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David Levithan



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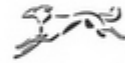
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every day
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For Paige
(May you find happiness every day)

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About the Author

Day 5994

I wake up.

Immediately I have to figure out who I am. It's not just the body—opening my eyes and discovering whether the skin on my arm is light or dark, whether my hair is long or short, whether I'm fat or thin, boy or girl, scarred or smooth. The body is the easiest thing to adjust to, if you're used to waking up in a new one each morning. It's the life, the context of the body, that can be hard to grasp.

Every day I am someone else. I am myself—I know I am myself—but I am also someone else.

It has always been like this.

The information is there. I wake up, open my eyes, understand that it is a new morning, a new place. The biography kicks in, a welcome gift from the not-me part of the mind. Today I am Justin. Somehow I know this—my name is Justin—and at the same time I know that I'm not really Justin, I'm only borrowing his life for a day. I look around and know that this is his room. This is his home. The alarm will go off in seven minutes.

I'm never the same person twice, but I've certainly been this type before. Clothes everywhere. Far more video games than books. Sleeps in his boxers. From the taste of his mouth, a smoker. But not so addicted that he needs one as soon as he wakes up.

“Good morning, Justin,” I say. Checking out his voice. Low. The voice in my head is always different.

Justin doesn't take care of himself. His scalp itches. His eyes don't want to open. He hasn't gotten much sleep.

Already I know I'm not going to like today.

It's hard being in the body of someone you don't like, because you still have to respect it. I've harmed people's lives in the past, and I've found that every time I slip up, it haunts me. So I try to be careful.

From what I can tell, every person I inhabit is the same age as me. I don't hop from being sixteen to being sixty. Right now, it's only sixteen. I don't know how this works. Or why. I stopped trying to figure it out a long time ago. I'm never going to figure it out, any more than a normal person will figure out his or her own existence. After a while, you have to be at peace with the fact that you simply *are*. There is no way to know why. You can have theories, but there will never be proof.

I can access facts, not feelings. I know this is Justin's room, but I have no idea if he likes it or not. Does he want to kill his parents in the next room? Or would he be lost without his mother coming in to make sure he's awake? It's impossible to tell. It's as if that part of me replaces the same part of whatever person I'm in. And while I'm glad to be thinking like myself, a hint every now and then of how the other person thinks would be helpful. We all contain mysteries, especially when seen from the inside.

The alarm goes off. I reach for a shirt and some jeans, but something lets me see that it's the same shirt he wore yesterday. I pick a different shirt. I take the clothes with me to the bathroom, dress after showering. His parents are in the kitchen now. They have no idea that anything is different.

Sixteen years is a lot of time to practice. I don't usually make mistakes. Not anymore.

I read his parents easily: Justin doesn't talk to them much in the morning, so I don't have to talk to them. I have grown accustomed to sensing expectation in others, or the lack of it. I shovel down some cereal, leave the bowl in the sink without washing it, grab Justin's keys and go.

Yesterday I was a girl in a town I'd guess to be two hours away. The day before, I was a boy in a town three hours farther than that. I am already forgetting their details. I have to, or else I will never remember who I really am.

Justin listens to loud and obnoxious music on a loud and obnoxious station where loud and obnoxious DJs make loud and obnoxious jokes as a way of getting through the morning. This is all I need to know about Justin,

really. I access his memory to show me the way to school, which parking space to take, which locker to go to. The combination. The names of the people he knows in the halls.

Sometimes I can't go through these motions. I can't bring myself to go to school, maneuver through the day. I'll say I'm sick, stay in bed and read a few books. But even that gets tiresome after a while, and I find myself up for the challenge of a new school, new friends. For a day.

As I take Justin's books out of his locker, I can feel someone hovering on the periphery. I turn, and the girl standing there is transparent in her emotions—tentative and expectant, nervous and adoring. I don't have to access Justin to know that this is his girlfriend. No one else would have this reaction to him, so unsteady in his presence. She's pretty, but she doesn't see it. She's hiding behind her hair, happy to see me and unhappy to see me at the same time.

