

Empty Swings

The other kids walked right through Sean as he sat in the woodchips. He eventually moved to the tetherball and hopped from the base of the pole up to the tip. He found he could balance there a good thirty seconds before drifting back down. After some practice, he could manage it on one foot, spinning on the heel of his sneaker.

Nobody noticed, of course.

Next, he rocked in place on his swing set, so that it rattled as if by a strong wind. He sighed at the clouds, thought back to his big fall. The monkey bars hadn't seemed so very high.

"You look like you could use a push," said a voice from just beyond the corner of his eye.

The boy had grey irises and a smile with a dimple on one side. He was taller than Sean. No, the same height. His feet didn't quite touch the ground. The new kid raised an eyebrow, and Sean realized he was staring. He cleared his throat, gave his name. He had almost forgotten the feeling of shaking hands.

The kid was named Luca. His favorite game was capture the flag, but there were only two of them, so they decided to try hide-and-seek. Sean knew all the best spots around the play structure, but after ten minutes of looking he knew he was stumped. The moment he called out olly olly, he felt an index finger pressed in the small of his back. And there was Luca, floating just behind him, still materializing from a shimmer in the air.

"Boo," he smirked, "got you good."

"Pretty cool," said Sean, only slightly impressed, "how'd you go invisible like that?"

Luca explained that you had to imagine pins and needles spreading around your arm, then you could just sort of look at your hand and tune it out. Focus on the stuff behind it.

Sean was a natural. He turned his arms clear, then moved on to his feet. When he vanished and reappeared by the swings on only his second try, Luca applauded.

“You’re a really fast learner!”

Sean hoped he wasn’t blushing, if blushing was even still possible.

After turning invisible, Sean was officially too good at hide-and-seek. Luca demanded they find another game, something like truth or dare. Sean took a while to think it over before settling on truth. Luca rolled his eyes.

“Okay. Tell me the truth about what you’re doing here. Why stick around?” He jabbed a thumb to the milling kindergartners by the jungle gym, the fourth-grade girls at the picnic table, and the schoolyard beyond. “News flash, you don’t need to go to school anymore.”

Sean swallowed.

“The truth is, I’ve been working on something.” And now, he couldn’t keep the pride out of his voice. “Did you know there’s a rumor about the swing sets? Apparently, they’re haunted.”

He brought Luca over to his special swing, the one at the end of the row, which dangled from rusted chains. It was one of the few things he could touch and move like normal. Sean gripped the chains, felt the rough coolness curled in his fingers, and shoved. The swing went high enough that the live children noticed too. Some backed away in reverent apprehension. Sean gave a thumbs up to Luca, who returned the gesture. They worked on developing the trick. Luca explained how it was easier to hold and carry stuff if you put the pins and needles into your hands first. The whole time, he smiled like a jack-o-lantern. It made Sean smile too.

“This is fun and all,” said Luca, as their audience diminished, “but honestly? I was hoping you would pick dare earlier.” He shrugged. “I was gonna rope you into exploring the

woods with me. Have you tried climbing trees yet, since you died? You can just keep going higher and higher. It's awesome. So, what do you say?"

Sean stared down at his hands. He made them clear again, so he could stare down at his shoes. He wished he could forget about being dead, just for one afternoon. He'd come so close, talking to a new friend.

"I don't really take dares anymore," said Sean. "Sorry."

For a while, they sat and listened to the creaking swings. Back and forth. Then a tall fifth-grader stepped up to Sean's swing set and gave it a kick. The rusty chains bucked as Sean and Luca stared. In fact, everyone was staring.

"Tyler, what the hell are you doing?" a freckled kid piped up. "Don't mess with it."

"You sound so effing stupid," Tyler, the eleven-year-old, drawled. "It's just the wind, geniuses." He gave a big fake yawn, then plopped himself down on the rust-covered swing.

The two friends watched as the boy swung higher and higher, as a small crowd formed. Some started clapping, and chanting *Tyler Tyler*. Now half the schoolyard was watching. Sean lifted off the ground. He focused until the pins and needles came, until transparency spread around his arms.

"Hey," said Luca beside him, "take it easy."

"I just want to try something," Sean whispered.

Day after day, for what felt like years, Sean had sat in this swing. It held power for him now. Sean called upon that power as he watched the boy pitch back and forth. At the height of the upswing, Sean grabbed Tyler by the wrist, felt his fingernails dig. He knew he had the momentary strength to fling him into open air. A fall from his height probably wouldn't kill him.

Then icy hands gripped Sean from behind, and Luca pulled him loose. The two went spinning through the air as Sean struggled in Luca's headlock.

"Let me go," he screamed, "you showed me how to do it. I was just doing what you showed me!" He broke away, made a fist. Luca sneered at the display.

"Grow up, Sean."

"I can't grow up, can I?" said Sean. "Because I'm dead, right? And I'm so sick of it. I'm so sick of everyone ignoring me."

"You're being lame," Luca shot back, "and you'll regret it."

"You're such a little coward," Sean called to him, "what do you know about anything?"

Sean flinched away as a gust of air hit him. It was suddenly hard to hold eye contact. He felt the cold pinpoints of Luca's eyes boring into his head. Like brain freeze.

"What would you know about being ignored? You're just a dumb kid." Luca's voice was hollow. Wind whipped his curly hair. "I could tell you about being ignored. Being alone. Being so lonely you scream just to know you still exist, so bored you find a dumb little schoolyard to kill time. Do you know how long I waited for you? It was like, the jackpot, when I found you dancing around on those monkey bars."

Sean felt his feet touch back to the ground. The eyes had him fixed in place.

"Just a little nudge," Luca went on, "just a little wind. That was all it took for you to fall. You didn't even notice." He grinned. "Then I finally had someone to talk to."

Bells blared as recess ended. The pitch rose into a shriek, cutting through the wind. A wave of grade schoolers hit Sean as he stood and stared, trampling through him. In that moment, he brought on the pins and needles and faded out, invisible, hiding in the swath of anonymous kids. He ran, and he crouched behind a distant wall. Luca tore through the schoolyard searching

for him, wind kicking up woodchips and litter in his wake. Sean sat quietly and waited to stop shaking. He was shocked to hear crying as the wind died down at last.

“I’m so sorry Sean.” It was a reedy voice, muffled between fingers. “It’s not true, I made it up. I heard about the monkey bars from rumors. I was trying to scare you. Taste of your own medicine.” Luca blew his nose in his shirt. A wince-worthy sound. “They still remember you,” he went on, “at the churchyard. Every weekend. A ghost hears things. Haven’t you gone to see your mom since it happened?”

Sean caught the accusation in the question, so he didn’t answer. He swallowed the lump of fear in his throat.

“Fine,” said Luca, “whatever. I’ll stop bothering you. All I can say is, being scary won’t work. You think it’ll help with being scared, but it just makes you stuck. And someday, when you finally want to move on, you won’t know how. Trust me.”

In an instant, he was gone.

Cool air rippled the trees at the forest’s edge. Sean counted down from ten twice over before he found the nerve to enter. It was his turn to apologize, to do the finding. One of these trees surely had a friend behind it. There was something thrilling about taking a dare without being seen, with no thought to anyone watching.

The feeling lit him up inside, like a flashlight shining through his ribcage.