

DENIAL

Refusal to accept the truth

After school, Will had a stop to make before leaving campus: the computer lab.

With his headphones planted firmly in his ears, he walked through the crowded halls and walkways. He didn't hear what his peers were saying but he noticed some of them staring at him. He didn't have to listen to know they were still talking about him and Ashley. Three school days later, and they were still the hot topic among their fellow 9th graders. They had been questioning and teasing him about Ashley all day. The more he swore Ashley and him were just friends, the more they believed otherwise. By 5th period, Will had shrugged his shoulders and let everyone believe what they wanted.

Will met up with Ashley right outside the computer lab with only a few minutes to spare before the computer club meeting started. She handed him the programming book she wanted him to stash away for her. She told him, "I'll need *C++ Algorithms* tomorrow."

Will said, "I gotcha," while putting the book away in his backpack.

He was set to leave school before Ashley called out to him, "Call me tonight, okay?"

Will paused and gulped. His entire body tensed up and beads of sweat began forming on his forehead. He gripped the straps of his backpack tightly as though it was about to fall off of his back. His heart began thumping again, beating at the same rate per minute as one of the new electronic songs he discovered.

Only one girl had ever asked Will to call her on the phone: April. He didn't compare the two girls to each other anymore, but that same anxious feeling came over him the first time April asked

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him to call her. He slowly and nervously turned and faced Ashley again. He asked, "Is everything cool?"

Ashley casually answered, "Everything's cool." She took a second to come up with a reason for wanting to talk to Will over the phone at night. "Just wanted to know how your Cyan Collective meeting went, that's all." She played it as cool as possible, but her expression hinted that wasn't the true reason.

Will had another concern. "Aren't your parents gonna get pissed if you're on the phone with me late at night?"

Ashley smiled and asked back, "Do I look like I care?"

Will didn't know if Ashley really wanted to talk about Cyan Collective, make her parents mad, a combination of both, or something else. What he did know was that the phone call was going to keep that smile on her face. So he committed to her, "I'll call you as soon as I get home."

Ashley didn't go into the computer lab after Will left. She watched Will disappear into the crowd and a feeling of regret came over her. She gently punched the locker she stood against and asked herself, "Why couldn't I be honest with him?"

Will was caught off guard when he saw the cars parked near the curb of the condemned Clarke House and people, both teens and adults, going into it. The people were dressed like typical Cyan Collective members, so he didn't hesitate to follow them inside rather than going around to the backyard. He shuffled himself past all the bodies and found the only open space in the living room. There, he got a better look at the members he was surrounded by and noticed he never saw any of them at any of the meetings he attended. He also noticed that nobody was talking and the house retained its eerie silence. It was like Will was in a house full of strangers; strangers to him, and strangers to each other.

Will felt April's spirit talking to him from within his heart. It was telling him to introduce himself to one of the teens in the living room. Will was all for it specifically because none of them went to Washington High. But before he could make a move, a familiar and

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annoying voice spoke to him. “Must be infuriating for you, Will.” He didn’t have to look to know Ezra was standing next to him. He felt Ezra’s aura of pretentiousness radiating around him. Smiling proudly with his arms folded, Ezra continued, “Being around all this actual talent and knowing you’ll never come close to being on our level. It has to be agonizing for you.”

Ezra’s insults never got to Will and neither did this one. Rather than facing Ezra and firing back, Will simply asked, “Where’s Raphael?”

Ezra said, “Hush. One of your betters is about to speak.” He pointed to the decayed staircase where Suzi Newkirk, the undeclared leader of the Cyan Collective, carefully stepped on to the first stair. She held on to the banister for support, knowing the stair could collapse at any moment. Everyone turned to face Suzi.

Ezra leaned closer to Will and whispered, “I heard she called this meeting to kick out all the has-beens and never-weres. I’d say it was nice knowing you, but I’d just be lying.” Will kept ignoring Ezra.

Standing over the entire Cyan Collective, Suzi addressed the group. “Listen up. I know you all have stuff to do, so I’m not going to take up a lot of your time. Just got a few things to say and then you can be on your way.”

“We submitted the forms to get this house registered as a historic landmark. If we can get that, the city can’t tear it down. But one of the requirements is we’re going to have to restore this place back to how it looked when Clarke lived here, or as close to it as possible. I’m just going to assume nobody here has \$150,000 lying around to pay for renovations.”

Suzi looked around and wasn’t surprised to see nobody stepping up to pay. She continued, “Didn’t think so. Which brings me to my next topic, this year’s Art in the Park. We got a huge vendor booth this year and it’s located in a spot that gets a lot of foot traffic. We’re going to sell pieces of art and all of the proceeds will go to pay for those renovations.”

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The reaction among the members were split evenly three ways. A third had no problem with selling their art for renovation money. A third wanted to keep any money their art made for themselves. The last third didn't like the idea of selling out for money regardless of the cause. Will wasn't in any of those groups because he didn't have any art to sell whatsoever.

