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PLEASE

IGNORE

VERA

DIETZ



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THE FUNERAL

The pastor is saying something about how Charlie was a free spirit. He was and he wasn't. He was free because on the inside he was tied up in knots. He lived hard because inside he was dying. Charlie made inner conflict look delicious.

The pastor is saying something about Charlie's vivacious and intense personality. I picture Charlie inside the white coffin, McDonald's napkin in one hand, felt-tipped pen in the other, scribbling, "Tell that guy to kiss my white vivacious ass. He never met me." I picture him crumpling the note and eating it. I picture him reaching for his Zippo lighter and setting it alight, right there in the box. I see the congregation, teary-eyed, suddenly distracted by the rising smoke seeping through the seams.

Is it okay to hate a dead kid? Even if I loved him once? Even if he was my best friend? Is it okay to hate him for being dead?



Dad doesn't want me to see the burying part, but I make him walk to the cemetery with me, and he holds my hand for the first time since I was twelve. The pastor says something about how we return to the earth the way we came from the earth and I feel the grass under my feet grab my ankles and pull me down. I picture Charlie in his coffin, nodding, certain that the Great Hunter meant for everything to unfold as it has. I picture him laughing in there as the winch lowers him into the hole. I hear him saying, "Hey, Veer—it's not every day you get lowered into a hole by a guy with a wart on his nose, right?" I look at the guy manning the winch. I look at the grass gripping my feet. I hear a handful of dirt hit the hollow-sounding coffin, and I bury my face in Dad's side and cry quietly. I still can't really believe Charlie is dead.

The reception is divided into four factions. First, you have Charlie's family. Mr. and Mrs. Kahn and their parents (Charlie's grandparents), and Charlie's aunts and uncles and seven cousins. Old friends of the family and close neighbors are included here, too, so that's where Dad and I end up. Dad, still awkward at social events without Mom, asks me forty-seven times between the church and the banquet hall if I'm okay. But really, he's worse off than I am. Especially when talking to the Kahns. They know we know their secrets because we live next door. And they know we know they know.

"I'm so sorry," Dad says.

"Thanks, Ken," Mrs. Kahn answers. It's hot outside—first day of September—and Mrs. Kahn is wearing long sleeves.

They both look at me and I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I am so mixed up about what I

should be feeling, I throw myself into Mrs. Kahn's arms and sob for a few seconds. Then I compose myself and wipe my wet cheeks with the back of my hands. Dad gives me a tissue from his blazer pocket.

"Sorry," I say.

"It's fine, Vera. You were his best friend. This must be awful hard on you," Mrs. Kahn says.

She has no idea how hard. I haven't been Charlie's best friend since April, when he totally screwed me over and started hanging out full-time with Jenny Flick and the Detentionhead losers. Let me tell you—if you think your best friend dying is a bitch, try your best friend dying after he screws you over. It's a bitch like no other.

To the right of the family corner, there's the community corner. A mix of neighbors, teachers, and kids that had a study hall or two with him. A few kids from his fifth-grade Little League baseball team. Our childhood babysitter, who Charlie had an endless crush on, is here with her new husband.

Beyond the community corner is the official-people area. Everyone there is in a black suit of some sort. The pastor is talking with the school principal, Charlie's family doctor, and two guys I never saw before. After the initial reception stuff is over, one of the pastor's helpers asks Mrs. Kahn if she needs anything. Mr. Kahn steps in and answers for her, sternly, and the helper then informs people that the buffet is open. It's a slow process, but eventually, people find their way to the food.

"You want anything?" Dad asks.

I shake my head.

"You sure?"

I nod yes. He gets a plate and slops on some salad and cottage cheese.

Across the room is the Detentionhead crowd—Charlie's new best friends. They stay close to the door and go out in groups to smoke. The stoop is littered with butts, even though there's one of those hourglass-shaped smokeless ashtrays there. For a while they were blocking the door, until the banquet hall manager asked them to move. So they did, and now they're circled around Jenny Flick as if she's Charlie's hopeless widow rather than the reason he's dead.

An hour later, Dad and I are driving home and he asks, "Do you know anything about what happened Sunday night?"

"Nope." A lie. I do.

"Because if you do, you need to say something."

"Yeah. I would if I did, but I don't." A lie. I do. I wouldn't if I could. I haven't. I won't. I can't yet.

I take a shower when I get home because I can't think of anything else to do. I put on my pajamas, even though it's only seven-thirty, and I sit down in the den with Dad, who is reading the newspaper. But I can't sit still, so I walk to the kitchen and slide the glass door open and close it behind me once I'm on the deck. There are a bunch of catbirds in the yard, squawking the way they do at dusk. I look into the woods, toward Charlie's house, and walk back inside again.

"You going to be okay with school tomorrow?" Dad asks.

"No," I say. "But I guess it's the best thing to do, you know?"

“Probably true,” he says. But he wasn’t there last Monday, in the parking lot, when Jenny and the Detentionheads, all dressed in black, gathered around her car and smoked. He wasn’t there when she wailed. She wailed so loud, I hated her more than I already hated her. Charlie’s own mother wasn’t wailing that much.

“Yeah. It’s the first week. It’s all review anyway.”

“You know, you could pick up a few more hours at work. That would probably keep your mind off things.”

I think the number one thing to remember about my dad is that no matter the ailment, he will suggest working as a possible cure.



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