

Big Brave Dog

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Her father was going to be upset again. It was already the third time this weekend and it was only Saturday. Yesterday with the fish, earlier this morning with the sunburn, and now this. She imagined her father's shaking voice, his grip tight around her forearm when they finally found each other again.

They always set a meeting place, just in case. They hadn't this time, or, at least, she couldn't remember if they did. If they did, she didn't remember which spot they picked.

She remembered laughing with her father as they exited the metal gate surrounding The Corkscrew. She thought she might vomit after flipping upside down and right side up fourteen times in forty-five seconds. She looked backward at the littered concrete floor below the royal blue roller coaster tracks. Crumpled receipts, single earrings, demolished cell phones, bi-fold wallets spread open. Things that fell to their death from 200 feet. Things people had no choice but to leave behind.

She remembered the dizzy walk to The Snack Shack and the long line for Snow Cones. A teenage girl in a ketchup-red collared shirt reached over

the greasy wooden ledge of The Shack, handing out two perfect circles painted red, yellow, blue. They took the Snow Cones and her father tucked his wallet back into his pocket. "I need to go to the bathroom," he said, heading over towards the Porta Potties to the right of the Snack Shack, way back behind The Tilt-A-Whirl. She followed him.

They stopped under the spinning circular metal cage. Her father leaned down and said, "Hold my Snow Cone. Stay right here. I'll be quick." She remembered up to this point exactly how it happened, she was sure. She was there, under The Tilt-A-Whirl, digging her front teeth into the ice as screams bellowed down from the spiraling disk above her head. She stared up through the slits in the floor. Everyone inside was pressed up against the walls, stuck there spinning with nothing strapping them in. *How do they stay in place?* She was distracted. Her left hand relaxed by her side, dropping her father's Snow Cone to the concrete.

Last night, Louise and her father arrived at the Wagner's beach cottage just before dinner. They visited the Wagners every summer in July. The Wagners lived in a two-bedroom home covered in faded gray shingles on this little bay with a private beach and a long wooden deck jutting out deep into the water. This morning, over breakfast, Louise's father told her to put on sunblock before heading down to the beach. He reminded her two more times at the beach, grabbing her by the arm on the second time and slathering it all over her back. He handed her the bottle to finish the task, the rest of his attention caught in a conversation with Mr. Wagner. She kept pushing it off: racing the Wagner boys into the water, burying her feet in the sand, wrapping herself up in a wet towel. She hated the stickiness, the white streaky lines, the smell. It was like she half forgot to put it on and half decided not to. By the next time she caught her father's attention — dragging a bucket full of water and tiny tan crabs up from the wave-break to their semi-circle of beach chairs—the sun had painted her exposed skin a riotous rouge red everywhere except her back and shoulders. She hadn't even noticed.

It took him until 4:00 this afternoon to forgive the mistake. He didn't say it, but he started laughing at her jokes again and smiled as he handed her a bottle of green aloe to put on after she took an outdoor shower. Louise flinched at the sight of the freezing, sticky goo. Her face twisted sour and her father laughed quiet. "Come on, Louise. You'll be fine," he said. "You're a big brave dog." He always said that. Pulling a Band-Aid over a scraped knee, turning around to the backseat before the first day of school, squeezing

Louise's hand through a tetanus shot in the doctor's office. "You're a big brave dog." Louise couldn't remember where the phrase came from. A bedtime story? A pep talk? A children's book? She wasn't sure. But it stuck, so much so that Louise had started using it as her own mantra in small moments of fear or discomfort. She grabbed the bottle. After her shower, she stood in the wooden frame under the sky with arms stretched out like a scarecrow until it dried a crusty clear green.

"Louise, I *just* bought that." She pictured her father's response, his calm, quiet voice soaked in disappointment. Louise's stomach twisted into a tight knot. She thought the teenager at The Snack Shack might just give her a new one, so she ran back over with her Snow Cone in her right hand and the flimsy, white, rainbow-stained paper cone in her left. Louise dug her teeth back into her Snow Cone in line. The syrup had already started to drain from the top and sink to the bottom, so the bite mostly just burned her mouth. The colors merged and the paper tip had turned a deep violet.

