

LATE AUGUST HEAT

Small droplets of water fell onto the playground equipment, slow enough for Kiara to count. It said on the news it was going to rain hard that day, but Jonathan and Adrian thought they could kill some time there before the rain started. She had smelled rain as they walked out of the house, so she objected, but the two hyper boys wouldn't listen.

"Guys!" she yelled to them from the creaking swing set. "It's starting to rain, let's head back." She grabbed their water bottles and wrapped sandwich leftovers and placed them in the picnic basket. The two boys kept chasing each other around the slide. She couldn't believe how much energy Jonathan, a rising senior in high school, had to play with their 7-year-old brother.

"Mom's gonna get mad if you two come back home soaking wet. Let's go!" she shouted at them again. The rain started dripping faster and harder. She looked down at her watch. It was just past 6 and the sun was setting. Kiara watched the sun set in a cascade of warm, benign tones and cringed at the unpleasant moisture lingering in the air around them.

"Got ya!" shouted Jonathan, picking up the brown freckled boy. Adrian screamed and laughed until he had exhausted himself.

"Let's go," Jonathan said, out of breath but smiling.

"I've been telling you that for the past 5 minutes," Kiara grumbled. Her big brother's smile was annoying but something she learned to admire dearly. It was like smiling all the time was a piece of cake for him. Kiara herself couldn't even smile without her jaw hurting after five seconds. Sometimes she felt a hint of sadness in those smiles she adored.

The rain pounded harder into the concrete walkways of the one way street and soon every inch of the playground cement was covered in puddles. The three siblings ran across the street to get back to their home, which was only a block away and convenient when Adrian wanted to play. Their mom wouldn't let him play inside because he would knock over expensive things. It was also "good for getting vitamin D" according to their mom. Kiara begged to stay behind the first week of summer, but she was rejected to the point where when the word "playground" was mentioned, she would start putting on sunscreen. The rain intensified and they would probably have to shout to talk to each other.

"Last corner," she shouted. Kiara had been in charge of directions for as long as she could remember. It was unintentional, but she sometimes imitated the GPS's automated voice when vocalizing directions.

They sprinted down the sidewalk, Jonathan carrying Adrian on his back, practically doing high knees up the stairs. They burst through the door frame, gasping for air as the trio of siblings attempted to dry off their clothes and shoes, now soaking in fresh rain water.

Surprisingly, it made Kiara feel even more uncomfortable being cold while wet than being warm and drenched.

“Oh my!” exclaimed their mom. “I told you to be back before 6!”

“Sorry,” Kiara mumbled, shrugging off her mom. She was about to go upstairs to her room, when her mom stopped her with an extended arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she said in her I’m-going-to-get-mad-if-you-go-up-those-stairs tone. Kiara gently pushed her hand out of the way.

“To shower,” she said blatantly. Kiara made sure to run up quickly so the carpet on the stairs wouldn’t get too wet. Now in the privacy of her bathroom, she hurriedly peeled off her drenched clothes, and slipped into the shower, shivering at the contact of her bare feet to the cold, tiled floors. A hot bath was just what she needed.

The next day, Kiara woke up with an unusually grumbling stomach. She was in agonizing pain, but couldn’t find the strength to leave the warm comfort of her bedsheets. She had skipped the previous night’s dinner, but didn’t regret it one bit because of that bath.

“Well, nothing I can do about it anymore,” she said to herself, lightly slapping her face in a poor attempt to wake herself up. After unlocking the door, she quietly tiptoed down the stairs. It’s not like it did anything to quiet the creaking of stairs though. There were loud voices in the dining room. Mostly of Adrian yelling. Kiara walked into the kitchen where Jonathan was scrubbing plates and rinsing spoons. She admired the common sight of her big brother willingly helping around the house. She awkwardly shuffled by him to get a bowl from the cabinet.

“You weren’t at dinner yesterday,” he said quietly.

“Yea I sorta forgot.” The suffocating silence told her that Jonathan was upset.

