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by hanktalkin

Summary

You are a very successful author. You have a loving wife. You live together in a stylishly modern house that is in no way like your father’s stylishly modern house, and the two of you have a cat.

But you dream at night. There are images of someone you’ve never met, your fingers lanced in grey ones and hair that smells of alien planets no matter how long ago she’s left them. It makes no sense for you to long for her. There is no fate in love, there is no incompleteness to you as a person simply because in another reality you loved someone else.

Your loving wife leaves you because you are too emotionally distant.

Chapter 1

There is a life waiting for you. It's out there, custom made, given shape from a cast-iron mold and laser engraved with the declaration *Rose Lalonde* in a font that is just barely too small to read. It has been waiting for you since the moment you were born, every delicate branch shaped in precognition on the path you have been deposited on this Earth to take. *Experience Childhood, Mature, Find Love, Acquire Success, Reach Fulfillment,* it says, the bonsai tree of choices as illusory as it can be. The pruned branches on the ground may make fleeting change, may treat the delusion that every other human shares, may even ignite something inside you that could (theoretically) be a semblance of free will. You know better. This reality was not meant to house you. Choices are still made—like when you say you don't want to share a room with Dave anymore, like when you spend weeks pouring over college selections—but they are perfunctory. You know you have the ability to see which path you will take, to open your eye and just *look*, and though you don't the fact that you *can* has stolen any pleasure you might have gotten from something even as mundane as looking past your reflection in the vending machine. You *can* know, and somehow that is just as bad as knowing.

You go through life as best you can. Waiting. In some distant splinter, in a time you can't fully touch, you swipe a page from another girl's book and come to the very cliché existential conclusion that nothing is coming. You are not the special Rose Lalonde. You do not get to see beyond stars, you do not get to play the rain. The anchor of gravity weighs so heavily on you, you think your spine might snap with the effort. That other girl, the one you're stealing your rather unfortunate character arc from, was also burdened with a great Knowing, but by God it couldn't have hurt this *much*.

Physics shouldn't hold you. You should be able to fly.

It is after great psychological interrogation of your own mind that you determine the only way you'll avoid stymieing into depression is to follow the lead of every other human on this planet when they wake up one day and realize no stylishly dressed denizen will ever whisk them from their childhood bed and off to adventure: you keep your chin up. Live on day at a time. Hence, the life that is waiting.

You are a very successful author. You have a loving wife. You live together in a stylishly modern house that is a completely different flavor of stylishly modern house than your father's, and the two of you have a cat. You age with the grace that is expected of your species.

But still. You dream at night. There are visions of still moments and hands placed in the smalls of backs, there are intertwined fingers you can't make out. But more important than these glimpsed moments is the *shape* of the thing that they command. You know that it—the cavity that holds the memories—belongs to a person, but only tangentially, a mark in the dictionary that simply says *see here for more information*. The sense is powerful. Potent. Your vision does not know specifics, does not know the color of her eyes or the way her nose catches the light in profile. Instead there is the solid and unmistakable recognition of *love*. Of

resoluteness. You miss something you never had because whatever you and her had to withstand, it did not make it to this universe.

Dave goes traveling abroad. The cat dies. You and your loving wife hold a funeral for it.

It makes no sense for you to long for her. A girl, a concept you have never met. There is no fate in love, there is no incompleteness to you as a person simply because in another time you had met someone and chose to commit. It would not follow for your other you, (the one who is a million thousand versions of a her teenage self) to pine for a woman on Earth because you, (the ragged and aged you) happened to marry her.

Your loving wife leaves you because you are too emotionally distant.

John wakes up when you try to move his head off your shoulder, all the orchestrated effort of the past six minutes down the drain. He yawns, his entire face going wide then contracting, the whole range of expression like an artist studying their face in a mirror.

When he sees the bit of drool he left on your blouse he says, “aw jeez Rose, I’m sorry. I guess I forgot we can’t really do all nighters anymore.”

“I was able to manage our ‘movies where an estranged cousin shows up and ruins everything’ marathon just fine, thank you very much,” you point out.

He grins, the remains of his boyish bucktooth’dness peaking through on his middle-aged face. “Wow. Guess you owned me at movie night. I’ll go grab the big gold trophy.”

You allow a pleasantly neutral smile to cross your features. You fail to mention that you spent the entire night with your back straight and your gaze locked unflinchingly at the poster-encrusted living room wall.

He gets up and makes you both breakfast, which is chocolate cereal and nothing to drink, the exact same as the past two mornings. Memories vanish from your mind like blown dandelions, time so stretched and grainy that you find yourself missing full hours. One moment, you finish your breakfast first, and the next thing you know you’re alone in the kitchen and staring down into a sink of unwashed cereal bowls. Archeologists will be able to date them back at least three weeks. You are wrist deep in hot water when John comes in.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he says evasively. Or maybe it’s guilt. “I was going to get around to them eventually.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” you say. “I was already here.” This feels like a lie. You are implying there was some sort of conscious thought to it.

John gets ready for work while you pretend to look at something on your phone, listening as he lists places you guys could go tonight since he’s just such a horrible cook and he feels bad making you eat microwave chicken nuggets all the time. You nod noncommittally. He never asks how long you think you’ll be staying—knowing John, it probably hasn’t even crossed his mind as of yet. You’d probably have to stay a full month before the idea of not being a

Perfect Host would even settle in that big wholesome brain of his, and even then he'd probably only ask if you wanted him to get you out an air mattress.

You should go home. You have a perfectly nice house to wait out your wretched mid-life crisis in, one with clean clothes and non-canned tea. At the very least you should have brought your laptop, but when you left your seaside cottage and began the two hour drive up the coast, you were in…quite a state.

