

1: SOMETHING REMARKABLY BEAUTIFUL

It was the middle of winter, and my jacket was such an obnoxiously bright shade of yellow that I worried I stuck out like a sore thumb. One yellow stick in a sea of grey and winter colors in the school hallway. A teacher's assistant was ushering me down the hallway so quickly; I assumed it was because he wanted to be rid of the responsibility that was me as soon as possible. He was droning on and on about school policy and scheduling and horridly boring stuff. He seemed to be about as interested in telling me these things as I was in listening to them.

"Electives are twice a day, first thing in the morning and first class after lunch. I'll show you to the music room since that's what you've selected." He said in a monotone.

"Can't wait." I decided to try. "Being in a new place, especially a place of learning, always gets me excited."

The TA looked at me like I was some kind of weirdo, rather than your typical kid excited for learning and education, but whatever. Students slugged along in the hallways, stalling as long as they could until the tardy bell. The TA paid them no mind and neither did they towards him. Instead I could feel their eyes on me, and sensed their ears perking up, as is typically the case when one becomes aware of business that's not their own.

Finally, we came to a stop in front of a door marked ORCHESTRA, and the TA pushed open the door. From inside came the wails of disorganized high school level band practice, the sound of brass and woodwinds clashed with harsh percussions and cymbals. There certainly was some semblance of a tune, but it could have been Mozart's 3rd concerto just as easily as it could have been Row, Row, Row, Your Boat. As I walked in the orchestra stopped playing, in that kind of cacophonous way a group of musicians settles when no one has directed them to stop simultaneously.

"The instructor will be here in a second." The TA told me, before he disappeared down the hallway. The tardy bell rang and once it was done, there was dead silence in the room. I stood awkwardly at the front for a few moments, allowing the skeptical eyes

of my new judgemental classmates to scan me, make sure I was acceptable, then I took the first empty seat I could find.

Whatever unspoken requirements the class had for me I must have met because as I took a seat, the noise in the room picked back up. Some students began playing their instruments again, others began talking among themselves. The boy I sat next to was quivering, and I noticed for the first time that he had a wide personal bubble. Every single seat directly next to or in front or behind him was empty, of course now I'd changed that. He held a trombone close to his chest like a safety blanket, and I looked down at his shaking hands. His sleeves inched up just a bit, but enough for me to take note of his wrists, which were covered in scar tissue, seemingly self inflicted.

Familiar. But uninteresting all the same.

I continued looking around the room. After my scan I'd felt quite proud of myself. I'd managed to discern the cool kids (sitting in the back in a small cluster, talking amongst themselves instead of playing their instruments. They laughed with the confidence of those who had never experienced nonacceptance before), the quiet kids and the band geeks, (sitting right up front, flipping through sheet music studiously and tuning/cleaning their instruments instead of socializing with each other. In fact, if anything it appeared they were avoiding the gaze of their neighbors).

I did always think of myself as a "people person". A sort of backwards version of one anyways. I didn't like to interact with people very much, but I did enjoy observing and watching people. Trying to discern their personalities from their appearance, and find their insecurities and confident areas of self from their snippets of conversation I could catch when they passed me by. It was all admittedly quite judgemental, but I considered myself good at it all the same. And really, if you're right about someone, does that make it a judgement?

My fingers itched for an instrument to play, but I hadn't brought my own and I didn't see any extras lying around the classroom. I figured I would have to wait and speak to the teacher about getting my hands on something to play, when as if on cue the classroom door opened and the music instructor walked in.

I felt my breath catch in my throat.

Something remarkably beautiful walked through that classroom door. I was stunned by how breathtaking the teacher was. Her wavy, dark red hair was parted on the left and slightly tousled, as though she'd run her fingers through it a few times during the day. She had bright green eyes which were piercing, but unintimidating, they belonged to someone with great power who was unaware they had it. She was thin and tall, and held herself with the grace and confidence of someone who was doing exactly what they wanted. She seemed admirably put together. Our eyes met for just one moment, before I forced myself to look away, but in that moment I could hardly breathe.

