

Sanctuary. It means a place of refuge or safety. But it's so much more.

It's where you can hide away and forget everything else in the world. Where the problems and the drama can disappear.

And when I found my sanctuary, they really did disappear.

So today, I'm going to tell you of the day I found my sanctuary.

I was seven years old, and I was in my bed, covering my ears, trying to block out my parents' shouts.

My long, wavy blonde hair was in my face, and my head was between my knees.

My bedroom door was shut and locked, and I tightly wound my purple fleece blanket around me in the hope of blocking out the screaming.

But I could still hear them loud and clear.

"Stop." I whispered over and over, but it didn't work. It *never* worked. And then, I couldn't take it anymore.

Running down the steep, wooden stairs, teddy bear in hand, I stood in front of my parents.

'They don't even notice me,' I thought bitterly.

My mother's blue eyes were fierce, something that happened a lot lately. My father's light brown hair was matted down by sweat, and his nostrils were flaring.

They were still fighting, voices getting louder and louder by the second. And it angered me.

"STOP IT!" I screamed.

I furiously pushed the two apart. "STOP FIGHTING! Moms and Dads shouldn't fight! They're supposed to love each other! But every day, you and Dad start shouting at each other and I'm sick and tired of it."

My breath was ragged, and my blue eyes wild. "Just please, stop." I pleaded an exhausted look on my face.

There was a pause, and soon I was in my mother's arms, her hugging me, me hugging her back.

"I promise we won't fight." she murmured, face buried in my hair. "I promise."

Looking up, I saw my dad crouched down, at eye level. "No more shouting or screaming. Whatever you want, Jules."

I smiled at my nickname.

Ever since they started fighting, he had called me Juliet. But before the fighting, he called me Jules, claiming that "Juliet is *such* a long name."

Going back upstairs to my room, I thought everything was going to be alright, back to the way it was. How it should've been all along. But the shouts came again as I reached my bed.

"You are a horrible father, Ron!" my mother spat, loud enough for me to hear.

"What about you, Margaret! When I get home, all I hear is your yapping!" My father growled, sending a shiver down my spine.

And as they fought again, tears streamed down my pale, freckled face.

'They broke their promise.' I thought miserably. 'A promise to their own little girl.'

And I just knew that the situation was never going to get better.

If their only daughter couldn't convince them to stop arguing, no one could.

So I grabbed a coat from my closet and put it over my polka-dotted footie pajamas. I put on some purple mittens and a blue hat, hoping it wouldn't be too cold outside.

Wanting company, I grabbed my favorite stuffed animal, a blue plush teddy bear named Fluffy. It was a memory, of what used to be. What might probably never be again.

Quietly, I sneaked downstairs to get my sneakers that were colored a bright pink.

Now, I was ready.

I opened the front door and ran out, not bothering to close the door. And there I was, running and running, never stopping.

Finally, I got tired and stopped, realizing that I was in the woods.

As I looked around, all I could see were tall trees and brown leaves covering the ground like a carpet.

The cool breeze made me hug my jacket tight around me, and knowing that I was lost, I decided that the only direction to go was straight ahead.

And that's when I found it. And when I did, it took my breath away.

My obsidian blue eyes shimmered in the moonlight as I stared at what was before me in awe.

In front of me was what would be mine. *My sanctuary.*

Ahead of me were garlands of leaves to create a doorway. I pushed through the leaves, and soon, I was in the center of a circle of trees.

All of the brightly colored trees were a blur of yellow, red, orange, and brown as I spun around, admiring the site.

Because the trees were so tall, they served as a roof. As I looked up, I saw the tiniest piece of moonlight shining over me, and I felt that I could stay there forever.

And I almost did.

I started building a pile of leaves, deciding to have some fun. When I was finally finished, I jumped in them, laughing in enjoyment.

Hugging my teddy bear tight, I closed my eyes, and soon enough I was out like a light.

“Wake up. Wake up!” I felt a hard shove, and I soon met the hard ground.

Opening my eyes, I saw the moon shining above me. It was night time.

Then, a glaring boy caught my attention.

He had curly brown hair and grey eyes that were stormy and innocent. His skin was pale, and he wore a green hoodie with faded jeans.

“What are you doing? This is mine, not yours!”

I frowned at his outburst, and replied, “Can’t I stay here? I ran away, and I need a place to stay.”

The boy crossed his arms and said snobbishly, “Look, little girl, this is mine and I saw it first!”

“Little girl! I’m not little!” I protested. “How old are you?”

The boy smirked. “I’m eleven!”

“Well I’m ten.” I stated.

The boy smirked. “I’m still a year older than you! Now leave, little girl. This is mine.”

Frowning again, I tried to reason with him. “Can’t we share the place?” I suggested.

Apparently, that wasn’t a good idea because he threw his hands up in annoyance.

“What is wrong with you girls? You always want to share! And I’m not sharing with anyone with whiny, spoiled brats!”

That made me mad. Sure, some girls were annoying, but he didn’t have to make assumptions. I *wasn’t* annoying, and I *wasn’t* a spoiled brat.

So, of course, I tackled the boy and slapped him.

“Ow! Ow! Ow! Stop! Stop!” he exclaimed between slaps.