Her name is Rhiannon. And for a moment—just the slightest beat—I think that, yes, this is the right name for her. I don't know why. I don't know her. But it feels right.

This is not Justin's thought. It's mine. I try to ignore it. I'm not the person she wants to talk to.

"Hey," I say, keeping it casual.

"Hey," she murmurs back.

She's looking at the floor, at her inked-in Converse. She's drawn cities there, skylines around the soles. Something's happened between her and Justin, and I don't know what it is. It's probably not something that Justin even recognized at the time.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

I see the surprise on her face, even as she tries to cover it. This is not something that Justin normally asks.

And the strange thing is: I want to know the answer. The fact that he wouldn't care makes me want it more.

"Sure," she says, not sounding sure at all.

I find it hard to look at her. I know from experience that beneath every peripheral girl is a central truth. She's hiding hers away, but at the same time she wants me to see it. That is, she wants *Justin* to see it. And it's there, just out of my reach. A sound waiting to be a word.

She is so lost in her sadness that she has no idea how visible it is. I think I understand her—for a moment, I presume to understand her—but then, from within this sadness, she surprises me with a brief flash of determination. Bravery, even.

Shifting her gaze away from the floor, her eyes matching mine, she asks, “Are you mad at me?”

I can’t think of any reason to be mad at her. If anything, I am mad at Justin, for making her feel so diminished. It’s there in her body language. When she is around him, she makes herself small.

“No,” I say. “I’m not mad at you at all.”

I tell her what she wants to hear, but she doesn’t trust it. I feed her the right words, but she suspects they’re threaded with hooks.

This is not my problem; I know that. I am here for one day. I cannot solve anyone’s boyfriend problems. I should not change anyone’s life.

I turn away from her, get my books out, close the locker. She stays in the same spot, anchored by the profound, desperate loneliness of a bad relationship.

“Do you still want to get lunch today?” she asks.

The easy thing would be to say no. I often do this: sense the other person’s life drawing me in, and run in the other direction.

But there’s something about her—the cities on her shoes, the flash of bravery, the unnecessary sadness—that makes me want to know what the word will be when it stops being a sound. I have spent years meeting people without ever knowing them, and on this morning, in this place, with this girl, I feel the faintest pull of wanting to know. And in a moment of either weakness or bravery on my own part, I decide to follow it. I decide to find out more.

“Absolutely,” I say. “Lunch would be great.”

Again, I read her: What I’ve said is too enthusiastic. Justin is never enthusiastic.

“No big deal,” I add.

She’s relieved. Or, at least, as relieved as she’ll allow herself to be, which is a very guarded form of relief. By accessing, I know she and Justin have been together for over a year. That’s as specific as it gets. Justin doesn’t remember the exact date.

She reaches out and takes my hand. I am surprised by how good this feels.

“I’m glad you’re not mad at me,” she says. “I just want everything to be okay.”

I nod. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s this: We all want everything to be okay. We don’t even wish so much for fantastic or marvelous or outstanding. We will happily settle for okay, because most of the time, okay is enough.

The first bell rings.

“I’ll see you later,” I say.

Such a basic promise. But to Rhiannon, it means the world.



At first it was hard to go through each day without making any lasting connections, leaving any life-changing effects. When I was younger, I craved friendship and closeness. I would make bonds without acknowledging how quickly and permanently they would break. I took other people’s lives personally. I felt their friends could be my friends, their parents could be my parents. But after a while, I had to stop. It was too heartbreaking to live with so many separations.

I am a drifter, and as lonely as that can be, it is also remarkably freeing. I will never define myself in terms of anyone else. I will never feel the pressure of peers or the burden of parental expectation. I can view everyone as pieces of a whole, and focus on the whole, not the pieces. I have learned how to observe, far better than most people observe. I am not blinded by the past or motivated by the future. I focus on the present, because that is where I am destined to live.

I learn. Sometimes I am taught something I have already been taught in dozens of other classrooms. Sometimes I am taught something completely new. I have to access the body, access the mind and see what information it’s retained. And when I do, I learn. Knowledge is the only thing I take with me when I go.

