

The Whole Truth
by
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Happy birthday to me.

I'm twenty-two, so it's not like it's a super special birthday, but did it have to completely suck?

I grab my bags from the overhead compartment and get off the bus. It's not a long walk to my dorm, but it's dark and cold as hell. The wind blows directly in my face, adding insult to injury, but I'm still glad I came back to campus early.

It would be bleak, but the mostly deserted campus is illuminated by the many lamp posts lining the walkways, the light reflecting off the snow.

I'm out of breath by the time I make it up the hill and pull my roller bag to the front door of Taylor.

This is the moment of truth. Technically, I'm not supposed to be here. No one's supposed to come back from winter break until tomorrow, unless you're an international student who doesn't go home or you don't have anywhere to go.

I had somewhere to go, but I couldn't stick it.

I pull out my key card. If this doesn't work, I'll have to call my Israeli friend Miriam and see if I can crash in her room.

I hold up my key card, exhaling with relief when the light turns green and door clicks open.

I'm tired to my bones by the time I carry my things up to the fourth floor and open the door to the suite Hannah and I share. I wish she was here. I could really use a friend to vent to, but she won't arrive until tomorrow.

Passing through the common room, I enter my little bedroom and drop my things. The overheated air warms my chilled skin, and I heave a sigh of relief as I fall back on the bed.

I call a couple of takeout places, but none of them will deliver for less than a twenty-five-dollar order when there's so few people on campus. Which means I'll have to venture back out into the cold and find something in town.

I've never minded eating alone when I have lots of work to do, which is most of the time, but tonight the thought is depressing.

I put my coat and hat back on and head out into the cold, my shoulders hunched by my ears. Burger Bar isn't the closest, but it's the kind of comfort food I'm craving tonight, so I make my way down the hill and through the empty campus to Main Street.

There's a handful of people inside, and they all look up as I push through the door. I order at the counter and sit down at a table near the window so I can watch the snow fall.

They call my name ten minutes later, and it's a good thing I'm not with anyone. I'm so ravenous, I eat half my burger in about a minute. I'm only vaguely aware of another person entering the restaurant and ordering at the counter. I glance over as a guy sits down at the table next to mine.

I'm not in the mood for chit chat, so I quickly look away and continue eating. But we're both facing the windows at the front of the restaurant. Since it's dark, I see a watery reflection of the interior of the restaurant, including the guy sitting at the next table.

I duck my head and study the paper that lines the tray, which lists fun facts about the restaurant and town. But I've read it a zillion times before. Looking up again, I catch his eye in the dark glass.

He smiles, and it's so easygoing and sweet, I smile back without meaning to. Plus he's really cute, with floppy brown hair that falls over his forehead. I guess I must be lonelier than I thought, because I turn to look at him—the real him—beside me.

“Kind of awkward, huh?” he says, smiling again. His eyes are a warm brown.

“Yeah.”

“I can move somewhere else if that would be better.”

“Don’t be silly.”

His smile flashes.

“I’ve never come back from break this early,” I say. I guess I want to chat after all. “It’s so dead.”

“I’ve been back since before New Year’s. At first it was depressing, but then I kind of got into it.”

“You like depressing?”

He laughs. “I like the quiet, especially when I know things will get busy again. I get a lot of work done.”

I munch on a fry. “I guess you must live off campus. Are you a grad student?”

Before he can answer, the guy behind the counter calls out, “Number eight-four, come and get it.”

“Be right back,” my neighbor says.

He returns a minute later, his tray loaded with a burger and mountain of fries, and continues like we weren’t interrupted.

“I’m in the MFA writing program. My place is close by, so I come here a lot.” He slides a fry around a pool of ketchup and pops it in his mouth. “Why’d you come back so early?”

“I’m in the MFA writing program. My place is close by, so I come here a lot.”

“Why’d you come back so early?”

I grimace. “It’s kind of a long story, but basically some family stuff I couldn’t deal with.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“Today’s my birthday,” I tell him. “It kind of sucks so far.” I sound like a little kid, but I can’t help it. I’m feeling sorry for myself. “Then again, this burger is really good.”

“Would it feel more like a birthday if someone bought you a drink?”

His smile reads pure friendliness, so I’m not even sure if he’s hitting on me, but it doesn’t matter. All of a sudden, a drink sounds great.

“That’s really nice of you.”

“You’re twenty-one, right?”

“Twenty-two, actually.”

He looks relieved. “Awesome. I’m Jude,” he says, reaching his hand out all formal-like.

I give his hand a firm shake. “Audrey.”

“Do you like Packard’s?”

“Sure.”

I’m playing it cool, but I’m secretly thrilled at the thought of hanging out with him instead of going back to my silent dorm.