"Bye Rose," John says, shouldering his own laptop bag. "I'm working double shifts, so help yourself to whatever."

And then he's out the door. Your first day alone in the Egbert house, and you spend the hour after he leaves staring at that same spot on the living room wall.

You could go home, text John later and know he'll be perfectly understanding. That's the adult thing to do. But John's house is so much closer to the fabric store and you've been meaning to pick up new yarn.

The excuses will run out eventually, but you occupy yourself by paying $3.86 for a bundle of malachite sheep's fur you'll never use.

As you pass by the rows of bolts, each one shining with color and promised softness, you reach out and feel the fabric between you fingers. It draws you to her, and you wonder if that means she liked to sew. You don't let yourself draw the conclusion, though. You have no way of knowing what the tangential threads of association might mean, if the unique patterns were something she liked or something she did or some connection that present perspective won't yet let you imagine. You've learned your lesson about conclusions, that you only look the fool when you try to grasp the images you can't really see.

You used to think of her as The Madonna. It was summer, and your father took you to Florence, trying on "cool hats" while he escorted you and Dave around the walking streets as the petulant churn of family vacation rattled on. It was the least terrible of any trip he'd whisked you away to, actually. There was never a moment Dave's camera parted from his eye, his glasses pushed into his hair for a greater length of time than the rest of his life combined, and you likewise found that the city spoke something to you. You found you loved the art, the smells, the way everything seemed ancient and ill thought out instead of strange falsified monuments for your benefit alone. The Ufizi drew you into her clutches. It showed you things. You were stood in front of the *Madonna del Granduca* when you were struck so hard with familiarity that you allowed the smallest cry of shock from you young lips. The other gallery attendees must have thought you were having a particularly divine revelation.

As you looked at the soft tones of her robe, the delicate way she held her child, you couldn't help but see someone else, find comfort in her compassion. This was at a time when you still believed your visions were that of the future, and you went on to conclude that the girl from your dreams was a particularly Christian woman, and thus your union was particularly star-crossed. You spent many an embarrassing year flitting through Catholic church groups, trying to find a gossamery face.

So you've given up trying to make sense of her. You cannot even make sense of you.

You would be proud of yourself for going out and managing to run an errand if not for the fact that that as soon as you get back to John's place, you sit in the exact same spot for the remaining six hours, except there is now a new ball of yarn on your lap.

John rattles the keys outside the front door. You look idly at where the living room connects to the hall and strain your ears. He isn't alone. He's talking, joking with someone as they walk into the front hall and the muffled voices straighten out into two recognizable ones.

"Hey sweetie!" your father says, holding one of John's grocery bags and greeting you with an overly sanguine smile that would wrinkle his crow's feet if they weren't so expertly concealed by his shades. "You haven't been sitting there all day, have you?"

"Hello father," you say evenly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Just wanted to come by and check to see how my favorite girl is doing." He comes over and, still balancing the bag on his hip, presses a kiss to your temple. "You know I had to learn about this whole thing from Dave?"

"I saw no reason to trouble you with it," you say, fighting the urge to wipe at the kiss's ghost. "As you can see, John has been expertly helping me through this difficult time."

"That so?" If your father notices the empty chip bags and dirty dishes surrounding your movie couch, he doesn't comment. Instead, he says, "movie night, huh? I remember the first time we had John over back in New York. I swear the three of you watched movies for like… forty-eight hours straight."

"There wasn't much for children to entertain themselves with in said house." For once, the ice in your voice seems thinned.

"Roxy pulled up just as I was coming home!" John chimes in. "Isn't that a cool coincidence Rose?" Even John can't be that enthused by something so mundane. He must be trying to change the subject.

Your father, mercifully, takes the cue. He goes over and drops his cargo next to John's, likely glad to be of service. They're quire a pair: Father with his hair grown silver like bleached sand, and John's as dark as windswept nights. Father reaches out to ruffle it.

"Lucky you, bouncing from one pretty face to the next," he says, and John laughs.

"Our host shouldn't have to suffer your ceaseless flirting, Father," you say stiffly.

John shakes his head. "I don't mind really-"

"And I should be going," you add. "I am sorry John, I know you wanted to go somewhere for dinner but I really have been away from home for far too long and the plants will be getting very thirsty without me."

You rise. Your father watches you with a frown on his face, and John just looks uncomfortable as you gather up your few things. "O-oh, okay. Let me know how you're feeling later? You can come back any time, you know."

You do know. What you didn't know was all that you needed to leave this place was the kick of being subjected to oppressive family concern.

Roxy has, and always will, remind you of Dave. The demented mirror of a twin brother you possess, who doesn't even give you the decency of acting like his multitude of doomed selves. Dave is not the sort of person who maintains a real, paper subscription to *The Economist*. All hope for him dies the night of your sixteenth birthday when you find him with several articles from *Business Insider* printed out and held together with binder clips shoved under his pillow while he drools on the corner. Irony be damned, this is not a Dave Strider.

But he is *your* Dave Strider. You were fourteen when you asked him, "Dave? Do you remember our earlier conversation about zombies?"

His head lifted instantly. "About how in zombie movies no one can ever have heard of zombies before because otherwise they would know to just shoot them in the head and then the movie would be over?"

"Yes, that."

"No I don't." He was sitting on your bed, setting out the developed pictured from Italy one by one in alphabetical order. What "alphabetical order" meant in a visual medium, you failed to ask.

"Well I have an extension of that theory," you said, knees pointed outward as you sat in the perfect center of your velvet pillow. "Are you aware of the movie Groundhog Day?"

"Yeah Rose, I'm John's friend too." His face didn't change as he set a close up of a bird next to a sunset shot of *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*.