"Can I help you?" the teenage girl in the red shirt asked, as if someone just woke her up from a nap.

"Yes, please. I dropped my Snow Cone over there." Louise pointed over to the spill, but there were so many people in the way and it was really too far away to see the spot. "And I'm wondering if I can have a new one."

"So sorry, but we're out." She didn't seem so sorry. "Gary, who works over there at The Sweet Spot probably still has some if you want to try that." The teenager pointed flimsily to another hut to her left. No one was in line. Louise sprinted over, holding her Snow Cone up in the air with one hand.

"Hi, there! What's your name?" Gary, another sweaty teenager in red, asked with more energy and optimism than any other human working at or attending The Billington County Fair.

"Louise," she answered suspiciously. "Um, so, I had two Snow Cones, but one fell out of the cone part." Gary nodded along ferociously. "I'm wondering if I can get another one."

His smile never faltered. "Oh no. How terrible! Unfortunately, I can't just *give* you a Snow Cone. You can *buy* another one if you want!" He was beaming.

"Oh. Okay. Thank you," Louise said. Dejected, she turned and ran back to The Tilt-A-Whirl. Suddenly, Louise couldn't remember how much time had passed between when she dropped the Snow Cone and this exact moment. It was like the circle overhead had never stopped spinning and the people

had just been stuck screaming this whole time. The perfect chunk of ice on the ground was now a purple puddle. She stood there until her Snow Cone melted completely, coating her hand in watered-down syrup. Red, yellow, blue, violet all swirled cosmically over her skin and the white paper cone.

Stay right here. That's what she thought at first. But she couldn't just *stand* here waiting forever. The longer she waited, the more she needed to move. Wiping her sticky hands on her jean shorts, she peeked up through the slits rotating above her head. The cage was slowing down. The ride was ending. She saw someone in a neon yellow shirt. Tommy Wagner was wearing a neon yellow shirt.

Louise hated Tommy Wagner. He always pushed her when no one was looking and when she shoved him back, he would yell, "Jeez Louise!" and everyone would laugh at her. She hated him because he always did things like that when no one was looking. Once last summer, all of the kids were sleeping on blow-up mattresses on the living room floor. She was next to the wall on one side and Tommy and Joey Wagner on the other. Joey was asleep.

Tommy whispered, "Louise, are you still up?"

"Yeah," she whispered back.

He jolted up on his elbow and leaned his head over her. "Louise, what would you do if I kissed you right now?"

She cringed and pushed the back of her head down into the deflating air mattress. She felt scared.

"I don't want to," she whispered.

"Yeah, but what would you do?"

She didn't know. She turned her head towards the wall. Tommy Wagner pulled at her shoulder and shoved his face down and kissed her on the side of her mouth. She wanted to scream. She turned her body to the wall and didn't fall asleep until she heard him snoring beside her.

Louise replayed that moment from time to time, but it was always different. Sometimes, she punched him square in the nose. Other times, she pinned him to his air mattress and yelled until everyone in the house woke up. Sometimes she said loud and mean, "Don't you dare!" or "Who do you think you are?" But those things didn't happen. She just froze in place.

Louise rushed up the rattling metal ramp to The Tilt-A-Whirl, and was sixth in line on the platform. Rising to the tops of her toes, she strained her neck to look for Tommy Wagner's stupid neon shirt. People piled out in a line, stumbling down the ramp on the other side. Louise flashed her wristband at

the teenager manning the gate and sprinted into the cage. She poked her head out the exit and realized that the boy in the neon shirt was far too young and short to be Tommy Wagner.

"Alright, daredevils!" a prerecorded voice blared through the speakers in the ground. "Take your place and hold on tight!"

A rush of fear overcame Louise when she saw two teenagers in red shirts locking the entrance and exit doors. "Excuse me," one of them said slowly with absolutely no facial expression, pointing to the wall of the cage. "Please take your place and hold on tight."

