

## On the Fence

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By: Deanna Leung

An unexpected burst of color. That's what she felt when he said I love you. She always thought love would feel like the color red. Now she knew, it actually felt more like gold – a thick, honey colored warmth coursing through the body. I love you more than life, he said. Sarah, he breathed, you are life itself. He gripped her shoulders and asked, do you understand me? She shook her head in affirmation; she understood. If anyone is to end this, he warned, it will be you. And so, it was in her power. With her arms wrapped around his neck she decided, we will be forever and the grayness of depression would fade away.

Sarah shook away the memory. She gripped the metal bar tighter and grounded her feet in the diamond holes of the wire fence. She closed her eyes and let the wind caress her face. Her hair was clipped back because letting it go would mean chaos, uncontrollable strands of black hair. After a moment, she opened her eyes, looked down, and moved her right foot out of the diamond hole and onto the top of the fence. Maybe, she thought, if I jump, the wind will catch me, and I'll fly somewhere far from here, somewhere where I can forget him. She felt a clench in her throat, the feeling you fight against right before you cry. But before her emotions had a chance to manifest themselves, she felt a force pulling her back from the edge. As she fell, her hand reached out, hopelessly extended for no one to grab and save her. She watched the skies recede and the white promise of the clouds escaped her touch.

She lay there for a moment, sprawled on her back waiting for darkness to take her. Instead of being transported to the next

life, she heard a voice say, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

God has a funny way of talking, she thought. "Are you just going to lie there? I've seen dogs take shits here." Shit, did God just say shit? She opened her eyes to be blinded by the sun. She turned her head and saw the tiny bits of dirt on worn out black sneakers. When she shifted her focus from foreground to background, not far from where she lay, was an overfilled cart and a cardboard sign propped up by a cup.

"Need a hand?" he offered. She took his hand and stood up. Then she looked down and brushed off her clothes.

As soon as she looked up she was met with an accusatory pointer finger. "Were you trying to kill yourself?"

She looked away. "No."

He raised his right eyebrow. "So what were you doing then?"

"I was just on the fence." She felt for her phone but was met with the unsettling feeling of an empty pocket. She scanned the ground and found it a few paces away.

"Well you really shouldn't be climbing fences. People will get the wrong idea."

She picked up her phone; the pristine screen was now cracked. She glared at the man with her glossy, brown eyes. "Well you really have no business being in other people's business. If I want to climb the damn fence, I will. Consider yourself lucky I'm not hurt from you pulling me off the fence." Sarah gave him one last look, sizing him up from head to toe, and walked away.

He clicked his tongue and shook his head as he watched her leave. Then he looked over to his self-claimed part of the

sidewalk. As he started walking back, he noticed something in the corner of his eye. It was a hair clip, the same color as her eyes, with one of the middle prongs chipped off. He picked it up and sat on the sidewalk, opening and closing the clip as he zoned out. His trance was broken by the sound of rustling feet on gravel. He turned his head and saw that same girl swinging her arms with her face all scrunched up. She looked like she was going to huff, and puff and blow the fence down. He chuckled to himself. It had been a while since he'd interacted with a teenage girl.

"So you've come back to apologize I see. Yes, you're welcome for saving for life." She ignored him and started looking for something in the area where she landed. The wind was relentless and blew her hair in all directions. He snickered as he watched her try to put her hair behind her ears, but the wind remained unforgiving.

"Geez, your hair is a mess," he said. "If you ever want to get a boyfriend, you should really keep it under control." He graciously extended her the hair clip. "Here use this, I found it on the ground." She turned around so quickly, a normal person would have needed a moment to recover. She, however, immediately marched over and snatched the hair clip out of his hands so aggressively that another prong chipped off. This time, he was the one met with the pointer finger.

"This is *my* clip," she said, "and clearly because *you* pulled me off the fence, you broke it."

"The clip breaking was worth saving your life," he replied.

"And don't tell me what to do with my hair. What do you know about girls' hair anyways?"

He opened his mouth to retaliate but before he got the chance she was already leaving. Cheated out of a comeback, he answered to the wind, "I do know a thing or two *actually*. French braid is my specialty." He watched the wind blow his sign over and sighed. "Well it has been a while. I guess I'd be pretty rusty."

