

Clang! Clang!

In the distance, the city bells ring. It's two o'clock. Which means...

Ting!

The visitor ringer chimes. I flinch. She's right on time.

As usual, she's decked out in horrible clothes--womens' fashion from the last decade hanging on an awkward teen frame. Her mascara is smudged, and her blush is gaudy.

I stare down at the surface of my desk, avoiding eye contact, and begin to toy with a small notepad. She'll take ages to find something, I know.

Her high-heeled footsteps clack against the linoleum floor as she idly peruses the aisles. *Clack-tack-tack*. She's the only one here, but the tiny store feels full. I wonder what little item she'll purchase this time. A barrette? A pack of cigs?

"Hey, Randy!"

I almost jump out of my chair. *Damn it*. She's standing in front of the cashier's desk now. "Y-yes?"

She raises an eyebrow, then grins, revealing a set of lipstick-smeared teeth. Her flowery perfume is overbearing. "How are you today?"

I swallow and sit up. Our conversations...they're always uncomfortable. "I'm fine." My voice is clipped and firm.

She doesn't take the hint. "That's great! Hey, tell me how this looks." She holds up a red satin bow to the side of her head. She's wearing her hair out, long and free. Usually, it's tied up in an archaic bun.

"It looks...fine."

She raises an eyebrow. "Really? I was joking. It's too childish."

You're a child. "Ah."

She stares at the bow for a moment, turning it over in her hands. They're dry and chafed, tinged with pink at the fingertips. There's grime underneath her nails peeking out from layers of peeling red polish.

After a moment, she sighs and droops. "Well, there's nothing else, so..." Gingerly, she sets the bow on the counter before me, then reaches into her black coat pocket for money. "I'll settle for looking *girlish*."

I grimace. "Alright." I check the price tag--\$.50. She never buys anything over a dollar. "That'll--"

She pulls out a two-dollar bill and waves it in front of my face. "I checked. Keep the change. It's *rare*."

Hesitantly, I grab the bill and place it in the money box. "Alright. See you tomorrow."

"Right." She doesn't move from her spot, and presses her lips together, staring at the floor. Her fingers are clasped behind her back.

I frown. "Do you need anything? I can--"

"You're *smart*, right? You're good at school?" She blurts, then covers her mouth with her hands.

My eyes widen. "W-what?"

She clears her throat. "Sorry, I--you get good grades? And you're going to college this fall?"

I have no idea what she's talking about, but something about her voice gives me chills. It's desperate, on the verge of tears. "I--yes, I do. I graduated top of my class."

She takes a deep breath, then clenches her fists. Dimly, I realize that she's already crying. "What's wrong?"

She winces. "N-nothing. I-" She sniffles and looks away. "Nothing at all."

But I know what's wrong, and I know she knows, too.

I take a deep breath, unsure of how to begin. "Did a *client*-"

"No. It's not-" She starts, then stops at the sight of my face. "I-"

"Did they *do* anything?" I try to sound reassuring, but my words come out harsher than I intended. She takes a step backward as if I've just punched her in the gut.

"No!" She shouts, frantic, shaking her head. Her voice rises. "No, I'm not a--*please*, just listen, I-"

"Fine."

She stops and stares at me with wide eyes rimmed with black and red. Her face suddenly looks gaunt, jaundiced. "What?"

"Tell me. I'm all ears."

For a moment, those sickly, stunned eyes of hers don't leave my face. Then, she bursts into tearful murmurs. "Please can you give me money? I'll do anything, for anyone you know, who-"

"*Stop!*" I mutter through clenched teeth, glancing over her shoulder to check if anyone else is there. Thankfully, the store's deserted. "No. I want nothing of the sort."

She gulps. "But I need money to run away. You understand, don't you?" Her face crumples, and she covers her mouth with a hand.

I breathe in and out, slowly, trying to collect my thoughts--because I *do* understand. Everyone does. We all walk past her house for baseball. We have to, because the open grassy fields are obstructed by a sleazy downtown. It's a place spoken about in hushed, knowing tones, a place our mothers forbid us from entering.

Sometimes, when we wander around at night, we've got to drive through that neighborhood. And almost every time, there are old, beat-up cars parked in front of her house, and we know what they're there for.

"R-randy?" She rubs her eye, leaving a streak of dark-green makeup across her cheek.