I know so many things that Justin doesn’t know, that he will never know. I sit there in his math class, open his notebook, and write down phrases he has never heard. Shakespeare and Kerouac and Dickinson. Tomorrow, or

some day after tomorrow, or never, he will see these words in his own handwriting and he won't have any idea where they came from, or even what they are.

That is as much interference as I allow myself.

Everything else must be done cleanly.

Rhiannon stays with me. Her details. Flickers from Justin's memories. Small things, like the way her hair falls, the way she bites her fingernails, the determination and resignation in her voice. Random things. I see her dancing with Justin's grandfather, because he's said he wants a dance with a pretty girl. I see her covering her eyes during a scary movie, peering between her fingers, enjoying her fright. These are the good memories. I don't look at any others.

I only see her once in the morning, a brief passing in the halls between first and second period. I find myself smiling when she comes near, and she smiles back. It's as simple as that. Simple and complicated, as most true things are. I find myself looking for her after second period, and then again after third and fourth. I don't even feel in control of this. I want to see her. Simple. Complicated.

By the time we get to lunch, I am exhausted. Justin's body is worn down from too little sleep and I, inside of it, am worn down from restlessness and too much thought.

I wait for her at Justin's locker. The first bell rings. The second bell rings. No Rhiannon. Maybe I was supposed to meet her somewhere else. Maybe Justin's forgotten where they always meet.

If that's the case, she's used to Justin forgetting. She finds me right when I'm about to give up. The halls are nearly empty, the cattle call has passed. She comes closer than she did before.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," she says.

She is looking to me. Justin is the one who makes the first move. Justin is the one who figures things out. Justin is the one who says what they're going to do.

It depresses me.

I have seen this too many times before. The unwarranted devotion. Putting up with the fear of being with the wrong person because you can't deal with the fear of being alone. The hope tinged with doubt, and the doubt tinged with hope. Every time I see these feelings in someone else's face, it weighs me down. And there's something in Rhiannon's face that's more than just the disappointments. There is a gentleness there. A gentleness that Justin will never, ever appreciate. I see it right away, but nobody else does.

I take all my books and put them in the locker. I walk over to her and put my hand lightly on her arm.

I have no idea what I'm doing. I only know that I'm doing it.

"Let's go somewhere," I say. "Where do you want to go?"

I am close enough now to see that her eyes are blue. I am close enough now to see that nobody ever gets close enough to see how blue her eyes are.

"I don't know," she replies.

I take her hand.

"Come on," I tell her.

This is no longer restlessness—it's recklessness. At first we're walking hand in hand. Then we're running hand in hand. That giddy rush of keeping up with one another, of zooming through the school, reducing everything that's not us into an inconsequential blur. We are laughing, we are playful. We leave her books in her locker and move out of the building, into the air, the real air, the sunshine and the trees and the less burdensome world. I am breaking the rules as I leave the school. I am breaking the rules as we get into Justin's car. I am breaking the rules as I turn the key in the ignition.

"Where do you want to go?" I ask again. "Tell me, truly, where you'd love to go."

I don't initially realize how much hinges on her answer. If she says, *Let's go to the mall*, I will disconnect. If she says, *Take me back to your house*, I will disconnect. If she says, *Actually, I don't want to miss sixth period*, I will disconnect. And I should disconnect. I should not be doing this.

But she says, "I want to go to the ocean. I want you to take me to the ocean."

And I feel myself connecting.

It takes us an hour to get there. It's late September in Maryland. The leaves haven't begun to change, but you can tell they're starting to think about it. The greens are muted, faded. Color is right around the corner.

I give Rhiannon control of the radio. She's surprised by this, but I don't care. I've had enough of the loud and the obnoxious, and I sense that she's had enough of it, too. She brings melody to the car. A song comes on that I know, and I sing along.

And if I only could, I'd make a deal with God...

Now Rhiannon goes from surprised to suspicious. Justin never sings along.

"What's gotten into you?" she asks.

"Music," I tell her.

"Ha."

"No, really."

She looks at me for a long time. Then smiles.

"In that case," she says, flipping the dial to find the next song.

Soon we are singing at the top of our lungs. A pop song that's as substantial as a balloon, but lifts us in the same way when we sing it.

