to his bedroom, collapsed on his bed and cried into his pillow case.

Matty felt so ashamed for crying even though it was in the privacy of his bedroom and his parents weren't yet home from work to hear him.

Matty believed that boys weren't supposed to cry, at least not audibly and for as long as he had. Perhaps, a few tears with the passing of a close loved one was acceptable, but a boy crying for receiving poor marks was inappropriate.

The worst part of all for the ninth-grader was that he couldn't understand why he was feeling so upset. Bad grades were unusual for him, but not unheard of. He had gotten C's before and even a few D's on assignments in the past and it hadn't bothered him like this.

Because Matty felt his feelings were illogical and because he wanted to be a "man" like his father and uncles, Matty made a resolution to hide what was going on inside of him from everyone, even his sweet mother who he was especially close with.

Matty assumed that eventually the unexplainable feelings would vanish, but he was wrong. Over the next six months, things got worse instead of better. The feelings he had of sadness and loneliness turned into dangerous thoughts and showed up at the most inconvenient times like on the end-of-the-year class trip to the amusement park.

Matty liked most rides and rollercoasters except for the SkyDrop. That was the one ride he wouldn't go on, but of course all of his friends wanted him to ride it with them.

"Come on, Matty. It'll be fun," his pal, Finn, had teased him good-naturedly.

“Yeah, Holt! Don’t be a wimp,” another chuckled playfully.

Matty had succumbed to peer pressure before on instances of party games like Truth or Dare, but he was not giving in this time.

“No,” he said kindly but without leaving room for argument, “you guys go on though. Have fun. I’ll just wait over here on this bench.”

His friends shrugged in defeat, assured Matty that they would be back soon, and then rushed, laughing toward the ride. Matty sat down. He felt alone sitting on the park bench watching as a group of girls from his class walked by taking selfies with their cotton candy.

“I don’t fit in,” Matty thought consciously for the first time. It wasn’t true, of course. His friends would be back in a matter of minutes and they would want to hang out with him because they liked him, but Matty didn’t think that or believe that.

As a hot wave of anxiety swept through his body, Matty began to think about all the reasons why he didn’t deserve friendship. He remembered the time he had lost the soccer game for his team by missing a crucial shot. He remembered when he had messed up reading the opening prayer at church. He remembered that his teeth weren’t perfectly straight and that he had an unusual red birthmark on his arm.

It was then, in those fifteen minutes of innocent waiting that Matty first started to dislike himself and to believe that he was a loser.

His friends greeted him cheerfully when they returned from the ride. Matty put on his smile and pretended like everything was perfectly fine. The crew of freshmen boys then agreed to stop for ice cream. Matty spent the rest of the day going along with them, riding bumper cars, posing in silly ways for the photograph on the water flume, and convincing everyone that he was having fun.

But on the inside Matty was miserable. He wanted to go home and be alone. His heart felt constantly heavy from the sadness that weighed upon it. Matty felt real pain, but he was a good actor and so his best friends, Finn, Colin, and Jake were completely unsuspecting.

Soon after the trip, Matty’s freshman year came to an unceremonious end. He was glad too because acting like he was happy every day, when he wasn’t, was wearing him down. At the same time, Matty was not as excited for summer vacation as he had been in previous years.

The days of jumping into swimming pools, riding bicycles, and catching fireflies without a care in the world seemed long gone from him now.

Matty felt a little better after a few weeks of sitting alone in the sunshine and taking long walks on the mountainside behind his home. The constant pressure to perform academically and athletically was relieved at least for a little while.

However, there were still things that bothered him like when he woke up in the morning, looked in the mirror and saw one too many pimples on his face. Or when a thought about the girl he liked with the red hair and the handsome, older boyfriend popped into his head.

Then, there were the thoughts about the future and the past that were usually quite upsetting. Matty had a bad habit of lying in bed at night and replaying every embarrassing incident or failure he had had in his fifteen years until he was so worked up he would have to go downstairs and run on the treadmill until he was so tired, he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

While trivial regrets of the past haunted him at night, the mention of college, a career, or a girlfriend was enough to send Matty into a flurry of worry and anxiety. Like most kids his age, he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life.

