

## WONDERLAND

Twelve years before they shut down the Wonderland Pier, she worked there selling snow-cones. It began in June after graduation: all the other girls, those with heads or eyes perhaps more hungry than hers, who wanted more, discussed plans of college, of the packing-up and the associated difficult decisions, of keeping in touch, and all the while Sadie, *you know, the girl with the weirdo brother, Sadie C.*, stood there wondering when the credits would start rolling. And then they didn't. She put her diploma in a file box at the bottom of her closet and thought *now it'll be done, we just had to resolve this last derivative metaphor*, and then it wasn't. And the snow-cone place was hiring for the summer.

Every day she drove the fifty-five minutes from her parents' house to the pier. The traffic was hell. She spent the time memorizing license plate designs and playing one-player *I Spy*. Bumper sticker for the Phillies. Steven Singer billboard. Dented Honda Civic. When she was smaller this was a road trip in from the city, and she would watch the ocean appear all at once over the horizon and wrestle with her brother in the backseat yelling about whatever it was that day. McDonald's drive-thru.

The donut place down the boardwalk opened early in the morning, so she'd stop there first before work, grab a coffee and a fresh-baked donut and let the sprinkles stick to her chin as the bikers flew by over the softened wooden boards, and then she'd walk back up in time to clock in at nine, half an hour before they opened. She liked these first few minutes, just opening, when it was so quiet you could still clearly hear the Atlantic crashing, only ever interrupted by seagulls and her own sounds of sweeping out the cramped snow-cone stand.

But then, of course, it began. The other opener arrived, most days a boy called Jay, and then everybody else did. Slowly, at first, especially when it was still early summer, but it began nonetheless: the rides started up in their hulking painted-metal bones and all the people trickled and then flooded into the concrete spaces between all the other stands and the fences and the various rainbow-colored attractions. Sticky-faced children with tired-eyed parents ran by *no running* signs and shoved five-dollar bills into her hands, and since her third day she'd stopped actually thinking about what she said to them when they came up, only repeating a meaningless string of syllables—*Hiwhatcanigetoutoday, Willthatbeall, Thankyouhaveagoodone.*

Her and Jay didn't talk much either, but they didn't really have time to, she just took orders and five-dollar bills and smiled absently, and Jay just blended the ice and poured whatever flavor she'd told him and yelled out the other window for whoever ordered the *small blue raspberry*. She liked Jay. He worked shorter, since he was only sixteen, and every afternoon, when he left two hours before she did, he gave a small salute, silently, grinning. Sadie would salute back. Tiff, if she was closing that day, would always stare and roll her eyes at the two of them, but that was Tiff's problem.

"You remind me of my brother," she said one day to him, when it was cool and pouring rain and nobody bothered coming out to the beach.

"Shit," he said.

"In a good way, I swear." She wondered if the bags below his brown eyes had been getting deeper, or if she was just crazy. "He'd like you."

"He in high school too?"

“Yeah,” she said. A white lie. Danny was high school age, that’s what Jay had meant by the question. Later, when she tells Danny about it, during visitation hours in that shitty peeling plastic orange armchair, he’d tell her she shouldn’t have lied. *You don’t have to keep secrets just for me, Sadie, it’s fine.* But she did, anyways. Their business was theirs. “You can probably leave early, if you want. Nobody’s coming out in this weather. You can borrow my phone to call your mom to get a ride.”

Thunder rolled even louder than the ocean. He’d taken the offer, saluted goodbye, dark arms silhouetted against the white-painted door, and Sadie made herself a mango snow cone.

By the end of June, Tiff got fired for stealing cash from the register when she closed, so Chris took over her shifts. Sadie had worked with him a few times before that, but not really. He was only part-time. But then Tiff was gone, and it became only Chris and Sadie for an hour and a half almost every afternoon, between when he showed up for the night and she left.

