

The First Great Day of Many

Jack sat on a bench, stiff and watching ducks bathe in the lake. He sat so upright his back ached. With white knuckles he gripped the bouquet of pink and red roses. He thought about getting chocolates and a teddy bear, but figured it'd be too much. He didn't want to overwhelm her.

He scanned the people enjoying a sunny Saturday. Bikers, dog-walkers, parents with children. It was so picturesque compared to his two years of climbing out of hell, he was set to cry from the overwhelming contentment and fluidity surrounding him.

He checked his watch. They agreed to meet here at noon. It was five minutes past. Of course, he arrived thirty minutes early because he didn't want to risk the bus being late and them thinking he bailed. His leg jittered uncontrollably.

"Jack!" A woman shouted his name and he swung to face her, his whole body tugging itself in the direction of the familiar voice. The woman walked toward him, her hand in that of a little girl with a pink dress and her hair up in a braid. He went to the library a couple days ago and watched tutorials on how to do different braids and hairdos, imagining the chance of her one day asking him for help. He wanted to be prepared if it ever came true. He'd die of happiness if that day ever comes.

His throat tightened, holding back tears. He didn't want to scare her; she was only four. But he recognized the familiar nose and sharp freckle on her left cheek from the picture of a toddler that he's looked at every night for the past two years. It was technically a replica, because one horrible, terrible night at the center, he'd ripped up the original in a fit of hysteria. He'd cried and not eaten for a week after that and it was only by Charlotte, the woman's, good graces that

he got better when she sent a copy in the mail. He'd asked a counselor to laminate it for him so it wouldn't get ruined.

He stepped up to meet them on the sidewalk. The little girl stared up at him with cautious curiosity. That made him feel warm. She wasn't scared, but she didn't naively trust him, he was basically a stranger to her. He imagined her reacting to someone else out in the world, maybe four or five years later, and having the same reaction. It would keep her safe, in his opinion, yet not paranoid of everyone and everything. Or maybe he was reading too much into her. He had a lot of catching up to do.

He forced himself to stop staring at her and faced Charlotte. She had a small smile, tentative, cautious, but without suspicion or betrayal, which was better compared to two years ago, when he was at his worst. He looked back down at the girl.

"Hi," he whispered, the breath of a promise in that single word; he hoped she heard it.

"Hiya," she said after an encouraging smile from Charlotte. "I like your flowers." She pointed at the bouquet.

"They're for you," he said and held them out, not too close because he didn't want to make it seem like he was shoving them at her. She broke out into a giant smile, and he got to see her teeth, purely white but with a piece of spinach in a crack. It was too adorable to mention it just yet. He'd tell her later.

"I love them!" She made a high pitched squeal. "I didn't get you anything." He nearly started balling right then, but covered it up with a puff of laughter and swallowed it back down. She was perfect already, and without any influence from him. What if he messed it up, coming back?

“Th—that’s fine. Just getting to spend today with you guys is a gift.” Charlotte crouched down to the girl.

“What do you say to Jack, sweetie?”

“Oh, right. Thank you Mr. Jack.” He chuckled and looked at Charlotte. She shrugged and stood back up. The three of them began walking through the park. He heard a fountain sprinkling in the distance.

“You’re welcome. Um, what would you like to do today?” He couldn’t sleep last night, thinking about all the different things they could do. Boating in the lake, chalk drawing, ice cream.

“Ms. Mom, look! Ducks!” She skipped ahead of them, getting close to the lake’s edge. His heart seized up, but he forced himself not to overreact. Charlotte didn’t seem worried. They watched her toss petals from one of the roses into the lake, as if the ducks could eat them. It made him smile. He hadn’t smiled this much in two years and probably before then too, though that passage of time is still a little blurry in his mind.

“Ms. Mom?” he asked and Charlotte snorted.

“It’s a thing right now. Makes her feel grown up.” He wanted her to stay little and innocent and ignorant of his sins forever.

“Should I call her Ms. Hannah, then?”

“Oh, she’d love that.” Charlotte squeezed his shoulder and gazed into his eyes. “What day?” He looked back at Ms. Hannah, watching a duck taking a bath.

“Great day.” She could see in his eyes he wasn’t lying.

There'd be bad days ahead, bad things to talk about, think about, and experience later. When she'd ask him why he always wore long sleeves and he'd have to figure out an answer besides the fact he couldn't bear her seeing his track mark scars. When he'd have to go back to the center when she's seven for a couple weeks because he was scared he'd relapse. When she'd be old enough and he'd have to finally tell her everything, every sinful thing he did and didn't do. But today wasn't one of those days and for that he couldn't be more grateful.