"New kid?" She asked. Her voice, raspy with tiredness, dissonant and beautifully unique, called out to me. I focused my attention over her shoulder, avoiding eye contact, and nodded my head yes. "Wanna come up front and introduce yourself?" I shook my head no, and I heard her laugh. "Fair enough." She said with a giggle. My God, how beautiful.

I felt a tickle. In my head. Not on my head, or in my hair or anything like that. My brain tickled. I was feeling curious. As the teacher instructed the class to go around and introduce themselves, I observed her closely. She seemed incredibly fragile, like most humans, I supposed, and I wondered what it would take to break her. I wanted to feel her skin underneath my fingertips, hot and flushed with fear and despair. I was curious about what she looked like when she was in pain, in agony, and what she looked like when she was experiencing ecstasy. I wanted to see the faces she kept hidden from her students, and I wanted to know how much it would take to earn those faces.

"You sure are fucked up in that head of yours." Said my mother. I had just been telling her about my wonderful first day at a new school, and might have accidentally on purpose let it slip about my beautiful new music teacher, Mrs. Honey. Pay attention to the Mrs., my mother had said to me.

"Isn't that the name of that teacher in that kid's movie?" I asked, flopping down on the sofa pushed up against the wall and sprawling out on top of it. The sofa also functioned as a pull out bed, where my mother slept. Despite the bourgeois nature of

our new hometown, we lived in a one room house on the outskirts of the county. Every morning I heard the town's judgement of us in the school bus tires as they squealed to a stop outside our house to pick me up.

"Matilda." My mom replied, pulling a joint from behind her ear. She tossed it to me and I walked to the door, opening it and sitting on the stoop before lighting it up.

"Right, right." I breathed, looking up at the gray sky. Behind me I heard rustling noises, probably my mom getting up and walking over to the kitchen to start preparing dinner or something.

"You know if you're cooking, I think I'm gonna go for a walk." I said, standing up. Occasionally the smell of food made me sick, kind of a weird thing considering I need food to live. I always sort of thought of myself as the type of person who didn't have any particular desire for life, so much so that my mindset affected my biology and my body in turn did everything it could to sabotage my survival instincts.

I walked through the park and accidentally kicked a syringe just lying in the grass in front of me. Nice. Stay fucking classy Elderry County. I kept walking and ended up along the train tracks, which were parallel to the towns small river, well it was more like a creek really, but you'd see people vainly trying to swim in it sometimes anyways. We had only been here for two weeks and yet I knew this tiny town like the back of my hand already. I followed the train tracks, trying to keep balance while walking along the rail as smoke drifted from my mouth through the air behind me.

Lights flashed from somewhere ahead of me, alternating colors. Red, blue, red, blue. Police lights? I slowed down cautiously. My mother was a firm believer that the only good cop is a dead cop, and while I wasn't quite as extremist as she was, I wasn't completely gung ho about law enforcement either. But it looked like, at least from where I was standing, that there was an actual emergency they were attending to. A train was stopped on the tracks as well, and I figured there must have been some kind of accident. I stopped walking, having gotten as close as I was comfortable with, and settled for being nosy from afar.

Train accidents were kind of cool. The unbridled chaos that preceded and followed train accidents was kind of a turn on. I put my joint out on my wrist and put it in my pocket. I bent down and picked up a penny from the side of the tracks, it's dull glimmer having caught my attention.

"I think there was an accident." I said to my mom, walking back into our house. "Up on the train tracks near the river."

The house indeed smelled of food, cabbage and red meat and high proof alcohol, an Irishman's paradise.

"Oh yeah?" My mom responded curiously.

"Maybe a train crashed. Maybe some dude launched themselves in front of it as it was coming around the bend." I pondered.

I heard my mom giggle. "That's awfully dark."

I looked at her for just a second, before I looked down at my shoes. "Maybe there was a penny on the tracks." I mumbled.

I put the penny I'd found on the tip of my thumb and flicked it out the door before slamming it shut.

My brain tickles were getting worse. During music class I stared up at Mrs. Honey as she conducted heaven's orchestra from behind her podium at the front of the classroom. The music class sounded god awful, but that was in no way her fault, the students didn't pay attention and they were rude and disruptive at the best of times.

One day I got a flash of an event in my head, the body of Mrs. Honey on the train tracks where the accident was, twisted and mangled after being run over, police shaking their heads in disappointment.