Chris smelled like cigarettes and would say things like *god, I hate this job, have you seen that new alien movie, did you get a haircut, it looks good, yeah.* When they were slow, which was rare, but happened sometimes, he’d dare her to make a snow-cone with all the flavors in one just to find out what it tasted like. He’d fill the machine with ice, blend it all up, scoop it into one of the little cups, and she’d go through the whole line of pumps of neon syrups and put them all in the cup until the pink and blue and bright green all mixed into one muddy purple. The answer was that it just tasted sweet. They theorized that half the flavor of any of them was only placebo, after all. That’s why the colors were so bright, to distract you from how the cherry tastes just like the pineapple ice. When

she laughed, she leaned too close to Chris, so close she wondered if you can get secondhand smoke just from somebody's breath.

"I'm covering a shift for Jay tomorrow, so I'll be opening with you, by the way. We could hang out after," he said. So they did, and they watched the sun go down over the sea and the lights turn on everywhere, and she'd never kissed anyone before, not really, but then she had. It was nice, she thought. The electronic billboard on the way home glowed red and blue and silver-white, and maybe this was what being a real person was.

And then it was July, and the sun was only ever hotter than yesterday, and there were only ever more people. She worked a couple closing shifts for the first time, and she didn't like it, so she asked to be kept to the mornings.

On her breaks, Sadie'd walk down the boardwalk and eat mint soft-serve and exchange knowing glances with the girl behind the counter. She'd watch kites on the beach over enough umbrellas to hide all the sand, aquamarine turtles and violet butterflies, and the planes would carry long lettered banners behind them that said *janet, will you marry me?* and *happy 90th, aunt florence!*, and her ice cream would drip green onto her thighs on the bench across the boardwalk from the entrance to the Wonderland Pier. She wrote down funny things she saw to tell Danny later in her notebook. *I saw a girl say no to a proposal today. Outside the 7-11, there was a cop parked illegally. Someone asked if the snow-cones were organic.*

She'd decided not to tell Danny about Chris. He didn't need to know. He'd just crinkle his face in that friendly disgust, anyways. Instead, most days, the good days, she'd tell him the stuff from her notebook. "Everybody thinks it's the big stuff I miss about being outside," he'd say,

"and it is, sure, but somebody's gotta keep me updated on these terrible cop parking jobs, Jesus." He'd laugh, dryly, and she'd smile at the sound.

Some days, she'd dare to ask him about his life. "How are you doing with it?", she'd say.

"I don't know," he'd say, or sometimes "bored as hell", or when he was feeling particularly honest, "I'm sorry for doing all this to you and Mom and Dad." And a few days, every so often, when Sadie would come into the hospital for their pre-scheduled conversations, he wouldn't be there, and a nurse would say "Sorry, he's not feeling up to it today." But she'd come back next time.

In the morning shifts, she started sometimes bringing Jay an extra donut from the place down the boardwalk. "You don't gotta," he'd say.

"You have frosting on your face," she said, wiping the counter.

"You're not my mom," he laughed. "Can you get chocolate, next time?"

She didn't tell Chris about Danny, either. Well, he didn't ask, so she didn't bother. They'd talk about other things.

"The moon's so pretty tonight," she'd said once, at night in the parking lot outside of his apartment. It was full and bright and un-photographable. The neon signs lit up the asphalt. "Don't you think?"

"I hate small talk," he'd said. "Let's talk about the real stuff, y'know? Get philosophical." He was smart like that, because he'd went to college for a bit and read. He dangled a cigarette between his fingers. "Do you think there's a meaning to life?"

She looked at her shoes, beat-up violet sneakers speckled with paint. In high school, she'd knelt on the floor of the cavernous

auditorium, painting a tower on a wooden board for a musical. She remembered seeing that show, then, seeing a girl stand on a ladder behind it so she could poke her head out the tower's window and sing.

"What, you've never thought about this?" he laughed.