He hadn't a clue where or what he wanted to study after high school. He worried that he wouldn't ever know and would end-up doing something he hated for the rest of his life.

Matty also felt behind his peers in that he had never had a girlfriend or even gone on a date. Of course, he wasn't really interested in that yet, but that's what made the whole thing more frustrating. He worried that he would never mature enough to ask a girl out and give her the attention she deserved and that he would die alone and lonely.

The truth was that many girls had crushes on Matty but he knew that those girls were only attracted to him on a superficial level. If they knew the real Matty with all his insecurities, they would run and hide.

Matty's parents finally realized something was wrong with their son on the family's annual week-long trip to the shore. It was a time of year Matty usually looked forward to, but not this season.

For the first time in his life, Matty felt nervous about leaving his house overnight and being away from the town which was so familiar to him. Plus, he wasn't in the mood for playing pranks with his cousins or listening to his grandparents tell stories of their childhoods. Life just felt too heavy and too dark for all of that.

Matty briefly considered asking his parents for permission to skip the trip and stay home by himself. He would prefer thinking and pining away in the woods in solitude to playing beach ball and getting sunburn. But he quickly discarded the idea. His parents wouldn't understand.

As the family of three drove to the shore with boogie boards and fishing rods in tow, Matty didn't chatter the whole ride down. This was the first sign to his mother that something was not right.

Her son had always had so much to say before about plans to learn to surf or stories from trips past. This year he was quiet. He listened to his own music through earbuds for almost the entire duration of their journey except for when he slept and dreamt they were driving back home.

His father was surprised when they stopped for food and Matty declined his father's offer to treat him to a large chocolate shake, one of Matty's favorite guilty pleasures. Matty had told his father he wasn't in the mood.

Throughout the vacation, Matty tried to be the chipper, outgoing boy he once was for the sake of his younger cousins, Max and Maverick, twins aged eleven who admired Matty in every way. Most of the family didn't notice anything was different about the teenager because he tried his best to act like there wasn't.

Perhaps they thought he was a little quieter and less silly than the year before. That was to be expected though because he was growing up. But his mother saw and remembered all of the small things that were different about her little boy, like the way his laughter sounded more forced and less free. The way he slept much more than usual. The way his eyes looked glazed over during a card game and the way he had to be constantly reminded when it was his turn to play. And when it seemed Matty didn't even try to win the family sandcastle building competition.

One night, Matty's mom asked him to walk along the beach with her to watch the sunrise just the two of them. She wanted to be alone with the boy she felt like she was losing. Matty agreed. He wasn't excited about getting up early, but he loved his mother and he didn't want to make her sad.

Matty and his mom set out before any of the others awoke. Matty held a plastic water bottle. His mother had a warm cup of coffee.

They walked slowly across the dunes. Matty's mother looked up at her son who was a few steps ahead of her.

He was taller than her now. She thought back to when he was a baby and she held him in her arms. She longed for a moment to hold him like that again, to have him be little, to have him need her.

Things seemed much simpler in those days. Matty's mother knew how to comfort him when he was crying. She fed him and he smiled. She sang to him and he laughed. All Matty's mother wanted to do was comfort him now.

For a while, they strolled along in silence. Matty felt at ease. He adored no one more than his mother. While being alone was his preference lately, Matty didn't mind her presence. She had a peace about her that made him feel safe.

"I like this," he said with a smile, the first genuine one his mother had seen in awhile.

She smiled back and felt her throat grow tight. She was an easy crier but she wouldn't, not now. Instead, she reached out and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I like it too, Matty," she said. "I'm glad you came with me."

"Would you have gone without me?" he asked.

His mother laughed. "No, but it is beautiful, isn't it?" she said gazing out at the soft peach-colored sun that glowed just above the horizon and the water that glistened below.

"It is," Matty whispered. Beautiful wasn't a word he had used to describe the world recently, but he wasn't lying. The sun was beautiful, and so was the reliable sound of waves crashing, the feeling of soft sand under his feet, and the moment alone with his mother.

It was so beautiful; he sat down to take it all in. His mother followed her son's lead. And so they sat with their feet where the tide ended looking out at the endless sea.

"I love you," his mother said, still wondering how her only baby had grown before her eyes.

