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## Happier

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## Happier

When I saw you last, I didn't know that it would be the last time. It was your goodbye party at some loud restaurant in San Francisco. They put us at a long table in the back. Sixteen people total. You were seated in the middle, surrounded by all your friends, both old and new. Some you met in college—classmates, roommates, and co-workers. Others you met in high school. And then there was me: your oldest friend. We met in junior high in our school's production of Annie. We bonded over our bitterness from playing ensemble roles as orphans. You wanted to play Annie. It was the one time you were happy to have red hair. You said I had the chops to play a bigger part but sixth graders don't get lead roles. But we played the lead roles in each other lives as best friends through the rest of junior high and then high school. You moved to the city for college while I stayed back in our hometown to attend community college but we kept in touch through the five years it took us to complete our degrees. And then you announced you were going off to travel indefinitely with your boyfriend.

One month after graduation you'd be in another country trying things some of us couldn't ever imagine doing. But before you left, your friends wanted to have one last hoorah. One might assume that a goodbye party would be hosted by your best friend but after a touch-and-go relationship through college, I wasn't sure I was even worthy of the title. You said I was your best friend, but only to me. I'll never know if it's how you referred to me when speaking to others. It was one of your college friends who planned the party. I'm sure she would have invited me had she known I even existed. But you invited me, I guess that's all that matters.

When I arrived, you hugged me and said you were glad I could come. I sat five people away from you so we couldn't say much to each other. The strangers I was seated with didn't say much to me either. So, from five seats away, I watched you laugh and smile with people who played a more active role in your life in recent years. And you looked happy. Happier than you ever were with me.

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When I saw you again for the first time in six years, I knew right away that it was you. And for as long as we were friends, there was no way you couldn't recognize me. But I needed confirmation that I made a lasting impression in your mind and even after six years, you would still remember me.

It was a tortuous process, trying to stand in just the right spot so you could see me but also avoiding eye contact so as not to make it obvious. When you did see me—conveniently right after the barista called my name—my heart fluttered because you remembered me and chose to do something about it. If you chose to ignore me, I don't know how bad it would have hurt me.

“Sydney?” You called out to me.

I turned to you, trying not to make it seem like this was the moment I was waiting for. “Amelia! Hi!”

You held your arms out, ready to embrace me before we met in the middle of the room. “How are you?”

Your arms were warm around me. You hugged me like you meant it and it had been so long since I had felt that kind of sincerity. "I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm really good actually. Do you have some time? Maybe we can catch up."

"Yeah, I have time."

"Great! I'm still waiting for my drink. Do you mind grabbing a table?"

"Yeah, sure. Is outside okay?"

"Outside works. It's a beautiful day."

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You wore your smile the whole night because you were excited. I wore mine as a mask to hide what I was really feeling. I had known for a long time that I wasn't the friend you needed, but for a while, I was the friend you had. Our friendship was like a bad habit, something neither of us had the strength to kick. I was only around because I had been for so long before.

My eyes bounced from one friend to the next. They were all talking to someone and drinking something. I was the odd one out. A passer-by would see me and wonder how I fit in with all these people. I guess I was wondering the same thing. You didn't say much to me that night, but it's okay, it gave me a lot of time to think. I am not adventurous, spontaneous, or even remotely outgoing and how we stayed friends for so long astonished me. These other people were much better suited to be your friend.

So, right there in that crowded San Francisco restaurant, I decided to do the one thing I knew I should have done a long time ago. I decided to let you go. I decided to stop trying to be a part of your life because you deserved so much better than me. I didn't want to hold you back anymore. I didn't want you to feel bad for making new friends and living a life that didn't include me. I wanted you to be happy. Even if that meant being happy with someone else.

...

To see you in the flesh again was surreal. Your hair was back to its natural strawberry-blonde and there was a certain glow about you sitting under the sun. I wondered if you noticed how absent I was from your life. I wondered if your life was better whether you knew or not that I was no longer there. I did my best to pretend that nothing ever changed.

"Tell me about your trip. How was it?"

You shook your head and took a sip of your drink. "No, I want to hear about your life before I go into detail about my trip." You smiled and leaned forward on your elbows.

I simply shrugged. I didn't know where to start. But no matter where I started, it wouldn't amount to your world expedition. "After graduation, I went back to work at the bookstore, got an apartment nearby and then they promoted me to a store manager."

"That's awesome! Congratulations. Have you finished writing your book?"

"Yeah, I finished it a couple months ago. I'm just working on the finishing touches before sending it off to publishers."

"That's so exciting. I can't wait to read it."

"Yeah, I'm excited. Hopefully, it all goes well. But enough about me, tell me about your trip."

You laughed. “Okay, okay.” You took a long drink, preparing to dive into your story. “The whole trip was amazing. I couldn’t even tell you all the places we went. We started in Europe and made it all the way to South America.”

There was a light in your eyes as you spoke. You looked just as happy as the day of your goodbye party. It was nice to see that the happy had stayed with you. It looked good on you.

“Are you still with your boyfriend?”

You were beaming even more now. “Yeah. We’ve been together almost seven years. Can you believe that?”

“Wow. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. Any guys in your life?”

“Of course not.”

“Oh, Sydney. You’ll find somebody. Don’t worry.”

For the first time that afternoon, the silence came over us like fog. I sipped my coffee just to be doing something. I tried not to look at you so you wouldn’t know what I was feeling. I spent so many years keeping my distance and then we were thrown right back into each other’s lives.

