

Mary sat alone in an overgrown field. She had driven out to the big willow in the North West corner of her family's farm. It was often used as a grazing area for her father's cattle and other livestock.

A calm breeze had rolled through and one could make out the early chirp of cicadas. It was just about sunset, so everything was visible: the tire swing one of her father's helpers had built for her and her brother, the two names carved in the base of the willow, and the long waves of pinkish purple cirrus clouds that crawled across the darkening sky.

Mary stood up, brushed off her jeans, and started to fold her blanket. She put it in the back of her father's truck and pulled herself onto the roof. She'd gotten into the habit of parking off the dirt road a bit, just below the sturdiest of the lower branches on the willow tree and vaulting up so she'd have a good view of the farm.

As the sun retreated past the horizon, she started to see fireflies float around the tree and in the surrounding fields, recalling the stories her mother told her every warm summer's night when she was younger, "God gave our family the biggest and strongest willow in all of Georgia," and she would go on to say that it was such a magical work of nature, that the closer one got to the tree, the denser it got with "floating stars." It was her way of saying that fireflies like to hang out there at night.

She squeezed her hand into her pocket, feeling for the small, pink cow that had settled at the bottom. Mary pulled it out and started to roll it around in her palm, inspecting it,

remembering every detail. The last time she had seen the one inch animal was last year, on the same date.

The thoughts of childhood memories flooded her mind. She was drowned in sorrow and took a blurry, tear-filled, look at the swing set and the etched willow. All she could think about was her first and only best-friend, whose life was cut short by a car crash.

**“MA + CJ
Best Friends For Ever”**

That’s what was carved into the tree. Mary Allen and Caroline Jackson were two inseparable friends, broken apart by a preventable tragedy. Mary squeezed tightly on the little cow until her knuckles whitened. Tears were now streaming down her cheeks to fall and splash on her blue jeans. No matter how old she got, Mary was never able to hold back her feelings on the subject. Here she was, a seventeen year old, sitting in a tree and crying about someone who had died ten years ago.

She didn’t touch the tire that hung on ropes from the branches. It was sacred to her, and everyone on the property knew that the tree was the one place they didn’t go. It was for her.

She noticed a half full bottle of whiskey swaying with the soft breeze. The bright, lime green, light that came from the hundreds of fireflies gave the orange liquid a psychedelic glow.

She put the cork back in her pocket, untied the shoelace that was tied tightly around the neck of the bottle and twisted the cork out of the mouth.

Mary took a small sip. She had started stealing cans of beer from liquor stores about two years ago, but none of that could've prepared her for the bitterness of the whiskey.

Mary wanted to feel nothing.

She jumped down and slammed the door of the Chevy. She adjusted the rearview mirror and pulled onto the path. The black and white rosary that hung around the mirror reminded Mary of where she wanted to go, but she wasn't sure what she'd do there. She let the last bit of alcohol flow into her mouth and trickle down her throat, and then threw the bottle out the window where it shattered in the grass.

The only thing that stood between her and the grave was the main street that led through town. No matter what time of day, the street was always busy and full of people, even at this hour, when only the bars and restaurants were open. Even now, the streets were splashed with colors from neon blue Coors light signs and amber streetlights.

Mary slammed the brakes twenty feet away her street. She couldn't drive tonight. She couldn't...

She slammed her head down on the upper curve of the steering wheel. Tears continued to drip and form small streams that slid down past the golden cross and down the thin metal

bar beneath it. Mary turned on the brakes and shut the car off, pulling the keys out of the ignition.

She slid out of the car and staggered her way back to the front door of their family's home, tripping over gravel and any small valley of grass that she encountered.

Once inside, she lay on the couch, thought of Caroline, and nodded off to sleep.