

Silver Links

I found the bracelet at a garage sale. I was eleven years old, heading home from piano lessons with Mrs. Matters, when I saw the cardboard sign proudly exclaiming that 'This sale is HUUUGE'. It was a gorgeous summer morning and it didn't take much pestering to get dad to go take a look. It really was a big sale; the front lawn and driveway were covered in tables and boxes and the garage was open with several pieces of furniture on display. I poked around for a little while, but there weren't any cool toys, mostly just grownup things. Eventually I came across a big box of loose jewelry, filled with tangled necklaces, random rings, a few bangles, and some other random shiny things. I decided to see if there was anything I thought my Mom might like, her birthday was coming up after all, but when I first laid eyes on it I knew I had to have it for myself. After some haggling with the owner, Dad ended up buying an entire set of pretty green dishes that he thought Aunt Susan might like and was happy enough to indulge my three-dollar desire.

It was a pretty bracelet, if rather plain. A simple silver chain with a small, cat shaped charm with a single jewel for an eye. Dad told me it definitely wasn't real silver, or a real jewel, not for three dollars, but I liked it. I wanted to put it on right away, but dad made me wash it first. While I was rinsing off the soapy water, I somehow managed to cut open my finger, just a little but I got some blood on the chain. Dad took the bracelet away after that for a bit, but gave it back once he was sure it didn't have any jagged edges I could have hurt myself on. Then he made me go practice my piano, Mrs.

Matters had said that I was still playing the piece too quickly. I pouted but did it anyway. Mrs. Matters always said I played too quickly. I thought it sounded better that way.

Mom never told me why, but that was my last lesson with Mrs. Matters. I started with a new teacher the very next Monday.

Four weeks later, the summer was over and it was time for 6th grade. I was starting at a new school that year, since my old one was only K-5. Mom woke me up for school that morning and made me breakfast, then took a picture of me standing with my brand new backpack in front of the porch and drove me the five minutes to the new school. I was nervous, my palms sweaty against the bright blue straps of my backpack and Mom had to tell me off twice for chewing on my nails.

Everything went well for the first half of the day. Mom walked me to the front entrance and handed me off to a nice lady at the door, who pointed me towards my classroom. My homeroom teacher seemed nice, her name was Ms. Aymee and she gave everyone a candy bar when she checked our names off on her clipboard. I even recognized one of the boys from my old school in the class, though he sat down at a different table so I didn't get to talk to him.

The table Ms. Aymee sat me at had four other children, two other boys and two girls. I didn't know any of them, but the two boys clearly knew one another and spent most of the morning animatedly talking about the summer camps they went to. I mostly fidgeted with my bracelet and tried to talk to my other table mates, but none of us were especially outgoing so we just sat in awkward silence.

Once everyone had arrived, Ms. Aymee had us all introduce ourselves and tell people something that we liked and something we didn't like. I said that I liked to play the piano and didn't like baseball. The boy next to me looked at me strangely when I said that, and when it was his turn he said that his name was Will and that he liked baseball.

Eventually it was time for recess, which I thought was rather strange. In lower school, we had lunch and then recess, but here it was the other way around. That didn't stop me from grabbing my lunchbox and following everyone else to the playground. Unlike my old school, St. Andrew's was a big property, with a large playground and an open field surrounded by a tall fence where the kids could run around. I carefully set my lunch down in the bin with my teacher's name on it by the door, then sprinted out to the playground.

Unlike the aging playground near my house, this one looked brand new and was huge, with three levels, two big slides, and a small climbing wall. I was just about to go down the fireman's pole from the second level when I was cornered by three other boys, the two from my table and a third one who I didn't recognize from class. I tried to introduce myself properly, but Will cut me off.

"How can you not like baseball, that's like the best sport ever. When I grow up, I'm going to be a baseball player, just like my Uncle!"

I blinked at him and thought about how my Uncle Tod would respond. "Ok I guess, good luck with that." I don't think he liked that answer, because his face turned red and he started to yell at me.

“What, do you think I’m not good enough? I’m going to be the best baseball player in the whole world, just like Babe Ruth!”

“Who? Isn’t that a type of candy bar?”

“How do you not know who Babe Ruth is? He’s like the bestest baseball player of all time! The Sultan of Swat!”

“Oh ok that’s cool I guess? Sultan of Swat is kind of a dumb nickname though. It’s a dumb sport anyway, you just run around in circles and nothing exciting ever happens.”

In hindsight, that was probably not the best thing to say, even though it did sound like a really dumb nickname and baseball was a dumb sport.

“You take that back you dumb jerk! Baseball is way better than anything you like! What kind of boy plays piano and wears jewelry like a girl?”

“Hey, lots of boys play piano! And my bracelet is great. Baseball bat? More like baseball bad!”