We bus our trays and head out. He’s a good five inches taller than me, with a lean, athletic build. Kind of unobtrusively sexy. Tonight’s looking better already.

I don’t even bother putting my hat and gloves on, because Packard’s is right next door. It’s dim and cozy, and Nirvana’s playing low in the background. No one else is at the bar, so we sit and each order a craft beer. I’m relieved when he doesn’t suggest shots or some other birthday cliché.

He clinks his bottle with mine. “Happy birthday.”

His eyes are exceptionally nice. Brown, but not a normal brown. They’re dark, but with

flecks of gold in them, and surrounded by darker lashes. And they're kind and solemn in a long, narrow face. I don't think he's much older than me, but he seems older because he's so serious. He looks like a poet. Like maybe Keats would have looked if he'd been well-nourished and not consumptive. Smart and kind and a little wistful.

"So this is your last semester?" he asks.

"Yes. This is it." It comes out sadder than I meant it to. "I kind of can't believe it."

"I know how you feel. It's my last semester, too."

I take a pull of my beer. "Do you write fiction or poetry?"

"Fiction."

"How much time did you take off after you graduated before coming here?"

"I didn't take any time. I thought about working a year or two before applying, you know, get some 'real-world' experience like people say you should do, but..." He shrugs.

"But what?" I ask.

"I wanted more time to write, and no one except my family wants to read my work and give feedback. And I can't trust them."

"I'm planning to apply to Columbia for journalism, but I thought it would be good to work for a while first."

"Any idea where yet?"

"I have an offer from a paper in New Jersey and one in Florida. I interned at both of them."

"That's great."

A couple about my parents' age comes through the door, bringing with them a draft of cold air, and takes a seat at a table behind us.

Jude leans in closer as they start to debate the merits of each wine on the menu, like he doesn't want to miss anything I say.

He's got little laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. I wish I could think of something funny to say so I could see them crinkle.

"Audrey?"

I blink stupidly before finally remembering what I was talking about.

"Sorry. I was going to say that I'm not excited about either of them. I wouldn't make enough to live on my own, so I'd have to live with either my parents or my grandparents, like I did the first time around. I know I'm just starting out and I have to pay my dues, but I still want to try for a bigger paper and salary."

"Like what?"

"Don't laugh, but I'm hoping for something at *The Washington Post*. They have a paid internship program, and they take a lot of graduates from Carlyle."

"Why would I laugh?"

"Because it sounds unrealistic."

"Not if you're good, it isn't. The last thing you should be doing is lowering your expectations. You have to be ambitious to get what you want."

I raise my glass. "Go big or go home."

"Hell, yeah," he says, giving my glass another clink.

I take a sip of my beer. "So what's your secret dream?"

"You want me to tell you that already? I just met you."

"Absolutely."

He smiles, one side of his mouth higher than the other, like he's amused but also

delighted. But that's not even the worst of it.

His eyes crinkle, and it's everything I thought it would be.

Heat washes over me, and I can only pray the light in the bar is dim enough to hide my reaction.

"Right now, I mainly want to get published and have people read my work," he says. "I don't spend a lot of time worrying about winning prizes or anything like that."

"No daydreams of giving a Pulitzer Prize speech?"

This smile is slow and dazzling. "No comment."

My skin starts to hum.

I lean an elbow on the bar and rest my head in my hand. "Maybe we'll win Pulitzers the same year."

"Sounds like a plan." He drinks his beer, his throat working as he swallows. "I guess you must write for the *Courier*?"

I nod. "I do stories about the administration and policies, plus town and gown."

"Do you like it?"

"It's great. You'd be surprised how much investigative journalism there is."

"Wait a second. You're Audrey Donnelly?"

"That's me."

"I've read your articles. The administration must be terrified of you."

I can't help my evil grin. "Maybe a little."

His expression, which was open and friendly before, changes into something else. His gaze drops to my lips and then meets my eyes again, and there's no mistaking what he's thinking about.

“I’m beginning to think you might be a little dangerous.” There’s heat in his eyes now, and a little more intensity.

His look sends a shiver down my spine. “Only if you lie or cheat or try to hide something. I’m all over that.”

“Then I guess I have nothing to worry about. I’m disgustingly honest.”

“Never cheated on a test?”

He looks horrified, like for real. “Of course not.”

I smile. “Me neither.”

“Want another beer?” he asks.

“Sure, why not.”

Jude signals to the bartender and orders us two more.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him, sliding off my stool.

I weave my way between tables to the bathroom, shocked at how full the place got while we were talking.

When I look in the mirror as I wash my hands, my face is still flushed, my eyes fever bright. I wet a paper towel and pat my skin, hoping to calm things down a bit. We’re having a nice conversation, so I need to get my lust under control.

