

FINN

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Autumn is a terror to sleep beside. She talks in her sleep, steals the covers, kicks, uses you as a pillow. The stories I could tell if I had anyone to tell them too. Autumn is uncharacteristically embarrassed about her nocturnal chaos though, and it's one of her eccentricities for which she will not tolerate a bit of teasing. Our mothers have their own tales of Autumn's Nighttime Calamities, and the look that she gives them has been enough to stop me from sharing my childhood memories of her restless sleep.

She hasn't changed. This past summer, she dozed off watching me playing a video game. I had finally, finally, made a specific timed jump when she flung her arm on to my lap, causing my guy to fall to his death. I gently lifted her hand off me and scooted a few inches away, but not too far. I didn't tell her about it when she woke up; she would say something about going back home when she starts to feel tired, and I'd rather give away all my games than lose a minute of whatever has been happening between us this summer.

I made sure to insert myself between Autumn and Jack last night for this very reason. It was clear that we were crashing at my house, and I felt it was my duty to be the one to take the blows.

I have to admit: I'd hoped for something like this.

It was her fingers twitching against my ribs that woke me.

Aunt Clara is right. Autumn snores now. She didn't when we were children. I'd believed Autumn when, again and again, she insisted that her mother was only joking.

But here we are, in this blanket tent I made for her, and her head is under the crook of my arm. She's on her side, curled in a tight ball, snoring, though not loudly. Her breath comes in hot short puffs.

Last night, we were both laying on our backs. Jack had already fallen asleep. Autumn was drifting, but I hadn't wanted to give her up yet, so I kept her talking until she said, "Hush, Finny, I need to focus on sweeping."

I'd turned my face and saw her closed eyes, her gentle breathing.

"You're sleeping?"

She frowned, gently. "No? Can't you see me over here with the broom? It's so messy in here."

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Oh, you know...in the room... in between...."

"Between what?"

"Huh?"

"The room in between what, Autumn?"

"Oh...pretend and reality. Help me. It's so messy."

"Why is it so messy?" I asked, but she had not answered me. I'd gone to sleep much like I am now, on my back, staring at the quilt above us. I remember stretching my arm above my head, vaguely aware of the way she was twitching and mumbling a few inches from me, presumably cleaning the messy room between this world and the next.

Later, I woke up when she smacked my face. I pushed her hand away and turned my head toward her. She was still on her side, a bit closer but not touching me, the covers bunched

in her other fist, the hand that had clocked me resting between us. I made myself look away and close my eyes.

This is heaven; her forehead pressed into me, her head under my arm and my hand on her shoulder. She pressed against me in the night and my arm moved by instinct. Even if I was half asleep, I would never have done it knowingly. I wouldn't know if she was okay with it; I don't know it now either, but I am unable to move.

My penis, based on very minimal evidence, has decided that today is going to be the greatest day of both of our lives. I understand the enthusiasm, but it's sadly, vastly overestimating the situation. If I move, Autumn is going to wake up.

This is what I get for putting myself in this position. Again.

Not that I've been in this *exact* position with Autumn, but like I said; the tales I could tell.

The toilet flushes, making me realize that I hadn't wondered where my other best friend had gone off to.

I am not going to be able to keep up the brave face with Jack anymore. I don't think he'll let me.

After we went to see that silly horror movie that made Autumn scream three times, each of them— Jack and Autumn— said they had a fun time. They said they could understand why I liked it so much, sure, maybe we could do it again.

Autumn had meant it. I could tell.

It wasn't that Jack didn't mean it, but I could tell there was a lot that he wasn't saying. I'd hoped last night would help. I wanted Jack to see that Autumn isn't a poseur who thinks she's a princess, which is how she sounds when Alexis or Taylor talk about her.

It's more like Autumn is a real princess, but from an alien planet. It makes her the most confident and insecure person I've ever known.

Except for Sylvie, of course.

It sounds like Jack wretches and spits. The toilet flushes again, and then the sink runs. Remembering Sylvie has helped my predicament, though adds to my already bloated guilt, further robbing my penis of the delusion that a miracle is about to occur. I hear Jack get a glass of water in the kitchen. I try to remember what Sylvie said about her flight itinerary.

She must be in the air now. Over the channel? I can't say. I picture her in her seat, by the aisle, like she told me she prefers, Hfrests on her tray table, and her golden hair falls back as she tilts her head to listen.

I hope this trip did what the therapist thought it would.

At first, I was doubtful; Sylvie in Europe on her own with no one to rein her in? Sure, she'd been to Europe three times, is fluent in French, and has a cell phone. But I still couldn't believe that her therapist insisted she not bring a single friend on the big gap year trip he'd prescribed.

