

FUN AND GAMES

At some time in the night, my eyes shoot open. My heart races. Is there someone in my room? I sit up, scan for motion, and click on my end table lamp. The flood of light makes me squint. I'm alone, yet uneasy. What woke me? I check my phone. 3:17 a.m. Too early to get up, and by the time I fall back to sleep, I'll be a zombie when my alarm shrieks in the morning. I roll onto my back, click off the lamp, and stare at the ceiling.

Blink. Breathe. Blink.

Clock.

3:21 a.m.

Only four minutes?

I scroll through Snapchat, bored. Not one post on Insta worth my time. I'm not a big believer in social media to begin with, but if you're not in the know, stuff happens. This one girl at a school a few towns over found out that some guy posted they'd been dating...for three months! And she didn't even know him. Could you imagine? Not me. I keep up with social media to be safe. No one's gonna say they hooked up with me and get away with it.

My eyes close, but I still can't sleep. I wonder about Dyson. Who is he? Where does he live? Is he cute? Why can I hear him? The poem he read scrolls across my mind. So beautiful. So passionate. So dark. Should I be afraid of him? Tell someone? Ignore him? Do I give into curiosity and genuinely get to know him? Why haven't I told Shai yet?

What if he's in my head forever?

Now, I definitely can't sleep.

I turn my lamp back on and sit at my desk with pencil and paper. It's been a long while, but I start to draw. A curve. A shadow. A straight line. A face, the one I see in my mind when I hear Dyson's voice, although I will never know if I'm right since I don't plan on us meeting him...ever. But the boy I draw is cute and it makes me want to meet him.

I huff, frustrated.

*"You awake?"* A whisper.

"Dyson?"

*"Do you have plans to meet someone else in your head in the middle of the night?"*

"No." I smile.

*"Can't sleep?"*

"No."

*"Me neither. Why'd you huff? That jerk still around?"*

"Thank God, no. I'm actually drawing, which is weird."

Dyson's voice lifts. *"Why is it weird?"*

"Because I haven't drawn in a very long time."

*"Really? What changed? New inspiration?"*

What do I tell him, that my hand is on autopilot because I'm curious to see his face? Sure, Mahlorie, that doesn't scream stalker. It's totally normal. But what about this is normal? Still...

*"Mahlorie? You fall asleep?"*

Crap, I forgot I told him my name. Flustered, I say, "Sorry, I'm tired and it's late." I quickly throw the paper in the trash and hop back into bed. "Why are you awake?"

*"Too much on my mind."*

I want to know, but I don't. "Like what?"

*"Like why can we talk to each other? How is this even physically possible?"* His gravelly voice carries sleep. *"We have to think way off the grid if we really want to know why, like the kind of explanation you'd find in a good 'B' flick on the sci-fi channel."*

"What, like *Sharknado*?"

*"Exactly. Weird, fantastic, supernatural even. Because that's what we're dealing with here."* Deep breath.

Worry? Nerves? "Maybe," I dare, "we should try to figure out what connects us, what we have in common. It could lead to an answer."

*"Not a bad idea. So, tell me all about yourself. What makes you tick?"*

I run my fingers through my hair. "I wish I knew." This is gonna be harder than I thought.

*"Well besides art, which you like, and Phil the Perv, who you don't, there's not much else I know about you...except that you suck at math."*

"Hey, that's not fair. It was a hard question."

*"I got it right."*

"Well, maybe that's because you're some kind of freaky math genius and not a reflection of my math skills at all."

*"You got me."*

"Seriously?"

*"It's my favorite subject. I love math."*

"Oh."

*"How about you? What's your favorite subject?"*

“Summer.”

Laughter. *“Not big on academia?”*

“It’s not that.” I sit up, legs crossed. “They teach us so much stuff that’s useless—”

*“Like algebra?”*

“Yes, like algebra, and they take three times as long as they should to do it. Plus, there’s the whole popularity contest and wardrobe and gossip. It’s not me.”

*“That’s why I homeschool. I learn what I want, when I want. I’m the most popular kid in my school, and I don’t even bother to get dressed some days.”*

I laugh. “Sounds perfect to me. I’d trade lives in a heartbeat.”

*“I don’t know. From what I’ve heard so far, I think the short of the end of the stick is falling in my hands, not yours, in that trade.”*

“Hey!”

*“I’m just saying.”*

His laugh makes me smile. It’s quiet between us, and I start to feel sleepy. My fingers click off the lamp and I lay down in the dark. Moonbeams strike the wall.

*“You getting tired?”* Dyson asks.

“A little. You?”

*“I could sleep, but I’ll hang with you for as long as you want.”*

I stare at my ceiling. Headlights cross the walls and spread out. Suddenly, I’m tensed.

“Dyson, are you scared?”

*“Because we can hear each other? No, not at all. I’m not afraid of much.”*

“Why not?” Eyelids grow heavy.

There's a pause. *"Things happen every day that are out of our control. Power is an illusion. If the sun doesn't rise tomorrow, what could we do about it? We trust that the seasons will come, that the guy in the lane next to us will stay there, that our locked door will keep bad guys out. But the truth is, we are at the mercy of circumstance. For instance, you're running late and miss your flight. Not a big deal, unless that plane is hijacked by terrorists and flown into the World Trade Center. Why did Death let them off the hook, but not the rest? What choices led them to miss their flight that were out of their control?"*

The air stills, his conviction pure.

*"Or you run into an old friend you haven't thought of in years until that very morning when they popped in your head for no apparent reason. Life is a series of moments that are interconnected, some spectacular, others insignificant. But once in a while, the course of your life is changed and after that moment you'll never be the same again. So, no, your voice in my head doesn't scare me at all. It's a moment that's connected us."*

I'm speechless. Who is this guy? "I've never met anyone like you before."

*"Uh-oh. Is that good or bad?"*

"It's good. Most people I know think life is a series of parties. They don't think like you. They don't think like me."

*"Well, that's something we have in common."*

My eyes close as sleep draws me in. Time passes in silence.

*"Mahlorie?"*

Breathe in. Awake. "Yeah?"

*"I'm glad it's you. I mean, if I had to have a perfect stranger appear in my head and start to talk to me through my mind, I'm glad the Universe chose you."*

Metal Mouth by Jaimie Engle

Through sleep, I say, "Me too."

And just before radio silence, I hear Dyson whisper, "*For as long as it lasts.*"