"I don't know," she said. When Danny was fourteen, he'd said to her, softly, *I'm tired of being like this, what's the point*, and she'd said *Jacob Quinn-Hughes is a fucking idiot, and I'm gonna kill him for you, wanna get ice cream, I can skip class and drive us*. "I guess I don't like thinking about it." Sadie frowned.

"I'm not sure there is one," Chris said. "I think there's just nothing. We're just animals. Climbing through the night. Killing each other all the time, y'know?" He leaned in, breathing cigarette-smell into her face.

"You think?"

"Yeah, don't you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I think maybe it's what you make of it."

"Yeah, and the sun'll come out tomorrow, sure." He laughed again, sharply. "You're so uncurious. That's why you're still here selling ice, y'know, not really thinking. It's easier."

She looked at her shoes again, embarrassed. "I guess," she mumbled. Her face was red and hot in the cool night.

And then August came crashing into the shore, and it was the hottest summer on record. Red-eyed teenagers ordered snow-cones and forgot to tip. License plates from New York and Maryland drove down the highway. Jay yelled out, *medium pineapple! small cherry! large grape!* She watched bikers and kites and kids running on the concrete. The horses on the carousel glistened in the sunlight. The swing ride spun screaming children around. She was getting tired of that noise. She'd

started hearing it in her ears when she closed her eyes to sleep, the screaming-laughing children and the ocean and the loud whir of the ice machine. And then, one cooler morning, something rose out of the monotonous rhythm of taking orders: “Sadie?”

A girl with long blue braids and a university t-shirt stared back at her. She placed her: a high school classroom, maps on all the walls, three months ago. *Mary*. When Danny left school the first time, Mary had said to her *gosh, how terrible, I’m so sorry, are you okay? y’know, it’s such a terrible thing to do to someone* and Mary’s boyfriend had said, when he thought she couldn’t hear, *ha, knew that guy was fucking crazy*.

“Oh my God, hi! Crazy that you’re working here this summer! How fun!” Mary said.

“Oh, hey,” Sadie said. “Yeah, just something to do, y’know?”

“Totally. Are you just for the summer, or like...?” Mary trailed off.

Sadie knew what she meant.

“I mean, we’re only open for the summer, so, yeah. I guess,” Sadie paused. The morning sun hurt her eyes. She forced a laugh. “I guess I don’t know after that.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Mary smiled politely. “Anyway, can I have a medium cherry flavor?”

“Yeah, that’s five dollars.”

That night, Chris had called her. She stood in her parents’ kitchen, feet cold on the tile, lit up by the refrigerator and by her laptop on the counter on some job site glowing white and green. “Sorry to do this to you,” he said. “I just think this isn’t gonna work out. This girl I dated is back in town, y’know. I don’t feel like we have stuff in common anymore, really.”

It was 11:11pm, and she wished he was dead. Or that she could scream. Or she wished she could call Danny. *Your fault for dating a guy*

*seven years older than you*, he'd say. Or maybe, *you're better off without him*.

She went upstairs, up to her room, up to the closet with the file box where her diploma sat. She just sat down and stared at it, at the closet door. At the wall next to it, at the painting she'd done in fifth grade, a vase of flowers in pink and yellow and brilliant blue. Before that, in kindergarten, somebody asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up. She hadn't said sell snow-cones, she knew that. *I'm gonna be a knight*, she'd said. They don't have those in real life, though. That's what everybody said in response, they said *no, Sadie, silly, what job do you want to do when you're a grown-up?* and she said *fine. firefighter*.

"What are you gonna do when the summer's over?" Danny asked, scratching marks into the chair. "That place closes, right?"

"I'm looking for other jobs, yeah," she said. "Got an interview at Dollar Tree."

Danny frowned, then. She almost liked seeing him frown like this, it was better than that nothing stare or the grin that said *don't worry about it*. "I don't wanna be the reason you don't go to school or something," he said.

"You're not." In her head, she traced the taut string that went from her eyes to his, like if she kept it just like that he'd know she wasn't lying. "I don't think I'd like it," she said. "I didn't like it in high school."

"Okay."