"The concept of a Groundhog's Day Loop, or sometimes simply a Time Loop is implicitly fascinating to our popular culture ever since the release of Bill Murray's cinematic masterpiece in 1993. So when we, as an audience, recognize such a Time Loop in another piece of media, we shorthand the plot to our fellows as 'like Groundhog Day'. However, in every subsequent interpretation of this classic story structure, whether meant to be moral or fantastical, no character in universe ever recognizes the fact that they are inside a Groundhog's Day Loop, despite the fact that it is practically burned into our collective cultural understanding of time travel."

He looked at you. Finally. Your fingers picked at a loose thread in your quilt. "Are you saying that all time travel media resides in a universe where Groundhog Day doesn't exist."

"Precisely."

"Damn. That's fucking good."

"If I might posit a question." Your hands stopped, needles drawn inward as the scarf ceased. "If I were to tell you I was Groundhog Looping, would you believe me?"

"Fuck no," he said. "Movies aren't real, Rose."

So that is how you and your brother part. Still, he has his fairly successful accounting position, and you have your…magnum opus? A work you'll never top and so since its publication you've never seen the need to try. What they never tell you about authorship is that it sinks into your cortex, affects your train of thought until you begin to narrate your own life. *Rose Lalonde-Evans sits down at her computer. Rose Lalonde-Evans stares at the page for forty-five minutes before making herself some hot chocolate.* Though, maybe you will need to drop the Evans in the future. The thought leaves you standing in your kitchen until your cup becomes cold chocolate.

It isn't fair. Her love has cost you your own, and you don't even know if longing for this gone girl is even worthwhile when you've never seen how your story ends. Would you have lasted? Only a singular time do you see the two of you making it to adulthood, and after that is the white blur in your vision where your Sight is replaced with the exceedingly less helpful Ultimate Self. You hope Ultimate You is having fun with her new self-actualization, because her gain has left you a pathetic woman holding what amounts to a handful of acrylic dice. She's probably looking back at you, maybe musing how this strange doomed offshoot came to exist, a place with no Gods, no Game and instead just a small, angry planet.

You flip off your reflection in the chrome refrigerator, just on the off chance.

The adult in you realizes that whatever you feel isn't love. Love is miniscule decisions made every day, and whatever you can say of your alternate selves, the ability for informed compatibility was minimal. Ideally, these teenage versions of yourselves could have grown up, continued to love each other every day, but in the nature of Paradox Space there will be millions of them and only one of you to take on their discarded memories.

Rose eats. Rose sleeps. Rose stares at her screen and ignores texts from her father. She goes out and buys cat food for just for something to do, to feel alive in this modern existence where trying to make a human connection is so much more difficult in a world absent of forced contact. A sixteen-year-old Rose is more socially developed after living on a meteor for three years but that doesn't help when her barren offshoot ***can't even remember the girl's face.***

Rose goes home. Rose tends to her lemon tree. Rose winds back at John's house a few weeks later.

Dave brings back a girl.

The line between bringing back a girl and bringing *you* back a girl is remarkably thin, because as soon as you hear Jade's name it all falls back into place. You know she used to have the universe in her palms but, unlike you, she doesn't even know what she's lost. You don't know which of you that makes more pathetic.

When you meet Jade and she throws her arms around you because *Dave has told her so much* since he found her on his many a wayward travel while trotting about the globe, and he's brought her back because she always wanted to visit America. You now know why those childhood Pesterchum conversations seemed so empty with just the three of you, but you don't know how to explain it to Dave and John. You've never tried to broach the subject since your moment with Dave, not even before then when you'd wake from childhood nightmares

and your father would ask you what's wrong. You know how it will go. You've opened your inner eye to that willingly.

But this time you *do* actually need to divulge some of your Essential Information that is absolutely Not You Going Crazy to your loved ones as much as you fear what they'll say. Because it's suddenly vitally important to convince Jade to stay around. Something in you knows you can't lose her, can't go back to three. She's your missing piece.

You needn't have worried. Within the week she wants to stay and get a visa, and you wonder if, even here, the forces of Space are at work.

You wonder if the same domino of triggers could be done for your mystery girl. If you could just learn her name, then maybe all the memories would slide back into place like Jade as she sticks her butt on the couch between you and Dave. You doubt it though. Wherever she is, her reality is not accessible to yours, if one was created for her at all.

It takes entirely too long for you to realize that, through a series of technicalities, you are all moving in together.

You've stayed with John for months now, returning the favor by buying food because at the very least shopping makes you feel like you're moving forward. When John told you he'd be changing places in the near future, you didn't even bat an eye, remembering the Extremely Heterosexual pact that he and Dave had made as children that if neither of them were married by forty, they would move into their own bro pad and live out the remainder of their days as the coolest bachelors around. You've come along like a fixture, finding yourself living with your brother once again. It's a nice place: Dave plays the stock market well, and John makes decent enough while working both the Mini Putt-Putt and standup nights at Colonel Sassacre's. The fact that there are four bedrooms doesn't even register to you.

That is until Jade. She's been staying Dave like you've been staying with John so of course she is there, and suddenly you all live in a house and pretend there's nothing strange at all. It shouldn't be like this. You're all adults, you're meant to be out there, living your lives, not indulging in the rather cliché childhood fantasy of spending your nights together in the living room watching Ghost Rider. It's infantile. You need to grow up, get a job, get married, have adopted babies. You've broken things somehow.

"Rose is fresh out of a divorce, so there's that," Dave tells Jade while you eat takeout and stubbornly refuse to move from the kitchen counter. "Hey, now that she's free, maybe you two should hook up and expedite the green card process."

"Really?" Jade asks, all wild eyes with none of the power that should lurk beneath. "That would be so awesome!" But then her brow crunches. "Wait, no, Rose probably really doesn't want to think about that right now. And you were joking, weren't you? You were joking, Dave."

