

*Fall Daze*

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Okay, I'll admit it. There may have been the smallest hint of drama queen on Day One of my so-called new life. Not that I'm the leading lady of hyperbole or anything. 'Cause believe me, compared to some of the overreactive freaks around here, my responses were catatonia central. I'm only saying that there may have been a tiny bit of overdone.

First off, let me clue you in. I'm one of those semi-brainy kids with a social life. Not the super in crowd, but enough party invites to go around. August of the last summer before graduation, I was pretty clear on my priorities: work, guys, hanging with my buds, and sax practice. Not in that order. When I didn't have a day shift, I'd lay in the hammock in our backyard, talking to Jess or Sam on the phone and bopping out notes from my Marsalis songbook that I got for my birthday in March.

We'd honed in on a few college guys from a clandestine campus party, and had been SMS'ing our way into more gatherings before school rolled around. Despite a looming disaster of bad skin and nothing to wear on a Friday night at the mall, it had been a pretty good week. And those issues were a dead-end nada compared to what slam-dunked me into a pit of despair.

To start with, it was the end of the world. Summer after my junior year, one year to swallow of high school, and my dad calls a family meeting. Never a good sign—it's usually my mom who's all group on the fly like that, gathering the clan to discuss the important stuff. Or at least, what she thought was important, like who tracked muddy slush on the Persian, or why the dishwasher sprung a mysterious orange bubbles-and-foam leak. Two for two on those, my little brother Josh. Josh, cute until he was two and for the past nine years a royal pain in the proverbial.

Three weeks left of summer vacation, and then I'd be a senior! We were eating stuffed pepperoni pizza and Caesar salads with sloppy beige dressing, and my dad holds court and drops

it on us. And I didn't have it straight in my head so I'm like move, cool, will the new house have an attic bedroom and can I have it and will it be closer to the mall? And then the sledge blow, piece by piece.

'Niks, we're moving to Virginia. The company's offered me a big promotion. And with college coming up for you soon and Josh starting middle school, your mother and I thought this would be the least disruptive time to do it. We've already talked to the guidance counselor at your new school, and he's assured us that you'd be able to take all the same honors classes. Plus the school's a lot smaller than Springdale, and they've got a great music program. You'll make friends in no time.'

Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Like, Cliché City guys, could you even breathe something original once in awhile? It's my parents, so no. Then, while I dissected their banal excuse for an explanation, Dad sent Mom in to bat. And she carried right on through this insanity, all sweetness, logic, and light.

'Look Nicole, we know this won't be easy. But it's really important that we approach this whole experience as a family adventure. It's the best thing for everyone in the long run.'

I watched Josh pester them with stupid questions about soccer teams and swim practice. I sat on the navy corduroy beanbag chair, leaning on the claw foot oak coffee table, and I listened to my family plan the last days of my future. My dad paced around the den with his hands across his chest. My mom rocked on the edge of the blue floral sofa, eyes dancing from me to Josh and back.

I know what they expected. It would have been so easy to play the game of 'you're so unfair' and 'I can't believe you're doing this to me.' But I took an extra thirty seconds to think

about it. Then I saw my way lit clear through this dumb scheme and I shot back, ‘You don’t have to worry about me.’

I waited a beat or two, feeling their relief crowd the dark paneled room. ‘Yeah, I mean it’s no big deal, because I’m not going with you. I’ll move in with Sam and her family. They’ve got space with Dan at college and her parents love me.’

Not even trying to resist, I added, ‘Unlike some people.’

Now you gotta understand, defiance is not the done thing in my house. The Caulfields have ‘debate,’ ‘discussions,’ and sometimes even ‘discourse.’ My mom used to teach English at UMASS, and she’s in love with the sound of what she calls ‘the Socratic method.’ Questions, comments, concerns about the lingering death of our sixteen year-old daughter’s social life and high school happiness? Let’s talk about it.

Understanding, my parents are not. Predictable, they most surely are. The evening went along its awful course, from the vague threats of ‘over my dead body’ to the all-out guilt of ‘we all have to get through this together.’ Yeah, right.

I didn’t talk to them for three days. The house echoed with my deliberate silence, though my mom tried to fill it with plans and moving chatter. She was all ‘when we get to Virginia’ this’ and ‘how will we clear out the basement’ that.