"Such a shame. One of them would say.

His partner would nod his head in agreement. *Shame.*

"I mean, she was a pillar of this community."

The partner would nod again. *A pillar.*

"What kind of sick fuck would push her like this?"

A few days later when I came home from school I informed my mom. "They're saying something happened."

"'Something' like what? 'Something' sounds so ominous." She responded, barely looking up from her tv program.

"On the train tracks." I reminded her. "They're saying there was this girl and...it wasn't an accident, something happened like...like someone pushed the girl who died."

The silence from my mother was all the response I needed. I could feel disapproval radiating off of her in waves, and I worried I had royally pissed her off.

"You know we had to move out here for a reason, right." It was a statement.

"I won't get involved anymore." I promised meekly. I could tell she didn't believe me, and why should she. Hell, I didn't believe me.

I had an issue. I was a bit of a detective back in my hometown. Detective meaning snoop.

Mrs. Honey knew the girl that died. She was a student in orchestra class, one of Mrs. Honey's favorites. I could tell that because when I walked into the music classroom that afternoon there was a small memorial for the girl set up in a dedicated corner of the room. It caught my attention as I walked in the nearly empty classroom one morning; I spotted the flickering light from one of the candles out of the corner of my eye. I walked over to the small shrine and looked at the picture of the girl. She was a freshman, 14 years old, she had a round and young looking face, and a dangerously mischievous looking grin. She looked like someone teachers would send out in the hallway quite a lot. Like someone who was used to kicking up a fuss because otherwise no one would pay attention to her. Her dark hair in the picture was braided, barely, and several strands stood up around her head like a lion's mane. It was probably the neatest looking picture they could find of her too. Honestly, she looked like a handful of a child. I could see why Mrs. Honey liked her.

During music class that day my eyes kept drifting over to the memorial, then over to Mrs. Honey, then back to the memorial. I felt a strange pang in the middle of my chest

which, after further examination, I recognized as jealousy. For christ sake the girl was dead, I needed to pull myself together.

That afternoon I stood in the main doors of the school, watching Mrs. Honey leave to her car through the back entrance. I scratched my head, even though I knew the itch was coming from inside. She dropped her keys and nearly fell over as she was bending to pick them up. I liked to believe I had some psychic effect on her, that we were connected in a kind of way that she wasn't aware of. I wanted her to sneeze when I thought about her and I wanted her ears to burn when I talked about her. I wanted to have an impact on her, an effect on her life that maybe she didn't even realize was thanks to me. *Be careful here*, my mom's words from my first day in town echoed in my head. *Be careful, and be good*. She had said. Oh, I'm trying. I thought.

I'm trying.

2: IT'S A BUNCH OF BULLSHIT, ABBY

I sat in a classroom the color of english tea and listened to a teacher unenthusiastically drone on about imaginary numbers, all the while my mind was on something else entirely. I had made a friend. Well, I met a girl. Abigail Garcia, fourteen years old but with the remarkable curiosity of a child half her age. Her curiosity manifested itself in the form of research, and as a result she knew every useless fact under the sun. We would hang out on the blacktop during lunch, me laying on the ground and her standing over me, reciting facts. She followed me as well as a shadow, and she had a lot of questions about me as well. Abigail found me completely enthralling, a mysterious transfer student who seemed foreign and exotic. I made an attempt to come off as cool and collected in front of her. I already didn't care about much other than what was right in front of me at any particular moment, and it wasn't due to apathy so much as just a lack of interest in acting in a way anyone expected. How I felt at any particular moment was very obvious in my behavior and to be quite honest I didn't see any reason to behave in a way that was not directly reflective of my current mood.

I had been in Elderry County High for fourteen days and already other students avoided me like a leper. Rumors spread fast in a small town, and they weren't very welcoming to outsiders. That made a virulent combination.

During one lunch, Abigail was going on about the latest interesting facts she'd researched the night before. How too much water can actually kill a person and how Van Morrison originally called the song *Brown-Skinned Girl* and how despite how much the term micro-penis makes you giggle, very mature by the way, it actually isn't very funny at all and in fact studies show it is very detrimental to both the male psyche and their reproduction, and yet they're becoming more and more common which is worrying for the progression of mankind, oh and by the way-

"Are you a serial killer?" That question came out of nowhere, and I snorted so hard out of shock, chocolate milk nearly shot out of my nose.