She was still fuming when she got to her doorstep. She went to her bedroom and started brushing her mangled hair. It hurt so much trying to untangle the knots that she wanted to cry. Her nose started getting stuffy so she put the brush down to get a tissue. As she blew her nose she looked at the shriveled, brown aloe plant next to the tissue box. Luke had gifted it to her for Christmas. Sarah by no means had a green thumb so she tried her very best to keep it alive. A month later, she left to go to Chile for her college study abroad program. She gave it to Luke and told him to take care of it for her. To her dismay upon returning, Luke had let the plant die. She took it back anyways because she didn't have the heart throw it out. A few days later, Luke broke up with her. The tears were streaming down her face now as she stared at it. "Why did you have to let it die Luke," she cried, "why?"

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He loved Mondays. Tuesday was garbage pick-up day so that meant all the neighborhood trash was out on Monday. He would open bags, analyze the contents, and draw conclusions about the household.

There was an old lady that lived toward the end of the street. She always had full bottles of pills in her trash. When he looked at the instructions for when to take the medication, it was

always the same week in which he found the medicine. “Donepizal,” he read, “fancy.” He had no knowledge of medication. He used to be a businessman. “Well,” he concluded, “her distrust with doctors and medication persists.”

He went to another house and found a whole bag dedicated to girl-gendered toys – Barbie dolls, Cabbage Patch Kids, and lots of stuffed animals. “Little girl must be all grown up,” he said. He sifted through the toys and picked out a pink bunny. He stroked its ears back and smiled.

In the end, he would pick out what he wanted and add them to his cart. As much as it was interesting playing treasure hunt with trash, it reminded him of his prior life. He had never met anyone who liked taking out the trash. Now that he didn’t even have things to throw out, he realized how much he missed it.

She stepped outside and was battered immediately by the sun’s rays as if they were wrecking balls swinging heat waves back and forth. She wanted to melt and evaporate, leaving behind the grains of salty pain. Summer used to be her favorite season because she got to be home and see Luke. Now it just felt like an eternal inferno.

With nothing else to do since her summer job was over, Sarah walked back to the fence. On her side, the fence wasn’t very high up, around eight feet. It was only at the top of the fence, looking down, that one could see the daunting drop it was to the bustling city street below, where if one fell and somehow didn’t die immediately from impact, would surely meet their end by the wheels of a car.

A wisp of hair dangled by the side of her face. Sarah unclipped her hair and redid it. With two prongs missing, it wasn’t holding her hair back as effectively as before. After fixing her hair, she suddenly remembered the reason why her clip was broken. She glanced over but there was only his sign, cup, and cart. She wanted something to distract her so she walked a bit closer to his abode. The cart was filled with old shoes, dirty clothes, a broken umbrella, blankets, and lots of bags with things she couldn’t see since they were tied up. In the part of the cart where mothers usually put their child, was a fat stack of newspapers. She peered over and read the newspaper on top of the stack.

Caroline Proctor passes away in hospital after found in house bleeding from wrist cuts.

Sarah instantly felt a chill, despite the sun still beaming.

After enough analyses of garbage, he headed back to his spot. In the distance, he saw someone standing really close to his cart. “Step away from the cart!” he shouted as he fast-walked toward the sidewalk. When he got closer, he could see it was a girl with long, black hair clipped back. She retreated and hurriedly turned to escape but it was too late, he was close behind her and she walked right into him.

“What the hell are you doing with my cart?” he said, pointing at her once again.

She averted her gaze. “Nothing, I just read the headline of the newspaper. That’s all.”

He gave her a suspicious look and checked his cart. He couldn't find anything out of place so he placed the pink bunny in his cart and then took a seat behind his cardboard sign. He expected her to leave but she just stood there, looking at the bunny.

"Did you hear about it?" he asked.

"What?" she said.

"The girl in the newspaper. Caroline Proctor."

She turned to look at the fence. "Yeah, after it happened my high school made a big fuss about depression and suicide."

"Could you imagine?" He scoffed and shook his head.