Well, the silent treatment was my only weapon in this war, and they attacked first. My parents deserved that side shudder, and more. I used my best stage sigh—not that I had to fake desperation, but I added on a slather of my favorite ‘make ’em pay’ routine. Pick a room, and drench it with my shared unhappiness by slouching for hours in the most comfortable chair. Only fair, after what they’d done to me.

Mostly, I just sat on the phone with Jess and Sam, huddled in conference in between shifts at Roz's Diner downtown. I was only working three days a week, because I'd wanted plenty of time to chill, but every minute away from my buddies I schemed to stay in Boston. Jess, the oldest and loudest of my friends, was clear on required action.

'Look Niks, you gotta take a stand. I mean, you're not a kid anymore, right? They can't do this to you! No way! You could pack a bag and sneak out—pretend you ran away and hang at my house for a bit. You can sleep over the garage and I'll make sure you don't starve to death.'

Sam, the science-nerd-turned-basketball-star when she grew five inches in tenth grade, was cooler but equally peeved. 'Don't your parents get it? Your whole life is here—bad enough that you're planning Berkeley for college and I've got that MIT scholarship, so we'd never even see each other except for vacations and now there's not even that? Let's talk it over with my mom and we can figure something out, okay?'

Sam was right—her parents offered up the possibility if I could work something out with my family. She called me with a done deal.

'So that'll work, right Niks? Your parents are gonna flip out, but you have to stand up to them, okay? You want some practice breaking the news to them, or are you cool with it?'

Sam talked me through the plot to force the crazy adults in my house into action. And after breaking my silence, and a marathon gab session with the people who were trying to ruin my life, my parents left the decision up to me.

In the end, it was Josh who got me in the moving van that would drag me away from my whole wonderful life three days before school started. The packing had been going on for a week. The whole house was drowning in cardboard and duct tape, and we'd already had four truckloads of Salvation Army pickups from all the junk in the basement. Fourteen years I'd lived

in that house—I knew every creaking staircase inch. Two seconds before my little brother appeared in my doorway I called out, ‘Whaddya want? And it better be good!’

Basically, eleven year-old boys are dorks. Josh was no exception—he and his lame-o friends were always getting into my stuff and generally plain old nasty. There he was, hanging in my doorway all loose-jointed and crooked grin and he comes out with this bomb.

‘Look Niks, don’t go all postal on me, okay? I know you think this whole moving thing reeks, and maybe if I were you I’d stay, but I’m gonna miss my friends too, and it would be really awesome if you’d come to Virginia with us.’

This, the longest sentence in history from a kid who thinks talking is what you do between firing spitballs and whose entire vocabulary could fit comfortably on a damp beer mat. It blew me away. There we were, in the skeleton of my room that I’d had since before this little twerp was born, and he was asking me not to leave him alone with the ’rents. Whoa.

Of course, I’m way too cool to show my extreme shock at his sudden show of personhood, so I sneered right back at him and said, ‘Whatever. I’m busy. Get outta my room, okay?’

But after he left I stopped dumping my clothes into my green canvas duffel, and sat on my bed covered in a sleeping bag for the last night in our house on Cedar Creek Road. Outside, as the sun leaned across the back fence, I could hear Josh playing catch with our golden retriever Grover, who we’d had since I was twelve and got as a bribe for getting my braces on. There was the unmistakable clattering of my dad in the den, working intently on his laptop with the echoes of talkback on his beat up clock radio. And the mice scurrying was my mom, darting in and out of every room in this white weatherboard Cape Cod, as she inventoried a lifetime in furniture

and souvenirs. That's when I figured out that home wasn't just walls, streets, school. It was also the sound of my family making their way in the world, the best that they knew how.

Yeah, yeah, I bet you think you can hear violins and rolling credits as the audience dissolves in feel good tears. No way man—nothing has that much closure. My three and a half seconds of understanding my family turned into a four hour solo stint in my darkened room with the door locked. Same old, same old dinner time my mom yelled up the stairs.