“That wasn’t the best thing to say,” she said, pouring the cereal into the bowl. “What I meant was-”

“It’s fine. Mom made baked potato soup yesterday but Adrian finished your bowl,” he said in a condescending tone. A pang of sharp piercing guilt stabbed Kiara in the chest. Her mom was allergic to potatoes so they rarely had baked potato soup. It was obvious that she made it for her and Kiara had just shoved her off. She felt horrible. As she reached for the milk, a loud crash came from the dining room along with an “Adrian!” from their dad.

“Dad! Are you okay?” asked Jonathan in a voice loud enough for them to hear. The man with greying dark brown hair stuck out a thumbs up from under the table.

“We’re good! Adrian just dropped his plate!” he shouted back. Kiara shrugged her surprise off and poured the milk into her bowl. Cereal before that though. Obviously. She shoved a spoonful into her mouth, stomach aching with hunger before Jonathan interrupted.

“You’re not going to pray?” he asked with a frown. He was like a mini dad and sometimes it got annoying like when Kiara would do the slightest things that she wasn’t supposed to do.

“I prayed last week,” she replied, munching on the cereal, looking at the wall near the front door. They took a family picture every 3 years. It was “to preserve the memories” according to their dad, although Kiara found it pointless since her smile wasn’t genuine. It’s not like she

stayed in that house for anything but food, water, and shelter. Jonathan put away the last bowl and sighed.

“That’s not how it works. God wants to hear from you often like you and your friends.”

“I don’t have any,” she replied instantly without a second thought. Rachel was really her only friend throughout middle school, but when she moved to the high school her parents wanted her to go to, they lost touch. It wasn’t like there would be another Rachel in her life anyways. She remembered how her light blonde hair swung around when she ran after her in freeze tag. And how she bit the top of her pen when she was concentrating. Half chewed pens were still mixed in her pencil mug after several attempts at imitating the blonde’s habits.

Jonathan froze for a second after she answered. Then, he grabbed the broom and dustpan and walked over to his parents. Kiara silently and quickly finished her bowl of cereal at the counter. By the time she walked over, the mess was already cleaned and Adrian was asking to go play. She groaned but went to change out of her pajamas.

“Hey, sweetheart, you snuck downstairs without a good morning to me?” her dad asked, arms wide open and walking towards her. He hugged her and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

“Morning, Dad,” she said, wiping off the kiss with the back of her hand. As she applied the sunscreen to her face, her mom yelled from the living room,

“Be back before 6!”

“We will, Mom!” Jonathan shouted back. After finally applying sunscreen on Adrian, who was desperately trying to avoid application of the “disgustingly wet and sticky goop” (as he liked to call it) the three slipped on their gym shoes and walked to the playground as usual. Kiara made sure she didn’t forget the basket with their water bottles, some sliced watermelon, and 3 ham sandwiches prepared by their mom. They spent large amounts of the day babysitting Adrian, and it was tiring running around in the heat. She wasn’t sure how 7-year-olds even had that much energy. Once they arrived at the playground, Kiara set their basket down on a nearby picnic table and tied her hair up into a high ponytail, preparing to run around the park with her younger brother. She and Jonathan had set shifts on who played with Adrian. The first twenty minutes would be Kiara, then Jonathan for the next 20 minutes, and so on. It had been like that ever since Adrian was old enough to know what he wanted. It was a high functioning system.

Kiara spotted a little girl and a teenager who looked around Jonathan's age. She saw Adrian run over the girl and peppily talk to her with a bright smile and extended hand. Although he was out of ear range, Kiara guessed he had probably said something along the lines of, “Hi! I’m Adrian, wanna play together?” because the girl ran off with him to climb the playground equipment. The brother and Jonathan were talking and started walking towards Kiara. *Oh god, a person. What do I do? Should I just stay silent?* As the guy approached the table, she tried to make it seem like she was busy watching Adrian. When they got even closer, she could see that the boy had fluffy jet black hair and green eyes. They weren’t green eyes like hers though. They were like emerald green, Kiara’s was more hazel.

“Hey, I’m Liam. That’s my little sister, Lily, over there,” he said in an unexpectedly deep voice.