Suzi continued, "I know deadlines go against the reason Cyan Collective was formed in the first place. But if you want your pieces put up for sale, you got until the end of February to get them to me." She ended her speech with, "That's all I got. If you're sticking around, we're moving to the backyard. The rest of you I'll see next year if your still in town."

Suzi was twice as cautious with coming down from the stair as she was climbing it. Seconds after she did, it split in half. Only a handful of people, including Will and Ezra, followed her through the kitchen and into the backyard. The others left through the front door and, as Suzi said, wouldn't return until next year's meeting. That included all of the teens Will didn't get to introduce himself to.

It only took a few meetings for Will to fully adapt to the backyard's environment. The rock music coming from the boom box, the discussions around art, the heat and light coming from the fire barrel, it all became second nature to him. He sat on one of the couches surrounding the fire and went back to work on his latest drawing.

He focused on revising Ashley, specifically her stance. He remembered what she told him earlier, "Do I look like I care?" That statement, and the rebellious tone in which Ashley said it, echoed in Will's mind. He modified Ashley's posture to be more defiant and braver. In his drawing, she stood more ready and willing to face her parents. But there was still the matter of her missing left hand. Will moved his pencil over to start drawing it. But he froze up and he couldn't move the pencil any closer to the paper.

Deep down, Will knew what he needed to draw. He knew what Ashley needed at her side to stand against her parents. The Vision made that clear and it pulled Will back in to his drawing to give him a reminder. The afternoon sky became a hellish void. The smell of beer

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and cigarette smoke became the smell of sulfur. The heat from the fire barrel became the heat from the fires of Hell. The sound of “Change (In The House of Flies)” became the sound of Benjamin and Jazmine’s growling as they moved in closer to sink their fangs into Ashley.

This time, Ashley stood as bravely as Will drew her. She turned to face Will and smiled at him. She put out her left hand, inviting him to take it. Will said he’d do anything to keep that smile on Ashley. The beating of his heart, which overpowered the sound of the demons growling, told him what he had to do to make that happen. As he attempted to reach out to Ashley, his arm shook and his fingers tingled uncontrollably. He didn’t reach out too far before pulling back his arm and faintly saying, “We...we said that...we’re just fri...”

A bright flash of light brought Will back to reality. Topaz was now sitting next to Will and fanning the Polaroid photo she took of him staring at his drawing. Raphael, Will’s art mentor, stood behind him. He was inspecting cans of spray paint one-by-one that he had in a duffle bag on the ground next to him. Velvet sat on the arm of the couch on the opposite of Will and tinkered with a small lump of clay. She was present physically but detached from the group mentally. Ezra lied on the couch next to Will’s and stared at the sky as it grew darker.

Raphael looked over Will’s drawing and commented, “I see you’re starting your edgy boy period.” Then he warned, “Might wanna be careful with how fast you enter that phase, Will. Some artists don’t ever leave it.”

Never missing a chance to mock Will, Ezra said, “For him to enter any phase, he’d have to be an artist first. Good thing that’ll never happen.”

Doing his job as mentor, Raphael gave Will feedback on his drawing. He gave Will both positive remarks and critique. “The devils look cool. You still need to work on your human anatomy, so their bodies looking as uneven as they do works. Try not erasing so much. Those smudges can stay on the page even long after you’re done. The really good art critics can see them from a mile away.”

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“I recognize the girl as one of the ones from your other drawings, one of your muses right? Didn’t she have curly hair? The lines you drew look stiff. Make them more varied; thicker lines for the bulk and thinner lines for the tips.”

Raphael focused on what Will drew, whereas Topaz’s attention was on what he didn’t. She asked, “What are you going to do with her left hand?”

Will hesitated to answer Topaz. Topaz and Ezra were also 9th graders, but they weren’t the ones to follow any gossip let alone the ongoing rumors about Will and Ashley. The only person Ezra cared to hear anything about was Ezra himself. Velvet was a sophomore and Raphael was a senior. So like the others in their classes, they didn’t care for the affairs of freshmen. There was nothing at risk for Will to tell her the truth, that he wanted to draw Ashley holding his hand. Yet, he hesitated. And then he lied. “I’m thinking about drawing her holding a sword or something cool like that.”

Raphael was crouched behind the couch, putting spray paint cans into the duffle bag. He wasn’t seeing the drawing, but he heard how unsure Will was with his idea. He asked, “Is that what your Vision is telling you to draw?” Will’s silence was all the answer Raphael needed. “It’s not is it?”

Will closed his sketchbook and answered, “No it’s not.” His tone was one of remorse, as though he did something wrong and immediately felt guilty for it. The usually cheery Topaz was upset by Will’s response. Velvet was still mentally absent; she didn’t hear a word. She formed her lump of clay into a pair of earrings. A small oval was stacked on top of another oval twice its size. The larger oval had a hole in the middle.

Ezra scoffed and said, “You’d defy your Vision? The only reason why you’re allowed to taint Cyan Collective with your presence? Disgraceful.” He threw up his hands and told Raphael, “Give up on him, Raph. He’ll never learn.”