It's as if time itself relaxes around us. She stops thinking about how unusual it is. She lets herself be a part of it.

I want to give her a good day. Just one good day. I have wandered for so long without any sense of purpose, and now this ephemeral purpose has been given to me—it feels like it has been given to me. I only have a day to give—so why can't it be a good one? Why can't it be a shared one? Why can't I take the music of the moment and see how long it can last? The rules are erasable. I can take this. I can give this.

When the song is over, she rolls down her window and trails her hand in the air, introducing a new music into the car. I roll down all the other windows and drive faster, so the wind takes over, blows our hair all around, makes it seem like the car has disappeared and we are the velocity, we are the speed. Then another good song comes on and I enclose us again, this time taking her hand. I drive like that for miles, and ask her questions. Like how her parents are doing. What it's like now that her sister's off at college. If she thinks school is different at all this year.

It's hard for her. Every single answer starts with the phrase *I don't know*. But most of the time she does know, if I give her the time and the space in

which to answer. Her mother means well; her father less so. Her sister isn't calling home, but Rhiannon can understand that. School is school—she wants it to be over, but she's afraid of it being over, because then she'll have to figure out what comes next.

She asks me what I think, and I tell her, “Honestly, I’m just trying to live day to day.”

It isn't enough, but it's something. We watch the trees, the sky, the signs, the road. We sense each other. The world, right now, is only us. We continue to sing along. And we sing with the same abandon, not worrying too much if our voices hit the right notes or the right words. We look at each other while we're singing; these aren't two solos, this is a duet that isn't taking itself at all seriously. It is its own form of conversation—you can learn a lot about people from the stories they tell, but you can also know them from the way they sing along, whether they like the windows up or down, if they live by the map or by the world, if they feel the pull of the ocean.

She tells me where to drive. Off the highway. The empty back roads. This isn't summer; this isn't a weekend. It's the middle of a Monday, and nobody but us is going to the beach.

“I should be in English class,” Rhiannon says.

“I should be in bio,” I say, accessing Justin's schedule.

We keep going. When I first saw her, she seemed to be balancing on edges and points. Now the ground is more even, welcoming.

I know this is dangerous. Justin is not good to her. I recognize that. If I access the bad memories, I see tears, fights, and remnants of passable togetherness. She is always there for him, and he must like that. His friends like her, and he must like that, too. But that's not the same as love. She has been hanging on to the hope of him for so long that she doesn't realize there isn't anything left to hope for. They don't have silences together; they have noise. Mostly his. If I tried, I could go deep into their arguments. I could track down whatever shards he's collected from all the times he's destroyed her. If I were really Justin, I would find something wrong with her. Right now. Tell her. Yell. Bring her down. Put her in her place.

But I can't. I'm not Justin. Even if she doesn't know it.

“Let's just enjoy ourselves,” I say.

“Okay,” she replies. “I like that. I spend so much time thinking about running away—it's nice to actually do it. For a day. It's good to be on the

other side of the window. I don't do this enough."

There are so many things inside of her that I want to know. And at the same time, with every word we speak, I feel there may be something inside of her that I already know. When I get there, we will recognize each other. We will have that.

I park the car and we head to the ocean. We take off our shoes and leave them under our seats. When we get to the sand, I lean over to roll up my jeans. While I do, Rhiannon runs ahead. When I look back up, she is spinning around the beach, kicking up sand, calling my name. Everything, at that moment, is lightness. She is so joyful, I can't help but stop for a second and watch. Witness. Tell myself to remember.

"C'mon!" she cries. "Get over here!"

I'm not who you think I am, I want to tell her. But there's no way. Of course there's no way.

We have the beach to ourselves, the ocean to ourselves. I have her to myself. She has me to herself.

There is a part of childhood that is childish, and a part that is sacred. Suddenly we are touching the sacred part—running to the shoreline, feeling the first cold burst of water on our ankles, reaching into the tide to catch at shells before they ebb away from our fingers. We have returned to a world that is capable of glistening, and we are wading deeper within it. We stretch our arms wide, as if we are embracing the wind. She splashes me mischievously and I mount a counterattack. Our pants, our shirts get wet, but we don't care.

