



Fall Daze
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“We’re moving to Virginia.” My dad chattered with nutcracker teeth. His smile never flinched.

His four little words exploded into gray debris. The shrapnel of my perfect life.

“Big promotion,” he said. “The firm’s got a transport corridor development project off the highway two hours west of Arlington. They need an engineer to manage the plan. Maybe not the ideal time, but best for all of us at the end of the day.”

Right on cue, my mom dove in, all sweetness and light. Her jaw shimmed with forced enthusiasm. “We’re all in this together,” she said. “It’ll be great.”

I counted the stitches up the left side of my jeans. Lots. I watched my fingers walk down the goldthread seam, and tried to remember when I painted my nails flamingo pink. Tuesday. I wondered if there was pistachio ice cream in the freezer. I remembered. Yes.

To focus my attention, Mom pounded the message home. “Niks, we’ve already talked to the guidance counselor, you can take all the same senior honors classes. The new school’s smaller than Springdale, and they’ve got a terrific music program. You’ll make friends in no time.”

“Nicole, we know this won’t be easy,” Dad said. “But it’s important that we approach this whole experience as a family adventure. We need you on board.”

The air ballooned and gushed to fill the space in my head. Half-sentences fizzed at the back of my throat. With the summer heat sinking, my parents talked until the frogs in our neighbor’s birdbath passed out from boredom. I tuned out while their words buzzed in my ears, a chainsaw swirl.

Like a stubby scarecrow, my eleven-year-old brother’s arms and legs poked out from a Spider-Man t-shirt and cut-off shorts. Josh pestered

my parents with stupid questions. “When are soccer tryouts? Can I swim backstroke in the relay?”

Mom hugged him and laughed. “Plenty of time for all that. Let’s get through the move first.”

I sat on the corduroy armchair and listened to them plan the last days of my future. Dad paced with his hands across his chest. Mom rocked on the edge of the daisy-print sofa, eyes hammering me into acceptance. My parents wobbled back and forth on the see-saw of weak excuses.

“New school, new friends—”

“Small town—”

“Fresh air—”

My life. Going, going, gone!

August of the last summer before graduation, I was clear on my priorities: work, guys, hanging with my buds, and saxophone practice. Maybe not in that order. In Boston, summer cruised in on a dry thunderstorm and stayed static hot for three months. When I didn’t have a day shift at the diner, I chilled in the hammock in our backyard, phone Velcroed to my chin. Despite the ongoing disaster of bad skin and nothing to wear on a Friday night at the mall, my life was good. Until ‘The Announcement.’ I knew what they expected. Between Mom’s glare and Dad’s restlessness, they assumed I’d head for an easy game of ‘you’re so unfair’ and ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.’

I dropped that line and totally sideswiped them. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

I waited a half-time measure. Two. The wings of their relief crowded the room. Busted.

“It’s no big deal, because I’m not going. I can move in with Sam. They’ve got space with Dan at college and her parents adore me.”

I mumbled, “Unlike some people.”

Before they could reply, I scooted out the den and up the stairs. Every loose step growled as I stomped. The burgundy-and-cream striped

wallpaper in my room was covered in Art Deco jazz posters, which I pulled off and shredded onto the aqua blue rug. My favorite, a 1940s Charlie Parker bill from Birdland, clung to the back of the door. Stuttering a breath, I popped a rubber band around it and dropped it in my closet. I called my friends.

Like an offended sea lion, Jess jumped in to protect me when she heard the news. "Look, Niks, you gotta take a stand. I mean, you're not a kid anymore, right? They can't do this to you. No way. You could pack a bag and sneak out, pretend you ran away and hang at my house for a bit. You can sleep over the garage and I'll make sure you don't starve to death."

Sam, the science-nerd-turned-basketball-star when she grew five inches in tenth grade, was cooler but still pissed off. "Don't your parents get it? Your whole life is here! Bad enough that you're planning the West Coast for college and I've got that MIT scholarship, so we'd never even see each other except for vacations. And now there's not even that? Let me talk it over with my mom. We'll figure something out, okay?"

Sam was right, her parents offered up a possibility if my family agreed. She called me before ten with a done deal. Sam talked me through the plot to rattle the crazy adults in my house.

"That'll work, right, Niks? Your mom and dad are gonna flip out, but you have to stand up to them, okay? Want some practice breaking the news, or are you cool with it?"