"The pain of her friends? Her parents?" He got no response. His body suddenly felt heavy even though he had not eaten decently for months. "I don't know you that well, but just know that if you're on the fence about it, I'm sure there are people you will leave behind that will miss you." His fingers dug into his sign. "A whole fuck ton."

She turned to face him. There were tears in her eyes. Her lip was quivering as she shouted, "Why do you even care what I do?" She wiped her face with her hand and stood there with her body quaking. "I know my parents love me. I know I have friends. I can't explain it." He didn't say anything but she saw his eyes fixed on hers. "With Luke, he made it easier. He was another reason not to do. But I just feel so fucking depressed sometimes. And for what? For no good god damn reason!"

She was sobbing so intensely she could hardly breathe. She didn't understand the compelling force that was coercing the words out of her mouth. She just looked at him, with the labored expression of someone who has been hanging off a cliff, at her

wits end, and asked one more time so softly it was almost a whisper, "Why do you care?" He didn't say anything, so she turned to go. As soon as she turned away, she thought she heard him say, "Because I should." She ignored it and started to run. A newfound feeling of lightness enveloped her. After running for ten minutes straight, she keeled over and put her hands on her knees. As she heaved and her heart pumped vigorously, she thought, either he spoke quietly or it was because her cries competed with the wind, but she swore he actually said, "Because I should've."

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He waited for something to happen. He didn't feel funny. Nothing hurt. So he sat on the sidewalk and waited. It was already dark and light was coming and going as winds pushed clouds that shrouded the moon as they traversed the night sky. He thought, maybe it wasn't enough, but he didn't have anymore. Eventually he shriveled up on the sidewalk and fell asleep. Hours passed, peaceful and dreamless, until he was disturbed by an excruciating pain in his abdominal area. He turned on his side and held onto his stomach. His breathing grew labored and difficult as his heart palpitated. He forced himself onto his back and spread his arms to their full arm span. He tried to find the light, as a guide upward, but all he saw was a puddle of liquid silver staining the black sky. The liquid silver started to leak, pouring on to his face, suffocating and blinding him. When it turned completely dark, he didn't know if the sky ran out of moonlight or the end had finally come.

She inputted the tip on the app and opened the door. “Thank you very much kind sir! Have a spectacular night!” Sarah stumbled out of her Uber that dropped her off a block away since she paid less and it only went as far as the express drop-off spot. She slowly walked down the sidewalk, swerving left and right. When she got to the fence she grabbed ahold of it to steady herself as she lurched over and vomited. She wiped her mouth with her hand and looked over to the left.

“Hey you!” She let go of the fence and took slow, heavy steps over and fell forward, grabbing the cart to catch herself. With her vision hazy and words delayed, she confessed, “You’re the first person I ever told. You better not fucking tell anyone.” She kept one hand on the cart and put the other on her heart. “To be honest, I’m glad. But still, I swear if you say anything –” she gagged and vomited again before she could finish.

“Don’t ignore me!” He remained silent. She squatted down and shook him. She got no response so she shook him harder. “Wake up. Wake the hell up!”

She started to feel a choke in her throat. She fumbled to turn on the flashlight on her phone and dropped her phone. “Fuck!” She patted the ground to try to find it. Her hands grazed over something that felt like a pill bottle. She frantically kept feeling around and felt more pill bottles.

“Wake up! Please!” Her hands were shaking and her vision blurred even more with the tears welling up in her eyes. When she finally located her phone, she didn’t want to drop it again so she gripped it so tightly it hurt and dialed 911.

He opened his eyes and everything was still black. He closed them and opened them again and this time, in the distance of the

darkness, he saw a little girl. He started chasing her, trying to yell but the sounds refused to leave, retreating so far back in his throat that they fell down his esophagus. They got trapped going down, since there were so many words, so much to he wanted to say. The airway was blocked and he couldn’t breathe. However, he refused to stop and as he watched her run, with every step, she got a little bit taller, a little bit older. When she became grown, young, and beautiful, she stopped. He stopped too, barely able to inhale a wisp of air. She stood with her back to him and in all the darkness her hair started dripping red. He summoned all his strength to lift his leg up but the red had seeped to his feet; he was stuck. It was then she finally turned around and raised her hands as if she had wings and was going to fly. He wanted to cry out, yes, fly over to me. She put her arms down as if preparing to lift them for flight. But they never lifted, and with her arms dangling by her sides, she fell backwards into the darkness. He fell to his knees and cried until his own tears mixed with the red and all he could do was mouth over and over, “I should’ve cared more, I should’ve known, I should’ve been there. I should have, I should have...” until it all drowned him.

