

Nosedive

By Nico Butterfield

I'm about twenty minutes away from school and halfway through my coffee when my phone starts vibrating. I scooch up in the seat and cram my hand into the pocket of my jeans. I slide it out and plop back into the seat, making a mental note to order looser pants.

"First period's starting. You're late."

"I'm coming, I'm coming. Ten minutes."

"Eddie..."

"Clara..." I say. "Okay twenty," giving up on the ruse. "But I'm coming."

"Ugh, you're the worst."

"I know, I know."

"Hurry."

"I am, I am. See you soon."

"See you."

I hang up, smiling, moving up in my seat to return the phone to my pocket.

Clara's new this year. Her parents homeschooled her for a while so she could focus on diving. But things really started to ramp up sophomore year, and her Dad couldn't keep pace with the material anymore. I had my doubts about homeschooling and half expected her to be a bit of an idiot. Not to be rude or anything, but, I mean, there's a reason more kids don't do it. I was wrong of course. Harry, that's her dad, used to be a math professor at NYU and knows his stuff. It was biology that started to cause problems. They had to hire a tutor, and at that point it just made more sense to ditch the homeschooling.

A student joining during junior year is pretty unusual, but over the summer Harry went in to see our headmaster, Mr. Mullens, and made a big fuss about equal opportunity and a bunch of other legal terms. Clara was enrolled the same day.

I was never a big people person. I went to school, I did my work, and I went home. Simple. I mean, I had acquaintances, those friends you say hi to in the halls and have short conversations with but never really hangout with. I had those, but no one I'd meet on the weekends and see a movie with or anything. No one that I actually wanted to be around. Most kids at my high school smoked weed behind the auditorium, skipped class, and threw huge parties on the weekends. They just weren't my people. I liked getting my work done, watching *The Office* for the millionth time, maybe making a nice pasta sauce or something for dinner, playing a little Minecraft, and going to bed. I was more than happy doing things that way. Clara changed that. She was a whirlwind. The storm started the first day of junior year.

We had pre-calc together and the first day she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the seat next to her.

"Sorry, I don't really know anyone here. Sit with me?"

"Uh, sure...."

"Ah I'm sorry, you don't have to, you just look nice, and I don't want to sit alone."

She was nervous, definitely nervous, but, sure of herself, like she was on a train and didn't know where it was going, but knew she'd be fine wherever she ended up.

"No, I don't mind. I'm Eddie."

"Clara."

That was the first day. Me, not knowing what to say, hoping that she would take the lead. And her, taking the lead, sparking conversation in those few minutes before and after class when everyone is either settling in or getting ready to leave. We'd talk about those things that acquaintances would talk about. We'd complain about how much homework we had, how annoying our parents were, or argue over the TV shows we liked or didn't like. I'd see her around school talking to teachers or other kids, but it never felt right to go up to her and just strike up a conversation. I mean, the girl was intimidating. She was a mystery, and a scary mystery. She'd show up barefoot to class, sleep under the big sycamore tree on the quad and talk to her teachers like they were her best friends. She cared about how she did in school. She didn't hate drugs or anything, but didn't do them because they'd get in the way of her diving, and she could hold her own in a Minecraft world. Soon, those little moments with Clara became my favorite of the day. I'd lie in bed planning what I'd say to her and would get up in the morning making sure the right side of my face looked the best it could because I knew that's the side she'd see most. It felt like I was at the top of an amusement park ride every time she'd walk in the room, about to tip over the edge, stomach in my throat. After months of this, months of these little moments with this mystery girl, months of not knowing what to say or when to say it, something changed.

Mrs. Kaplan had just begun her lecture on trigonometric functions, and Clara, keeping her eyes trained on Mrs. Kaplan, scribbled the words, "*Do you swim?*" on the top right corner of my note sheet. A complete breach of protocol. *We **don't** talk during class. We talk **after** class.* I panicked. I wanted to answer, I really did, but Mrs. Kaplan had just talked yesterday about how fundamental this unit was to the rest of the course, and sneaking around behind the teacher's

back wasn't something I was prepared for. So, I pretended not to see the question, deciding I'd answer after class when these kinds of conversations were appropriate. This was a mistake.

"Ahh," I exclaimed, jumping to the side, as the back of Clara's pencil pokes me between the ribs.

"Edward?" Mrs. Kaplan said with a wry smile, "Everything all right over there?"

"Yeah, sorry Mrs. Kaplan." I said, scratching the back of my head, trying to disappear.

