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Spoken/Unspoken

By Markella Paradissis-Wagner

Cristina

I wished I saw her every night. I only saw her when Mama and I drove down those ever-winding country roads to the farmer's market, and then to the spare parts store for Mama's work, and then to check on Nana in the retirement home on Fridays. But it might as well have been every night, because I went home and thought about her.

Her.

I first glimpsed her kneeling in the grass by the road, under a rumbling sky. I only saw her for a moment, and I knew the girl saw me too, as the bushes peeled back for a second in the rush of wind as the car passed. Their leaves blushed green and rifled like a deck of playing cards in the warm storm winds. I didn't think much of it, honestly, until we saw her again. And again. And finally, I said to Mama, "You know we pass that same girl every Friday?"

Mama smiled a somehow knowing smile. "Yeah? Cristina, you got a crush?"

I shook my head and smiled. "No." And kept smiling.

But how could I not? With the girl's long dark hair curling against the evening sky, her lips parted in surprise—or the beginning of a smile—when she saw our car go by.

That night, I lay in bed, thinking. Thinking, what if we met? *Mama could drive until one of us got a license. What if we got married? Funny story, how we met. So my Mama and I were driving down this country road...*

I rolled over, and just before drifting to sleep thought, *that was definitely a smile she gave me.*

I thought about her at the table the next morning, chewing through eggs with the shells still stuck in them; I thought about her while folding Mama's large underpants and sweaters; I thought about her while shaving my armpits in the shower, barely feeling the burn of the razor on my skin, just as I did not taste the eggshells or register the still damp clothing.

I had to see her again.

Finally, on the fourth Friday, I asked Mama if she could drop me off at the farmer's market, and maybe Mama could run her errands and check on Nana and her meds by herself this time.

"I didn't know you were so interested in farming."

"Well...I've always wanted more time there. We drop by it so quickly."

"I think Nana would miss you," Mama said.

"I'll see her next time. Maybe I'll pick out some fruit for her."

Mama rolled her eyes, but pulled over anyway. The car beeped and its red lights flashed. I hopped out and pretended to look at tomatoes until she was far away. *Should I buy something for the girl?* I patted my pockets. No wallet. *But I think Mama fell for my story. Ha-ha.*

As I continued walking, the smugness of my plan faded. *Did the girl even want to meet me? And I way overestimated how far of a walk it would be to my mystery girl.*

The thought was a cool breeze in this humidity. *Mystery girl. Like I'm going to join my princess.*

Dampness touching my neck, my hair, soaking my armpits, I walked into view. Moment of truth. *Well, Princess, what do you think?* The girl saw me. I smiled, and the girl smiled back.

I walked the rest of the way and the girl grabbed my hand—flutters shot from my chest to my stomach—and tugged me into the bushes. I made to say something, but the words got stuck so I swallowed my spit and leaned in, eyes half-open, half-panicking on the inside. When I saw her reach for my face, I closed my eyes and fell into it—the kiss. Her hands met my cheeks, cool against hot.

She was soft and rough and the kiss felt like 10,000 seconds but was probably only seven, and for those seven seconds I believed in magic, magic in the lightning bugs in the tall grass, the silver streaking the air around us, the safety of this second.

When we broke apart, the girl's brown eyes, like bright lights, were on me. *She saw me.*

We sat and watched the stars, mostly in silence. I tried to settle my mind whirring in all different directions. *I can't believe I'm here and we kissed and now we're sitting together. What*

is she thinking? I should have grabbed my wallet from Mama's purse so I could buy her—Mama.
I jumped to my feet. *Mama must almost be back to the farmer's market by now.*

"I'll see you," I called, but the girl was looking up at the sky.

I didn't make it all the way back to the farmer's market when Mama's van pulled up. Mama didn't say anything, just raised her eyebrows. As we drove, I folded my hands, paranoid that even speaking a single word would make this magic feeling end.

When we got home, Mama said, "I was on Facebook at the retirement home—"

"Was it that boring?"

