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The Whole World

Written by Emily Winslow

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The Whole World

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PROLOGUE

‘Come on,’ Nick said, tugging my arm. He pulled me past the plesiosaur and iguanodon skeletons and unlocked a stairwell. He prodded the button to call the elevator. When the thing came it had one of those old iron grilles, which he shoved aside for entry. He pressed me against the back wall of the box and kissed me.

He has lovely hands. Later, when the people making ‘missing’ posters asked for a detailed description of him, I uselessly went on about his perfect hands.

When the elevator went *ping* at the top floor, he stalked out down a long, dingy hallway. I trotted after him. I’d forgotten that he had an office up in Earth Sciences – but of course he would. It was a tiny space, nothing more than books and a coffee maker and a desk and a lock on the door, which was enough. We perched on the desk and he pulled my face to his.

I don’t think he meant for much more than petting – he

didn't seem like someone who would rush anything. But when he started to unbutton my shirt, I said no. I'm certain I did, but it got muffled in his cheek. So he undid the next button. I said no again. I pushed his shoulder, hard. Nick was surprised. I was too. I mean, it's fine to say no to anything, but this was abrupt. He leant in to kiss me again. I don't think he deliberately ignored me; I think he was just on a roll. So was I, frankly. I kissed him back, which was disorienting – he had a right to be even more confused. It was all so . . .

There was this line. I wanted to be on one side of it. I tried to stay there, and haul him back. But he couldn't see the line. All he knew was that I was still leaning into him. He kissed me all down my neck, and then lower, down into where my shirt was open from the first two buttons. It made me crazy, in a good way, and it made me angry, which was strange. I shoved him so hard that he was suddenly standing upright; I had pushed him off the desk onto his feet. I leant over the other side of the desk and vomited into his trash can. It had papers in it, not crumpled, just all smooth and rounded, clinging to the side of the basket. I vomited in it, and then over it onto the floor.

The sounds were horrible. I tried to stop. I covered up my mouth but just ended up with stuff on my sleeve.

Nick put his hand on my back. I elbowed him off. More stuff came out of me. I didn't think I'd eaten enough for it to go on this long.

When it finally stopped I held still. A minute flipped on his clock, one of those old 'digital' clocks that has the numbers on little cards attached to an axle.

Nick said something. I made a noise to cover it up and bolted. I didn't wait for the elevator; instead I lurched onto the stairs, which I hadn't realised go on forever. Every corner I turned there was another flight down. I passed the museum level by mistake. Then the ground floor stopped everything.

Through the window in the stairwell door I saw a dozen students gathered, for a club or a meeting. My shirt was still open at the top. I turned to the wall. It took me a few tries to mash the buttons back through their slits.

I wanted to brush my teeth. I wanted to change my clothes. I rushed back up one flight to get my jacket from the window seat in the gem room. On Trumpington Street I started running.

CHAPTER ONE

That whole thing in Nick's office happened just around what would have been Thanksgiving. Home was, no doubt, drenched in crackling, flashy leaves. England does the season differently. Students at Cambridge are discouraged from having cars, so autumn comes with a flurry of bicycles. Leaves barely bother to brown before falling listlessly – the bikes make up for that in their number, variety, and motion. They swirl everywhere, as if blown into little cyclones by the wind.

I used to live in New Hampshire, which is all spectacular falls and knee-high winters, and summers thick with humidity and mosquitoes. It's a parade of nature there; that's what makes it special. But here in Cambridge, instead of trees and mountains and extremes of weather, there are buildings, all these towers, like something cartoonishly Atlantean that you'd put in a fish tank for guppies to swim through. Everything is made of stone, not clapboard. This city is like

people, instead of God, made the world, and turned out to be good at this creation business.

The University has thirty-one colleges, which house, feed, and tutor students. The University departments provide lectures and exams. The older colleges downtown, founded by Plantagenets and Tudors, dominate the shops and houses like tall ships in a busy harbour. They're huge and solid and walled, each with an arched entryway giving a peep of courtyards beyond. There's usually a sign telling whether or not they're open for tourists, and always a sign remonstrating that the courtyard grass is not to be walked on.

Peterhouse is on Trumpington Street. The college itself is on one side of the big art museum, and my room, in the dorm extension St Peter's Terrace, is on the other.

I love these old buildings because they're still in use. They haven't been made into museums. There's something so sad about people filing through a famous rich person's bedroom to ogle a made, never-again-slept-in bed. These college rooms are all lively with activity, just as they were built to be. They're as different from museums as a wild animal is different from taxidermy.

I chose Peterhouse because it's the oldest of the colleges, more than seven hundred years old. That seemed the right thing to do. If I was going to go to Cambridge, and live in actual architecture, and wear a monkish academic robe called a 'gown' just to eat dinner, it seemed best to go all the way. Peterhouse had been the first of the colleges to get electricity, but it still lit meals only by candlelight. Its

stained glass windows were by William Morris. There was a fireplace in my dorm room. When I saw that I laughed out loud.

Liv is American too, which is why we became friends. She was my first friend here. She's Californian, and could have gone to Stanford.