She continued lecturing and I dove back into my notes, which were progressing nicely until I noticed a hand creeping towards the top of my page, underlining the question so it now read, "Do you swim?"

"Not really." I whispered, giving in.

"Come on, it'll be fun."

Before I could say, "No, no it wouldn't. I really don't swim," school was over and I was following a grey Toyota minivan to the pool. It's her mom's car and it's huge, but that didn't stop her from completely disregarding the speed limit. She almost lost me three separate times.

"Ready?!" She asked in the parking lot outside the *California Diving Academy*, a crazed look in her eye.

"You know that the speed limit isn't a suggestion, right?"

"Debatable."

A thick wave of chlorine hit me as we entered the main pool area. It was an amazing space. The room was as long as two football fields laying side by side, with the height of the ceiling matching it's length. Three huge white pillars loomed above me as divers hurled

themselves off, contorting their bodies into spectacular shapes before piercing the surface of the water.

“Okay, so let’s get you changed.”

“I actually don’t have a suit...so I think I’ll just watch.”

“I knew you’d say that, so...I brought you one!” she smiled, holding up a pair of black speedo trunks.

“Look Clara, swimming’s really not my thing.” I said trailing off. She looked a bit put out, like she was a little kid and I’d just told her there wasn’t gonna be any dessert after dinner.

“I’d love to watch you do that though,” pointing towards the pillars and filling the silence.

“That’s insane.”

“Fine. Be boring. I’ll do a couple dives then we can go,” she said, perking up a little.

Before I could complain about her calling me boring, she was in the changing room. Minutes later she came back out wearing a bright red, one-piece bathing suit with goggles and a bright blue swim cap. She looked ridiculous. She waved and smiled at me, running over to the shortest pillar. The lifeguard blew his whistle and yelled at her to walk, prompting her to slow down before reaching the pillar. Once at the top, she did another little wave and flung herself off the platform. She had told me about her diving, but seeing it was different. There was never a doubt in her mind that she would land safely in the water below. Her movements were so fast, so purposeful, so athletic. She was totally free. It was like magic, watching her hang there for what felt like years, twisting and turning in the air with her red suit and blue cap vibrant against the white backdrop of the room’s walls. And then, when she finally reached the water, she landed

flat on her back with a resounding, “thwack!” I leapt to my feet and started moving towards the edge of the pool. She popped up from underneath the water, pain etched across her face.

“Does that happen often?!” I said as she made her way to the edge of the pool to meet me.

“No no, not often,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Here, come on,” reaching out my hand to help her out of the pool.

She shook her head though and insisted on another dive. She did five more dives after that. She hit the water the right way each time, hands piercing it like a torpedo with tiny ripples pulsing out from where she broke through the pool’s surface. The bright red bathing suit and blue swim cap didn’t look so ridiculous anymore.

After that, those few minutes I used to have with her before and after class turned to hours. We hung out during free periods, after school, on weekends, all of it. She encouraged my Minecraft obsession, and I made going to her diving practices a regular thing. We weren’t just acquaintances anymore. Just to be clear, I’m not, like, a desirable guy. I don’t play sports. I’m awkward. I play Minecraft and do LEGOs in my spare time. Girls aren’t just pulling me into the seats next to them left and right. Girls don’t take me swimming with them.

She meant something to me. She meant a lot to me, and I wanted to mean more to her. This was a first for me, and that made Clara even more special than she already was. It made her too special. She’d been with guys before. She’d been with lots of guys. She’d dated William or Brian or Chris or some other name that wasn’t mine, mostly other divers. And the things I thought were special, the things I thought meant something, didn’t mean the same to her.

We’re friends. We’re great friends. The best of friends.

About ten minutes from school, my car makes a resounding thud that reverberates through its metal frame. My seat belt tightens around my chest and I'm jolted forward in my seat, feeling my head whip forward as I hit the brakes. I look around and everything seems okay. Juice Wrld is still blaring in the background, "She told me put my heart in the baaag and nobooooody gets hurt." My coffee is safe in its cup holder. There are no tail lights or telephone poles staring back at me through the windshield. The airbags haven't gone off. I'm uninjured. I park and hop out to investigate. A wave of the fresh air rushes to meet me as I exit my dad's old BMW. It's almost April, and the air has that sweet spring smell, like laundry just out of the dryer. As I round the front of the car, I see colored pencils strewn across the asphalt, exploding outward from where their plastic container hit the ground. At least 60 of them. Blue, red, yellow, green, turquoise; they were all there, decorating the moist pavement, a rainbow on the dark asphalt. The sweet air turns sour in my nostrils. I bend down to pick one up, turning it between my shaking fingers. It has "Crayola" carved into the middle of it in shiny gold lettering with "red - rojo - rouge" listed at its end. It is brand new. I was never any good at art. The kid whose grey baseball cap now lies at my feet, was probably excited to use it. Maybe he was good? Maybe he could draw dragons like I used to try to? His dragons didn't end up looking like angry sheep. He got their scales and wings right. He can't be more than twelve, maybe thirteen. Blood pools on the pavement under his shining, blond hair as I stand over him.