"Ha-ha. I came across a picture of you and Keagan from your birthday last year."

"Oh god—Mom, delete it."

"I will."

"He broke up with me. Do you know how embarrassing it is to still be seen in pics with him?"

"Do you think I should just drop you off by that pretty girl next time?" She chuckled at my stunned expression. "Come on, Cristina. Your crushes, like when you first liked Keagan, have never been subtle. Even when you were little, and you liked that neighbor girl—"

"Ok!" I said, giggling. "I would really appreciate it if you did that."

She faked a scoff. "I'm not gonna leave my 14-year-old by the side of the road just to meet up with some floozy."

“Mama!” I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to laugh or change the subject. *Plus, she kind of already did leave me by the road with some floozy.*

“This isn’t about avoiding Nana, is it?” Mama asked. “I know she really hurt your feelings when she didn’t want you at Christmas after—after you told her you wanted to ask the girl from P.E. on a date?”

“No—that was so long ago. Why would you say that?” My cheeks flared hot and my palms began to sweat. Nana didn’t have any right to block me out. It was so ridiculous I could barely hear the words come out of Mama’s mouth.

“Cause you’re gonna miss seeing your elders when you grow up. Kids your age never want to, because they’re *old* and boring and they ingest food as liquids and pass it out as liquids too—”

I burst out laughing. “Jesus.”

“You’re not thinking of pretty girls now, are ya?”

We laughed until it was quiet again, and I asked, “Mama, what if this was the beginning to a real love story? We’ll tell this story at our wedding.”

Mama looked down, shook her head ever so slightly, and her lips moved but she didn’t smile.

She finally said, “Cristina, I’ll pull over for a few minutes and see if you can score her number.”

If my love life didn't hang in the balance, Mama's stressed tone while saying *score her number* would have been almost comical. "Then, we'll see Nana. She was asking about you last time, you know."

"I think I can get her number."

"Three minutes."

"Four."

"Your Mama used to be something back in the day. I could get that number in three."

"Oh my gosh."

I measured the week in energy bursts. I'd be sitting on my phone, or watching TV with Mama, and I'd imagine when I'd see her next, and a torrent of energy would explode through me. Watching the summer rain roll by, eating roast dinner with Mama, I'd have to hold in my smiles and wiggle in my seat. As I poured Apple Jacks into my bowl on Friday, I wondered if Mama would say anything about this evening's errands.

"Hey, we're still going tonight, right?" I asked, trying to sound casual. Instead, my voice shot up, airy.

"Yes," Mama said, eyeing me as she put away the dishes. I twiddled my thumbs on the wooden table, a small smile at the corners of my lips.

I didn't intend to do nothing for the day, but that's exactly how it happened.

I lay in bed on my phone. Cleaned a little. Busy hands for dull hours. I ate a butter, egg, and tomato sandwich, and scrolled on my phone some more. I began to get dressed when Mama knocked on the door and told me it was time to get ready to go.

As we pulled up on that fifth Friday, I didn't see the girl in the usual spot. I flashed Mama a nervous look, but she gave me a thumbs-up. I got out. Three minutes. Tick-tock. The brake lights looked like glowing devil horns in the waning yellow sky. As I came around the side of the car, the girl was there.

I jumped a little. The girl's throat moved like she had something to say, but choked it back. The wind tousled the girl's hair and blew cool air up my sleeves. I held them down. "Hey."

The girl made towards me—stopped. As I stepped forward, the girl led me back around the side of the van, blocking the houses across the road.

There was a tremble in the girl's hands but she held my face again (*Was that splotch of pink on her cheek there before, or is it just hot outside? Is she blushing?*) and, as the girl kissed me, my whole world went warm. The girl tugged me closer by my shirt. *Hell yeah.*

"My Mama can drive us to see each other in the van," I heard myself saying when we parted.

The girl looked doubtfully at the van, so I quickly added, "She's cool. She drove me to see my ex, and didn't make it too weird with him—" *Stop talking.*

The girl looked at me now, but those brown eyes were hotter.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up an ex. It's over with him."

