

Jas

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I'm pretty sure my friend Jas is dead.

She could be in the hospital. She could be with her aunt and uncle downtown, which is what my older sister Elsie told me. During recess, the teacher told me and some of the other third graders that she's on a vacation with her grandparents.

I don't believe it. Not really. I don't know. My parents won't tell me. They don't tell me anything.

They're mumbling to themselves about electricians and bills when I walk into the kitchen.

"Is Jas dead?" I ask. My mother's eyebrows sew themselves together as she looks down at me.

"Dead? Why are you thinking about death, sweetie? That's for the adults to worry about, you go play."

I open my mouth, but she's shooing me off. I walk to the door and shove my feet into my shoes before I step out into the hall. Without Jas, I don't have anyone to play with. I walk down to the end of the hallway, by the window where we usually play, and sit down on the orangey-red carpet. Usually, I sit on the side of the window by the socket while Jas sits on the other side. But there's still a fork in the socket.

I lean against the wall and pull my knees to my chest. I want to get rid of the fork, but I can't grab it. I can't shake it either, which is how I get the chess pieces out of that plastic holder Jas has, or had.

Thinking about chess just reminds me of Jas. We always play chess when we're bored but now she's not here. I rub my hands through the thick carpet while I think about her.

She and her family live on the same floor as my family. We're both in third grade. We both play chess. We walk to the bus stop together. On Monday I was going to Apartment 19 to meet her. That's when I saw her lying on the floor at the end of the hall, right next to where the fork was stuck in the socket. Some of her long black hair was stuck up, while the rest spread across the carpet like ink out of a spilled pen. Her brown eyes stared blankly at the red and gold wallpaper without blinking. It reminded me of Travis, Elsie's old boyfriend. I sprinted down the hall and pounded on my parent's door.

"Jas is dead!"

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course she isn’t,” my father said while he shoved me back into our apartment.

“She is! She is! She’s not moving!” I cried. My mother pushed me into Elsie’s arms and said something about taking me to the bus stop. Elsie checked the clock, and sat back down for breakfast. I curled up under a blanket on the couch. Sirens blared outside and the sound of boots thumped around the hall. Dad came back in and went into the kitchen.

“Maybe she should stay home today,” Elsie said. “That was probably pretty traumatic.”

“She’s too young to know what happened,” Dad replied. “Just take her on the elevator today. She loves the elevator.”

Elsie wound up driving me to school, because I missed the bus. I spent all day feeling like my whole body was full of water. It splashed around my mind while we did math and made whirlpools in my stomach during lunch. When I got home, I asked my mom what happened to Jas.

“That’s for the adults to worry about. Go do your homework.”

I know a fork in the socket is bad. Last year, in second grade, we watched these old, grainy videos about home safety. In one of them, a boy with a mullet pushed a fork into a socket and the film cut to black. It made me feel like I had a bowling ball in my chest that stayed there all day. When I wasn’t eating, my parents asked me what was wrong. I told them.

“He’s fine!” Mom said, “His parents took him to the hospital and they made him all better.”

The bowling ball feeling didn’t go away.

Jas could make them tell us. She once pestered her parents until they told us that the guy down the hall was sent to jail, and wasn’t just being questioned. At the very least, she’d know what to do about how empty I feel. It’s like someone went into my body with an ice cream scoop and replaced everything with oil. She’d calmed me down before, the time I found Travis.

Travis was a good boyfriend, from what I knew. He bought me the cheap coloring books from the dollar store sometimes, and Elsie could never stop talking about him. I’d found him in our living room, draped across the leather couch. I’d been going to the kitchen, and snuck by him on my tip-toes so I wouldn’t wake him. Then I saw his eyes were open. They stared at the floor, never focused on anything. His breaths were small and rattled in his throat. I got so scared, I ran to Jas’s apartment and slept in her room. She distracted me by telling me about a movie she’d seen, until she fell asleep. She radiated heat, and her breaths were deep and even.

No one had ever asked me why I slept at Jas's house that night. When I asked if Travis was alright, my father pretended to look confused.

"Travis wasn't here last night. You wouldn't know anyway, you slept at Jas's place. Travis is fine."

My sister sobbed. My parents went back to their conversation, which included the words "rehabilitation" and "Xanax" a whole bunch.

I lie on the orange carpet and tried to imagine Jas helping me. Her eyes come into view, dark brown, before they go glassy like doll's eyes. Like Travis's eyes. And then they become Travis's eyes, and I can see him, pale and limp across the couch by the orange medicine bottle before he becomes Jas again. Stiff, motionless. Words like "cardiac," "ICU," "AED," "rehabilitation," "probation," and "alprazolam" all fill the air above my head.

My eyes fly open, and I grip the carpet until strands come loose in my hands. I want to throw a tantrum. I want to rip out my hair and scream and kick walls and punch floors until someone tells me what happened to the boy in the video that put the fork into the socket and where Travis is and whether Jas is alive or not.

Jas could do it. Jas would've done it already. I kick the fork with the bottom of my shoe and it goes flying. It glints where it lands on the thick carpet.

I roll onto my side and bury my head into my arms. I can't do it. Jas is somewhere dead or alive, and I don't know where. And no one is going to tell me.

I feel sick.