"I love you too," Matty replied, keeping his gaze steady ahead of him.

"Matty, is something wrong?" his mother asked quietly with fear that she might offend her son with the question.

Matty shook his head. "No, why would you think that?"

His mother hesitated. "You've seemed a little off, that's all. I don't know. Maybe I'm just imagining something. I only want to make sure you're happy," his mother said while drawing a heart in the sand Matty couldn't see.

Matty nodded. Part of him wanted to spill everything to his mother. He knew he could. But what if it broke her heart? Worse yet, what if it broke his pride?

"Are you happy, Mom?" he asked, trying to get the attention off of himself before he began to cry.

The question threw his mother off guard. Of course she was, she thought. But her own happiness seemed so trivial ever since the day she found out she had conceived Matty. She had wanted to have a baby for so long, but couldn't. If only Matty knew the countless prayers he had answered! Simply being a mother brought her a kind of joy that surpassed mere happiness.

“Oh, Matty,” she sighed. “You really are the sweetest.” Matty blushed at the compliment. His mother continued, “I always have joy because I have you, but as your mom I can only ever be as happy as you are.”

There was quiet for a moment as Matty considered his mother’s words. If she could only be as happy as he was, then she really couldn’t be that happy at all. Matty knew that his mother deserved to be happy. It wouldn’t be right of him to be the one who limited his mother’s happiness, he thought.

Matty knew it was time for him to tell her the truth, but he was afraid. Closing himself off from others and bottling up his feelings had become a lonely, but comfortable lifestyle. What lay ahead of him would be open, honest, and vulnerable and it would hurt for a while before things could get better because Matty would no longer be living in a sense of denial.

So, he took a deep breath, dug his toes further into the sand and prepared himself to tell his mother what the last six months had really been like for him because he loved her.

“Mom, I don’t know why,” Matty stuttered, “but I just don’t feel the way I used to. There is no good reason for me to be unhappy but I am, constantly. Everything is too much for me to handle and I feel like I’m a big screw-up. I can’t do anything right. None of my friends understand. Everything is so uncertain. I can’t stand it. All I want to do is be alone, but then I’m just so lonely I can hardly bear it.”

Matty’s mother felt grief. She was glad her son had been honest and she was determined to help him feel better, but it still stung to hear that her baby was hurting. She wondered if there was anything she could have done to prevent Matty from feeling this pain.

“Matty, love, I’m so sorry,” his mother cooed, rubbing circles on his back with the palm of her hand. “You know your dad and I love you so much. You’re our whole world, Matty. We’re going to do whatever it takes to get you feeling better.”

Matty nodded and rested his head on his mother’s shoulder like he used to do when he was a little boy and she was reading him bedtime stories. Her words had comforted him, but they didn’t take away the sadness or the fear of the future.

“I’m sorry,” Matty whispered as his mother petted his wavy, thick hair.

“Don’t apologize for your feelings, Matty. It’s okay. I’m so glad you told me. I was missing your jokes and your smirks and your singing in the shower, but now we have a chance of getting those things back.”

Matty felt a tear roll down his face. He wiped it off quickly hoping his mother hadn’t seen it, but she had.

“You know,” she whispered in the kindest, gentlest way a woman ever had, “crying is thought to be weak, but I think those who cry openly are the very bravest of all.”

Matty couldn't hold it in anymore. Weeks of pent-up feelings came pouring out as tears on his mother's cotton tee shirt. Matty's mother was proud of him. She knew there is nothing more frightening for a man than to admit he is not okay.

“Thank you, Mom,” Matty said gratefully after he had cried all he could.

“You're welcome, Matty. Try your best to keep your chin up for the rest of the trip if you can. There's only one day left. Then, we can sort everything out with your father when we get back home.”

“I can do that,” Matty responded dutifully.

“It looks like it's finally morning, now,” Matty's mother said because the colors of the sunrise had faded into a light blue sky and a bright yellow sun.

“Yeah,” Matty agreed.

“Come on,” his mother said, “Let's head back. Your grandfather will be up soon and he'll like me to get breakfast ready.”

With that the two walked back to their rental. Matty felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but he knew there was a very long, uphill hike ahead of him.