I see now that Dr. Giles had been onto something. Sylvie knows how to take care of herself when she's not trying to impress other people. Sylvie gets drunk to impress people. If no one had dared her first, none of Sylvie's legendary stunts would have been pulled.

On her own, with her backpack and her maps, hostel listings and train schedules, Sylvie trekked across that continent. She got herself in a situation once, in Amsterdam, when she hadn't realized those guys were trying to get with her, but she got herself safe, and it was all over by the time she called me.

I hope Sylvie can see how capable she is, how smart and resilient. I hope she can feel good about herself for her own reasons, not for other people to notice.

Sylvie has so much potential; she could be anything she wants to be, if she stops caring what the wrong people think about her.

I hope I'm not going to ruin whatever progress this summer gave her.

Jack enters the room. I close my eyes. Though the blankets will provide cover, my body remains somewhat optimistic. I should move, wake Autumn, and pretend my arm was never around her, but I can't bear it yet. I hear the tent blankets flutter, then Jack sighs. He says the same thing he told me the night I trusted Sylvie when she said that she could stay sober for us and I had to drunkenly call him for a ride.

"We both should have expected this, you know," Jack mumbles.

He closes the tent. It sounds like he goes to the couch, but I'm paying less attention to him now.

Autumn won't sleep for much longer, She twitches occasionally, moving her face in reaction to things I cannot see. She makes a soft noise, the sort of noise that I wish she'd make while awake and consenting, and with that thought, I finally have the will to lift my arm and shift away from her. She frowns at the loss of heat, and I pause to rest on my side, waiting for her to stir. She whimpers, and curls into a tighter ball.

I allow myself the brief luxury of gazing at her face.

It is cosmically unfair how beautiful Autumn is, I am at such a disadvantage based on basic biology alone. Her goofy, brilliant brain is enough to admire; why must she have that face, along with everything else?

I never stood a chance.

Even before she grew breasts.

I need to stop this train of thought.

Might as well get this over with then.

Jack is typing on his phone, sitting on the couch. He doesn't speak until I sit down.

"Finn, man—"

"I know," I say.

He flips his phone closed. "No. You're in way over your head. You have no idea."

"I have an idea."

He stares at me.

"I know what I'm doing," I try.

"What *are* you doing? And what about *her*?" Jack glances at the tent. Even though we were talking low, he starts to whisper. "She would have to be the stupidest person on earth to not know you're bonkers in love with her."

"She's not stupid. She just doesn't know how much I—" I can't bear to say the word—"care about her. She thinks it's an old crush."

I get that stare from him again, but I don't know what he wants me to say. Autumn doesn't flirt with me. She doesn't make suggestive jokes or give me any false reason to hope. Not when she's awake.

I'm the problem. I get confused when she looks at me with the affection that's only natural given our history.

"Finn," Jack says, "Look at it this way. I'm not like you. I wasn't raised in a house where people talked about feelings and stuff. This is hard for me, and I'm doing it anyway. Again."

Again.

It's true.

"You're a good friend," I say, "and thanks. But she needs me. She's in a weird place with her other friends—"

"She was laughing all night," Jack says, like he's trying to nail each word into my head.

"She was drunk. She's—" I realize what I'm about to say, but it's too late— "like Sylvie in that way. She's disturbingly good at hiding how much pain she's in."

Jack groans and rubs his face. He says something I don't quite hear, but it might end with the word "type." Autumn makes a noise in the tent and we both hold our breaths and listen. Silence.

"Since you brought up Sylvie," he whispers, "'Yeah, I complain about her, but she's my friend too and I—"

"I know," I say, "I'm going—"

Autumn makes a noise.

"She's about to wake up," I tell him.

Jack sighs. He's right, and he knows that I know that he's right.

Jack and I can both see what happens next. Autumn and I will go off to Springfield. We'll both make friends, probably mutual this time; but eventually, Autumn is going to meet someone she likes, someone who has whatever it is that made her want to be with Jamie. And I am going to be more than devastated. I will be obliterated. Jack and I are close enough that it kinda makes this his problem too. But I can't give up what I have with Autumn, and when she does meet that guy, I'm going to make sure he's supporting her, not treating her like a troublesome but valuable acquisition. Or a sidekick. Or a punchline.

"Fin-nah" Jack whines. He snaps his fingers in front of my face. "Hello!"

"Sorry, I..."

"Zoned out the way she does? You have been so, so...like last week!" Jack says, "How could you have missed that game?"

"Autumn and I were at the mall."