All along the curved wall, people stood straight up with their hands clenching handlebars on both sides. There were no seatbelts or anything to keep them in place. She backed up slowly, gripped the handles, and scrunched her eyes closed.

The cage rose up and crawled in a slow circle. With each passing second, the crawl morphed into a walk and finally into a sprint. Everyone was screeching in unified horror. The whole cage was just terrified people circling each other in the air. She could barely open her mouth with all the wind smacking her in the face. "*You're a big brave dog,*" she whispered to herself over and over. "*You're a big brave dog.*"

Louise opened her eyes and tried to move her shoulders from the cold metal wall, but it felt like some invisible person was sitting on her chest. Her eyes burned from the wind, but she kept pulling them open anyway. The world for her was streaks of overlapping, intersecting color. T-shirts and hair and sneakers and skin became this wild kaleidoscopic tornado rushing in every direction. The pace slowed. The cage dropped back to the ground.

If I were my dad, where would I go? Earlier, when they arrived, they entered the fairgrounds under the big metal Billington County Fair sign to get their plastic red wristbands. Then they stopped at The Zipper, The Scrambler, and Water-Gun-Fun. They did The Bumper Cars, and that's where they split up from the Wagners, because the Wagners wanted to get in line for The Mechanical Bull. "Not yet, Louise," her father said. "Maybe next year." After that, Louise and her dad did The Bumper Cars one more time and got in line for The Corkscrew. She pictured her father's big blue eyes open wide in this evil excitement as he crashed his tiny yellow plastic car into hers head-on. They were laughing so hard that they weren't making any noise. They leaned over their clammy cushioned steering wheels, gasping desperately for air. *My*

dad would have loved The Tilt-A-Whirl, she thought. Louise ran through the list of rides they were yet to try, and headed for The Carousel.

For years, this was one of the only rides her father would allow. This, The Spinning Tea Cups, The Ferris Wheel, and The Caterpillar. The Carousel wasn't even really a ride. On The Zipper, The Scrambler, The Corkscrew, The Tilt-A-Whirl, it always felt like you went somewhere, even if it was just up in the sky. You could walk in a circle faster than The Carousel if you really wanted to. She stepped up onto the platform and picked a pale blue pony with a gold studded saddle. She climbed up and gripped the muggy post piercing the pony right through his back.

The music started. This hysterical orchestra of crashing symbols and piercing horns that made you dizzy before the floor even started moving. Louise rose up and down and up like she was floating in the waves at the beach. She kept her eyes wide open, searching for her father's navy blue pullover and tan baseball cap in the crowd. She kept thinking she saw him, but it was always just someone else in navy.

She thought back to the beach. "Louise!" Her father was shocked. "You're scorched!" He examined her flaming skin. Her knees, shoulders, nose. Her hair was pulled back into two braids, and the straight part down the middle of her scalp was nearly glowing. He pulled his tan baseball hat off of his head and plopped it on hers. He pulled his dingy white long-sleeve shirt over her head, sheltering her skin from neck to shins. The Wagner boys looked over and smirked.

As everyone folded up their beach chairs and packed up their towels, Louise returned to her bucket to set her beach pets free. The water had dried up in the sun and the crabs were scattered around the damp surface, their bodies exposed and lifeless. She dragged the bucket down to the water and poured them out anyway. Kneeling at the edge, rinsing the bucket with incoming waves, she started to cry. She kept her back to the group so no one would see, but her puffy eyes and runny nose were impossible to hide.

"Louise, are you crying *again*?" Tommy Wagner said, irritated and aggressive.

She locked eyes with her father. She wished she could tell him what had happened with the crabs. "It's just my sunburn."