'Nicole, come down please—the chicken's getting cold!' Now for sure she did that on purpose, because I gave up all the extreme gross factor of meat about three months into high school and hadn't looked back from my tofu and tempeh. Anyway, I decided to forgive her, pounded downstairs, and slid into my usual seat in the breakfast nook looking out across the deck.

My dad was droning like a biplane running out of gas, the whole 'work this' and 'work that' crapola. My mom dished up the salad and potatoes, I grabbed the veggie dogs out of the microwave, and Josh whistled while he kicked the leg of my chair. Right then, those three humans were the clear-as, annoying-as people I'd lived with forever, and I almost changed my mind. Almost.

'Fine. I'm not saying I'm gonna like it, I'm not saying I'm gonna be Joe Schmo Smiley Face about it, I'm not saying I might not dump the whole disaster and come back after a week. But I'll go.'

I guess the hug-o-rama was supposed to make us all feel good, but all it did was make me want to hurl. My mom got all teary and my dad said how proud he was of me making the right decision. Whatever.

After dinner I walked over to Sam's house, four doors down. We hung out on the porch swing, listening to the cicadas and planning our visits. 'Look Sam, I'll definitely be back here for Halloween weekend and Homecoming—just save me a good date for the dance and I'm there! I've got mondo cash from work this summer and that was one of the conditions of me agreeing to go.'

Even to myself the justifications sounded thin on the ground. But Sam's been my friend forever, and her super cool self just held out her arms and laughed about our phone bill. 'Y'know, maybe your parents will throw you out and you'll have to come live with us, after they see how much you cost 'em in month one away from home, eh?'

'Nah, I'll be a cheap-as senior in the middle of podunk Virginia—no friends, no social life, no expenses except for long-distance and e-mail. They'll thank me!'

Truth is, I had no idea what to expect. The last time I went to a school without the mutual cheering squad of best friends had been in kindergarten, and I was pretty down on the whole thing.

I won't rehash the goodbyes—they were ugly. Following the eighteen-wheeler that held most of our stuff, the four of us piled into the smaller rented moving van and left my joy behind. It was a twelve-hour drive, and we slept in a motel before going to check out the new house that my parents had picked. After breakfast the next morning, we drove through a densely wooded suburb to what my dopey mom kept calling 'home.' Uh-huh. Right.

I was so ready to hate the whole thing. But we pulled up in the twisted gravel driveway, and this clam gray contemporary loomed to greet us. Getting in the habit of being Mr. Info Man, my dad rattled on as he dug out the keys and we stepped through the eight-foot double door.

‘Okay guys, here we are. Hope you like it—it’s a little more architecturally diverse than our place in Boston. Watch the door there Josh, it has a tendency to slam.’

You see where I was going with the mocking, right? ‘Architecturally diverse,’ for a house that had about six different half-levels and windows that would have been a geometry teacher’s idea of heaven? That’s my father for you—never use a monosyllabic intro when a diatribe might bore us all to premature death. Only then the second half of my dad’s blabbing sank in.

‘Niks, we thought you’d like the bedroom at the top of the back stairs. It’s got its own bathroom and skylight, and the window seat looks out over the pond in the yard.’

Through the kitchen, a twisty spiral staircase climbed through a square hole in the ceiling. I wasn’t ready for the revelation of my new space—a whole semi-floor to myself, tub with jets, and a room with windows on three sides. Maybe, just maybe this wasn’t a total loss after all.

Wrong. School started two days after that and it was bigger than any nightmare I could’ve imagined. Day one at Lynchfield High School began as the second worst day of my life, coming in close behind the time in fourth grade when my shorts split up the middle in gym class while I was doing a somersault, and my major crush Danny Bartolo was standing right behind me when it happened. So let’s just say the first day of my last year in high school was bad, as in leave-behind-and-never-mention-again-even-if-I-suffer-mighty-torture bad.

Seven a.m. wake-up call after no sleep. I’d already decided on the denim mini, orange crop, and combat boots. I snaked on a handful of noisy silver bangles and tweaked my hair into short spiky twists. I needed all the power dressing I could get that morning, and no avalanche of dirty looks from my heartless parents would send me back upstairs to change. I grabbed my slingback bag, swooped on a handful of Cheerios and sat waiting in the car for ten minutes while Josh debated waffles or French toast. Not even the radio stations sounded cool here—all I could

get on the dial while I sat there wasting my life was news, weather, and the occasional bar of Manilow. Psycholand, that's for sure.