"Let's rehearse. You know what my parents are like."

"Yeah. All that 'rational discussion' that your mom's hung up on from her college prof days would drive me insane. My parents and I go right to the screaming and smashing the good china." Sam didn't exaggerate. I'd been at her house during a family feud.

"I'll focus on the academic side. You know, college admissions, keeping my grades up. If I go down the social life track they'll zone out for sure."

“Agreed. Reel them in with the schoolwork, and don’t forget to tell them how strict my parents are about curfew.”

Back home that night, over another family dinner, chewy spaghetti with pesto sauce and broccoli, I broke my silence.

“Sam’s parents said yes.”

My dad held his glass of apple juice at eye level. The liquid sloshed over the rim and dripped on the tablecloth. He didn’t blink. “Oh?”

“Yes, that I can live with them next year.”

I hyped the scenario, filling in the blanks. “Mr. and Mrs. Bandera are fine with it. This is a really bad time to be disrupting my studies. I’m only halfway through my AP biology credits, and Mr. Nall is teaching calculus this year. First semester senior year is majorly important for college decisions, right? You’re always telling me to take responsibility for my own choices. This is my choice.”

My mom scraped green chunks from her fork and pushed away her bowl with both hands. She wedged a wilted strand of brown hair into her ponytail. “Nicole, this is absurd. I understand you’re upset, but this is a very immature attitude. We’ll all have to adjust. Let’s look at this logically.”

Her voice was a cleaver on a glass board, slicing into my stomach. I scrunched my eyes to concentrate harder. Calm.

“Logically,” I said, “academics are really important in my last year of high school. I’ll do better at Springdale than if I have to start all over again in some other town. And Sam’s parents have more house rules than you do, so you don’t have to worry about being out late on school nights. I can even fly down for vacations.”

My parents sized me up like a jury with a guilty defendant. Scraping her thumbnail over a gardening callus, Mom waited. Dad tapped his foot on the linoleum, floppy sneakers thwap-thwapping under the table.

“Excuse me,” Josh said.

“Okay.” My dad chugged his drink.

Mistaking his response for Josh’s permission, I curled another oily string on my fork. Mom jolted. Her greyhound eyebrows twitched and she shook her head.

“Okay, Nicole,” my dad said. “You’re old enough to make this decision. We’d like you to come with us, but we won’t force you.”

The resignation in his voice was a dried-up leaf. Halfway to lighting a fire under our hibernating argument, my mom gathered the dishes and flushed a lake of running water down the kitchen sink. They left it up to me. No reason to change my mind.

Ten days of packing surrendered the house to an avalanche of cardboard and duct tape. By the musty armload, basement junk climbed into grateful Salvation Army pickups. The For Sale sign vanished with the phantoms of new owners, leaving behind a halo of exhausted grass.

Eleven-year-old boys are dorks. Josh and his loser friends were always getting into my stuff. I heard him slide down the hallway as I stuffed a duffel bag with CDs.

“Whaddya want? Better be good.”

Loose-jointed and crooked grin, Josh slam-dunked the bomb. “Look, Niks, don’t go all postal on me, okay? I know you think this whole moving thing reeks, and maybe if I were you I’d stay, but I’m gonna miss my friends too, and it would be really awesome if you’d come to Virginia with us.”

This, the longest sentence in history from a kid who thought talking was wasted time, and whose entire vocabulary could fit comfortably on a damp beer mat. It blew me away. There we were, in the skeleton of a room that I slept in since before the little twerp’s birth, and he asked me not to leave him alone with the ‘rents? Whoa. I ignored his sudden show of personhood.

“Whatever. I’m busy. Get out of my room.”

But after he left, I stopped dumping clothes into the canvas tote. I sat on my bed, covered in a sleeping bag for the last night at Cedar Creek Road. Outside, as the sun leaned across the back fence, I could hear Josh, playing catch with our golden retriever Grover, the dog a bribe for getting braces when I was twelve. My dad clattering in the den, pecking letters on his laptop with the echoes of talkback on the beat-up clock radio. My mom's mice scurrying little feet, darting through each room, as she check-listed lifetimes in furniture and souvenirs.