She asks me to help her build a sand castle, and as I do, she tells me about how she and her sister would never work on sand castles together—it was always a competition, with her sister going for the highest possible mountains while Rhiannon paid attention to detail, wanting each castle to be the dollhouse she was never allowed to have. I see echoes of this detail now as she makes turrets bloom from her cupped hands. I myself have no memories of sand castles, but there must be some sense memory attached, because I feel I know how to do this, how to shape this.

When we are done, we walk back down to the water to wash off our hands. I look back and see the way our footsteps intermingle to form a

single path.

“What is it?” she asks, seeing me glance backward, seeing something in my expression.

How can I explain this? The only way I know is to say “Thank you.”

She looks at me as if she’s never heard the phrase before.

“For what?” she asks.

“For this,” I say. “For all of it.”

This escape. The water. The waves. Her. It feels like we’ve stepped outside of time. Even though there is no such place.

There’s still a part of her that’s waiting for the twist, the moment when all of this pleasure will jackknife into pain.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “It’s okay to be happy.”

The tears come to her eyes. I take her in my arms. It’s the wrong thing to do. But it’s the right thing to do. I have to listen to my own words. Happiness is so rarely a part of my vocabulary, because for me it’s so fleeting.

“I’m happy,” she says. “Really, I am.”

Justin would be laughing at her. Justin would be pushing her down into the sand, to do whatever he wanted to do. Justin would never have come here.

I am tired of not feeling. I am tired of not connecting. I want to be here with her. I want to be the one who lives up to her hopes, if only for the time I’m given.

The ocean makes its music; the wind does its dance. We hold on. At first we hold on to one another, but then it starts to feel like we are holding on to something even bigger than that. Greater.

“What’s happening?” Rhiannon asks.

“Shhh,” I say. “Don’t question it.”

She kisses me. I have not kissed anyone in years. I have not allowed myself to kiss anyone for years. Her lips are soft as flower petals, but with an intensity behind them. I take it slow, let each moment pour into the next. Feel her skin, her breath. Taste the condensation of our contact, linger in the heat of it. Her eyes are closed and mine are open. I want to remember this as more than a single sensation. I want to remember this whole.

We do nothing more than kiss. We do nothing less than kiss. At times, she moves to take it further, but I don’t need that. I trace her shoulders as she

traces my back. I kiss her neck. She kisses beneath my ear. The times we stop, we smile at each other. Giddy disbelief, giddy belief. She should be in English class. I should be in bio. We weren't supposed to come anywhere near the ocean today. We have defied the day as it was set out for us.

We walk hand in hand down the beach as the sun dips in the sky. I am not thinking about the past. I am not thinking about the future. I am full of such gratitude for the sun, the water, the way my feet sink into the sand, the way my hand feels holding hers.

"We should do this every Monday," she says. "And Tuesday. And Wednesday. And Thursday. And Friday."

"We'd only get tired of it," I tell her. "It's best to have it just once."

"Never again?" She doesn't like the sound of that.

"Well, never say never."

"I'd never say never," she tells me.

There are a few more people on the beach now, mostly older men and women taking an afternoon walk. They nod to us as we pass, and sometimes they say hello. We nod back, return their hellos. Nobody questions why we're here. Nobody questions anything. We're just a part of the moment, like everything else.

The sun falls farther. The temperature drops alongside it. Rhiannon shivers, so I stop holding her hand and put my arm around her. She suggests we go back to the car and get the "make-out blanket" from the trunk. We find it there, buried under empty beer bottles, twisted jumper cables, and other guy crap. I wonder how often Rhiannon and Justin have used the make-out blanket for that purpose, but I don't try to access the memories. Instead, I bring the blanket back out onto the beach and put it down for both of us. I lie down and face the sky, and Rhiannon lies down next to me and does the same. We stare at the clouds, breathing distance from one another, taking it all in.

"This has to be one of the best days ever," Rhiannon says.

Without turning my head, I find her hand with my hand.

"Tell me about some of the other days like this," I ask.

"I don't know...."

"Just one. The first one that comes to mind."

