

## Sunset

The crickets' evening chorus reverberated throughout the air. A boy sat in a clearing by the bank of a river reading a thick book, a ritual he performed each Saturday evening. His head rested on the bark of a lone tree, the sun's solar gold a warm cradle.

His silent reverie was interrupted by a flash. It was a pale pulse from beneath the canopy of the surrounding trees. He jolted up to identify its source, easily spotting it: a camera aimed at him, held by a man standing a distance away on the edge of the forest. He lowered it when their eyes met.

"Uh, sorry!" the man apologized, "I was taking a picture of you!"

He yelled that as if admitting to his disturbing behavior made it any less so.

"Yeah, I could tell," the boy sneered. He clamped his book shut, and trudged over to the man, "So taking pictures of kids is something you do a lot?"

"No-no-no!" he stammered, "It's not like that! You just looked picturesque. I wanted to capture the moment!"

"Then why didn't you just ask me for a picture?" the boy questioned.

"Like I said, it's to capture the moment. So it's genuine! Asking you would make the photo too artificial!"

The boy frowned, indifferent to his rampant justifications. Artificial or not, who cares? Nobody would be able to tell the difference. The man chuckled nervously. His thoughts must've been plain on his face.

"I guess it might be hard for you to understand," he said, followed by another round of stiff laughter.

"...What are you doing out here anyway?"

"Um. Well, I heard this area looks great during the sunset, so I came here to photograph it. Then I saw you, and...well, you know..."

Sure the sunset could be beautiful, but it was the same here as it was anywhere else in town as far as the boy was concerned. That the man just happened to be recommended this specific spot by chance was an unnerving coincidence...

Although, the boy had to admit there was no eerie aura emanating from the photographer. At least, nothing he could sense through first appraisal. He appeared more guilty of bold insensitivity than perversion. The man didn't look much older than himself in fact. He was probably in college, and his last statement implied that he didn't live in town. The boy didn't recognize him at all either, a rare thing in such a quaint area. He didn't know everyone's name, but he usually recognized every face he came across.

"Do you live here? I haven't seen you around." the boy asked.

"Ah, no. I'm visiting my cousin, Riley. Riley Cahill. Maybe you know her?"

The boy perked up. He did know of Riley Cahill. Not only that, but she'd sold him the very book he'd been reading up until a minute ago. She was one of the few employees at the town's bookstore, in addition to one of the few friends he had above high school age.

"Oh, yeah I do!" the boy affirmed. "Now that I think about it, she did mention a while back that you'd be visiting for the summer. I kind of forgot about that. Sorry, man."

"No, it's alright, I was the one being suspicious in the first place," the man smiled, extending his hand, "I'm guessing you're Darryon then? Her friend? You look as she described."

The boy shook it, and nodded. The man smiled, "Nice to meet you then, I'm Connor."

The conversation took a positive turn after that, much to Connor's benefit, who was an inch away from a trip to the police station.

Riley found endless entertainment in the incident after the two young men described it to her. Her storming laughter rolled through the aisles of the bookstore. She found some restraint after receiving a couple of dirty looks from some browsing customers she found some restraint, but an impish grin remained stitched to her face.

“I swear...”, she snickered, “You know, I *told* you to only take pictures like that places with lots of people. And to turn your flash off! Aren’t you supposed to be an expert at this or something?”

Connor chuckled meekly, a shadow to Riley’s raucous glee. “Yeah...I’ve learned my lesson.”

“You better. I don’t want to have to bail you out of jail because you were seen taking pictures from the bushes of a preschool, or something ridiculous.”

From the way the cousins bantered they seemed more like siblings than cousins. Darryon said as much, and in response Riley explained the two were in close when they were younger. Both figuratively and literally. They shared the same neighborhood.

“We might as well have been sister and brother. We were only a few houses apart”, Riley explained; a fond tone to her words, “We always went to the same school and rode the same bus and everything. I think we played around together damn near every day.”

She sighed, “Well, until he fell in love with his camera. Once we got to high school he spent less and less time with me and our other buddies, and more time looking for birds to photograph.”

“Dang. Birds over your own blood,” Darryon remarked.

“Right? He even named it; Alyssa or Lin or something. I mean, who the hell names their camera!? He even talked to-”

“Woah, hey!” Connor interjected, theatrically raising an arm, “First of all, don’t disrespect Lisa! Second of all, It’s not like I stopped hanging with you guys altogether!”

“Yeah, but playing *Smash Bros.* wasn’t as fun when you weren’t there to bully half the time.”

“Yeah, that’s because then *you’d* be at the bottom of the skill hierarchy.”

“Whatever,” Riley rolled her eyes, “We’re taking pictures at the mountain tomorrow, right? You want to come, Darry?”

'Darry' bristled upon hearing his loathed nickname. "...Sure, I'm not busy. But I don't have a real camera."

"You can use my spare one," offered Connor.

"Ok, thanks... Does it have a name I should be aware of?"

"No!" Connor's face flushed, "And I don't even name my cameras anymore!"

The following day, they headed towards a ridge site overlooking the town. The cicadas buzz filled the pine forest blanketing the mountain.

"Hey, Riley, I didn't know you liked photography," said Darryon.

She shrugged, "I don't. Not as much as Connor. I only do this kind of thing with him. My camera's been collecting dust for most of the year"

"Yep," Connor affirmed, "It's easy to tell since your skills haven't gotten any better in the last near-decade."

Riley flicked him on the nape, hard, and he yelped.

"Not all of us can or want to be as 'amazing' at this as you!"

"What got you into photography anyways, Connor?" asked Darryon.

"I can't really say anything *got* me into it. Not in the sense that I was inspired by some famous photographer or photo," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, "I just started, I guess. One day, I saw this cool-looking bug, and-

"A bug?"

Connor laughed, "Yeah, a bug. I didn't know what kind it was – I still don't, actually. I never really bothered to look it up for some reason. Anyways, it wasn't like anything I'd seen before. It was super cool. I took a picture so I could remember it forever. I guess that was the start of my hobby."

"Huh, cool."

After a few minutes the three of them reached a clearing on the side of the mountain. Having escaped the roof of leaves, Darryon looked upwards.

The view he witnessed was extraordinary.

The sky was an angel, a divine beauty not of this world. Rivers of scarlet ran across her figure. Great lavender-hued nebulas sailed across them, following the guide of the light wind. A great golden eye oversaw all of it as it sunk deeper into the horizon, yielding to an encroaching navy expanse. Darryon was starstruck at something as grand as this gracing his insignificant town, which sat humbly and quietly.

Connor and Riley stood in awe as well, their bodies twilight statues beneath the heavenly grandeur. That sight gave Darryon an idea.

A subtle *click* sounded, and they turned to face Darryon with his camera directed towards them. They looked at him with confusion.

“What are you doing?” asked Connor.

Darryon lowered his camera, and smirked. “Just capturing the moment.”