He greets me with a smile as I settle back onto my stool, and now we have a bowl of pretzels in front of us. I could stay here for hours, with no complaint.

The first beer has already warmed me up and mellowed me out, and the arguments I had with my family seem like they happened months or years ago.

“So why did you choose Carlyle?” I ask him.

“I wanted to work with Graham.”

“You mean Graham Duncan?”

“He’s one of my favorite writers.”

“I have to admit I’ve never read him. I don’t read a lot of fiction in general.”

“What do you read?”

“I like biographies about journalists and leaders and kick-ass people who changed the world or uncovered lies.”

“I ought to read more of that sort of thing,” he says.

“What do you like about Professor Duncan’s books?”

“There’s something so...I don’t know, generous about his writing. Even though it can be dark, he puts his arms around the whole teeming mass of humanity, good and bad.” A sheepish look comes over him. “Wow, I sound ridiculous.”

“No. It’s cool that you get to work with someone you admire so much.”

“He’s a great guy, and he’s advising my thesis.”

“That’s lucky. You could have come here and found out he was a total ass.”

“You’re right. I never even thought of that.”

“It totally sucks when someone you admire disappoints you.”

“That happened to you?”

“You know the journalist, Conrad Otis?” I ask.

“Sure.”

“He came here and taught a class, and it was such a letdown. I was so excited. I mean, he made a real impact on journalism, and I expected to meet this amazing guy and be blown away by him. But he was such a pompous ass. He spent the whole class telling us how journalism was better in his day and how low standards are now, but also talking himself up the whole time. I

was so depressed by the end of it. I don't know if I ever want to meet another hero of mine."

"People like that are terrible teachers, because everything is about them." He traces patterns on the condensation of his bottle, and I'm mesmerized by his long, elegant fingers.

"What made you want to be a journalist?"

"When I was twelve, I heard a couple of newscasters talk about Watergate and asked my dad what it was. He told me the story, and then we watched *All the President's Men* together."

"A classic."

"That was pretty much it for me. It was like something snapped into place. I've always hated when people know things that I don't. I hated that grownups kept things from me, because I always thought I had a right to know everything."

He laughs. "Scary kid."

"Probably. I suppose journalism helps me channel my craziness in a productive way. My middle school didn't have a student paper, so I started one. Every story and photo was by me, and I distributed it once a week at lunch."

"What did you write about?"

"Let's see." I think for a few seconds. "I investigated the recycling program and discovered that they'd been doing it wrong. The guy in charge of facilities thought single stream meant all the recycling and garbage could be mixed together, so it was all getting tossed in the trash. It turned into a whole thing and even ended up as a small story in the town paper."

"Damn. You weren't kidding around, huh?"

"I wasn't then, and I'm not now."

"I'll have to look for your byline in the paper from now on."

"I'm not in there all that frequently, because I work on longer pieces that take a while to

report.”

“What story are you most proud of?”

Not one guy has ever asked me these kinds of questions about my writing.

“Last year, I did a story on the rate of hiring minority tenure-track professors. We’re behind what some other universities are doing.”

“I remember that! People were talking about it for weeks.”

“I was proud of that one, even though it generated a lot of hate mail. People accused me of hurting my own university, but the whole point was to bring things to light and make it better.”

“Does that kind of criticism bother you?”

“It’s frustrating, but I try not to read the comments on my stories.”

“I’ll stick to fiction. It’s much less complicated when you’re making everything up.”

“Are you really making everything up, though? I thought most writers based characters on people they know?”

“Well, yeah, there’s that, but I try not to replicate someone entirely. Usually my characters are bits and pieces of different people, along with some made-up stuff. Kind of a Frankenstein’s monster approach.”

“It’s a good thing for my family I’m not a fiction writer. I’d definitely put them in my stories.”

“Really? No qualms at all?”

“I’d have qualms,” I say, “but I doubt they’d stop me. Our family is our foundational material, even for people who aren’t writers.”

“There’s a quote by the poet Czeslaw Milosz that goes, ‘When a writer is born into a

family, that family is finished.”

“That’s a little dramatic.”

“Maybe. But you can definitely hurt people when you use their lives for your own purposes. I don’t want to hurt my family. My dad’s my biggest fan. He wants to read everything I write.”

So we have that in common. “And your mom doesn’t?”

“She doesn’t get it the same way.”

“So you’re holding back.”

“Remind me never to be interviewed by you,” he says, his laugh half-hearted.

“God, I’m sorry.” I lean back a bit so I’m not in his space. “Sometimes I don’t know when to turn off.”

“It’s okay. You’re not wrong.”

“I’m still sorry. I can be a little intense.”

“I like intense.”