Rhiannon thinks about it for a second. Then she shakes her head. "It's stupid."

“Tell me.”

She turns to me and moves her hand to my chest. Makes lazy circles there. “For some reason, the first thing that comes to mind is this mother-daughter fashion show. Do you promise you won’t laugh?”

I promise.

She studies me. Makes sure I’m sincere. Continues.

“It was in fourth grade or something. Renwick’s was doing a fund-raiser for hurricane victims, and they asked for volunteers from our class. I didn’t ask my mother or anything—I just signed up. And when I brought the information home—well, you know how my mom is. She was terrified. It’s hard enough to get her out to the supermarket. But a fashion show? In front of strangers? I might as well have asked her to pose for *Playboy*. God, now there’s a scary thought.”

Her hand is now resting on my chest. She’s looking off to the sky.

“But here’s the thing: she didn’t say no. I guess it’s only now that I realize what I put her through. She didn’t make me go to the teacher and take it back. No, when the day came, we drove over to Renwick’s and went where they told us to go. I had thought they would put us in matching outfits, but it wasn’t like that. Instead, they basically told us we could wear whatever we wanted from the store. So there we were, trying all these things on. I went for the gowns, of course—I was so much more of a girl then. I ended up with this light blue dress—ruffles all over the place. I thought it was so sophisticated.”

“I’m sure it was classy,” I say.

She hits me. “Shut up. Let me tell my story.”

I hold her hand on my chest. Lean over and kiss her quickly.

“Go ahead,” I say. I am loving this. I never have people tell me their stories. I usually have to figure them out myself. Because I know that if people tell me stories, they will expect them to be remembered. And I cannot guarantee that. There is no way to know if the stories stay after I’m gone. And how devastating would it be to confide in someone and have the confidence disappear? I don’t want to be responsible for that.

But with Rhiannon I can’t resist.

She continues. “So I had my wannabe prom dress. And then it was Mom’s turn. She surprised me, because she went for the dresses, too. I’d

never really seen her all dressed up before. And I think that was the most amazing thing to me: It wasn't me who was Cinderella. It was her.

"After we picked out our clothes, they put makeup on us and everything. I thought Mom was going to flip, but she was actually enjoying it. They didn't really do much with her—just a little more color. And that was all it took. She was pretty. I know it's hard to believe, knowing her now. But that day, she was like a movie star. All the other moms were complimenting her. And when it was time for the actual show, we paraded out there and people applauded. Mom and I were both smiling, and it was real, you know?"

"We didn't get to keep the dresses or anything. But I remember on the ride home, Mom kept saying how great I was. When we got back to our house, Dad looked at us like we were aliens, but the cool thing is, he decided to play along. Instead of getting all weird, he kept calling us his supermodels, and asked us to do the show for him in our living room, which we did. We were laughing so much. And that was it. The day ended. I'm not sure Mom's worn makeup since. And it's not like I turned out to be a supermodel. But that day reminds me of this one. Because it was a break from everything, wasn't it?"

"It sounds like it," I tell her.

"I can't believe I just told you that."

"Why?"

"Because. I don't know. It just sounds so silly."

"No, it sounds like a good day."

"How about you?" she asks.

"I was never in a mother-daughter fashion show," I joke. Even though, as a matter of fact, I've been in a few.

She hits me lightly on the shoulder. "No. Tell me about another day like this one."

I access Justin and find out he moved to town when he was twelve. So anything before that is fair game, because Rhiannon won't have been there. I could try to find one of Justin's memories to share, but I don't want to do that. I want to give Rhiannon something of my own.

"There was this one day when I was eleven." I try to remember the name of the boy whose body I was in, but it's lost to me. "I was playing hide-and-seek with my friends. I mean, the brutal, tackle kind of hide-and-seek. We were in the woods, and for some reason I decided that what I had to do was

climb a tree. I don't think I'd ever climbed a tree before. But I found one with some low branches and just started moving. Up and up. It was as natural as walking. In my memory, that tree was hundreds of feet tall. Thousands. At some point, I crossed the tree line. I was still climbing, but there weren't any other trees around. I was all by myself, clinging to the trunk of this tree, a long way from the ground."