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

Abigail tilted her head. "Well, you've got three first names after all."

Ava Drew Charlotte. "Hmm." I tapped my finger on my chin in an exaggerated fashion. "Ted Bundy. Jeffery Dahmer. Albert Fish. Jack the-

"Would you stop deflecting the damn question?"

I blinked. "Well...yes, I guess I am one. I mean I've never killed anyone, but that doesn't mean much of anything."

Only a girl like Abigail would agree with that statement. "According to most research there's three common characteristics shared among most serial killers."

"Yeah? Let's go through the checklist."

"Do you set a lot of fires?" I nodded. "Like torturing animals?" Another nod. "Wet the bed well past a socially acceptable age?"

I happily answered all of Abigail's questions, enjoying the hesitant skepticism on her face as she couldn't tell if I was telling the truth or messing with her. Like had I really been caught at 7 years old using a stick to prod at the broken leg of a rabbit caught in the fence of our family home in Winchester?

"Well sure. It's leg was all twisted the wrong way, like this," I demonstrated using my arms. "And there was a big scratch on his ankle so I just poked at it and listened to him whimper and whine."

Then I proceeded to claim that I had been a pyromaniac since I had the dexterity to work a lighter, setting small scraps of toilet paper on fire in my bedroom, and getting the girl's restroom in my middle school closed down twice for lighting tampons on fire then dropping them in the trash can. I enjoyed fire. It wasn't, I assured her, for any weird reason like a sex thing or something, it was just pretty to look at and warm, what wasn't to like about it? And, I proudly shared, I had been wetting the bed constantly since I was five years old, although - this is what I had heard at least - bed-wetting was also a trauma thing. And I mean, if you wanted to get into the trauma conversation, we could talk about how the reason we moved to this town in the first place was to get away from

my biological father, who enjoyed, among other things, beating my mother up and creeping into my bedroom after a hard day of not working.

For a fourteen year old, Abigail packed quite a punch in those little hands. I blinked in shock as a slap from her stung my face.

“*Stop* it! What are you doing? Trying to make me hate you?”

I rubbed my palm against the sore cheek, clicking my tongue in disapproval. “You asked the question, it’s not my fault you’re too sensitive to listen to the answers.”

Abigail Garcia struck me as a girl who would quite easily believe whatever you told her, and I had wanted to mess with her a little bit.

“It’s a bunch of bullshit, Abby.”

“Why?”

“Nothing in this world is worth expending the energy it takes to kill.”

“That’s quite dismal.”

“What, you’d rather I had the energy to kill? I’m *this* close.” I squeezed my thumb and index finger together and made a point to rub them against each other a few times. “You wanna know the secret to figuring out whether something is true or false?” Off of her nod, I took my index and middle finger and then poked her forehead, her left breast, and right below her belly button. “You check there, there, and there. That’s the only real evidence a person needs.”

I think right then in that moment when I told her that, my fate was sealed.

A couple of days later the second body was found around the train tracks. Most of the body turned up floating down the river, the rest was smeared on the rails of the tracks. It was another young girl, Serena Fletcher, a fifteen year old sophomore at the high school. I knew her. I mean, not like knew her well, but we would exchange amicable nods whenever we passed each other in the hallway. If there was an empty seat on the bus next to her or someone else I’d sooner choose the seat next to her. She was a remarkably ordinary girl, no one that would ever have enemies, but once they found her the sheriff’s department instituted a 7:30 curfew on the town’s population of teenagers.

Soon they began putting up signs because no one was listening or obeying the curfew. Boys thought they didn't have to because it was girls who were being pushed onto train tracks, and girls thought they'd seem more adventurous and dangerous if they didn't follow the rules. One night at about nine PM I walked down the street, just going out for a walk. Flickering street lamps lit up a gas station where three teenage boys sat on the curb, smoking their parent's cigarettes. Telephone poles and buildings had yellow posters taped on them.

CURFEW 7:30 PM. SHERIFF'S OFFICE IS WATCHING.