Dave shrugs his chopsticks. In that they move up and down on his fingers like a tiny, indecisive marionette.

Jade turns to you with that face you love and you can't believe you ever forgot. "I'm sorry, I don't know if that's a sensitive topic…"

Leave it to Jade to apologize for Dave's dickery. "It's alright," you say. "It's certainly not the worst idea to make it past my brother's eloquent bullshit hole." And for once, you're not lying. The mention of The State of You doesn't bring you a reflexive pain.

Jade snorts. John declares that it *would* be a super awesome idea, and he and Jade immediately launch into plans for your hypothetical wedding. You think Dave is watching you.

Later that night, when a particularly obtuse foreign film is playing on the television since it was your turn to pick the movie, John falls asleep on you again. This time, he at least has the decency to pass out on your lap, where you can use your velvet pillow as a buffer to lift his head and discretely set it back. You extract yourself from Jade's arms, knock aside where Dave has leaned against your legs, and head to the second floor balcony.

There's a telescope up here. John's addition no doubt, and the corner of roof looks so much like his childhood home that you feel a pain behind your eyes. In attempt to alleviate it, you press one against the finderscope.

You don't know what you're looking for. Perhaps hoping you can see beyond the stars, through the infrared radiation, out beyond the universe into the one where she exists. But alas, the lens cap is on, and you have no idea how to work this fucking thing.

Distantly, you feel a memory, on that never happened exactly, but a composite of a thousand different moments that perhaps maybe happened. Long arms wrap around your middle and a chin rests on your shoulder, saying, "come back to bed, Rose."

Instead what happens is Jade presses her head into the small of your back, wraps her arms around your middle, and says, "come back to the cuddle pile, Rose."

You hesitate. You don't smile. You don't think you can, not yet for a very long time, but you do place your hands against hers. For most every other Rose, these constellations would be wrong. But for you, in this mistaken plane you've somehow created, they are yours. Maybe these three other pieces from the old world can be enough.

"Alright," you tell her, not moving. "I'm coming."

Chapter 2

Of course, you've thought before on the fact that your Dave Strider is not a true Dave Strider. For one, he is Dave Lalonde and no one would ever think to question this—wouldn't it be more strange if you *didn't* share a name with your completely biological twin brother? Often times you wonder what Dirk's thoughts are on this whole matter, if he has any of course, and assuming that he ran off to do…*whatever*…not just on coincidence. You've often wondered how he and Roxy seem to have such insight without the benefit of seer powers to delay their drift into irrelevance, but perhaps their own aspects buffer them against total ignorance, even while cut off from the Game. At one point, you fancied a guess that any future/former player, when given enough age and wisdom, will eventually settle into the realization they are meant to be doing something special . However, the mere existence of your brother proves that theory to be a load of hokum.

But that's enough about Dave Lalonde. God knows there's already been an extensive amount of narrative thread unraveled to expound upon *that*.

So instead, we bring our attention to one John Egbert, once again asleep, beginning this story like a mid-nineties video game character. What is wrong with this John Egbert, you wonder? Nothing would be your initial guess, since to you he is perfectly himself, and he exists alongside you in a reality that was tailor fit. But there must be *something* that sets him apart, otherwise every flaw you notice in your brother is just you being a rude bitch.

So what is it then? Perhaps his failure to grow a mustache? John Crocker had a particularly luxurious one, as did his ectofather, so why does John only succeed in a scraggly little goatee that makes him look more like a bespectacled Robin Hood rather than a world famous comedian?

You have to admit it's a tenuous lead at best. You cease observing your sleeping friend's face, and slide John of Loxley's glasses off his face so he doesn't get pressmarks in his temples. Delicately, you fold them and set them on the coffee table, which is really just a trunk full of pranking equipment that has been hauled into the middle of the living room in a desperate attempt at pizza elevation. You go visit your final quandary.

"Jade dear," you say with a little rap on her door. "We have a shopping date today."

After a moment's pause, you step inside to finder he curled under her cloud-patterned comforter. Perhaps that's what makes this Jade odd: she spends far less time asleep, and enough of it awake that she can make it to her bed on time.

"Jade," you say, shaking her shoulder lightly. "The mortifying ordeal of wedding planning is upon us."

Wedding planning is, perhaps, an exaggeration. You were a celebrated author once, and though you could never claim the obsession of the public eye that say a famous director demands, your engagement and subsequent marriage still required a certain standard of spectacle. There was the beautiful dress, the imported champagne, the cake that you cut open

to reveal a dozen live doves. Your wife loved it. Your agent doubly loved it. So since the people who mattered most to you at that particular intersection of your life were so enthralled, you found you too could enjoy yourself a little.

Perhaps then anything would be considered a downgrade, but you think that heading to Party City the day of to pick up the silverware *might* be considered trashy, even by non #1 New York Times Bestsellers.

Your Madonna has taste, of that you can be sure. You can practically feel her looking down at you, shaking her head.

It brings you comfort, that she might be out there in some Olam Habah, some reunion yet to come. That once you die or maybe just figure out a purpose for your timeline, you'll be rewarded by meeting her and getting to ask what the fuck that was all about. But these are comforts that linger, best when not interrogated, (like when you learned that millions of fecal bacteria are released with every toilet flush and are most likely clinging to your toothbrush right now, and vowed never to think of it again.)