Mosquitos bit at her ankles. She reached down smacking when her eyes caught on the blue horse underneath her. They moved to the green one beside her, and then the yellow one in front of her. Tilting her head back, she

examined the crimson and gold ceiling lined with thick blinding white light bulbs. She remembered this Carousel differently, looking back. It was once this brilliant, magical neon island in the middle of a dangerous, violently loud fairground. Her dad would make her wait in line until they found two horses directly next to each other. When she floated up high, he sunk down deep, and then they passed each other in the middle as the directions switched. Riding it now, alone, the colors were cold. Louise could not wait to get off of the grimy, chipping plastic and out from under the harsh blinding lights.

Where else? Strangers surrounded her, moving like microbes in a petri dish under a microscope. The air smelled like sugary warm fried dough, stale beer, and gasoline. All of the sounds merged into a thick oppressive cloud: the orchestra from The Carousel, the pounding of a mallet on the heads of fake moles, the bells from Water-Gun-Fun, the laughter, the screaming. *Where were the Wagners going?* Her skin pulsed with her heartbeat. She was starting to get cold, but her skin had retained the sunlight and was throwing heat all around like a bonfire. With every movement, her tank top and jean shorts rubbed up against the burns, unleashing goose bumps all over her body. Gigantic floodlights blared above every inch of the fairgrounds. Their yellow beams, the red and green lights lining the prize walls, the blinking bulbs on the rides in every direction, all created this radiant artificial fog around her. She hadn't even realized that it was dark out.

Louise spun in a circle, the knot in her stomach pulling tighter. Over near The Caterpillar, two security guards stood leaning against the side of The Libation Station. Louise had not seen a security guard all night, and started sprinting towards them without wasting another second. The security guards wore light blue collared shirts, fitted black pants, thick leather belts, and shiny boots. Whistles and lanyards hung on their chest, next to black and yellow badge-shaped patches. SECURITY stretched across their backs in bold capital letters. Attached to their belts, leather exterior pockets held walkie-talkies, tasers, and cans of pepper spray.

Louise reached the guards out of breath, but they didn't notice the child panting in front of them. They just stood there, leaning up against the wooden exterior of the hut, talking over each other, laughing loud, and sipping a dark yellow liquid from translucent plastic cups.

"Excuse me!" Louise called up. They snapped into silence, looked down at Louise, and lowered their cups down to the ground.

“Well, hello there! How can we help you?” one of the guards asked Louise, slow and surprised. His words slid into each other on the ends, like they were melting on a stovetop.

“I lost my dad and I’ve been looking for him everywhere, but I can’t...” Louise was talking herself to tears as the guard squatted down in front of her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, hey, hey. It’s okay. You’re okay.” His breath was sharp and hot with the smell of beer. “We’re going to find him. Don’t you worry. What’s your name, honey? How old are you?” He shifted uncomfortably in this kneeling position, almost tipping entirely to his left but catching himself at the last second.

“Louise,” she said cautiously, pulling her shoulder backwards slightly. “Eleven.” The guard kept his hand on her skin.

“Okay, Louise, so tell me, when and where did you lose him?” The guard leaned in closer. The second guard had returned to the front of The Libation Station. He was reaching over the ledge of the hut, flirting with a teenager. She handed him two more plastic cups.

“I don’t know when. Near the Porta Potties. Over there.” She pointed back to the spot where she dropped her Snow Cone. “Around The Tilt-A-Whirl.”

The guard lifted his sweaty hand from Louise’s shoulder. He stood up unsteadily. “Okay, Miss Louise. He’s probably over there waiting for you. Why don’t we go see if we can find him?” Voices shot out of his Walkie-Talkie as he headed for The Tilt-A-Whirl. Louise followed. They stopped under the screaming metal circle and the guard burped loudly. The thick, hot smell wafted down on top of Louise. “See him anywhere?” he asked, looking around in all directions.

“No, I already looked here,” Louise said, frustrated. “Do you think you could call someone?” she asked nervously, pointing to the Walkie-Talkie on his belt.

The guard chuckled sarcastically. “This is for emergencies, kiddo. I’m not sure we’re quite there yet.” He laughed again, squatting down to Louise’s height. “Listen, see over there, behind the Porta Potties? See how there’s that path to the other side of the park? Sometimes people take that as a sort of short cut. Maybe we’ll find your dad back there. What do you say?”