"You never miss the Strikers on TV," Jack says.

And it's true. I was a little annoyed with myself when I remembered that the game was on. Saint Louis barely has a league and I'm on a mission to support it. But Autumn was talking about how the mall was a neglected garden. Apparently, the area around the movie theatre is a sunny spot that gets the best rainfall. I'd decided it wouldn't be my personal responsibility if Saint Louis lost their soccer league.

My shrug has not satisfied Jack. He waits for me to explain myself.

"I'm going to break up with Sylvie when she gets home tomorrow."

"I figured," Jack says. Simple words, but his tone has the recrimination I deserve. "Then what?"

“Oh God!” Autumn moans, and I’m not surprised when she dashes out of her cave.

“Autumn,” I say involuntarily, as she passes me. She heads to the half-bath near the kitchen, the one recently vacated by Jack. I warned her that she would be miserable if she had that fourth drink. It was her choice, but I still feel responsible. Plus, Jack made it, so unlike the previous three that I’d made her, it had probably contained more than one shot of alcohol. I am about to comment on Jack’s bartending skills when I see his face and remember that I do not have the high ground.

“I’m going to check on her,” I say.

“I figured,” Jack says again. “Then what?”

“Then we’ll hang out.”

I get off the couch. We both know I’m avoiding the real question: What’s going to happen now that I’m in love with Autumn Davis with no hope of reciprocation?

“Go away” Autumn says to me. She sounds like she’s dying.

“You okay?” I know what she’s going to say.

“Yes. Go away.” Autumn hates being seen as vulnerable. She inherited that from her mother, despite all her complaining about her mother’s veneer of suburban perfection.

“Okay.” I have the urge to wait outside the door anyway, even though I know she wants privacy. I take a breath as I turn, trying to ignore the sounds on the other side of the door.

Sometimes it feels like Autumn brings out the worst in me. She makes me feel like the kind of guys I hate, the jocks who say things in the locker room that stun me. I tried, especially after I was an upper classman, to intervene in those conversation, but often I was too floored by what I’d heard to interrupt. A few times over the years though, when something was said specifically, vulgarly, about Autumn, my mouth spoke before the rest of me knew what was happening.

I was able to speak up quickly and berate them for their disgusting observations, because I agreed with them. I wanted what they wanted or had seen the sight they recalled. Their words were a grotesque reflection of my own feelings.

Then, after the very last track meet, a freshman came up to me and said, “You’ve let Patrick say worse stuff about girls,” laying bare my hypocrisy.

I sneered at that poor kid. “Then I should have had higher standards before today. You can take over next year.” I slung my bag over my shoulder and stomped off. I can’t remember his name, but he’s probably going to remember Finn, the asshole jock, for a while.

In high school, Autumn only had eyes for Jamie. She didn't want those jerks thinking about her at all, and she doesn't want me thinking about her like that, then or now. She made that clear years ago. I get why she needed to make it clear. It's for the best that she did. But someday if we talk about it, I will tell her that she should have at least told me that she didn't feel the same way. She didn't have to leave me the way that she did.

That's probably what my mother meant in the driveway before she and Aunt Clara left on their girls' trip. When she hugged me goodbye yesterday, she whispered, "For fucks sake, kiddo. Talk to her."

It's been hanging between Autumn and I, this mutual incomplete knowledge. She knows I wish she felt differently about me. She needs to know it's much worse than she thinks, but I'm fine. We can be friends. I'm not going to wig out and try to prove anything to her again.

But my mother is wrong about the timing. This is not the weekend for that conversation. I need to get through today and tomorrow. After that maybe. Or maybe it should wait until Christmas, I don't know.

I realize that, once again, I have forgotten about my other best friend. I came to the kitchen to make toast, out of habit, even though Autumn has never been hungover at my house before.

Jack appears in the doorway. He watches me. "Are you going to put cinnamon and sugar on it too?"

"That's not how Autumn likes her toast, asshole," I say. There I go again, lashing out instead of dealing with my fucking feelings like a man. "Do you want some too?" I try to sound more like myself.

“Sure.” He sits and yawns. Jack has decided to let me off the hook for today. “Did she like *Goodfellas*?” he asks.

I laugh. “We’d barely started it when you fell asleep. And you talked about it enough last night that she basically doesn’t need to see it now.”

“There is no way that can be true,” Jack says., “That film is like a carefully constructed house of cards—” he continues, but I’m not listening.

The door has closed. She’s back.

Behind me, I can hear her cross the kitchen and sit at the table.

“Feeling better?” Jack asks.