Perhaps she will guide you to a unified world, one that you've only seen in flashes of in years condensed down to slideshows. "Many cultures have a concept of a physical manifestation of death that is less akin to a Grim Reaper and more of a benevolent guide to the afterlife," you mention to Jade. "Think Charon, a simple merchant, performing a service for a nominal fee as he guides you to the place where your soul will reside for all eternity. Or perhaps less well known in western tradition is Yama, ruler of the departed, the first mortal to die and thus bestowed the glorious honor of making sure everyone else does it. These are benign or sometimes simply neutral beings, a perspective on death that is missing from Abrahamic religions. They are called psychopomps, soul guides, and despite their duty we do not assign them blame. Why, as humans, do we continually look death in the face and long for something recognizable to stare back? Why do we look for humanity in the very absence of it? There is nothing virtuous about death, no compassion, and yet we write our *Book Theif*s and our *Hogfather*s in a desperate attempt to claim that death is just the nature of things. Perhaps if we recognized that death is avoidable, removed the stigma that those who seek to reverse its effects are insane egomaniacs, then we could move to destroying it completely."

"…Well, *I* like the napkins with Squiddles on them."

You look down at the choice she has selected, the rainbow array of Squiddles beaming back at you. They are quite cute. "Yes, let's go with those."

You return to the Harlondebert home with several stacks of paper plates, plastic silverware, and a bunch of pink and green balloons Jade insisted on. If prom night is your aesthetic, by God are you winning this week's Bridezillas. You honk the horn, pick up John and the mysteriously reappeared Dave, and you're on your way.

The closest synagogue doesn't have a ballroom, but the study room in the basement turned out to be perfect for your purposes. A semi-ironic marriage to skirt immigration laws seems to fit nicely in a low ceilinged chamber surrounded by beanbag chairs.

Mr. Egbert is there, as if you were strapped for father figures. John doesn't leave his side much, and you know he worries about father since the old man refuses to abandon the Egbert home, despite the fact that he's unable to make it up the stairs for six years. He wants to die in that house, though he won't say it as bluntly, and John's done his best to convert the first floor into everything a solitary gentleman would need. It unsettles you, for some reason. The idea that the rest of the Egbert home will remain untouched, preserved just as it was when John left high school and abandoned the rooms full of clowns. Forever plastered in time by posters and the unused programming textbooks of an eighteen-year-old boy.

Your father sidles up to you. "I'm keeping an eye those Egberts," he says. "I know if John ever finagles his dad into a home, I'm not long for this world."

"I would never," you say, lightly sipping your pre-reception martini. "Mainly because I know trying to have you committed would be like trying to wrestle a cat into a suit."

Father wonks, and nudges you with a shoulder. You are trying to be nicer to him. He deserves a lot more than what you usually give.

"I'll remember this conversation Rose. Now! Where are you hiding my daughter-in-law?"

He spends the next thirty seconds cooing over the now summoned Jade, who's wearing her black dress with the green trimmings. She does look quite fetching, though she *is* wearing her squiddlesneaks.

"Oh!" Roxy says suddenly, tapping Jade unnecessarily on the arm in frantic excitement. "I need to tell you! They can't make it until after the ceremony, their flight won't be in for another hour."

Jade's face alights. "That's fine! It's a sham wedding anyway."

"Who, might I ask, are our unexpected guests?" you interrupt as Jade double checks for anyone hiding in the potted plants with comically large surveillance equipment.

"It's a surprise!" Jade beams at you. "Just some people that Roxy-"

"Ssshhhhh Jaaaadeee," your father hushes. "You say anymore and she'll figure it out. You know when she does the-" Your father mimes some strange zonked motion that reminds you passingly of Jack Sparrow. You are certain you've never done that in your life.

Jade raises her eyebrows in conspiratorial agreement, and zips her lips with a nod.

"Wedding crashers?" You feign mild distance. "Here? In front of my foosball table?" Said table has been taken over by the pair of boys. With a shake of your head you warn, "none of them better be wearing white, otherwise it's your head, Harley."

"Not Harley for much longer!" she says, and Roxy whisks her off with a laugh.

You're not cramped in the basement, even with the other two guests. Mr. Egbert has brought a lovely cake and your father has provided a surprisingly edible platter of hors d'oeuvres, the

later of which John and Dave have descended on with gusto now that Dave has been beaten at his third foosball game in a row. As they chow down, Dave convinces John to marry him.

“Think of it John,” he says around a mouthful of honey-covered crackers. “Jade takes Rose’s last name, you take mine, we become Gay Lalonde Power Couple^2. We go to our kids parent teacher conference and absolutely *destroy* them with the force of our four matching power suits. ‘No sir, I’m sorry. Sir, for the last time, I don’t know who Yamcha is.’”

John groans. “No Dave! We’re not doing a double ironic gay wedding!”

“But think how awkward the house is going to be if we don’t,” Dave points out. “We’re going to be like a unicycle with an extra wheel.”

“…Like a bike?” you offer, expertly sliding into the conversation and the shrimp bowl.

“No Rose,” he tells you tersely. “Like a unicycle with an extra wheel.”

“I *can’t* marry you!” John waves his tiny tuna sandwich about. “If I do, our bachelor contract is broken. As soon as I marry you, I’m going to have to move out!”

“Shit,” Dave says. You can’t tell if he’s genuinely taken aback or simply continuing the bit. It’s often hard to tell. “I hadn’t thought of that. Is that true Rose?”

“It depends,” you offer. “Upon verbal agreement of this contract, did you stipulate a post-completion timeframe? Was the language so that you would commit to the deal *if* you were single at the designated date of John’s fortieth birthday, or *as long as* you were single?”

“See?” John motions to you. “We can’t know for certain. I won’t risk our bromance on a maybe, dude.”

It would be so easy for you, to glance back to the exact day the two made their pact, to rectify the details that the human mind so easily looses track of. But you won’t. Nothing you See can surprise you anymore, you’ve seen all the ins and outs this world has to offer. It is unsatisfying to you, beneath you, and if things were fair Dave could just go do it himself. Pop back in time for a bit of extra-chronological spying. He could be so much and isn’t, and it may yet kill you that you don’t know why. He had one of the very dimensions of reality at his fingertips, Jade could bend the other in ways no player was meant to, and John…

Well John was powerful in ways that nothing to do with his aspect. Incredible for different reasons entirely, and you will never find the words to make any of them see.

