

“They don’t exist anymore,” she told me in the summer of ’08. We were lying on a grassy bank at midnight, like a scene in the romance paperbacks that kept in neat stacks on her bedroom desk. “It takes light a long time to get to Earth from where they are. Most of the stars we see are long dead.”

*We are watching the shadows of extinguished stars*, I wrote. The words struck me as profound, a line in unwritten poem. I pushed the notebook over to her, hoping for a compliment. Instead, I got a laugh.

“You always say such funny things,” she told me, and even though it wasn’t what I wanted, I smiled.

By the summer of ’09, I was in love with her. I couldn’t say how it happened, but one day I woke up and she was beautiful. The gap in her crooked teeth, her wispy hair, her plump perfect limbs, even the scattering of teenage spots starting to emerge over her nose and cheekbones.

I left notes for her. On her fridge. In the backseat of her dad’s car. Folded neatly between the pages of her teen romance paperbacks. They were slips of lined paper, with ‘*Carmelita, I love you, from Mark*’ scribbled in blue ball-point pen. She would crumple them up derisively in her hands and aim them at my head.

“Don’t you mock me, don’t you *ever* mock me,” she’d tell me angrily, and my hands would tremble as I fumbled for another piece of paper. *I really do love you*, I wanted to write. *I wasn’t mocking you*. But she’d always snatch the paper away before I could scratch out the words. I don’t think she would have believed me anyway.

She avoided me for the rest of that summer. I trailed behind her through sun-drenched days and star-kissed nights, but she never even honoured me with a glare. She found a new group of friends that summer, a platoon of rag-a-tag boys and girls from the local neighbourhood. I watched them as they sprayed graffiti on walls and broke into cars and smoked cigarettes behind

the primary school. I watched her as she kissed a boy under the frangipani tree. I went home nursing a broken heart.

I didn't follow her anymore after that day. I wonder if she missed me. I wonder if she even noticed I was gone.

The next summer, she showed up on my doorstep in eyeliner and mascara and a tank top that flaunted her budding cleavage. She looked around furtively, glancing behind me into the empty kitchen and the empty living room, and then she pulled out a packet of cigarettes and offered it to me. I recognized it as a peace offering, of sorts. An apology for last summer. I took one, and she smiled.

She'd lost weight in the school year. A diet, she told me, as we smoked in the deserted playground. She swung from the monkeybars and landed on all fours, her back arched like a cat, poised and lithe and perfect. She swayed her hips to imaginary music as she told me, "Zero coke and jelly beans. That's what I've been living on all year. And cigarettes." She lit another one and stuck it in her mouth to make her point.

My pen hovered over my notebook. *Carmelita, I love you*, was the only thing that came to mind, but that was no good. She would only hate me again. But I still did. I still did.

In the end, I wrote nothing. She didn't seem to mind. She swung from the swings, her long shaved legs flying before her, and shouted over the roaring of the wind. She told me about rock stars and pop groups, boys and fashion, drugs and drink.

I stood there in the sandpit and drank in the sound of her voice until the sun rose.

"Why don't you talk?" she had asked me once, when we were both five years old, unworldly and unbroken and unbent. I'd only shrugged. I could barely write at that age, and sign language bewildered me even then.

She'd decided to teach me and hadn't given up for a whole year. She was so beautiful back then, back when she thought anything could happen. All children grow up. Carmelita grew up at six years old, the day she realized that I was never going to say her name.

She came through my window on the first night of the summer of '10. She had two razor blades in her pocket.

"One for you," she said. "One for me."

I wrote, *why?*

She got angry then. "Because I don't want to die alone. Because this world's not worth it. Because Jimmy dumped me and I can't take it anymore."

I wrote, *get out.*

She did, and I didn't see her for another year.

The next summer, she came with sleeping pills. A whole bottle of them, thirty-four little white tablets. I hate the colour white. It looks like *death*. It looks like *nothing*.

"I don't know how many we should take," she confessed. "Seventeen each? Will that be enough?"

I didn't know. I shook my head. *What happened to you this time?* I wrote.

"Life," she said. "Life happened to me."

I wrote *get out*, and she walked away. She left the bottle of pills behind. I kept them in my closet. I don't know why I didn't just throw them away.

It was two weeks before I got the call.

I don't know why I never thought to tell her parents that she was suicidal. I don't know why I didn't call the police the second she left my house. I don't why I wrote *get out* instead of *Carmelita, I love you, don't do this, I can help*.

Maybe it was because I knew she hated liars.

Maybe it was because I thought that if I didn't want to die with her, she wouldn't want to either.

Maybe it was because I thought she loved me too much to leave.

In the end, she used a shotgun. I looked down at the shattered remains of her body and I thought: if only she had taken back the sleeping pills. The shotgun must have hurt. It must have hurt like hell.

During her funeral, I balanced my notepad on my lap, hidden behind the church pews, and I wrote.

*Stupid girl*, I wrote.

*Selfish girl*.

*Beautiful girl*.

*Wonderful girl*.

After the funeral, I went home. I took out the bottle of sleeping pills shook them onto the floor. I divided them into pairs. Seventeen each.

*Brilliant girl*.

*Cruel girl.*

*Hateful girl.*

I poured myself a glass of water. The seventeen pills fitted snugly in my palm. I wondered if I would choke if I tried to swallow them all at once. Perhaps I should take them one at a time.

I closed my eyes and I heard her voice: “Because I don’t want to die alone. Because this world’s not worth it.”

If I could speak, I would talk of many things. I would spew lines of poetry about my love for her and her love for me and the selfishness that would rob me of my life just because one (stupid selfish beautiful wonderful brilliant cruel hateful) girl didn’t want to die alone.

*We are all just watching the shadows of extinguished stars*, I thought, and I tipped the pills down my throat and chased death down with water.

For a moment they clogged in my throat, and I had one gasping moment of ohGodIdon’twanttodie, but then my throat cleared and they slid down, smooth as jelly.

*Innocent girl.*

Very soon, the world closed around me.