“I’ve missed you, Sydney.”

You didn’t give me a forced or obligatory ‘I miss you.’ It was sincere and it surprised me. I turned back to look at you and your happiness was gone. It disappeared and was replaced by something else.

“I’ve *really* missed you, Sydney.”

Your happiness was replaced by sadness, the same sadness I felt the last day we saw each other.

•••

I didn’t have the heart to tell you. I couldn’t be the reason that beautiful smile fell from your face. But even though I didn’t make it known to you what I was doing, you must have felt a weight lift off your shoulders when I stopped calling. By the time ten-fifteen rolled around, we were down two people, but the party raged on. But the party was over for me. The excitement fizzled out and the sadness crept in. I was ready to go, I was ready to leave you.

When one of your friends suggested everyone do a round of shots, that was my cue. I rose from my seat and slipped between the wall and the row of chairs. I tapped you on the shoulder and said I had to go. When you asked if I wanted to do a shot with everyone first, you said it with sincerity and just enough sarcasm that I knew you were joking but also ready to hand me a glass if I had a sudden change of heart. But I was driving home, you knew I didn’t drink, and being spontaneous just wasn’t who I was. And then you rose and pulled me close. The hug meant something different to each of us. While we were both saying goodbye, it was for different reasons. I had to keep myself from crying. You told me how much you’d miss me and I told you the same. I cherished our hug for as long as I could, knowing that it would be our last, knowing the forever we promised each other was over.

Right before we parted, I told you to forget everything and live in the moment. You’d be on the other side of the world, you should enjoy it with nothing to hold you back. And for the last time, I said goodbye. I left the restaurant feeling both relieved and disheartened at the same time. Outside, I turned back around and the scene remained: a table full of happy twenty-year-olds,

enjoying each other's company, this time without the sad girl in the corner. It painted a much better picture without me in it.

•••

I watched your life through pictures as you traveled from one country to the next. You called me only once, from Spain. You told me that you missed me and I reciprocated the feeling. But we missed each other because we felt like we had to. We had known each other and been friends for so long.

The pictures you posted showed you posing in front of monuments with a smile so wide I couldn't bear to interrupt the good you had going. You looked so happy, and now as you sat before me, you looked so sad.

"I've missed you, too." It sounded so forced coming from my mouth but I had to let you know that I didn't forget about you completely.

"I'm serious, Sydney. I have missed you. Why did I stop hearing from you?"

My stomach twisted in knots. I felt like throwing up. I thought this whole thing could have been avoided. That was the plan. And yet here we were. It didn't matter if I didn't have the heart to tell her then. I had to tell her now. I took a deep breath.

"Amelia, I'm sorry. You looked so happy at your goodbye party. You were never that happy when you were with me. I thought it'd be better for you if I wasn't around."

"Sydney, why would my life be better without my best friend?"

"You deserve a better best friend than me, Amelia. I'm not the friend you need."

"That's not true. You're my best friend because I wanted you to be. We said we were going to be friends forever."

I swallowed hard. "Forever and ever."

•••

Promising someone forever is a death sentence. Nothing lasts forever. And yet we promise it to each other anyway. Maybe we did it because we were young and naïve but we meant it, even if it wasn't the way things turned out.

We were in the eighth grade the first time we said it. You were sleeping over at my house. Our eighth-grade promotion was just around the corner. High school was the hot topic of the evening. We covered boys, classes, rumors, but it wasn't until the end that we got to the topic of friends. You and I had been friends at that point for two years, through two more school musical productions and awkward school dances. The title of friend had been earned at that point but nothing beyond that was for sure.

In the quiet of the night, when it felt like the rest of the world was asleep and we were the only two left awake, I asked you if we'd stay friends through high school. You laughed, not to make fun of me but because you thought it was such a funny thing to say. Of course, you said to me. I thought you would leave it at that, but then you added: You're my best friend; why wouldn't we be friends in high school? I sat in shock for a moment. It was such a relief to hear you say it. Good, I said, because you're my best friend too. You hugged me around the neck and I wrapped my arms around you. We're gonna be friends forever. I could hear it in your voice that

you meant it. Forever and ever. I meant it, too. And the moment I wished it would always be true, may have been the moment I doomed our relationship—forever.

•••

Throughout college, though we were miles apart, you were the only friend I really had. I met people in my classes but none of them stuck. We texted each other every few months to catch up but I always felt like such a burden to you. When I did let you go, it was a relief to feel like you weren't tied to me anymore. You were free and I didn't feel so guilty. Now, things were different. You didn't look so happy and I knew I was to blame.

“Were you happy, though?”

“Of course, I was happy. But I always felt like something was missing. Now I know that it was you.”

“You made so many new friends in college who were better for you. I knew I couldn't compete with them anymore.”

I had my hands folded in my lap, my knuckles turning white. You leaned in close to me, your arms resting on the table.

“I know that we kind of lost touch over the years but there was never any competition. You were always the one I could talk to or call in the middle of the night. And maybe you weren't the person who I went out with all the time but when we did hang out, those are the memories that I cherish. You were always the only person who would drop everything for me. That's why you'll always be my best friend.”

“I'm so sorry, Amelia. I didn't know.”

“I should have done a better job of letting you know.”

“Can we go back to being friends?”

“Of course. You'll always be my best friend.”

“Always.”