The ceremony is short and sweet. A ketubah is signed, the officiate says a few words, and you kiss Jade to seal the deal. It reminds you of kissing John, though maybe that’s to be expected. You could tell her, but she’d never find it as funny as you do as you try to make the comparison to the brother she doesn’t have.

You drink lots during the reception. The dual Best Men make speeches—John is yours Dave is Jade’s—before you tuck into the casserole you brought from home and have heated up in the basement’s microwave. John stands and says, “today! Was really important. Two of my

best friends are just got married, deciding to live in the same house and share daily chores and never ever get divorced, so a total change in how they're living now. And if anybody from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services is listening, they're totally in love in a non-platonic way." This gets a small *whoo!* from somewhere. Most likely Jade. "But uh, if we're being serious for a moment. Thank you everyone for coming today. You guys really are my best friends, and it actually means a lot to see us coming a little closer together. Thanks."

He stumbles over his last word a bit and sits down, his face a bit red. You appreciate it a lot actually.

Dave stands up and says, "rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub."

When John and Jade are done booing him, you all tuck in. You aren't the only one drinking, as your father has convinced John's to try some of his "good stuff" (which you most certainly want to get in on), and Jade has challenged John to beer pong. It appears to be going well, since a half an hour later, Dave stands on his chair and haul's John's hand up into the air. It has a pop-tab on one finger, and Dave dutifully informs the room, "he said yes!" Everyone drunkenly claps.

Maybe it's the inebriation, but you wind up kissing Jade a lot over the course of the evening. You are once even so wild as to smack John with a kiss on the cheek.

"Whoa Mrs. Lalonde," he says in faux scandalization. "Such a thing cannot be done! You are a married woman, and I am most recently betrothed to the greatest knight in all the land."

"That is what makes our love so wondrous, dear Sir Egbert. The younger," you add, with respect to present company. "Our love is now forbidden. Taboo. Star-"

You cut yourself off. You suddenly don't feel so well. Everything tonight feels like such empty fluff and the stars hold everything you were meant to have. The stars are the problem. You should never have crossed them in the first place.

If you were not feeling well before, you feel even less when the pair of surprises walk through the basement door. Because it only takes one introduction to realize Jade *is* very aware she has a brother, just not the one you were thinking of.

"Dr. Claire," the sharply dressed woman says as she shakes your hand. "I suppose that makes us sisters then?"

"In a sense, yes," you say faintly.

Dr. Claire's companion has an armful of Jade, and Jude doesn't seem too motivated to get her off him. Her mouth doesn't stop, saying how excited she's been to meet them and she just didn't think it was possible. Father's speaking to you, but his words are taking their sweet time to reach you.

"How…again?" you ask him.

“I used to babysit for little Joey and Jude here,” he explains, grabbing Dr. Claire around the shoulders in a tight side-hug. She’s nearly a foot taller than him. “When I heard the name Harley, I though, huh. It was a long shot, but you know, stranger things have happened.”

Dr. Claire looks at him fondly, shyly keeping her gaze averted from yours. You mutter, “stranger things indeed.”

“And whatta ya know!” he finishes. “It all checks out. Turns out Jade had some family here all along.”

“Dave! John!” Jade hollers, her hands still clasped in Jude’s. “Get your stupid butts over here!!!”

“My stupid butt has entered a loving and committed relationship with this chair,” Dave calls from a beanbag, positively hammered.

“Coming!” John shouts.

“John,” Jade says he makes his way over. “This is Jude and Joey. They’re my brother and sister! Isn’t that great! Turns out my grandpa had kids in America and he never told me any of it.”

“Whoa!” John gawks, and how he can’t tell he’s looking into a mirror you don’t know. “That’s like…the plot of like half the movies I own!”

“It is. Strange,” Jude admits. “A very, odd string of coincidences. But I am happy to finally. Meet Jade.”

He smiles, but it is not *his* mannerisms you are watching, but Dr. Claire’s. She has that sleek, businesswoman look you always admired about nineteen-eighties lesbians, and she’s watching the family reunion with an air of sadness and you don’t know how to deal with. It feels as though this is some sort of practical joke. How can they be real? How can two whole people suddenly exist where they didn’t before? You turn away.

“Something the matter, hon?” your father calls as you make your way up the stairs.

“Just need some fresh air,” you mutter over your shoulder. You're not sure if he hears.

The winter air is fresh and dark but it doesn’t lift you splitting headache. Have Jude and Joey always been here? On this planet? They must since your father knows them, and even if he didn’t, the only illusions the Game deals in are people so patterned with agency and history that they might as well be real. In all your adolescent glances across fortune—before you swore off the habit—how did you not see them? And if they exist here, on this Earth, why have you not met the other children of Jake Harley?

It mixes with the ill-advised champagne in your stomach and you lean over a bike rack so you don’t lose your cake.

Is this a product of arrogance? Certainly you’ve fallen to that pitfall before. But it seems if this is an attempt to teach you a lesson, the joyful reunion of long-lost family members is a

bit of a weaker punchline than turning into a grey tentacle monster. But here you are again, out amongst the stars. They give no comfort, cold and distant as they are; you search for Virgo among the gnarled constellations. Tears are wet on your cheeks.