That was when he punched me, right in the face. His form was terrible, if my old taekwondo teacher had seen me hit like that he would have had me running laps all class, but he was also right in front of me and I hadn’t seen it coming. As close as I was to the edge of the platform, I was lucky that I fell to the side and not straight back. Will stood stock still, clearly surprised by what he had done, and the two boys with him seemed equally shocked. After a few moments of silent indecision, he clearly decided that I had deserved it and aimed a kick at my ribs. I dodged out of the way, it was a really bad kick, and was about to kick him back when I remembered what Mom always

said about fighting. 'Don't do it if anyone is watching'. On the field below I could already see Ms. Aymee rushing over. With an angry glare, I grabbed the pole and jumped from the platform, sliding down and running towards her, screaming that Will had punched me.

After some yelling and questions, I ended up going home early. One of my back baby teeth had been loose for a while, and the punch and knocked it out, staining my lips and teeth with blood. The next day, I discovered that Will had tripped down the stairs the night before and broken his jaw. Mom always taught me to never wish ill on anyone, but Will had been a big meany and I quietly thought that he deserved it.

Out of sight inside the pockets of my shorts, the jewel on my bracelet flashed brightly for a moment and went dark.

Two weeks before the start of 8th grade, my friend Joy and I were invited to a prestigious, week long musical seminar in New York. Joy was a year younger than me and she played the flute, but we both had lessons with Mr. Madner and our parents knew each other from work so we ended up hanging out pretty often. Neither Mom nor Dad could take the time off to take me all the way to New York for the event, but Joy's mother offered to drive me there and back. After a lot of begging, and what felt like a million promises to be good and be careful, Mom finally gave in and said I could go.

It was the longest drive I'd ever been on, almost eight hours with only two short stops. It was made even longer by Joy's insistence on trying to practice with her flute in the back seat for half the trip. I wasn't sure how Mrs. Fisher was paying attention to the

road through Joy's shrill squealing, but she never asked her daughter to stop and Joy never listened to me about anything anyway so I didn't even try. It definitely didn't help that Joy apparently got really car sick, and nausea clearly didn't improve her musical ability. I mostly spent the trip flipping through the book Mom had shoved in my bag right before I left, a dry, wordy collection of essays that she'd been insisting I read all summer. Well, that and playing with my bracelet. I loved fiddling with the little cat charm and running my fingers along the delicate silvery link.

We got to our hotel twenty minutes to eight, and after getting our room and dropping off our bags, Mrs. Fisher took us to a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant that she knew nearby. Apparently, Mrs. Fisher had grown up in the area, and she pointed out some spots she remembered from her childhood on the way. I didn't really care that the pizza place on the corner had once been a 'men's bar', but for some reason she stopped talking after Joy asked her about it.

The restaurant itself proved just as good as Mrs. Fisher told us it was. It took a little bit to figure out what I wanted, I couldn't actually read the menu at all and Joy also was having some trouble, but with Mrs. Fisher's help we quickly ordered and our food got brought out really quickly. It was absolutely delicious, if a little hotter than I'd ever tried before, and the portions were really big. For dessert, Mrs. Fisher ordered a big plate of sticky rice with slices of chilled mangos. It was also really good, but I could barely eat any after the main course. When we finally made it back to the hotel, I quickly changed into my pajamas and was asleep by the time my head hit the pillow. Joy didn't

even manage that, she lay down for a moment while I went to brush my teeth and was snoring away when I came out of the bathroom.

Early the next morning, Mrs. Fisher shook me awake, and after a quick breakfast of Thai leftovers, she drove us the last half hour to the music school where the event was being hosted. After a frankly rather boring morning of speeches, papers to fill out, and group activities, it was finally time for lunch. Joy and I eagerly rushed to the cafeteria, hoping to beat any lines that might form. After picking up our trays, we sat down at a table in the corner together and dug into the perfectly adequate food.

I'm not sure how the commotion started, nor who threw the first punch. What I do know is that about fifteen minutes after we'd started eating, the people at the table two rows to the left of ours started shouting, and things just escalated from there. When it looked like the commotion was spreading in our direction, Joy and I quickly grabbed our things and tried to move away. A moment later, a tray, still laden with food, flew out of the crowd.

I don't know what I could have done, I didn't even see it until it had already happened. Joy was standing behind me, so maybe if I'd taken the spot on the other side of our table? I really don't know. The sealed soda can struck her straight on the temple and she crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut.

The next few minutes were a blur, I definitely remember a lot of screaming and panicking people. It was lucky that Joy's mom was still pretty close by, she'd decided to spend the morning in the city instead of driving home right after dropping us off. I choose to go to the hospital with the two of them instead of staying at the school.