"Him?" A pause. "I can't be with someone who doesn't know who they are. I never should have kissed you."

The breath was no longer in my chest. I'm not sure if it went out before or after the girl had spoken again. It didn't matter. She had sneered when she said it.

Hot tears. I froze them back. “Okay,” I said, voice wavering.

The girl stepped away as I opened the passenger door. I couldn’t look at Mama. But her smile was fading.

We drove together down the ever-winding country road as the sky turned dark, like every night this summer, and Mama reached over and squeezed my hand.

Lee

I knew the things that should be done, the things that shouldn't be done, and the things no one speaks about. The last one was more hazily defined but stood true in my mind anyway.

Don't let your weekly chores—dusting, taking out trash—build up and never skip a daily chore—feeding the horses out back, washing dishes. Sunday family dinners are not missed, don't disrespect Ma, especially not Pa, and don't...Don't. Was that last one—(*Don't.*)

I sighed. I saw the girl in the car in the night, wondered where she was going. *Probably a boyfriend, ugh.*

Most nights, I pushed the thought of her away, and remembered why I was out here. To be alone. To watch the stars. The way they shone out here just after sunset was better than anything that little green house had to offer. I didn't understand why my skin scrawled when I was inside the house. *It knows. It knows that I'm—different.*

Is *different* the right word?

Ma and Pa watched from the windows. I could feel their stares glued to my back like googly eyes.

My mind went outside when washing dishes with Ma, neither of us speaking, and watching TV with Pa and his beer and his beer belly. Ma and Pa mandated family dinners but I felt like I was watching them eat as opposed to eating with them.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm in the wrong place, or if I'm the one who's wrong. That was also the curse of sitting out here with the stars. To be alone meant to be alone with my thoughts. *Shit.*

Most days, Pa showed me how to work the farm, always asking if me if I'd take over it one day. I never responded. There was no way in hell's hell I'd take over the stinking place. Ma told me to read the Bible before I went to sleep. But no one really did. Most nights, Pa stumbled to bed and Ma stayed up cleaning counters and looking at bills. My mind went outside when Pa's breath was too strong or Ma's silence became too heavy. I was fed and clothed, but the air inside was unbreathable. Outside, there was no Ma or Pa, no beer or bills, and no spoken or unspoken rules.

There was the girl that drove by every week. I didn't even mean to—or maybe I did—but I met the car girl's eyes and made some sort of face. What my face did, I was not sure. I tried to smile, then remembered the unspoken rule and tried not to smile, quirking my eyebrows, but it was too late: the girl in the car whizzed by in the oncoming night. She had seen it. *(She had seen me.)*

Outside, under the stars and next to the messy green scribble of bushes, I sat with feelings that I wouldn't allow myself to think of during the day. *I'm a puzzle but the pieces are scattered.* Feelings that made it seem like I had a target on my back. *(They can't know my thoughts.)*

Maybe the car girl didn't know if she'd ever kiss anyone either, if it would even be right to kiss someone. *(My parents never told me not to kiss girls.)* Or maybe the girl didn't even see the smile I gave her, or thought nothing of it.

I turned my head towards the stars, sprawled across the sky like another language. I wished I could read it. Maybe it would give me answers, or maybe the little lights in the sky would spell out, *Ha-ha, screw you.*

But it was pointless—the girl had seen me and I knew she'd show up. I liked the girl and I knew the girl liked me. Curled in bed at night, I wanted to know what her lips tasted like—*what she tasted like*—and I never knew how badly I wanted to run away but also stay put like a mountain.

Was every day passing as long for her as it was for me? They go by in every excruciating detail from the cracked pink paint on Ma's plates to the creak of the floorboards under Pa's feet at night, the kind that keep me awake.

When the girl did show up that Friday, we didn't speak.