Louise looked over at the dirt lot behind the Porta Potties. It was darker than the rest of the park because there were no beaming lights

overhead. There were a few cars parked in a line. Just beyond them, she could see where the lights and the rides picked up again, glowing yellow in the distance. Louise's stomach twisted tighter as she looked back to the security guard crouching in her face. She shook her head up and down slowly without a word. The guard put his sweaty hand back on her shoulder and stood up. He walked towards the Porta Potties and Louise followed again, noticing now that there was no one standing in line.

The guard looked over his shoulder as they passed the line of Porta Potties and caught eyes with Louise trailing a few feet behind him. He smiled and turned back around. Within seconds, the neon glow of the fair had faded to that of a flickering candle. The air was gray and she could barely see the man's face standing in front of her. They passed the line of parked cars and, with every step, the world got darker and quieter.

The guard stopped and turned around. "I don't see anyone back here, do you? Do you see anyone, Miss Louise?" She turned around in a full circle and when she returned to her original position, the guard was standing much closer, just inches away from her body. "Louise," he said, leaning over slightly. "I don't mean to be fresh, but..." He reached his hand down to the middle of Louise's upper back. "Your tag is sticking out." He grabbed the tag of her tank top between his thumb and pointer finger and slowly tucked it back down into her shirt. His fingers lingered there for a second, under her shirt, up against her skin. "Much better," he said, dragging his fingers slowly in a straight line up her back. She started to step away from him slowly. "Hey," he said, frustrated all of a sudden. "Don't you want to find your dad?" She backed away, shaking, afraid to make a sudden move. Her stomach was churning so loud she could hear the movement.

Louise looked over her shoulder back to the glowing fairground. "I think... I think I see him," she stuttered. He stepped closer again, putting out one sweaty hand in front of her. "Look," he said, "We'll be over there to the other side in just a few minutes and we'll ask the rest of the guards if they've seen him. We can send out a message over the loudspeaker too if we don't find him. We just have to make it over to the other side of the path though, okay?" He leaned in so close that his breath made her face wet. "Okay, Louise?"

Louise turned quick and bolted back towards the Porta Potties. The guard reached for the back of her tank top, barely missing her left shoulder strap. He stumbled unsteadily after her, yelling. "Wait! Stop right there!" She

emerged back into the neon air like she was cannonballing into the surface of a cool swimming pool. She kept sprinting at full speed, darting in and out of people laughing and eating and walking to their next ride. She looked back over her shoulder for the guard's light blue shirt, but he had disappeared in the chaos. Louise sprinted until she thought she might vomit and then slowed her pace down to a full stop. Hunched over with her hands on her knees, she gulped huge, desperate breaths. Turning her head up against a big metal fence, she caught her breath and started to cry.

Where were the Wagners going? They were going on all the rides that Louise's dad would not let Louise ride. The Mechanical Bull first, then The Pendulum, and then The Drop Tower. She reached down and grabbed the front of her tank top, pulling it up in a bunch and exposing her belly to wipe her puffy, tired eyes. She wiped her runny nose in the same place. *You're a big, brave dog*, Louise thought to herself, trying to calm her breathing and stop the tears from leaking out of the sides of her eyes. *You're a big, brave dog*. She wiped her face again. Taking slower, steadier breaths, Louise turned around and spotted The Drop Tower from across the park.

The Drop Tower was the tallest ride at The Billington County Fair. It was nothing flashy: no blinking lights, no bright colors, no dramatic music. Just a gigantic chrome rectangle with black plastic seats protruding out on all four sides. Pure terror menacing over a short line of delirious teens and children over three feet tall. Louise joined them.