I met her my first week. It wasn't the way she talked that gave away her nationality. She hadn't even spoken yet. It was that she sat cross-legged on the floor in a public place. British people don't do that. She was sketching an empty windowsill inside the Fitzwilliam Museum.

I was above, surrounded by paintings of elaborate flower arrangements. She was below, on the middle landing of a fancy staircase, with two sets of steps going up on either side and another set heading down between them. She caught me looking at her drawing, and quickly hugged her sketchbook to her chest. Then she lowered it back to her lap, and smiled hello. She explained that there used to be three Chinese vases on this windowsill. 'Close your eyes,' she said. 'Go ahead and close your eyes. Just try to see it, okay?'

I'd descended the steps and was right in front of her. I closed my eyes.

'Three big vases, right? Right here. And this guy,' she said, 'this guy – I swear this is true and you can look up the newspaper stories – he tripped, I swear, he tripped on his own stupid shoelaces right into those vases, and he totally took them down. I was in the gallery above those stairs, the floral room, right, and I heard it. It was, like, *pow!* – at first a

hollow kind of sound and then a clatter. They shattered into six hundred pieces.'

I flinched.

'No kidding,' she went on. 'I ran to the stairs. It was terrible to see them like that, all splattered, chaos where there should have been this – grace, you know?'

I couldn't keep my eyes closed any longer. Right here, right where I was standing, they'd broken up into shards. I backed up onto a step, to get off of where they'd fallen.

She nodded. 'I know, right? I know. I was horrified too. But then I was, like, kind of elated. And I was, like, springier and more alive, somehow. It made me think:

'This is all really here. It's not like a picture in a book or on a screen. It's not even under glass or behind ropes. It's all just amazingly here. Until I saw some of it broken, I hadn't really understood. I'm here, you know? And this is all real, real enough that if you bump into it something could break. I'm really here.'

She was beatific with the memory.

Then she grinned and snapped out of it. 'It's amazing, you know?' she said.

I smiled back. I just stretched my face and held it tight. I was remembering something broken too. I never should have closed my eyes.

'Where are you from?' she asked. 'Is this your first year?'

I didn't answer right away. I nodded, to buy time. I made my mind imagine vases. Over and over again my mind went *clatter-pow*. I forced it to be vases in my mind.

* * *

Liv's college is Magdalene, which is pronounced like it means 'sentimental'.

She lives in a riverside building with brick windowsills and fancy wooden banisters. The architect who designed it made every banister different so that drunk students could feel if they were on the correct stair. Hers had a kind of obelisk, and posts carved like chequerboards.

She'd covered the wall over her bed with pages from her sketchbook. I recognised details from paintings in the Fitzwilliam – lots of Monet poplars – and sights from around town. She didn't choose obvious targets. There was no King's College Chapel, its towers jutting from either side of its roof like the tufts on a great horned owl. Instead she drew two-storey buses, shop-window mannequins, and the snack aisle of the supermarket. There are literally dozens of flavours of potato chip here, and the many bright colours all lined up on the shelves give the appearance of a busy, upright garden.

'Here, give me a hand,' she said, plonking down a stack of printed pages on her bed. 'Reusing is even better than recycling, right?' She had two pairs of scissors, one for each of us.

The pages were old essay drafts. She'd been cutting them up into intricate little snowflakes that now nearly filled a plastic grocery bag.

At first I watched her: She'd cut a small piece off, no worry about its shape, and then fold it twice. *Snip, snip, snip*, then unfold. The folding gave the cuts a symmetry within the random edges. I took a page. Cut, fold, snip. Each sheet made a dozen or more sharp flakes, each one different.

When we were done, she undid the fancy iron fasteners on

the casement windows over her bed. She grabbed a handful of paper snowflakes and heaved them out. She pressed another handful into my open palm.

We threw fistfuls of paper snow down onto the busy path below, while Liv shouted, ‘Ho ho ho!’ Some people stopped to look up at us in annoyance, shaking the papers out of their hair or brushing them off their shoulders. One didn’t. He bent to sweep up the scraps. At first I thought he was a neat freak, some kind of anti-litter crusader. But then he stood and pulled his arm back, and pitched the debris at us like a snowball. It couldn’t make it up to Liv’s window; it didn’t have the weight or cohesion for that. Instead it showered back onto him, drifting down past his great, huge smile.

That’s how we met Nick.

Liv was out in the hall before I even turned around. Her footsteps clattered down the stairs while mine padded. Out on the path, we tried to have a snowball fight, but even a ream of paper isn’t enough for that. We half-heartedly threw bits around, but the wind had carried a lot of it away. The river would be dotted with it.

A dozen paper flakes were caught in Nick’s hair. They were, by chance, arranged in a ring like a halo. Liv reached to tousle them out, but he ducked away from her hand. He reached up and rubbed them out of his hair himself. So Liv sprinkled another handful on, and he gave in and left them there. We all smiled. Teeth were everywhere.

Nick had to leave. He was a graduate student, a paleobiologist, at Magdalene too. He had a meeting. Liv got his phone number.