"I'm fine." I swallow. Christ, why me? "I don't have much. Here's a ten to buy a ticket to Chicago and a ten for food." I hand her the bills and look away. It's my salary for the week. "Find a shelter. Go back to school."

Her face lights up, and for a moment, I feel terrible, terrible. "Thank you so much, Randy. I-I promise, I'll come back someday!" She wipes her face and sniffs, then takes the money and turns to leave.

As she opens the door, she glances back at me and smiles. Her expression is so youthful, so carefree. A lump forms in my throat. "Thank you! I'll be an adult someday, Randy."

Then, with a creak of the door, she's gone.

I place my head in my hands. An unwelcome wave of memories floods my mind: Sylvia in kindergarten, picked on by kids whose parents tell them things. Sylvia when I started junior year, never once walking the halls of Greenwood High.

Sylvia. Poor Sylvia.

No, I think, letting a tear run down my cheek. *No, I don't think you ever will be.*

Editing Version

Ting!

The visitor bell chimes, and in the far distance, the worn town clock strikes two. She's right on time.

As usual, she's decked out in horrible clothes--womens' fashion from the last decade hanging on an awkward teen frame. Her smudged mascara and gaudy blush remind me of the old ladies at the diner.

I stare down at the surface of my desk and begin to toy with a small notepad. She'll take ages to find something, I know.

Her high-heeled footsteps clack against the linoleum floor as she idly searches the aisles. *Clack-tack-tack*. She's the only one here, but the tiny store feels full. I wonder what little item she'll purchase this time. A barrette? A pack of cigs?

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I swallow and sit up, hesitating. Our conversations...they're always uncomfortable. "I'm fine." My voice is deliberately curt.

She doesn't take the hint. "That's great! Hey, tell me how this looks." She holds up a red satin bow to the side of her head. She's wearing her hair out, long and free. Usually, it's tied up in an old-fashioned bun.

"It looks...fine."

She raises an eyebrow. "Really? I was joking, you know. It's too childish."

You're a child. "Ah."

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I frown. "Do you need anything? I can--"

"You're *smart*, right? You're good at school?" She blurts, then covers her mouth with her hands.

My brows furrow. "Excuse me?"

She clears her throat. "Sorry, I--you get good grades? And you're going to college this fall?"

I have no idea what she's talking about, but something about her voice gives me chills. It's desperate, on the verge of tears. "I--yes, I do. I graduated top of my class."

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"No!" She shouts, frantically shaking her head, and her voice rises. "No, I'm not a--*please*, just listen, I--"

"Fine."

She pauses and stares at me with wide eyes rimmed with black and red. Her face suddenly looks gaunt, jaundiced. "What?"

"Tell me. I'm all ears."

For a fleeting moment, those sickly, stunned eyes of hers don't leave my face. Then, she bursts into tearful murmurs. "Please can you give me money? I'll do anything, for anyone you know, who--"

A sharp inhale escapes my mouth. "*Stop!*" I glance over her shoulder to check if anyone is there. Thankfully, the store's deserted. "*No*. I want nothing of the sort."

She gulps. "But I need money to run away. You understand, don't you?" Her face crumples, and she covers her mouth with a hand.

I breathe in and out, slowly, trying to collect my thoughts--because I *do* understand. Everyone does. We've all walked past her house in the sleazy downtown neighborhood that obstructs the open sports fields. It's a place spoken about in hushed, knowing tones, a place our mothers used to forbid us from entering.

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Her face contorts into an ugly cry, and I feel terrible, terrible. "Thank you, Randy. *Thank you*. I-I promise, I'll--" She wipes her face and sniffs, then grabs the money. For a moment, she stands in place, staring at the floor. Then, without a word, she swoops in and gives me a trembling one-sided hug. A lump forms in my throat.

It's a brief embrace, and when she lets go, she gives me a sad smile. For a moment, time stops. Then the door creaks--

Ting!

--and she's gone.

For the last time.

I place my head in my hands. An unwelcome wave of memories floods my mind: Sylvia in kindergarten, picked on by kids whose parents told them things. Sylvia when I started junior year, never once walking the halls of Greenwood High.

Sylvia. Poor Sylvia.

Dear God, I think. A tear runs down my cheek. *Dear God, have mercy.*