Raphael stood up, put his hand on Will’s right shoulder, and gave him the lesson for the day. “Remember what I taught you, Will. An artist creates with their eyes, their mind, and their heart.” Will

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looked up at Rapheal like an eager apprentice, ready to take in everything their master was going to teach them. “The Vision is a mix of what you see, what you think, and what you feel. Deny your Vision and you’re denying yourself.”

Raphael deepened his voice; he really wanted Will to listen to – not hear – what he said next. “Draw what your Vision shows you, Will. Not what you think it does, and not what you want it to.” The way he spoke indicated that he didn’t want to have to teach Will that lesson again.

Raphael zipped up the duffle bag and carried it over to the unoccupied couch where he took his seat. There, he finished his lesson. “Problem is, up to now, I’ve only been telling you about the Vision. To really understand it, you’ll need to see it at work.” He gave Will a list of assignments. First, you’re coming with us to opening night of Ezra’s parents’ new exhibition at the Clarke Museum.”

Ezra groaned and complained. “Does he have to?”

Velvet spoke for the first time. “Will’s one of us. If we gotta go, he’s gotta go.”

Ezra bitterly replied, “Hmph. Better keep that same attitude for your Clan Weaving.”

Velvet said back, “Of course he’s invited too. That is if he’s still in our group by then.”

Curious, Will asked, “Clan Weaving? What’s that?”

Topaz enthusiastically answered on Velvet’s behalf, “Velvet’s 16th birthday! There’s going to be this big ceremony out in the woods!” She clapped and said, “I’m so excited for it! I love birthdays! So many photo ops!”

Raphael continued, “Then you’re coming with me when I go tag the Prescott Bridge.”

Topaz was thrilled to hear that too. “You’re finally going to do it? I can get so many pics! Can I come too?”

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Raphael answered, "Can't stop you." He turned back to Will and finished with, "Finally, you're volunteering for Suzi at Art in the Park. It'll be a good chance for you to see work from other Cyan Collective members."

That assignment got Ezra's attention. He stood upright, put his hands together, smiled deceptively, and stared at Will. "Ooh I want to be there when you have to be surrounded by good art all day. I want to see the look on your face when it finally hits you that you'll never be anywhere near as good." He faced Topaz and commanded, "Topaz, bring your PhotoMax 640 camera. I want the look of Will's failure posted on the internet."

Topaz gave Ezra a thumbs up and energetically said, "Okay!"

For some, what Raphael ordered Will to do came off as a punishment for failing to learn his lesson. Will saw it as opportunities to both grow as an artist and experience new things in life. He told Raphael, "I'm down with all that."

Will made it back to Presley Place right as the sun set and the street lights turned on. Before he went home, he looked across the cul-de-sac and saw a rare and odd sight. The Neville's garage was closed. The van was parked in the driveway so Jessica and Vincent were home. It was strange for them to not be in the garage rehearsing.

Will wanted to go straight to the phone in the kitchen and call Ashley. But Marcus was already on it. Marcus put his hand up to Will to stop him from getting any closer to the phone or telling him to give it up.

"Chantal, it comes a time in every man's life when they gotta make the tough decisions. The ones they end up regretting their whole lives. For your boy DeMarcus, that time is now. I'm saying I gotta cut you from my dodgeball squad."

Chantal's shrieks and crying over the phone were loud enough for Will to hear. Marcus tried to console her, but he didn't try too hard. "Look I know I promised you could be on the team if we made out behind the trailers. It's just that I'm trying to go out with a win streak and you're messing that up. You got hit too many times and I can't

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have that.” Needless to say, that didn’t cheer Chantal up, and Marcus was done trying to. He said, “Imma go ahead and let you get it all out of your system. Hit me up when you wanna go back behind the trailers a’ight?” Then, he ended the call.

Marcus pushed the phone against Will’s chest and said, “Here, chump. Call your girlfriend. Ol’ caking ass boy. Out here actually loving these broads.”

As he headed up the stairs, Will called out to him, “She’s not my...”

Marcus shouted back, “Yes she is!”

Will dialed Ashley’s cell phone. He’d only called her a handful of times but he already knew her number by heart. After two rings, Will was worried he was too late. Fortunately for him, she picked up on the third.

Ashley quietly spoke, “Sorry, I would’ve picked up sooner but I had to make sure my parents can hear me.”

Will replied, “It’s all good.”

For the next hour and a half, Will and Ashley talked about almost everything. From their new classes and the new vice principal. What crazy things they thought Nathan had planned for his first real date with Natsuki. How computer club went, how intensely Ashley was looking for bugs to fix, and locking a date and time for her to meet with Liz. Ashley’s progress on the fake Perryton IDs and what fake name would best fit Will. What Will learned about the Vision from Cyan Collective and everything Rapheal assigned him to do.

Will spoke and Ashley listened. Ashley talked and Will listened. Both gave each other their full attention; no parents, no TV in the background, and no pestering little brothers to distract them. The only thing they didn’t talk about was the direction their friendship was heading in. In fact, they both went out of their way to avoid that conversation. Neither was ready to hear the truth, and neither was ready to tell it.