My parents could be at the window any second from now with watchful eyes. *Hide.* I grabbed the girl from the car's hand and led her behind the bushes. I peeked around the leaves at the window—it was still empty. *Whew.*

The girl was leaning in (*oh no*) but I leaned in the rest of the way anyway. My hands caressed the girl's face and then ran through her hair (*soft*). Heat rose in my cheeks. But I couldn't breathe. Tension seeped through my muscles and my heartbeat was way too fast.

When the kiss ended (*finally*) I felt a roll of nausea in my belly. Then the stars were above us again and the cicadas were screaming in my ears.

"What do you like to do out here?" the car girl asked. She swung her hands, intertwined them, then broke them apart and swung them again.

"I like to watch the stars," I said.

The girl sat down near those ruffling bushes. I did not want her to sit but was glad she did, and slid through the grass next to her.

In the week that followed, I walked around home feeling like I had a bomb strapped to my chest counting down to Friday.

They knew. Ma and Pa could have seen us from the window. The little green house might have told them. Maybe they had always known.

My father had cleared the haze on my definition of unspoken, stinging and smart. I felt the ache of his explanation in my cheek as I did my weekly chores.

The air in the house became suffocating. The beer and the silence turned into yelling and smashed plates. *They'd never told me not to kiss girls.*

The night of the kiss, that evening—could not happen again.

Locked in my bedroom, trying to fall asleep, I wished there was something inside me that I could rip out and that losing it would make me different. I wished I could be up there in the night sky, away from the house—my stomach turned—and away from myself and this girl.

I'm screaming into a void but no one good will hear me. But my parents will, and they'll shut me into the void with this piece of myself and tell me they're proud I'm making the right choice.

But it's not a choice. But I like girls and I like you.

My thoughts blended together, consuming me. *Why can't I be someone else why won't these feelings go away—*

On Friday, I sat outside like usual, but my gaze kept slipping from the stars to the road. Waiting. Waiting. I folded and refolded my legs.

I ran my fingers through the dirt and then sat on my hands. (*Why can't I be someone else?*)

I sighed and pushed myself up from my spot by the bushes. *Might as well wait by the road if I can't focus on anything but this...situation.*

And it was a good night for staring at the sky, too. The purple clouds spread like a bruise across the sky. Lighting flashed, almost completely hidden within their bloated formations.

My hand touched my face absentmindedly as the van rolled up, then stopped.

God.

But there was the girl. She jumped a bit when she saw me. I knew I must've looked like a vampire standing there in the road, bags carved under my eyes.

Barely aware I was doing so, I walked her back around the other side of the van, making sure Ma and Pa couldn't see anything from the house this time.

But this girl saw me. This girl understood. This girl knew. The fear and unrest in my belly disappeared for a moment. I cupped the girl's face and when our lips met, electricity shot from my chest to my stomach. *(Is this what it's like—)*

I grabbed the girl's shirt and pulled her closer. The corner of my lips curled a bit into a smile as a thrill went through my whole body. The sky wasn't purple, it was gold. This was better than the stars. *What if I could know joy like this all the time—*

No.

I pulled away and let go of the girl's shirt, gasping. No, there was no way. I knew what had to happen. The girl smiled. *Please don't smile.*

I said, "We can't—"

The car girl said, "My Mama can drive us to see each other in the van."

I frowned and looked at the van. *Think of something, anything to end this clean and now.*

"She's cool. She drove me to see my ex. She didn't make it too weird with him. Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up an ex. It's over with him."

"Him?" I paused and took a breath. "I can't be with someone who doesn't know who they are. I never should have kissed you."

The girl's face hollowed like a rotting pumpkin. I realized what I had said. Words weren't just slapped together like trash on the street; even if the intent was jumbled, they meant something. I knew that, and so did the girl.

“Okay,” the girl said, voice quivering.

I meant what I said; I didn't mean it.

Silent, I took a step back, watching the girl get into the van. Was she crying? I hoped not.

The van drove away. The girl could drive away from this.

Tears welled in my eyes as the van turned up dirt farther down the street. I looked at the sky and wondered where under these stars the girl would end up tonight.

I didn't mean it.