You hear the crash bar to the parking lot swing out toward you, and as much as you love him, you don't want to see your father right now. You can't bear his questions that you can't answer, you can't look at Dave without the fear that the next time you show him the weak point between your eyes he'll throw the cautious extension back into your face. Your family who you love but can't face. However, it's neither of their footsteps that scuffle across the asphalt to where you're still keeled over and breathing out your mouth. It could be Jade. Jade wouldn't be so bad. You love her, but despite the wedding and green balloons it's a different kind of love, and she knows that and you know that but how do you even begin to explain-

"Rose?" John asks, circling until he's beside you but not putting a hand on your shoulder. You can't be grateful enough for that. "Are you alright? You left the party really fast. Was it the shrimp?"

"No, our guests' arrival and the shrimp were merely temporally similar," you say, waving him away as you straighten your spine.

His brow furrows. "Was Jade's family rude to you or something?"

"They are not *just* Jade's family," you say, and oh, you don't feel so good. Usually you wouldn't be so frivolous with your Insight unless it's wrapped in several layers of philosophy, but the churning in your stomach is making you testy. Maybe John's right about the shrimp.

"What does *that* mean?" he says, because he's paying too close attention to you to dismiss what you say. Damn him and his concern.

"Damn you and your concern," you snap, and his furrowed brow melts into a frown.

"I get that it's your wedding and you're allowed to freak out and stuff, but you're being a real *jerk* Rose." He points back into the synagogue. "You ran away from like, twenty-five percent of our guests as soon as they showed up, and you ripped your dress and didn't even notice." John reaches into his back pocket and fumbles with a piece of orange fabric. He grimaces when he hands it to you. "Roxy's really worried about you."

"Is that why you're out here John? Purely at the behest of my father?" And wow you don't know where all this bitch energy is coming from.

"No!" he looks like he the fabric in your face, instead balling it into a fist when you don't take. "That's not what I'm saying! It just feels like whenever you get like this, all…*huffy*, we all just are supposed to leave you alone because *that's Rose you know*. But I'm so tired of it! Getting to meet her family is really important to Jade and I just want you to acknowledge that when you run away it hurts the rest of this too."

You freeze, staring at him under a wrong sky while the Pacific breeze draws goose bumps on your bare shoulders. "Do I…do this often?"

“As long as I’ve known you, yeah.” There's a glare behind his moonlit glasses. “You just get all…cryptic, and when you ask what’s wrong you say we wouldn’t understand.”

“You *wouldn’t* understand,” you say. He raises an eyebrow. “…I see. I suppose that would get…frustrating to hear.”

Here you thought you’d been so careful, so subtle, the all-seeing oracle as she watches the blind stumble about before her. It occurs to you now that if *you* encountered someone like that, you’d want to shove her down some stairs.

“Yeah well,” he shrugs. “I think we’ve all gotten used to it.”

That doesn’t make you feel much better. You pinch the bridge of your nose, still trying to massage away the piercing headache. Discreetly, you atempt to open your mind, to learn more about your new guests, but there is an aching blockade in the way, even when you try to see them as they are at present. It could be because they’re with your father—you’ve always found it difficult to see through the Void surrounding him—but it may simply be that you’re out of practice.

“…I apologize John,” you say faintly. “I have been a bit…thoughtless.”

You hear a long exhale. Finally, he slides closer to you, which you can tell he’s been wanting to for a while now. He puts a hand on your shoulder. “It’s okay, we get it. I just wish…” He stops, chewing on his lip the way he does when he’s reconsidering. “If you have something to talk to us about, you can, and we’ll listen. We know you've gone through a lot the past year, but we can't help until you talk to us. Whenever that is!” He puts his hands up in the universal *no pressure!* motion.

You think on that. You have been selfish, have been cowardly. There were three other players to this game after all. Maybe it’s time you attempted to tell them the rules, damn yourself in the process.

“Thank you John,” you say honestly. “I believe I needed that.”

“…Someone to come talk to you?”

“I would say, to borrow a turn of phrase from Jade, a not insignificant kick to the rear.”

John laughs, and you’re reminded—because only you in your tower of isolation could possibly forget—how much you love him. You owe it to them, all of them, because they mean just as much to you as this planet you’ve found yourself on. You’ll get the courage, you think, perhaps after you’ve had a few more glasses.

You tell John this, and he says, “I think maybe you should have a nap first…”

“Hm. Perhaps. Those beanbag chairs did seem to be calling me. I might yet convince them and Dave’s butt to get a divorce.”

He nods, returns your scrap of dress, and walks with you back into the building.

You do tell them all, in the fullness of time. You stand in your kitchen of the (now) Lalonde household while John and Dave exchange their vows over a partially eaten box of greasy pizza. Dave crushes a red solo cup beneath his heel.

The trend seems to be that Lalonde weddings degrade with every successive iteration. If your father ever gets remarried, it's going to be in a cave in the middle of the woods in upstate New York.

When the apple juice is drunk and the pizza is devoured, your self-control frays and you blurt what has been wrestling inside you for months. If you are honest with yourself—and let's face it, you often aren't—then you would admit that this constantly warring uroboros has been swirling inside for longer than the past year. Maybe your whole life.

They stare at you at first. That's all they do, but you keep on talking and they keep on stare, and at one point Dave looks like he's about say something very Dave, but his new husband gives him a sharp elbow in the ribs. As the words spill over your lips, an unending torrent bubbling past black lipstick that's left a mark on your red plastic cup because you've been to nervous to remember to seal, a sob somehow sneaks past and escapes into the unmoving kitchen. You don't know where it came from; your eyes are dry, and you do not feel pained, at least no more than you have for the past forty-one years. It is that you are simply… overwhelmed. While you continue, Jade slides closer, and locks her fingers in yours over the kitchen table.

When you are done, you have no final flourish, no closing statement to convince them of your sanity. The words simply stop, and are you left staring at your only friends in the world.

The silence hangs, for a second, and then Jade refuses to let anything fill up the hollow place inside you where the words once sat because she wastes no time in saying, "I believe you Rose."