"I'm Kiara. I see you've already met Jonathan," she said with the usual plastic smile.

"Nice to meet you. I hope we see each other more in the future," he said, putting his hand out. She shook it and they all sat down at the table. They talked about Liam's adventures in foreign countries and about the different languages he could speak. *Wow he's impressive.* They made small talk about school, favorite foods, and their siblings. Kiara found out that Liam was going to be a senior in high school, and he volunteered to tutor her in Algebra II.

"She's actually really smart. She just doesn't decide to use her genius. Too nice to leave the others in the dust," Jonathan said sarcastically, chuckling with Liam. Kiara blushed in embarrassment and lightly hit Jonathan's arm glaring at him with a stop-embarrassing-me look. They talked until sunset, sharing the watermelon and occasionally playing with the kids. It was already dark outside when they parted ways, promising to keep in touch, and surprisingly, Adrian was exhausted, for once in his life.

"What's this? You, a 7 year old, are tired?" Kiara asked teasingly, in her good mood..

"7 and a half," Adrian said between gasps for breath. "I'll show you!" Just like that he ran into the street. Kiara laughed and shadowed her face with her hand, but stopped when she heard Jonathan yell, "Adrian!"

A loud honk came after it. When she slowly moved her hand, she saw two bright car lights staring her in the face. Below them was a bleeding 7 (and a half) year-old kid. Kiara's eyes widened.

THREE YEARS LATER

It was January 12, 2020, three years since the accident. Adrian Canplus Finton was announced dead on Thursday, August 17, 2017 at 8:24 pm. They were informed that the driver of the car that hit Adrian was drunk after leaving an office dinner at a local bar. He was alive, with only a bruised cheek as a physical remembrance of the time. Nightmares of red and blue lights had faded away and life was somewhat normal again. Somewhat. Time went on and the Earth stayed in rotation. An outsider wouldn't be able to differentiate the Fintons from any other basic caucasian Christian family. Rather than going to college, Jonathan applied for a low paying job working in retail. His mentors, teachers, comrades, all thought his smarts and high school straight A's had gone to waste. They pitied him in silence. A new family photo was hung up on the familiar frame, but without a tiny familiar face. When Kiara moved out of the house to go to the University of Illinois, she stayed in a small flat with her roommate, Emily. She had long blonde hair that was mostly unkempt since she woke up late for morning classes. Today was special though, because it was Adrian's birthday.

The 18 year old put on a dress length brown coat and grabbed the flowers she and Emily had bought early in the morning.

"Taxi!" she called out, to the yellow cab. She got in excitedly and greeted the driver. "To Graceland Cemetery please," she said, with a smile. When she got there, she walked to the 7 and a half year old's grave. A tall, brown haired man was there looking down at the grave. "Jonathan!" she shouted, waving at him. She let her smile falter slightly.

“Hey! You’ve grown up nicely,” he said laughing and ruffling her hair. She laid the white and blue hydrangeas down and smiled. She could see Adrian, running towards them asking to play. Kiara quit crying at everything that reminded her of him, instead she welcomed them. Jonathan had already told Adrian about everything that happened after his passing.

“Hi Adrian. Happy birthday!” she started but then stopped. “Haha, sorry I’m not really sure how I’m supposed to start this off. Let’s see, hmm. I got a job as a part timer at a video game store a few months ago. We took a new family picture too. I asked Jonathan to photoshop you in there but Mom caught him in the act.” She laughed by herself. It was kind of lonely not hearing him interrupt her, like he used to. Kiara looked behind her to find Jonathan, but he was invested, phone to his ear, in a call. After a deep breath, she continued talking. She told him about her new room mate and about Lily and Liam. Liam went to the same university as her and majored in architectural design. By the time she finished talking, their parents had arrived and they prayed together. After a long, reminiscing thirty minutes, they waved goodbye and parted ways. Although Adrian was no longer physically with them, the Fintons could feel his spirit in times of loneliness. He was watching over his dear family, and, bit by bit, melted away the plastic that bounded Kiara’s forced smile. They were finally able to move on.