At least this one has a seat belt. Her hands were still shaking, so the metal buckle crashed up against the plastic clip over and over until it finally clicked into place. She braced herself for what was coming. *Keep your eyes open, Louise.* She kept reminding herself as another disillusioned teenager walked around jiggling seat belts to make sure they were secure. *Just keep your eyes open.* The Drop Tower would shoot up to the highest possible point overlooking the entire fairground, and sit there suspended in air for five seconds. Then, it would tumble down four stories, halt abruptly, and bounce in place for five more seconds. It would do this five times before returning to its original position. If Louise kept her eyes open, she could see every corner of the fair. The teenager pulled the thick metal bar down over Louise, and the stranger next to her, until it clicked.

Without a signal, warning, or countdown, they catapulted up so high that Louise thought the seats might just detach, launch up through the clouds, and enter earth's orbit. Her eyes scrunched tight and refused to open.

She couldn't breathe. Her legs dangled heavy, rattling in space. Her thighs slid in a puddle of sweat on the plastic seat. Before she knew it, she was plummeting and her legs shot out straight as the seat caught four stories below. She already missed the highest point, but she still couldn't open her eyes. *I'm going to throw up.* She thought it first and then said it out loud, to the horror of her stranger seat partner. "I'm going to throw up!" They tumbled down again and again. Louise gagged, which made her eyes shoot open with two stops left on the tower. She tried to look for her father's hat, Tommy Wagner's neon shirt, Mrs. Wagner's flaming orange hair, but her eyes were full of water. At this height, she could only see about a quarter of the park closest to her. They dropped. She could barely make out the shapes below. The ground became a terrible, blotchy watercolor painting. They dropped. Before the teenage Drop Tower attendant could return to unleash her, Louise had already vomited all over her own sneakers.

Her throat burned and her mouth tasted repulsively sweet. Sulking, she sat down on a bench contemplating her failures. There was no bravery left. No more steps to retrace. No next moves or big ideas. She would be the last human child at The Billington County Fair and would likely get kidnapped by the security guard, a roller coaster technician, or a creepy teenager in a red collared shirt. Defeated, she made her way to The Ferris Wheel.

The line was short, so she got to sit by herself. She stepped shakily into a yellow metal half-orb and the door shut tight behind her. The metal pressed up against her arm and felt cool on her sunburn. Looking down at her hands, she realized that her skin was covered in hundreds of tiny, bubbly sun blisters. She flipped her hands over and noticed the slice still raw between her left thumb and pointer finger.

Last night, after dinner, Louise's father and the Wagners walked out to the back yard to sit in striped plastic lounge chairs just as the sun was starting to set. Tommy, Joey, and Louise ran out past them to the edge of the dock.

Louise and Joey sat with their feet in the water and Tommy stood above them, holding a fishing rod tightly with both hands. Every time he whipped his string back behind him and prepared to fling it out into the water, Louise winced thinking about the hook accidentally catching her somewhere. In the back, in the arm, in the face. She winced leaning forward every time.

"Can I try?" Louise asked. They always said no. Tommy laughed and shook his head dismissively.

"Nothing..." Tommy whispered in defeat, after some time standing there without any string movement.

Joey laughed next to Louise. "Yeah, nothing. You never catch anything anyway. You don't even put the bait on right." Tommy dropped the fishing rod and lunged forward at Joey, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt and stretching it out until you could hear the little fibers ripping inside. Joey dug his nails into Tommy's wrist. They jerked back and forth for a minute — gaining the full attention of all three parents and bringing Mrs. Wagner to her feet — before the boys tumbled entangled into the water. Mrs. Wagner pulled them by their shirts back onto the dock and the boys stalked into the cottage to change their clothes and *think about what they did!*

Louise sat there alone for a few moments, splashing her feet around until she heard a rattling behind her. The fishing rod was shaking, sliding across the dock towards the water. Louise grabbed hold of the handle and stood up. The string was spinning out, so she grabbed the reel and pulled it towards her. She bent her knees to keep her balance and leaned back, turning the reel in firm circles until a small, glistening sliver bass emerged from the water flailing desperately on her string. "Dad!" she yelled, in disbelief coupled with this electrifying sense of accomplishment. He was too far away, engrossed in conversation with Mr. Wagner and he couldn't hear her. She called again and kept pulling the fish up into the air. She couldn't reach it squirming at the top of the rod, so she dropped it down on the deck.