I can see shimmers of it now. The height. The town below me.

"It was magical," I say. "There's no other word to describe it. I could hear my friends yelling as they were caught, as the game played out. But I was in a completely different place. I was seeing the world from above, which is an extraordinary thing when it happens for the first time. I'd never flown in a plane. I'm not even sure I'd been in a tall building. So there I was, hovering above everything I knew. I had made it somewhere special, and I'd gotten there all on my own. Nobody had given it to me. Nobody had told me to do it. I'd climbed and climbed and climbed, and this was my reward. To watch over the world, and to be alone with myself. That, I found, was what I needed."

Rhiannon leans into me. "That's amazing," she whispers.

"Yeah, it was."

"And it was in Minnesota?"

In truth, it was in North Carolina. But I access Justin and find that, yes, for him it would've been Minnesota. So I nod.

"You want to know another day like this one?" Rhiannon asks, curling closer.

I adjust my arm, make us both comfortable. "Sure."

"Our second date."

But this is only our first, I think. Ridiculously.

"Really?" I ask.

"Remember?"

I check to see if Justin remembers their second date. He doesn't.

"Dack's party?" she prompts.

Still nothing.

"Yeah ...," I hedge.

"I don't know—maybe it doesn't count as a date. But it was the second time we hooked up. And, I don't know, you were just so ... sweet about it. Don't get mad, alright?"

I wonder where this is going.

“I promise, nothing could make me mad right now,” I tell her. I even cross my heart to prove it.

She smiles. “Okay. Well, lately—it’s like you’re always in a rush. Like, we have sex but we’re not really ... intimate. And I don’t mind. I mean, it’s fun. But every now and then, it’s good to have it be like this. And at Dack’s party—it was like this. Like you had all the time in the world, and you wanted us to have it together. I loved that. It was back when you were really looking at me. It was like—well, it was like you’d climbed up that tree and found me there at the top. And we had that together. Even though we were in someone’s backyard. At one point—do you remember?—you made me move over a little so I’d be in the moonlight. ‘It makes your skin glow,’ you said. And I felt like that. Glowing. Because you were watching me, along with the moon.”

Does she realize that right now she’s lit by the warm orange spreading from the horizon, as not-quite-day becomes not-quite-night? I lean over and become that shadow. I kiss her once, then we drift into each other, close our eyes, drift into sleep. And as we drift into sleep, I feel something I’ve never felt before. A closeness that isn’t merely physical. A connection that defies the fact that we’ve only just met. A sensation that can only come from the most euphoric of feelings: belonging.

What is it about the moment you fall in love? How can such a small measure of time contain such enormity? I suddenly realize why people believe in *déjà vu*, why people believe they’ve lived past lives, because there is no way the years I’ve spent on this earth could possibly encapsulate what I’m feeling. The moment you fall in love feels like it has centuries behind it, generations—all of them rearranging themselves so that this precise, remarkable intersection could happen. In your heart, in your bones, no matter how silly you know it is, you feel that everything has been leading to this, all the secret arrows were pointing here, the universe and time itself crafted this long ago, and you are just now realizing it, you are just now arriving at the place you were always meant to be.

We wake an hour later to the sound of her phone.

I keep my eyes closed. Hear her groan. Hear her tell her mother she'll be home soon.

The water has gone deep black and the sky has gone ink blue. The chill in the air presses harder against us as we pick up the blanket, provide a new set of footprints.

She navigates, I drive. She talks, I listen. We sing some more. Then she leans into my shoulder and I let her stay there and sleep for a little longer, dream for a little longer.

I am trying not to think of what will happen next.

I am trying not to think of endings.

I never get to see people while they're asleep. Not like this. She is the opposite of when I first met her. Her vulnerability is open, but she's safe within it. I watch the rise and fall of her, the stir and rest of her. I only wake her when I need her to tell me where to go.

The last ten minutes, she talks about what we're going to do tomorrow. I find it hard to respond.

"Even if we can't do this, I'll see you at lunch?" she asks.

I nod.

"And maybe we can do something after school?"