That night, dormitory 1B caught fire just after one in the morning. Four boys and one girl didn't make it out of the building in time. Joy did end up making a full recovery, but only a few an entire week spent in a coma at the hospital. The event was canceled and Mom drove out to pick me up, and though she never said anything, I knew she missed an important meeting because of it. In the brightly lit hospital waiting room, no one noticed the unnatural light gleaming from the cat's eye.

I was a senior in high school when I finally started to make the connection. The woman who cut me in line at the grocery store? Her bags split open and a gallon of milk exploded all across her heels. The man who scratched Mom's car with his bumper and tried to drive off? I watched as a minivan t-boned him at the intersection. It had been a dark, cloudy night, and the bright glow shining from the ruby eye had been unmistakable. I was only thankful that Mom hadn't noticed, too busy staring at the car crash to realize that the light wasn't coming from my cell phone.

Even that wasn't really quite enough for me, I mean it sounded completely crazy. Maybe I'd imagined it! Over the next few weeks however... Well, once I was looking for it, it was suddenly all too clear. Tiny coincidences that I had never really thought about, suddenly illuminated under the bloody light shining from my most prized possession.

What really did it for me however, really showed me that I wasn't going crazy, happened at the very end of senior year. Mr. Jackson, my French teacher, seemed absolutely determined to screw me over. I was a good student, a great one even. My 4.0 GPA had me in the running for valedictorian, and he clearly didn't like that idea. I'd

complained after midterms that he was clearly not grading me fairly, but had somehow still scraped by with an A in the class. This semester though, he was being far sneakier about it. He would dock me a point here, two points there, and it was all adding up to have me end the class with a B+. After getting back my latest quiz, eighty-nine out of a hundred points, I had done the math and concluded that even with a near perfect final I wouldn't be able to end the year with an A. That conniving little asshat...

That evening, I was sitting in the living room working on a paper when I got a message from one of my friends. 'Wtf check wats happnin on Channel 11, its crzy mate!'. Grabbing the remote from the coffee table, I quickly navigated to the indicated channel and froze. It was him, my French teacher, on the screen. The reporter was saying that he had just been successfully arrested after a protracted car chase and shootout with the police. My laptop began to slide off my lap, and as I reached out to grab it my eyes fell on the bracelet. It was dark in the living room; the sun had gone down hours ago and the only illumination was the TV and my computer screen. The jeweled eye was glowing, a tiny burning star hanging from my wrist. I looked between the jewel and the TV screen several times, then turned off the TV, snapped my laptop shut, and went straight to bed, determined to ignore what had happened.

For the next few weeks, I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. It was me, all of it was me. All those disasters that had seemed to follow me, it was all me. I didn't know what to do, if I should do anything at all even. Should I throw it out, hide it somewhere where no one would find it? No. No, I couldn't do that. I shouldn't do that.

I did end up graduating Valedictorian, gave a speech at graduation and everything. Dad was so proud of me, and several of my relatives even drove in from out of town. Somehow though, it all felt fake and lifeless.

I was heading to college at the end of the summer, I'd gotten a very good scholarship at a rather prestigious university, and after a bit of pleading I convinced my parents to give me a bit of money so I could head down to campus a month ahead of schedule. All my things were packed and Mom promised to ship them off to my dorm room by the time I was supposed to move in. With just a suitcase and a backpack, I got in my rental car and drove away, my first ever solo trip.

On my way, I choose to stop in a quaint little town called Charm. It had a few shops and museums I wanted to visit, and one of my classmates had told me that I definitely needed to stop there to visit her favorite restaurant in the whole world. Apparently, they served the best apple pie she'd ever tried, and the steak was to die for.

It was five in the afternoon and I had decided to head back to my hotel room for an hour before dinner, mostly to charge my phone and use the hotel's wifi. What my friend hadn't told me was that the town was almost entirely Amish, and the cellular service was terrible. It had been a long day, I'd done a five mile hike in the morning and then spent the afternoon exploring the little shops littered throughout the town, and I was dead tired. I stepped into my room and flipped on the lights, tossing my key card onto the counter. I quickly plugged in my phone and slumped down on my bed. For

some reason, I was suddenly feeling even more tired than I had been before. 'Perhaps a short nap before dinner' I told myself. I'd planned to take a quick shower, but I was just... so... sleepy. My body collapsed onto the bed sheets.

From the closet by the door stepped a young woman dressed as one of the hotel maids, except with the addition of a gas mask over her nose and mouth. With measured steps, she silently walked over to the bed and gently lifted his left hand up to the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the curtains. Under the mask, a broad smile stretched across her face as she carefully unclasped the bracelet and tucked it into a pocket.

For once, the burning building wasn't technically his fault.