That's when I figured out that home wasn't just walls, streets, or school. It was also the sound of my family making their way in the world, the best that they knew how. No violins or rolling credits as the audience dissolved in feel-good tears. Nothing has that much closure. My three-and-a-half seconds of seeing the big picture turned into a four-hour solo stint in my black-lit room with the door locked.

"Nicole, come down please, the chicken's getting cold." My mom yelled up the stairs.

Did she do that on purpose? Because I gave up all the extreme gross factor of meat about three months into high school. I thumped downstairs and slid into my usual seat in the breakfast nook. My dad droned like a biplane running out of gas, the whole 'work this' and 'work that' crapola. My mom dished up the salad and potatoes, I grabbed the veggie dogs out of the microwave, and Josh whistled while he kicked the leg of my chair. Right then, those three humans were the clear-as, annoying-as people I'd lived with forever. I almost changed my mind.

"Fine. I'm not saying I'm gonna like it, I'm not saying I'm gonna be Joe Schmo Smiley Face about it, I'm also not saying I might not dump the whole fiasco and come back after a week. But I'll go."

I survived the hug-o-rama.

After dinner I walked over to Sam's house, four doors down. We hung out on the porch swing, listened to the cicadas, and planned our visits.

“Sam, I’ll definitely be back here for Homecoming, save me a date for the dance and I’m there. I’ve got mondo cash from work this summer and they agreed I could come up for weekends.”

Sam ignored my anorexic justifications. She held out her arms and laughed about our phone bill. “Y’know, maybe your parents will throw you out and you’ll have to come live with us, after they see how much you cost ‘em in month one away from home, eh?”

“Nah, I’ll be a cheap, as senior in the middle of po-dunk Virginia, no friends, no social life, no expenses except for long-distance and e-mail. They’ll thank me you’ll see.”

“You better not forget us.” Sam said it like she knew there wasn’t a snowball’s chance.

“The last time I went to a school without the mutual cheering squad of best friends was kindergarten. It’s going to be hell.”

Three days before school started at Springdale High, I abandoned my wonderful life in the demolition zone of damp goodbyes. Following the eighteen-wheeler that held most of our stuff, the four of us piled into the compact rented moving van and left my world behind. It was a twelve-hour drive. We slept in a motel on the interstate before checking out the new house. After breakfast, we drove through a cemetery-quiet suburb.

“Just wait until you see our new home, kids.” Riding shotgun, Mom talked to the windshield. “There’s a skylight over the living room, and the house backs right onto a nature preserve.”

Josh looked up from his video game and squirmed on the seat. “Can we build a tree house in the backyard?” Dad laughed and slapped the steering wheel. “As soon as we’re unpacked. I promise.”

I shoved the volume knob on my headphones to maximum and shut my eyes.

We pulled up in the rumbling gravel driveway; a clam-gray contemporary loomed to greet us. After the A/C in the rental, the hot air

slithered down my shirt in moist clumps and turned my legs to cold syrup. I slouched up the flagstones.

My dad, a.k.a. Mr. Info Man, rattled on as we stepped through the eight-foot double door. “Okay, guys, here we are. Hope you like it—it’s a little more architecturally diverse than our place in Boston. Watch the door there, Josh, it has a tendency to slam.”

Josh scuttled through and disappeared to the left. He shouted his discoveries. “Cool—there’s a double-sided fireplace in here!” Running past us up the main stairs, he added, “I call the blue room with the built-in bookcase!”

I followed my parents and let the door bang shut behind me. ‘Architecturally diverse,’ for a house with six half-levels and windows that were a math geek’s idea of paradise? That was my dad, never use a monosyllabic intro when a diatribe might bore the audience into catatonic despair. “Niks, we thought you’d like the bedroom at the top of the back stairs. It’s got its own bathroom and skylight, and the window seat looks out over the pond in the yard.”

Through the kitchen, a twisty spiral staircase crept through a square hole in the ceiling. I wasn’t ready for the revelation of my new space. A whole semi-floor to myself, tub with jets, and a room with windows on three sides. Maybe this was not a total loss.

Wrong. Day one at Lynchfield High School began as the second worst day of my life, second only to fourth grade gym class, when my shorts split on a somersault while Danny ‘the cutest boy ever’ Bartolo, stood behind me on the trampoline. The first day of my last year in high school was bad, as in leave-behind-and-never-mention-though-I-may-suffer-mighty-torture, bad.