"I'm gonna move out, though," she said. "Not far, just out of Mom and Dad's. You can visit, when you're out."

"Okay."



On the hottest day all summer, her last day there, a boy came to buy a snow cone.

“Hey, Jay-jay!” He looked right past Sadie, through the window, smiling wide at Jay. “How’s it going?” His words didn’t match the syllables, which were sharp and cruel. “Still working this shit?” the boy said.

Jay stood frozen. Sadie leaned sideways so her face was between Jay’s and the boy’s. “Can I get something for you?” she asked.

“Nah, I just gotta talk to him,” he said, again with the lying smile.

She held his gaze in practiced restraint. “He’s working right now.” She held the edge of the counter.

“What, are you his mom?” he said. “Jay, you got this bitch talking for you now?”

She looked behind her, into the whites of Jay’s wide eyes, his too-loose shirt. Danny had said *I’m tired, Sadie*, but she hadn’t been.

So she knew what she was doing before she did it. It was the only thing. The ocean crashed like cars, like metal locker doors. Blood rushed in her ears and the crowd swelled and roared in idle wordless conversation. She didn’t hear it. She leapt over the metal counter, through the window, between the plastic signs. The tip jar shattered on the concrete, and the napkins flew into the August wind coming in from the sea, and the plastic spoons clattered around in tinny applause. She pushed her hands right into the chest of that boy, shoved him hard. In second grade, she’d gotten in trouble for pulling hair. A girl had called somebody stupid. Her teacher had said *violence, Sadie, is never the solution*. She was confused, then, what everybody meant all the time by telling her to stand up for what was right and good, but she guessed maybe they meant tell the teacher.

She wondered, sometimes, if she'd have called it violence if she just yelled at the girl until she hurt herself instead. The boy fell. His hands hit the concrete and scraped the paler flesh. She hoped his hands bled like rivers.

When Danny got out, in September, she told him about it on the quieter end of the beach, in the early hours of the morning, when the wind was still cold but the sun was lighting up the beach grass. The bikers weren't even out yet, just the gulls, which screamed in impatient anticipation of the day. Danny said, "You really shouldn't have done that."

"He was being an asshole."

"Lots of people are assholes, Sadie. You can't fight all of them."

"I want to, all the time," she said. The sand sunk between her toes in her flip-flops.

"You're way more insane than I am," he said, laughing. "One day, you're gonna get arrested or something, and I am *not* paying your bail."

Sadie laughed, and shoved her brother. "Am not," she said. "I'll have you know I only hit that guy 'cause it was my last day. Nobody's telling the Macy's an hour from here that their new checkout girl's a violent psycho."

"Alright, fine."

"Wanna get donuts from that place down there? They open in five. I'm paying."

The town began, slowly. They watched it from the bench across from the rainbow-painted sign over the entrance to Wonderland, with coffee and donuts. Rainbow sprinkles stuck to Danny's chin and she laughed at him, and the bench sighed under their weight, and there were children and tired parents and older couples walking past, vacationers

and people having a beach day and employees and everybody sponging up the last warm drops of summer so they could bottle it up for forever. September brought some kind of desperate air to everybody.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to be a person,” said Sadie, quietly.

“Okay,” Danny said, “but you are. Wanna go up the Ferris wheel?” His hair shone in the yellow sun like auburn silk.

It was twelve years before the Wonderland Pier shut down, before she said to somebody, laughing, *God, that place was falling apart, I’m not surprised*, and ten years before she got regional manager, and eight before Danny’s college graduation, before there were *beautiful couples* at Christmas, and five before the next hottest summer on record, which burned all up and down the coast. Apartment keys pressed against her thigh in the pocket of her denim shorts. At the top of the Ferris wheel, Danny said, breaking the silence, “I thought everything was going to end, and then it didn’t.” She followed his eyes to the sea. She could see him tracing the horizon in his head, wondering if he could see the curve from this close, if he just squinted.

“Me too,” she said.