Underneath one of the telephone poles was another small shrine for the girl who died; in the center was a candlelit photo of her. On the golden frame, black sharpie words stated: *you will be missed*. Around the memorial were small tealight candles, flowers, and little snacks and cans of soda, I assumed they were things that were the girl's favorites.

This one couldn't look more different from the first girl they found on the train tracks. In her picture she looked neat and put together, for a split second I thought they'd left the default photo in the frame by mistake when setting up the memorial. She had platinum blonde hair parted perfectly down the middle and pigtails in two braids on either side. She was wearing an immaculately pressed white button down and her smile revealed two rows of perfectly straight, gleaming white teeth.

I went into the gas station and bought two bags of chips, leaving one on the memorial on my way out.

"How many deaths does it take for something to be considered a serial case?" I asked absently during one lunchtime, watching a moth fly into a barely visible spiderweb.

"Three." Abigail answered almost instantly. "You're asking about that because of the girls being pushed onto the tracks, right?" She sounded almost happy about it.

"Right."

"Come over to my house." The offer was out of nowhere, but somehow it seemed only right to take her up on it. After school that day we walked three blocks to the left of

the school, then four blocks down, and came upon a pale pink house sitting on the corner.

“This is it.”

“Very cozy looking.” I said. It came out bitter sounding, even though I didn’t mean it to, and Abby picked up on that like she picked up on everything.

A few days later they found a body, floating down the river in two pieces. The remarkably beautiful corpse of a remarkably beautiful woman was discovered at 4:44 in the morning by a runaway kid walking the train tracks parallel to the river. Of course, good 'ol Abby had the story as soon as it warmed the presses, and I had *just* enough morbid curiosity in me one afternoon to indulge her ramblings.

"So who do you think did it?" I asked, tracing a crack on the blacktop with my fingertip.

Abby was quiet for a second too long, and it prompted me to look up and check on her. She was looking across the blacktop somberly, and I followed her gaze to see who caught her attention.

"The other Abigail." She said. The other Abigail was standing in front of the school doors, blocking the entrance to the cafeteria with her friends. Well, friends was perhaps a strong word. They were her shadows, similar to how Abby just followed me around, these girls just seemed to trail after Abigail, who paid them no mind. The other Abigail was a strange case, the girl was quite foreboding from a distance, as beautiful and mesmerizing as an albino boa, and perhaps just as dangerous. Her dirty blonde hair was almost always in an uncombed bird's nest resting upon her head, and her long bangs covered up her glimmering hazel eyes, but she gave off the air of someone completely put together nonetheless. She exuded confidence, oozed privilege.

Everyone knew the name of the other Abigail's family, but she'd made it quite clear that she wanted nothing to do with her family name. I remembered a time in English class when we were meant to be discussing the movie we'd just watched, the 1966 Fahrenheit 451. Abigail's shadows were giggling behind her at the cheesy 60's acting and special effects, whispering and nudging each other, when Abigail turned to look behind her. Through her hair, she fixed her dark eyes on the two disruptions and grit her teeth.

"Would you two fuckers mind terribly, shutting up?"

The class was silent, either very surprised at this outburst, or not surprised at all. It was my first impression of Abigail though, and quite the memorable one too. That's when I realized Abigail actually took classes quite seriously, she just seemed to embody the attitude of someone who didn't care for much of anything at all. I sensed she was quite like me, in that she didn't particularly care to do anything that wouldn't affect her immediately in the moment. Someone like that didn't seem like a killer.

I turned back to look at Abby. "What makes you think that?" I asked.

"Your music teacher, she was last seen in the parking lot late one night and the only person who was there to see her was Abigail. The police went to her house to question her and everything."

"And how do you know that?"

"I sit across the street from their house sometimes to watch them. There's a nice covering, the trees hide me pretty well, and I'm pretty sure they don't pay much attention to outside anyways." Somehow, this information didn't surprise me.