Giddy, she squatted down next to the rod and tried to pick up her prize. Except, she couldn't grasp it because it was slippery, writhing around violently in a puddle. She scooped it up and cupped it in two hands. The fish's eyes were bulging and rolling around wildly. Its lips opened and closed frantically in desperation, gasping for something that was no longer there. The hook stuck deep in its flesh rose and fell over and over with each agonizing gulp. *It's dying*, Louise suddenly realized in pure panic. *I'm killing it*. She tried to pull the hook out but it would barely budge. With each pull, red and yellow liquid oozed from its lips as it jerked around madly in her hands. She pulled hard and the fish slipped, sending the hook deep into her own flesh.

"Dad!" She was sobbing now. She dropped the fish and sprinted down the dock. "Dad, Mr. Wagner, please! How do you get the hook out of a fish?"

Mr. Wagner laughed, but Louise's father shot up to his feet and ran down the dock. Louise followed in hysterics.

The fish was still squirming with a steady but fleeting force that weakened with each throw. Her father tried. He pushed the fish's cheeks together so it made a kissy face and wiggled the hook. He moved through the same process over and over as if he were performing CPR. His hands were covered in blood when the fish finally stopped moving. He looked up at Louise, devastated.

"We can ... save it, we just ... need to put it back ... in the water!" She barely got the words out. Her voice was cracking high-pitched over uncontrollable deep inhales. "Right?" she asked him. "Right?"

He reached into his pocket and took out his keys. Pressing one up against the thin translucent wire, he sliced the fish and the hook from the rod. Louise reached frantically for the fish and threw it into the water next to the dock. The small silver bass floated there in place on its side, mouth wide open. The hook and the scales shimmered on top of the water as the string trailed behind.

The Ferris Wheel started up in a graceful, undisturbed circle. The orbs rocked smooth like cradles. Louise turned around and looked out over The Billington County Fair, illuminated by this stunning electric haze. When she reached the peak, she could see every corner of the park. The blinking lights, the tiny food huts, the roller coasters rushing like snakes after prey. Before she had a chance to really enjoy the view, she was already descending slowly back to the planet. Louise slumped back down into the orb, exhausted. Her eyes burned dry. She closed them and accidentally drifted off to sleep.

"Louise!" She heard her name, distant and muffled like she was underwater. A warm shaking hand gripped her shoulder. "Louise!" She heard it again, and slowly awoke from a bad dream. Her father was leaning above her body, his eyes red, wide, and puffy. She looked around and started to remember where she was: the metal orb, The Ferris Wheel, the fair. She shoved her body up from the hard, cold seat and collapsed into her father's arms. He pulled her off of the ride that was no longer spinning. The Wagners were there, waiting below the platform. Mrs. Wagner waved, Tommy Wagner rolled his eyes and turned away. Right next to them stood a man who was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time: the security guard in his light blue shirt. Louise made sleepy, teary eye contact with the man; her body tensed up tight, stiff as an icicle in her father's arms.

Her father stepped off the platform and placed her back down on the ground. He turned to the guard. "Thank you again," he said, "for all your help finding her." They shook hands.

"Of course. That's my job," he said, suddenly sobered as he squatted down in front of Louise once again. "See, I told you we'd find him. Now, you go home and get some rest. I'll see you next time, Louise."



Her father was upset again. It was the third time this weekend. It was already Sunday. Louise woke up early on a deflated air mattress and walked out to the edge of the dock. She opened up a black tackle box with the initials TJW carved into the plastic. She sat there, alone on the dock, unraveling fishing wire and tying it together into massive, impossibly tangled knots. She grabbed all of the hooks she could find and tucked them into the big belly pocket of her sweatshirt. Running back to the cottage, the hooks jingled high and sharp like bells. She didn't tell her father until the ride home. "Louise!" he called out, laughing in shock.

"What?" she interrupted. "He never catches anything anyway."