You do not sob again. You simply look at her, opened mouthed, taking in the unabashed honesty on her face. "You do?"

"Sure!" She's glowing as she looks at you, smile taking up her whole face, early onset crow's feet wrinkling. "I always knew something was weird. Something about me, and then when I met Dave, something about him. And then something about us! When we first starting all talking it felt…really really right. And I thought maybe that was just because I'd never had a group of friends before, but hearing you say all that stuff about Space and battleships…it feels like I already knew?"

Jade. Of course, how could you have ever discounted Jade? Jade was always more than just her aspect in the same way that John was, your guiding light, your team psychopomp. She read the clouds long before you wrote your first GameFAQ.

"That is…" Incredible. More than you could have ever hoped. You thought because there was no Game to see, that somehow it unwitnessed. "Thank you. Jade."

She throws her arms around you, and now there *is* moisture under your eyes, and it is either the sentimentality finally coming to you in your old age or Jade is actually squeezing the life

out of you. “No!” she says, “thank you!! It’s starting to like…finally make sense!”

And you finally look up through your misted vision to see that John and Dave are looking on in awe. John shifts, rubbing the back of his neck, and with the feeling of Jade around your neck you could almost convince yourself that what he says doesn’t matter as long as you have her. Almost. For a few minutes, if you tried.

“Um,” he says, and blows a raspberry. He meets your gaze. “I guess I believe you too. I’m not gunna pretend I got Jade’s thing of ‘I totally knew it all along’ but… I guess I figured something spooky was up with you. I think I thought that ever since we were thirteen and you started that witchcraft stuff.”

“Wicca,” you correct faintly, hardly daring yourself to hear what else he’s saying.

“And something spooky ‘s up with you too, mister!” Jade chimes in, releasing you. You find you can breathe slightly better. She gets up and pokes him in the chest. “You got to *Groundhog’s Day*, windy boy!”

“Haha. Guess I did.” He rubs the spot over his heart. You sympathize. Jade has very hard pokes. When he manages to look you in the eye, he says, “I don’t know if I would have believed you if you told me thirty years ago but…I dunno. Life’s been pretty weird. I guess it’s easier to imagine a world where it was even weirder.”

And for the first time you realize Jade isn’t the only person you’ve stolen a character arc from. You can still see a sad young man in your mind’s eye, one who stopped answering your pesters, and who you eventually stopped hearing from at all, so wrapped up in your own life were you. Maybe, *possibly*, you have judged this timeline too harshly. Because you don’t know if John has ever been happier, don’t think any Jade has ever made it off that island in time to not be scarred. Maybe the lesson you can take is that power is not the only currency for relevance, and even if the world does not contain *her*, it is still worth it.

On that last thought, your eyes land on Dave. Your brother still has his hands in his pockets, that grim little coolguy frown on his face. You don’t know how to ask him, but thankfully John saves you the hassle.

“So you’ve been weird and quiet,” he says, and Dave…scoffs.

“Typical,” he says, shaking his head. “Day of my wedding and somehow we’ve tuned into the Rose show.”

“Dave!” Jade says, but you are not outraged. It has taken a long time, and you may yet never understand the full extent of your brother’s psyche, but sometimes, you do know when he’s bullshitting.

“I’m sorry brother,” you say simply. “But you know I just can’t abide the thought of you being the center of attention.”

John is quite a bit more upset than you. “Dave! I told you we needed to be supportive!”

“Don’t be a dick Dave,” Jade agree, crossing her arms.

He looks around the kitchen. “Well I guess I’m outvoted,” he shrugs.

“That’s not saying you believe her!” Jade points out.

But it is an answer to the question. One you feel you knew.

“It’s alright,” you say to all but him. “It’s a lot to ask. I understand.” You understand, but you are not alright.

“Can you like…think about it for a bit?” John pleads. He’s looking at you out the corner of your eye, like you might break down if Dave rejects you again. More for your benefit than for conviction.

“Think about what!” Dave throws his hands up in the air. “That we used to be superhero space god children? What are we even talking about here?”

“Dave,” you say, and the force in your voice surprises even you. All three sets of eyes turn to you. “It’s honestly fine. You don’t have to believe me. I’m doing this because I thought you should know, not because I wanted to you to drop everything.”

The only thing you want from him is to not pull away.

Because that’s what you were always afraid of, wasn’t it? Why you asked for separate rooms before he could beat you to the punch, why when he left the country you put him out of your mind entirely. You’ve always been worried that he’d do to you what you’ve always done to him.

He’s staring at you, and for once you feel like you do share one twin-linked mind.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine,” he says, like it means nothing. “So I got a crazy sister, what else is new?”

Jade glares at him on the word *crazy*, but you tap her foot with your toe.

After the moment stretches with no one saying anything, Dave looks around at all of you and says, “I’m not. Trying to be a dick or anything. You just…you guys are treating me like *I’m* the weird one. Usually we at least gang up on John or something.”

“We’re not ganging up on you!” Jade insists. “Rose just spilled-”

“Jade,” you say, just for her. “It’s really okay.” And you believe it. You may not have gotten a home run, but third base isn’t bad.

She lets out a huff, but her shoulders relax. John’s do too after a moment, and you’re left standing in a very silent and very awkward kitchen.

“So,” you say, “since I so rudely interrupted your wedding brother dear, might I make it up to you by lifting you and your groom onto some chairs?”

With no hesitation, he say, “you’re damn right you can.”

John and Jade exchange a look as you follow Dave into the living room, but you don’t offer an explanation. It would take an entire memoir to elucidate your relationship with your brother, and you don’t have that kind of time. Instead, you are simply happy to find yourself surround by friends, and that the prospect of staying on this planet until your natural death no longer feels so horrible.

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