"What the fuck."

The words escape my mouth no louder than a whisper as I stare down at his limp body. The young boy rests on his side, propped up by his backpack. It's straps dig into his neck as his head dangles rightward at an unnatural angle, just managing to touch the ground.

I didn't do this.

His backpack was jet black except for a lone keychain attached to the zipper, closing the small pocket in the center of the pack. It was a Rubik's Cube, one of the ones that's a keychain but you can still use. It was solved. Not a single square out of place, each side of the cube one solid color. Yes, the cube comes that way when you buy it. But he had solved it. I know he solved it. He has this curiosity in him. You can tell. He'd want to solve problems, not run away from them. He'd like chess too, any sort of puzzle. He was a thinker.

How could I have done this?

A belt wraps around his waist keeping his green polo shirt tucked neatly into his khaki pants. He looks so grown up. So put together. It's a dress code. I'm sure it is. He went to a private school. His parents probably paid thousands to give him the best education they could. I'm sure he was brilliant. He wasn't just born smart though. No, he didn't just get lucky. He earned it. He studied hard in all his classes, staying late after class to meet with his teachers. He didn't cut corners doing his homework either. He had drive, ambition, serious potential. He was destined to succeed, to make his parents proud. All that potential. All that promise. And me, standing here, having robbed him of it.

I tear myself away from the car and stagger towards the sidewalk. My phone is ringing but I can't hear it. I think about yelling for help. I think about going door to door, looking for his house. I think about his parents' faces when I tell them. I think about what they'll say when they

see. I think about what they'll do. Sweat pools in the small of my back, soaking through my shirt. I'm kneeling on the ground by the sidewalk now with my hands planted in the grass, gagging. I crawl further from the car, dripping with sweat. I run my hands through my hair, pounding them against my head, trying to calm down. My phone continues to ring. Clara jumps to the front of my mind, but disappears as images of scatter pencils and blood seeping into golden hair rush to replace her. I know I have to go back to the car, to the kid. I can't just leave him, but my body won't listen to me and I keep crawling.

This isn't happening. This CAN'T be happening.

I don't want to leave. I know they'll find me. They'll know I did it. I'm not trying to run, but the distance continues to grow, 30ft, 40ft, 50ft. My hands are scraped and my jeans are filthy. The rainbow of colors swirl in my head. Orange, purple, turquoise, all of them. Following me, haunting me. I don't stop. I can't. Then I hear it. A chilling shriek reverberates down the road. I bolt.

*I can't take it back. I **can't** take it back.*

My eyes are trained on the sidewalk in front of me as I run further and further away from the crash. The buildings, trees, and lampposts are a blur in my periphery. Lines of color streak across the edges of my vision like a car hurtling down the highway. A police car shoots past, lights flashing, ignoring me.

Forget about college. Forget about Clara. Jail, that's my future--What about HIS future, you selfish fuck?!

My feet feel heavy as they hit the pavement. Each step reverberates through my body. I feel it first in my knees. Then my back. Then my chest. The strain on my muscles as they propel me forward.

He shouldn't be dead. It isn't fair. His life is over. I took it from him.

My lungs burn. My legs ache. My head is swimming. Exhaustion clouds my thoughts as I pass shop after shop. House after house.

Why couldn't I have seen him?

After what feels like hours, I slow to walking with my hands on my head, breathing hard, unable to keep running. I don't like taking my shirt off. I really don't. It's why I don't like swimming. I'm drenched in sweat though, and it's getting uncomfortable, so I pull it off over my head and start wringing it out, watching the sweat trickle down the fabric. At this point I have no idea where I am. At the beginning of the run I thought some of the buildings looked familiar, but now it's mainly houses around me, and the roads are unrecognizable. Across the street from me, there's a long metal bench running along the sidewalk. I walk towards it, desperate for a rest. The sun is high in the sky above the treeline as I make my way across the street. The bench feels warm against my bare skin. Houses line the road across from me, a dense forest behind me. I close my eyes and lean back, resting my head on the metal bar at top of the bench, angling it towards the sky. As my breath begins to slow and my legs start to recover, the thoughts that I did my best to keep at bay during the run start creeping back to the forefront of my mind. Images of blonde hair and colored pencils lying motionless against the pavement flash behind my eyes.