Seven a.m. wake-up call after no sleep. I decided on the denim mini, orange crop, and combat boots. I snaked on a handful of fierce silver bangles and tweaked my hair into short spikes. I needed all the power dressing I could get. The landslide of parental disapproval got them nowhere. I grabbed my sling-back bag, swooped on a handful of Cheerios, and waited for Josh to debate waffles or French toast. Not even the radio stations sounded cool here—all I could pin on the car dial was

news, weather, or the occasional bar of Manilow. Psycho-land. When my parents said that this new school was 'small,' they didn't bother to mention it was a midget. Compared to the three stories, A through G blocks, and two full-sized football fields back home, Lynchfield High was Lilliput personified. Two hundred kids in four grades, compared to three hundred and sixty juniors at my old school. Instead of playing the invisibility card, sucking up the desperation, and counting down until my first visit to Boston, I got noticed.

Principal Collins stood in front of the whole school at an assembly in their dinky auditorium with creaky bucket seats and introduced me. "I am pleased to announce that we have a new student joining us for her final year. Nicole Caulfield, stand up so that we can give you a true blue Lynchfield Lynx welcome. C'mon now, don't be shy. There in the back row, hop on up and say hello."

I scraped my palms on the khaki vinyl bucket seat. Sweat trickled down the back of my knees. I dropped my head and stood up.

Social death is a painful way to go. I was a hopeless outcast on an island of screeching lunatics, who applauded me right on cue. Ohhh-kayyy. Not cool. I streamed out with the other faces, mumbled greetings to over-friendly teachers, and avoided eye contact with silent, staring kids.

Cafeterias are the same the world over. Even before I walked through the glass doors, I could smell the bean burritos and taste the grimy mashed potatoes. After picking up my food, I stood at the cash register, a stranger at a family reunion. I scanned the horizon for an empty table. Right then, I would have settled for a hole in the ground. No act of God to save me. My mouth hung open until I spied a corner seat next to the soda machine. After slurping down my gluey chowder and grabbing a chunk of the sourdough bread bowl, I headed to the library. The stacks hid my mascara streaks until the bell sounded for math. Digging in my purse for drops, I rinsed one scratchy contact lens and popped it back in. I glanced at my reflection in the glass by the door and rubbed at my raccoon eyes with a crumpled Kleenex. Maybe nobody would notice.

By the time last period limped into view, I felt like a soldier after six weeks of basic training. If I had a hundred seventy-nine days of this left,

I'd be back at Sam's house before the maples' sunset. With this idyllic thought comforting me like the ripped-up old teddy bear that I'd tossed in the boxes instead of throwing to Goodwill, I locked my jaw and drooped into choir. Same routine, pick a chair as close to the door as possible, set my eyes on the wall clock, and pray for a fire drill. I landed in the chair, metal jabbing my spine. A voice fell from the sky.

"Oh my God, I mean, can you believe it, we've got old man Cronin again. Like, you'd never know it, right, I mean, you're new and all, but he is totally this serious fossil and all the 'rents think he's the coolest 'cause we won States three years running but I cannot believe." The voice got louder. "Hey there, you with me? I'm Hillary, actually everyone calls me Lary, because Hillary's such a dufus name."

I pivoted my head, tracking the voice. Without turning all the way around, I mumbled acknowledgement. "Uh-huh."

The story rattled on. "But there you go, my mom was, like, in love with the Clintons long before they saw the inside of the White House, I've got a brother named William, can you stand it, but we call him Will 'cause no way are we gonna be ex-presidential groupies, that whole politics thing is insane, can you believe the war, jeez, where's the justice now?"

The tsunami engulfed me. Mr. Cronin cleared his throat and split us into parts. I huddled in the soprano section, back row, knees bent. As we shuffled around, that cheerful buzz drilled my ear.

"Oh, that's fab! Like, I am totally sick of being the only fashion plate in this section, look around, it's all church girls and double braids and I just love your boots. It's Nicole, right? I mean, is it, like, Nicole or Nicky or Niks or what?"

There was no escaping the voice. I finally turned to face her. Maybe I'd seen too many Laura Ashley clones in one day to take in this vision all at once. Maybe I expected to be disappointed. Leather boots, and lime-green hair, and smile a canyon wide.

"Hi, Lary, it's Niks. At least, that's what my friends call me. Niks."

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