After the thirtieth slap, he surrendered. “We can share! We can share! Just stop slapping me! My face is sensitive.”

Satisfied, I got up and put my hands on my hips.

“Great! Now, since we’re sharing, I should introduce myself. My name is Juliet, but you can call me Jules. And this,” I acknowledged my teddy bear, “Is Fluffy. Now, what’s yours?”

I could see the boy trying not to laugh at the fact that I was acting like a two year old carrying a stuffed bear around, but I didn't push it.

"My what?" he grumbled, stroking his red face.

"Your name."

"Xavier."

Smiling, I exclaimed, "Nice to meet you Xavier!"

For a while, we chatted, and Xavier finally warmed up to me.

In fact, after a few minutes, we were laughing and joking around, as if we were old friends.

After an hour or so, I yawned.

Turning to Xavier, I mumbled, "We should go to bed. I'm pretty tired."

I saw Xavier moving his lips, saying something back, but I didn't hear, because I was already falling into a deep sleep.

That night, I dreamt of my parents. They weren't fighting like they usually did. They were crying.

My mother's pale face was damp with tears, and my father was comforting her, rubbing her back, tears rushing down his face as well.

"My baby!" my mom wailed. "My Jules is gone!"

"It's okay," My father soothed, "We'll find her."

With a jolt, I woke up.

'I can't just leave them.' I thought, 'I didn't even say goodbye. They might think that something bad happened to me.'

So, after some thinking, I decided to go back.

I tried to leave without waking up Xavier, but I accidentally stepped on some leaves which made a crunching noise, and I woke him up.

“Where are you going?” His grey eyes looked tired, and he was yawning loudly.

“I have to go.” I confessed, looking at Xavier. “I need to be with my family. They need me.”

Xavier nodded, and surprisingly gave me a hug. “It was nice knowing you. Bye, little girl.” he said, cracking a smile.

I grinned back. “I’m only a year younger you.”

“I know.”

And with that, I was walking away from Xavier and my sanctuary.

After a few minutes, I was out of the woods, but was tired of walking and felt like falling face flat on the ground. But before, I could fall asleep, I spotted a house with a lawn gnome in the front yard and a ‘Home Sweet Home’ sign on the door.

That was the house. *My* house.

I took a deep breath, and hesitated at the door. What if they didn’t care I was gone? What if they didn’t notice I was gone at all?

But taking a chance, I rang the doorbell, patiently waiting for the door to open.

After a few moments, my mother opened the door.

Tears streaked her cheeks, and her eyes were red and puffy, just like my dream.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “But this is a bad time. You can come back later – Juliet?”

My mother stopped crying, and stared at me. “Juliet! Is that you? Oh sweetie, where have you been?”

My mom took me in her arms and I buried my face in the crook of her neck.

“I missed you.” I mumbled. Mom smiled and hugged me tighter.

“What’s going on?” I looked up and saw my father, whose face full of confusion and grief suddenly turned to elation.

“Jules! What happened? You went missing and your mother and I were worried sick! Come inside, you’re probably cold.”

I walked into the house, and everything was just like it was before (except for the fighting).

“Are you okay?” my mother asked, checking me for cuts or bruises.

I wanted to reply yes, but I really wasn’t okay.

The only thing I could think about was that my parents could be fighting again, and I needed to stop that.

So I said the only thing I wanted to say.

“Stop fighting.” I mumbled, looking into my mother’s blue eyes. After a pause, she put her hands on my shoulders.

“Is that why you ran away?” There was calmness in her tone, but her voice was firm.

I nodded, wondering what my mother was going to say next.

“Oh, sweetie.” She pulled me into another hug, but this one was the tightest by far. “I’m so sorry, Jules. I’m SO sorry. No more fighting. I promise.”

“But what if you break your promise like the last one?”

“We won’t.” my father assured me from behind. “I’ll make sure of it.” And then I was wrapped up in a giant bear hug, one that made me know that everything was going to be alright.

7 YEARS LATER

Now, I’m seventeen, and my family is great. Over the years, I’ve gone to the woods, where the sanctuary was. Where it should’ve been.

But I could never find it, and I constantly hit a dead end.

Every day I thought of the sanctuary and Xavier. But now, I can't even remember what both the sanctuary and Xavier looked like.

Ring! Ring! 'Must be the pizza.' I thought, reaching for the door.

My parents were on a date night, and left me at home with some money to order food for dinner.

Opening the door, I handed the pizza guy twenty dollars and muttered thanks, closing the door.

Before I could plop onto the sofa and eat my favorite pepperoni pizza, the doorbell rang again.

'Who dare disturbs my pizza?' I thought angrily.

I swung the door open and asked harshly, "What do you want?"

In front of me was the delivery boy. "Juliet, is that you?"

The pizza guy asked. The pizza guy just said my name. *My name.*

Was he some creepy stalker or some serial killer?

But instead of slamming the door in his face and locking myself in the bathroom like some paranoid person, I asked calmly, "How do you know my name?"

I looked at the boy closely, not being able to match a name with his face. But there was something unmistakably familiar about him.

"It's me." the boy claimed, looking at me. And right at that second, was when the realization came across my face. It was him.

"Xavier?"