"I think so. I mean, I'm not sure what else is going on. My mind isn't really there right now."

This makes sense to her. "Fair enough. Tomorrow is tomorrow. Let's end today on a nice note."

Once we get to town, I can access the directions to her house without having to ask her. But I want to get lost anyway. To prolong this. To escape this.

"Here we are," Rhiannon says as we approach her driveway.

I pull the car to a stop. I unlock the doors.

She leans over and kisses me. My senses are alive with the taste of her, the smell of her, the feel of her, the sound of her breathing, the sight of her as she pulls her body away from mine.

"That's the nice note," she says. And before I can say anything else, she's out the door and gone.

I don't get a chance to say goodbye.

I guess, correctly, that Justin's parents are used to him being out of touch and missing dinner. They try to yell at him, but you can tell that everyone's going through the motions, and when Justin storms off to his room, it's just the latest rerun of an old show.

I should be doing Justin's homework—I'm always pretty conscientious about that kind of thing, if I'm able to do it—but my mind keeps drifting to Rhiannon. Imagining her at home. Imagining her floating from the grace of the day. Imagining her believing that things are different, that Justin has somehow changed.

I shouldn't have done it. I know I shouldn't have done it. Even if it felt like the universe was telling me to do it.

I agonize over it for hours. I can't take it back. I can't make it go away.

I fell in love once, or at least until today I thought I had. His name was Brennan, and it felt so real, even if it was mostly words. Intense, heartfelt words. I stupidly let myself think of a possible future with him. But there was no future. I tried to navigate it, but I couldn't.

That was easy compared to this. It's one thing to fall in love. It's another to feel someone else falling in love with you, and to feel a responsibility toward that love.

There is no way for me to stay in this body. If I don't go to sleep, the shift will happen anyway. I used to think that if I stayed up all night, I'd get to remain where I was. But instead, I was ripped from the body I was in. And the ripping felt exactly like what you would imagine being ripped from a body would feel like, with every single nerve experiencing the pain of the break, and then the pain of being fused into someone new. From then on, I went to sleep every night. There was no use fighting it.

I realize I have to call her. Her number's right there in his phone. I can't let her think tomorrow is going to be like today.

"Hey!" she answers.

"Hey," I say.

"Thank you again for today."

"Yeah."

I don't want to do this. I don't want to ruin it. But I have to, don't I?

I continue, "But about today?"

"Are you going to tell me that we can't cut class every day? That's not like you."

Not like me.

"Yeah," I say, "but, you know, I don't want you to think every day is going to be like today. Because they're not going to be, alright? They can't be."

There's a silence. She knows something's wrong.

"I know that," she says carefully. "But maybe things can still be better. I know they can be."

"I don't know," I tell her. "That's all I wanted to say. I don't know. Today was something, but it's not, like, everything."

"I know that."

"Okay."

"Okay."

I sigh.

There's always a chance that, in some way, I will have brushed off on Justin. There's always a chance that his life will in fact change—that he will change. But I have no way of knowing. It's rare that I get to see a body after I've left it. And even then, it's usually months or years later. If I recognize it at all.

I want Justin to be better to her. But I can't have her expecting it.

"That's all," I tell her. It feels like a Justin thing to say.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, you will."

"Thanks again for today. No matter what trouble we get into tomorrow for it, it was worth it."

"Yeah."

"I love you," she says.

And I want to say it. I want to say *I love you, too*. Right now, right at this moment, every part of me would mean it. But that will only last for a couple more hours.

"Sleep well," I tell her. Then I hang up.

There's a notebook on his desk.

Remember that you love Rhiannon, I write in his handwriting.

I doubt he'll remember writing it.

I go onto his computer. I open up my own email account, then type out her name, her phone number, her email address, as well as Justin's email and password. I write about the day. And I send it to myself.

As soon as I'm through, I clear Justin's history.

This is hard for me.

I have gotten so used to what I am, and how my life works.

I never want to stay. I'm always ready to leave.

But not tonight.

Tonight I'm haunted by the fact that tomorrow he'll be here and I won't be.

I want to stay.

I pray to stay.

I close my eyes and wish to stay.