I did that.

I pull my head forward, off the warm metal and sit on the edge of the bench. My elbows rest on my thighs, holding my head in my hands.

I did that.

I don't have a perfect life. I have mild acne, I'm overweight, I'm not popular, and I work hard, but my grades aren't amazing. It isn't perfect, but it's enough. I get to watch the shows, eat the food, build the LEGO sets and play the video games I like. I have Clara. I have her as a friend, and the dream of us together. After this though, I mean I can forget about all that. I know, I should only be thinking about him. His life, not mine. I know that, but I can't help it. I'm not perfect. He loses everything, but I lose too. I'll be lucky if I can get a job as a gas station attendant. I don't know how my family will be able to look at me. I don't know how Clara will be able to look at me. I don't even know how I'll be able to look at me.

Yes, I do. They won't. They won't look at me--I won't look at me.

Sure, I'll try for a while. So will they. We'll do our best. We'll put on a brave face. But that guilt that's burning a hole in my chest won't go away. Neither will that feeling of shock, of disgust, of how could you, that they'll all feel. I feel trapped, like I'm filling with water, and it's only a matter of time before I burst.

I'm gonna have to tell someone.

I reach for my phone.

Clara Missed call.

Clara Missed call.

Clara Missed Facetime call.

She probably thinks I ran out of gas or got into a fender bender or something on the highway. I slide the phone back into my pocket, unwilling to end the fantasy. The fantasy that

the police won't check the car's registration. That they won't show up to my house. That my dad won't answer the door. That the news won't get back to the school. That I won't lose her.

It's been hours since I stopped running, and I can't get that thought out of my head.

Losing her.

I think my family is stuck with me. They'll treat me different, but they won't just abandon me. No one should have to be friends with the guy who just killed a kid, though. I wouldn't blame her for leaving, but that doesn't make it any easier. It's almost ironic. For so long I was terrified to tell her how I felt because I didn't want to lose my only friend. Now I'm gonna lose her anyway and I never got to know for sure one way or the other how she felt. I came close a couple of times...to telling her how I feel. I've always been pretty sure she doesn't feel the same way, but I could never shake the feeling that things might just work out.

There was this one time about two months ago I came real close. Like real close. I was driving her to diving practice. Just a normal day after school and I just couldn't take it anymore. I was about to tell her. Tell her everything. And right before I could one of those names came up, a name that wasn't mine, a name that was never mine.

"I know that you drive slow, but no way you drive **this** slow."

"Believe it. Going fifty five in a fifty five."

"God," breathed Clara, a deep sigh carrying the word out of her mouth. "We're gonna be late cuz of your terrible driving."

"No....We're gonna be late cuz of my **safe** driving. Big difference."

“Whatever,” she muttered, bringing her knees to her chest and turning her head towards the side window.

“Okay, okay, fine. I’ll go sixty. Happy?”

“Thrilled.”

“Maybe, if you had driven a bit more carefully you wouldn’t have gotten your license suspended and you could be driving.” I shot back, taunting her.

“Fair fair, but I do think there’s a middle ground somewhere in there.” She said grinning.

“Yeah. Maybe.” I said, also grinning as I turned my head to look at her before returning my attention to the wheel.

We drove a bit further and then I broke the silence. “Clara...”

“Yeah Eddie?”

“Well, I uh, I was wondering...”

Before I could finish, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” by the Beach Boys, her favorite song, started blaring from her side of the car. She looked at her phone for a second and then declined the call. I should’ve just kept going. I should’ve just gotten it out while I had the chance. I shouldn’t have asked who called. But I did.

“Well...I was waiting to tell you. I wanted it to be a surprise,” she said, pausing for dramatic effect. “But...that’s Williammm,” dancing her fingers across my right arm and singing his name.

“Who the hell is William?” I said, brushing away her tickles.

“Sorry, call him Will, call him Will. He likes that better.”

“Okay, Will. Who the hell is Will?”

“We’re like kinda, sorta dating a little bit,” she said, pulling her knees even closer to her chest. “I know I know. I didn’t tell you. We hooked up at diving over the summer, and I wasn’t sure if it meant anything. I didn’t wanna say anything if it was nothing. But we’ve been texting a lot, and it’s kind of something now...exciting yeah??”