When my parents said that this new school was 'small,' they didn't bother to mention that what they meant to say was miniscule. Compared to the three stories, A through G blocks, and two full-sized football fields back home, Lynchfield High was Lilliput personified. Two hundred kids in four grades, compared to three hundred and sixty juniors at my old school. So instead of just playing my planned invisibility card, sucking up the desperation, and counting down the days until my first visit back, I got noticed.

First thing, Principal Collins stood in front of the whole school at assembly in their dinky auditorium with creaky bucket seats and introduced me. 'I am pleased to announce that we have a new student joining us for her final year. Nicole Caulfield, please stand up so that we can give you a true blue Lynchfield Lynx welcome! C'mon now, don't be shy—there in the back row, hop on up and say hello!'

Social death is a painful way to go. Not only was I a hopeless outcast on an island of screeching lunatics, who cheered me right on cue, but now I was also the dweeb who agreed to be ridiculed by standing up. Ohhh-kayyy. Not cool. Fighting the obvious tears that arrived within seconds of this latest humiliation, I streamed out of the hall with the other faces.

Academics were predictable, and by lunchtime I was sure that at least I wouldn't have to study too hard. I already had my SATs set, and had lined up a pretty good shot at my first choice colleges. It was just a matter of coast and see, and try not to disintegrate with embarrassment or isolation. Easier than it sounded, my first day at school. The rest of the morning, I mumbled greetings to the over-friendly teachers and avoided eye contact with the silent, staring kids.

Cafeterias are the same the world over. Even before I walked through the glass doors, I could smell the bean burritos and taste the grimy mashed potatoes. I could also feel the impossibility—now that I'd gone through the line and picked up my food, I had to stand there trying not to look like the only stranger in a room full of family, scanning the horizon for an empty table. Right then, I would have settled for a hole in the ground.

But of course acts of God never strike on command; I stood there for about five minutes with my mouth hanging open until I spied a corner seat next to the soda machine. Slurping down my gluey chowder and grabbing a chunk of the sourdough bread bowl, I headed to the library. The stacks hid my mascara streaks. The bell sounded for math.

By the time last period limped into view, I felt like a soldier after six weeks of basic training: emptied out, used up, blank. If I had a hundred seventy-nine days of this left, I'd be back at Sam's house before the maples sunsetted. With this thought comforting me like the ripped up old teddy bear that I'd tossed in the boxes instead of throwing to Goodwill, I locked my jaw and slouched into choir. Same routine—pick a chair as close to the door as possible, set my eyes on the wall clock, and pray for a fire drill. I'd barely landed in the chair, metal jabbing in my spine, when this voice fell from the sky.

'Oh my God, I mean, can you believe it, we've got old man Cronin again! Like, you'd never know it right, I mean, you're new and all, but he is totally this serious fossil and all the 'rents think he's the coolest 'cause we won States three years running but I cannot believe. Hey there, you with me? I'm Hillary, actually everyone calls me Lary, 'cause Hillary's such a dufus name, but there you go, my mom was like, in love with the Clintons long before they saw the inside of the White House, I've got a brother named William, can you stand it, but we call him

Will 'cause no way are we gonna be ex-presidential groupies, that whole politics thing is insane, can you believe the war, jeez, where's the justice now?'

While this tsunami of sound engulfed and drowned me, Mr. Cronin cleared his throat and told us to split into parts. I'd sung a fair bit, along with playing sax in the jazz band, so I knew enough to lean towards the soprano section. Back row, of course. As we shuffled around, that cheerful buzzing again caught my ear.

'Oh that's fab, like, I am totally sick of being the only fashion plate in this section, look around, it's all church girls and double braids and I just love your boots. It's Nicole, right? I mean, is it like Nicole or Nicky or Niks or what?'

There was no escaping this woman, so I finally turned to face her. Maybe I'd seen too many Laura Ashley clones in one day to take in this vision all at once. Maybe I just expected to be disappointed. Leather boots, and lime green hair, and smile a canyon wide.

'Hi Lary—it's Niks. At least, that's what my friends call me. Niks.'