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The next day, she walked up to the hospital check-in desk with a splitting headache.

“How may I help you?”

“I’d like to visit someone.”

“Could I have their name please?”

“It’s,” Sarah paused. She felt a pang of shame. “I don’t know his name. I was the one who called 911 for a homeless man yesterday. He lives near my house, on Chester Street.”

“One moment please.” Sarah watched the woman go into a room behind her, leaving the door wide open. “Which room has the man who was brought in last night on an overdose?”

Sarah listened to her say, “James Proctor? He’s in room 202.”

She was out of hospital before the woman had time to return to her desk. She ran and didn’t stop, even though it felt like needles were puncturing her lungs, until she was at his cart. She grabbed the newspaper and read the rest of the article.

Caroline is survived by her parents, James and Kacey Proctor. James Proctor is a prominent investment banker at 8X Capital.

She clawed at the next paper.

James Proctor goes missing, hasn’t been at work for days.

And the next.

Do parents really know their kids? In recent news, James Proctor, a top investment banker, wasn’t there when his daughter passed away from a suicide attempt since he was on a business trip out of state. He claims he had no idea she was suicidal.

The papers crinkled under her grip. She watched her tears fall on the pages and wished they could wash away the words and make it as if none of this ever happened. She was so tired of crying but she didn’t try to hold back the tears. For the first time

this summer, the tears weren’t for her. She wasn’t crying for herself; she was crying for James.

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A week had passed since the incident. Every day Sarah would go to the fence and every day, his sign would still be down. Today she decided to climb up the fence. At the top of fence, the wind cajoled a few black strands out from the safety of the clip. She leaned her body forward against the fence so she could free her hands to unclip her hair and reclip it. The moment the clip was open, hungry for hair and ready to clasp, she heard a voice behind her. “Let it go. Stop trying to hold it back with that damn clip. It’s broken for god’s sake.” She put her left hand back on the fence and let her right arm lag on her side, holding the clip between her fingers. She turned her body, and as she did, her hair swung freely in the air. There was a man before her, clean-shaven, dressed in khaki pants and a white polo shirt. “You look cleaner,” was all she could muster.

“My wife,” he said while scratching the back of his head, “they contacted her and I went home for the first time in a while. All my things were still there.” He put his hand down. “And Caroline’s.”

She looked over to his cart, where the newspapers rested. “I’m glad,” she said. He gave her a subtle smile, unreciprocated from Sarah. He approached the fence and climbed up it too. Adjacent to the fence, the branches of trees swayed, becoming more aggressive as the wind picked up. One strong gust blew through and shook the fence violently. Sarah gasped and her right hand instinctively moved to grab a hold of the fence and in doing so, dropped the clip over the fence. They watched it fall until they

could no longer see it and could only wonder when it would eventually hit the ground. Still casting her eyes downward, Sarah asked, “Do you think it shattered?”

He squinted and tried to locate the clip, but quickly realized the futility of the attempt. “I don’t think it stood a chance.” He turned to look at her, and saw her dark hair dancing with the wind, no longer restrained. “But who knows, things can be stronger than we think.”

A crack of lightning flashed in the corner of their eyes. Seconds after, the thunder caught up and resounded through their ears. The storm clouds were so close now they could almost taste the gritty, charcoal color of the cumulonimbus beasts. Sarah put her hand out and felt rain. Sarah looked down and closed her eyes, shielding her face from each tiny, cold sting. The raindrops hit her hair and the dark, long strands absorbed the pain like the black hole where she suppressed it all, where it all went and was never allowed to escape, until she met James. James also looked downward, tears slithering silently down his cheeks. And as if meeting Sarah granted his tears the power to control the rain, as they leaked down his face, he willed the rain to muddle the ink of the newspapers and melt the words away. The skies empathized and the rain fell harder. Nevertheless, on the fence they stood, holding on.