“Yeah, wow. Super exciting....”

So yeah, that’s that. They’re still together and I’m here, sitting on this metal bench, waiting for my life to end.

The sun has begun it’s descent, near the treeline. I know the fantasy is ending. I know I have to go home. I can’t just stay out here.

I jump up and I reach for my phone again.

Dad 2hrs ago

Call me.

Clara 1hr ago

Eddie!!! I'm worriedd

Clara 20m ago

Why weren't you at school?! Let me know you're okay!

Dad Missed call.

Clara Missed call.

Clara Missed Facetime call.

5 More Notifications

The words, “Call me,” bounce around in my head, demanding attention.

He knows. He must know. Maybe she doesn't? Not yet at least.

Before I can change my mind, I tap the screen twice and the phone is ringing. I immediately regret my decision and am close to hanging up when I hear her.

“Eddie?” she says, almost confused.

“Eddie?! Are you okay?”

“Eddieeee.”

“I’m here, I’m here.” I say, holding the phone up to my ear, my hand shaking.

“What the fuck dude. Why didn’t you make first period??”

“Clara, I’ll explain later. Some things are gonna change soon and before they do I just need you to tell me why it was me.”

“Wow, really getting all serious on me now, aren’t we.

“Look...just, just before it all changes, why me?

“Why you?

“Why me?! Why did you grab my arm that day!?” I say, louder than I meant to.

“Jeez, Eddie.”

“I’m sorry. I just need you to answer it, Clara.”

“Okay okay.”

Her words soon fade and passing cars and rustling leaves fill the silence. I start to speak but can’t find the words, listening to her breath through the phone instead. Terrified.

“You, you just looked like you needed someone Eddie...and I mean I did too.”

I just sit there staring at the houses across from me, my voice still caught in my throat.

“Eddie?”

“Eddie come on--”

“I love you,” I blurt out.

“Aw cutie, I love you too.”

“No Clara, I’m **in** love with you.”

“Oh, well Eddi-”

I hang up, not wanting to hear the rest and hurl the phone down the street.

It's not a fairy tale. I don't get the girl. I don't get to be a high schooler with high schooler problems anymore. That kid doesn't get to grow up. He doesn't get to worry about girls not liking him. His parents don't get to tuck him in at night or go to his graduation. And that's on me.

"It's fucking **on me!**" I scream down the road, the words hanging in the air for a moment, unanswered, before fading into inevitable silence.

I knew whatever Clara said wasn't gonna change that. It wasn't gonna end with us walking off into the sunset. It wasn't gonna make me feel any less guilty. It wasn't gonna bring him back.

I just lose.

The sun has fallen below the tree tops and rays of light shoot through the gaps between their branches, speckling my bare chest as I stand next to the metal bench, staring into the forest. It feels like I've been playing chess. All my opponent's pieces placed neatly in their squares, ready for the game. But, the only piece I have is my king. Sure, I can move it around a bit. I can do my best to escape. Maybe I can even do this for a while, but regardless of how long I manage to, the fact is that with only a king, it's impossible to win the game. It's even impossible to tie. What am I supposed to do though? Just give up? Stop moving? No, you make the moves you can, and then you lose. You don't like it. You don't accept it. But, you do it. You own it. I turn towards the bench and grab my shirt. It's still damp, but I throw it on anyway.

I've made all my moves.

I look up the road and jam my hands in my pockets. As I do, a sharp stabbing pain burns between my pointer and middle fingers. My hand shoots out of my pocket and I begin sucking where it hurts. I reach in my pocket with the other hand and pull out the bright red crayola pencil I had picked up earlier. I stare at it for a while, cradling it in my hand. I already feel terrible. It doesn't make me feel worse. It doesn't make me think about him more. I already think about him constantly. That's not going to change. That's never going to change.

Why couldn't I have just seen you?

I move past the bench and wiggle between the trees. I stomp through the bushes for a while until the road is out of sight and stop beneath a young sycamore tree. It's a small tree, only a few feet taller than me and it doesn't have many branches. The bark is peeling off in some spots, but the leaves look healthy. The grass feels soft on my knees as I begin making a small, finger sized hole at the base of the tree. I drop the pencil in so half of it is still visible above the ground and fill in the sides of the hole with extra dirt so it stands upright. The shiny gold lettering, "red - rojo - rouge," glimmering in the fading daylight. I stand, wiping the dirt off my hands. Not looking back, I turn to leave the forest.

It's time to go home.