“More or less,” Autumn says. Her eyes are closed when I turn around, her chin on her knee. I hand Jack the first piece of toast and turn back to make more.

“So, if you go back to the original source material, *Wise Guys*,” Jack begins. He talks about this movie all the time. I don’t have to listen to know what he’s saying. I can agree or say the right thing while focusing on her.

I give Autumn her toast, buttered the way she likes it, and she gives me a weak, grateful smile that melts me. I’m not sure what’s keeping me upright.

Jack is only trying to save me from myself with this Scorsese monologue, and I’m being a terrible friend.

Her breathing is focused and slow. She chews, swallows, and takes a deep breath. Chew. Swallow. Breath. It’s working. She’s relaxing. Her eyes are still closed; she still leans her cheek on her bent knee.

Jack says, “As a writer, I think you’d dig the narrative style.”

Autumn opens her eyes and blinks at him. I'm certain she wasn't listening to this film lesson either.

"Why don't we restart the movie?" Jack gives me a look to remind me that our other conversation isn't over.

Autumn shrugs and finishes her toast.

I don't need to pay attention to the movie either. We all sit on the couch in a row, the tent abandoned. They're watching the movie. I'm just here, near her. It seems like the toast did the trick for the nausea she had when she woke.

When had she woken? What had we been saying?

When I'd warned Jack that she was about to wake up, we'd been talking about—

Sylvie or soccer, that's what she could have overheard.

Autumn already knows that I'm breaking up with Sylvie. I don't think I said anything that could have revealed the real reason.

"She's not who I want to be with," I said, when Autumn asked. It was the truth, even if it omitted so much. She nodded like she understood, but I'm a fool like that.

My best friends sit on either side of me for two and a half hours. Unlike last night, we are quiet. Last night felt so right with them here. I hope in the fall, when we're all in Springfield, they can be friends too. Just friends though.

That's a silly thought to have, but the point remains. I need to convince both myself and Jack that when Autumn does meet someone again, I'll be ready to let her go this time.

“Hey, Finn,” Jack says, “Come get your cleats out of my car.” He’s getting ready to leave, and my cleats are not in his car. His car is a dumpster and I’d never leave something of mine there, even cleats.

“Sure,” I glance at Autumn before I get up. She’s doing better, nestled in a blanket, finishing the glass of water I got her and having another slice of toast. I take note of how unfair it is that she can be so beautiful while hungover and sleep deprived.

I walk Jack to his car, and when he turns to me with that look on his face, I know what he’s going to say. I open my mouth.

“Your story doesn’t make sense.”

That’s not what I expected. “My story?”

“That she knows, but also simultaneously doesn’t know that you’re in love with her.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It basically is. And maybe you are the two stupidest people on earth to not realize you’re in love with each other, but I’m leaning towards she knows you love her and she’s fucking with you to make herself feel better.”

“That is not—”

He gives me a look and I stop talking.

“Break up with Sylvie. Call me after. Think about what I said.”

“Fine,” I say. I shrug one shoulder and look away.

“We’re cool?”

I met his eyes again. “Yeah.”

He nods and leaves. I head back inside.

I wonder if I should have pretended to go upstairs and put away the imaginary cleats before sitting next to her on the couch, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"Did you have fun?" I ask her.

She smiles faintly. "You were right about that fourth drink, and maybe about Jack's bartending skills."

"I was definitely right about both things. You're looking better though."

She looks amazing; that's how she looks by default.

"The toast helped. Thanks." Her weak smile fills me with warmth.

"Just a trick I learned." *From taking care of Sylvie*, I don't say.

"I think I'm going to go home and take a shower."

I'm surprised and I feel myself blink. "Okay." Perhaps it's for the best. I need to collect my thoughts. Think about what I'm going to say tomorrow.

Autumn stretches her arms above her head and groans before getting up, and I wish I could have that moment, so like many others, on instant replay. She calls, "Bye, Finny!" over her shoulder as she heads to the back door. I pause, then rush to my room to catch another glimpse of her before she goes inside her home, to perhaps see her again when she goes to her room.

Not that I'm trying to see her in any state of undress. Believe me, I've had my chances, and there've been close calls, but I've always closed my curtains when she forgets to close hers. Today though, she comes into her room and closes the curtains with efficiency. I leave my

curtains open and stretch out on my bed. I should be thinking about what my mother and Jack have said to me about my relationship— my friendship— with Autumn.

But all I can think about *is* Autumn. The way I could smell and feel her soft hair as she was curled up against me this morning. The way her brown eyes shone as we built the tent yesterday. The way she had arched her back and made that noise before getting off the couch.

But none of this is going to make me feel better now or in the long run.