Abby and I meshed so well because we both made people nervous and uncomfortable. I could tell people thought it was strange I was hanging out with someone her age, but I didn't care much about what other people thought anyhow. I hadn't transferred here expecting to be very popular anyways, that wasn't how things ever went for me. Abby and I were more fly on the wall types. Abby sensed other people's emotions quite well, and I was so unremarkable that people barely ever noticed me around. This put me in a prime position to hear all the nice drama and gossip, who cursed out who last weekend, which teacher was a bitch and fucking someone else behind her husband's back, who was selling what drugs to whom and where on campus, who was having sex in the bathroom during passing period and who preferred to do it under the bleachers like the good old days. People were quite interesting if you gave them a chance. Incredibly stupid, but interesting all the same.

"Abby and I think one of the teachers is sleeping with a senior." I told my mom one day after school. She was in the kitchen, patting together burger patties for a free

dinner at the local church. My mother tried to make a good impression wherever she went, it was very important to her that people liked her.

“Ooh, scandalous.” She exhaled sharply in an attempt to blow a strand of her dark brown hair from out of her eyes without smearing raw meat on her face. Her sorry try at a bun was coming loose and draping down over her shoulders and her face.

“Also uh...” I grabbed a pinch of raw meat and put it in my mouth, tasting the spices before I went to the window and spit it out onto the ground outside. “One of the teachers turned up...dead. The pretty one.”

My mother froze, then resumed her patty forming. “Uh huh.”

“I wonder who did it.” I tried to sound casual.

“Ava Drew Charlotte, you stay out of business that isn’t yours. We just got here, I don’t want you getting into trouble, understand me?” My mother looked at me seriously.

“I know, I was just...yeah, I know.” I stopped trying to make excuses for my curiosity.

But the next day after school, I told my mom I had band practice until late evening, and I hung around the school hallways until the parking lot cleared out. Then I walked over to the train tracks and walked along them until I found the spot on the river where she was found, wrapped up in caution tape like a grim present. I walked over to a dark stain on the grass and placed the toe of my shoe on it. I felt an impulse to kneel down and smell it, knowing it came from something remarkably beautiful and tragic.

I was surprised to feel moisture on my face and realize I was crying. I wiped away my superficial tears and sniffled. “Damn it.” I was cursing myself really, for getting so emotionally addicted to someone, so much so that their absence was a detriment to me despite the fact that I barely knew them.

I heard the caution tape rustle, I thought because of the wind, but then I heard a voice behind me.

“They say the murderer always returns to the scene of the crime.”

I turned around to see the other Abigail standing behind me, peering at me curiously from behind her messy blonde bangs.

"Is that why you're here?" I asked, doing my best to keep my voice steady.

Abigail let out a humorless laugh. "You think I killed her?"

"Someone did." I said.

"Nice observation, Sherlock." Abigail paused.

Abigail pulled out a section of newspaper from her pocket. She tossed it at me, well, threw is a better word, and I barely caught it. I looked down at it and saw the story headline - LOCAL TEACHER BRUTALLY KILLED IN FREAK ACCIDENT.

Local high school teacher Jessica Emerson was discovered one morning in two pieces, after having seemingly fallen on the train tracks near Elderry River.

I skimmed through the article. There was a quote from our principal.

She will be missed. She was a brilliant teacher and wonderful with the students. Her death was, in this case, especially tragic considering all she did for the community.

I must have snorted, because Abigail nodded and spoke up. "Yeah, he's a straight up sociopath isn't he."

I regarded her. "What a load of bullshit." I tried.

"He couldn't give a crap about her if someone paid him to."

I smiled. "Which someone was."

Abigail hesitated. "Dumb fucking principal." A hint of a smile played on her lips cautiously.

I nodded. "Dumb fucking school system really, hiring people who don't even like kids to watch over kids."

There was another pause as the other Abigail and I inspected each other.

"Do you know about the Castle?" Abigail went for it.

"A psycho killed her? Sure, I'll go with that. So what do we do about it?" Abigail looked surprised at how easy I made it for her. Then she gathered herself and made her expression blank again. She took a few steps towards me and then raised her hand up to my eye level, and flicked me hard in the forehead. "Ouch."

"We find him and catch 'em you retard." She said, her careful smirk threatening to erupt into a full blown smile. Abigail took two fingers and tapped them against her lips. I

nodded, *sure*, and she pulled out a pack of cigarettes and gave one of them to me. She asked me where I lived and I told her, then she offered, no, she told me that she was going to be walking me home that night.

4: