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English 306

2/25/14

Love Story

Sometimes, she tasted like heaven.

Sometimes, she tasted like heaven burned to the ground.

From now on, Charlie Hughes figured, she would probably taste like dirt.

The casket was closed because Haley Cox had rammed into a tree at fifty three miles per hour. The police knew exactly at what speed her car had been traveling at the time of impact because one of her hands had smashed through the dashboard and into the needle, effectively freezing it in place.

Haley Cox had once told Charlie that nothing could stop her, but a century-old oak tree had.

It was not a good day for a funeral. Funerals should be cold and rainy and gray. He'd bought a black umbrella, which was silly, because the men at the weather station had been predicting sun all week. But he'd never been to a funeral before, and in the movies it always rained. He had pictured himself, alone in a cluster of people, the rain flattening his suit to his body, rivulets running down his cheeks and washing the color away until everything was black and white and right and wrong.

He'd gone so far as to bring the umbrella along with him when he'd left that morning, tucked into the backseat in case the sun decided to develop a sense of decency.

One of his students probably would have said that the sky should cry on the day that Haley Cox was laid into the ground, but Charlie had always found clichés to be a cheap substitute for emotion.

The sun beat down on his back. The whole place smelled like flowers and other peoples' sweat. Everything was too bright. In their black mourning clothes, the attendees looked like holes in the tattered backdrop of the cemetery.

Haley's mother wasn't religious. Someone delivered an impressive eulogy, a relative of the family, maybe an uncle. Uncle Matt or Uncle Roy, probably. He had a beard and bushy eyebrows and arms corded with the muscles that come from heavy lifting, but his nose was just the same as Haley's, narrow and gently sloped. It looked strange on the face of a middle-aged man.

During the eulogy, a girl toward the front of the group began to cry, loud, hiccuping sobs that drowned out all other sounds and made her whole body shake. Her boyfriend wrapped a hand around her waist and tugged her away down a row of tombstones until the two of them looked a scene from a flyer for life insurance, tiny figures huddled together and casting one long mangled shadow behind them.

It would have been touching if Charlie hadn't seen the same girl call Haley a skank-ass ho five days previously. But then, most of the kids here had probably had similar thoughts about the dead girl. Haley had hated most of them, and they'd hated her in return. It was strange how despising someone became unacceptable after her spine snapped in half and her head went through the windshield of her mother's old mini van.

Haley Cox had been bad at writing essays and knowing the difference between

past preterite and past perfect tense.

She'd been awfully good at being difficult.

A month into the new term, Charlie ran into her outside of his classroom for the first time, a pile of papers under both arms, a bottle of diet soda clenched in his fist. The ridges from the bottle cap dug into his palm.

She was leaning up against one of the big picture windows that framed the entrance to the school, one leg bent, the toe of her converse dragging on the glass. The shoe would leave a black scuff mark. He knew, because he found it later, dull and unobtrusive, too low for the janitor to notice right away. It stayed there for three weeks before someone scrubbed it off.

She'd said, "Do you have a light?" and even though it was a question, something about her voice had made it seem like more of a challenge.

"I don't smoke," he'd said, out of habit, and then, "You shouldn't be smoking either," because it seemed like the right thing to say under the circumstances.

"I shouldn't be here two hours after school lets out, either."

Petulance was a good word. Charlie had written it on the board earlier that same day, the marker squeaking harshly on the slippery surface of the whiteboard -- "the quality of being childishly sulky or bad-tempered."

"Did you miss the late bus?"

"No, I took it." She rolled her eyes. "That's why I'm still standing here."

He was impressed by her gall. His students didn't really respect him; they were high-schoolers. Still, most of them treated him with the absentminded caution with which they treated most adults. He might have been unimpressive and soft-spoken and starting

to find gray hairs in the teeth of his comb, but he had the power to decide whether they passed the tenth grade.

Haley Cox didn't seem to care about passing. Haley Cox didn't seem to care about anything much.

“You need a ride?”

She cocked her head and gave him a look that he couldn't decipher, but then she was shouldering her backpack and standing up, stretching. Her tee shirt rode up her stomach, exposing a slice of pale flesh.

“After you, Mr. Hughes.”

His car wasn't new. He'd gotten it secondhand a few years ago, a nondescript gray thing that smelled like Cheerios on the inside. He'd wanted a convertible, but Molly had put her foot down. They needed something enclosed if they were going to have kids, and how practical was a convertible, anyway? He'd listened, her voice high and nervous, drilling into his pores and making his skin itch. He'd said yes, eventually. They'd both expected him to.

It was a matter of situational irony that he'd only used the car a handful of times before Molly showed him the pregnancy test. The day after, he'd turned onto Route 1 and headed for Pennsylvania. No apologies, no note. Just him and a few things packed into the backseat of the sedan. When a man chooses to drive away from the life that he's made, he's not supposed to look back. Charlie had been weak and listened to all nine of Molly voicemails on the first day, thirteen the next. He'd thought about changing his number, but the calls petered out after a few days.

Charlie had once been told that he could be anything that he wanted. It was a lie.

He would never let himself become a father.

“It’s a mess in here,” Haley said, scrunching up her nose and brushing a ketchup-stained wrapper off the passenger seat. “Doesn’t your wife get after you to clean it?”

He smiled at her, felt the muscles in his jaw work to pull his lips tight.

“My mom’s constantly getting after her boyfriend to do shit around the house. Take out the trash, do the dishes. Put the toilet seat up.”

His hand gripped the gearshift, eyes on the rearview mirror as he backed out of the faculty lot. “Was your mom supposed to pick you up today?”

She snorted, hunching her shoulders toward the window. They drove like that, the silence broken only by the occasional monosyllabic direction from the girl in the passenger street.

Charlie had grown up in Arkansas, where armadillos were as common as smoker’s lung. He’d seen too many to count on the side of the road, buzzards squabbling over whatever meat they could get to through the tough shell. When an armadillo sees a car coming, it curls into itself, trusting its plated back to protect the organs inside from the four-wheeled disaster bearing down on it.

Haley didn’t know yet that she wasn’t invincible. Charlie had learned years ago that he was weak.

There should always be food at a funeral, the physical act of putting food in one’s mouth a reminder to the living that they are, for the moment, still breathing and blinking and digesting. People stood in smalls groups of two or three, conversing in hushed tones and holding their plates close to their mouths for easy access. Haley’s mother was on

some kind of diet that seemed to be a step up from vegetarian; everything spread out on the tables was some shade of green or tan and smelled vaguely like the ocean. Charlie heaped a small pile of quinoa onto his plate, the plastic kind that was made to look like fancy china. It felt flimsy and light in his hands.

“Mr. Hughes?”

It was Mrs. Cox. When he had first met her six months ago, Charlie had been thrown off by how unlike mother and daughter were in appearance. Where Haley had been small and thin, her mother was round. Haley’s hair had been scrubby and blond, but Mrs. Cox wore her dark hair in a long braid that reached her mid back. The biggest difference between the two, however, was something intangible. Haley had carried herself with defiance, chest out and chin jutting, elbows turned to the sides and knocking into anyone who got too close. He swore she spat out sparks of light. Mrs. Cox was soft and drooping. She had long since learned that sparking was a waste of electricity.

“Mrs. Cox.” Even now, he searched her face for some glimpse of her daughter, a movement, the quirk of her mouth or the position of her eyebrows. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hughes. I appreciate your being here. I know Haley never liked school much, but I think that she genuinely enjoyed your class. I never saw her pick up a book on her own time before this year.”

Haley had been reading outside of class? But then, she had, hadn’t she? In the past month or two she’d taken to quoting the classics to him.

“The course of true love never did run smooth.” From the overstuffed chair in the corner of his living room, with holes in the knees of her jeans and a cigarette dangling

with practiced casualness from one hand.

“The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.” Eating dry cereal with her hands in the passenger seat of his car, spilling Special K onto the cushion.

“You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope.” Bending over to pick up her socks from where they had fallen between the headboard and the wall.

The words had been confident, rehearsed. Smooth, as though she’d practiced them over and over. Before, he’d assumed that she’d simply looked them up online, but now he could easily imagine her reading the books, bits of them, and storing away pieces to tell him later. She had probably thought that it was romantic. The thought coiled ugly inside of him.

“Mr. Hughes? Charles? May I call you Charles?”

Mrs. Cox’s voice was a little like Haley’s. Once, in the first few weeks, he’d felt the familiar sense of panic, of innate *wrongness* overwhelm him as she leaned toward him over the kitchen table. He’d jerked back, the legs of his chair screeching in protest as they dragged along the floor, and stood suddenly, a yellow wave of nausea rolling over him. Panting, he bent onto the kitchen counter, allowing the dizziness to pass. He noticed, absently, that his body was shaking. When Haley stood, it was tentative, slow. He wanted to scream at her to run, but his strength had shriveled up and died years ago.

She’d reached for him as though she didn’t want to scare him away.

“Mr. Hughes?” And then, after a pause, “Can I call you something else? Charles?”

He’d shaken his head, mute.

“Charlie?”

Somehow it sounded wrong on her lips, foreign, childish. Haley's hand was wrapped around his arm, squeezing too tight.

"Robert." It was his middle name, a good one. As a kid, he'd gone through a short period of asking people to call him by it, but the attempt had fallen flat. Now it was a new name, clean, untouched.

"Okay, Robert," she'd said, and then her other hand had gone to his wrist and he'd been pinned by his own weakness.

Robert had lived for seven months, but now he was lying with the girl in the closed casket. Charlie would miss him.

"Charles is fine."

"Right, Charles," Mrs. Cox said, and she attempted a smile. Her eyes were flat. "There was a question I wanted to ask you, actually. It's about the journals. Haley was writing in hers constantly. That's another thing I never thought I'd see her do, writing for fun."

The world swayed. He would have marked off one of his students for hyperbolizing like that, but for a moment the world really did seem to stutter dizzily, the trees around the outskirts of the cemetery leaning decidedly to the left. He blinked.

"I thought it would offer some closure if I could read it, but I can't find it anywhere. I've checked in all of her usual spots. I wondered if maybe she had turned it in to you?"

His mouth was dry. There was something in one of his shoes, a pebble maybe. It dug into the arch of his foot. He shook his head.

"The journals were a longterm project. I was going to collect them at the end of

the year, but really, they were for the students.” And they had been, a reason for his kids to write regularly. He’d seen them improving, the words coming more naturally to them in their discussions and essays.

“Maybe you could check your car? She might have dropped it on the way back from school on your group study days.”

He nodded numbly.

“I think she would have hated for me to read it. She was such a funny girl, so secretive! But I was just the same at that age.” Mrs. Cox laughed, a tired sound, half-hearted.

He was backing up, his feet finding purchase on the uneven lawn behind him. “I’ll just go and check my car. I’ll be back in a moment.” And then, because it seemed like the right thing, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

It wasn’t until he was on the road that he allowed himself to panic.

The journals had been a good idea, one of his better ones, but Haley was good at complicating things. When he’d passed them out three weeks before, she’d raised her eyebrows, quirked her mouth to one side as she accepted the little book from him.

She shouldn’t have been looking at him like that in class.

She’d pouted, arms crossed, body curved in on itself, when he told her off for it later. She wouldn’t turn to face him, even when he reached out and initiated the first touch, tips of his fingers running back and forth over her calf. He was reminded, momentarily, of how young she was, how small.

"I can't even smile at you?"

"Not like that, not in class. No."

"You're ashamed of me."

It wasn't a question, and it didn't need an answer. The funny thing was, she was only half right. She had seen the guilt in him and come to her own conclusions.

"You realize that people can't know, don't you? You realize that if they find out, I'm going to get in a huge amount of trouble."

"No shit." She was examining her fingernails, scraping at the polish. It flaked onto the bed.

"I'm serious, Haley. You need to be more careful."

"Are you ever going to take me out?" She finally rolled over, kicked away his hand. She still wouldn't meet his eye. "Are you ever going to show me off and be proud of me?"

She had known that he couldn't do that. It was cruel of her to ask.

The tree that killed Haley Cox had also quite possibly been finished by her. The hood of her mother's minivan had embedded itself in the trunk, pieces of metal and wood splintering out from the place of impact. Branches shoved their way through the front windshield as if trying to push it away. Tree and car had met an impasse.

Somehow, the van was still there. Whoever was supposed to tow it to the impoundment lot must be taking their time getting to it. The case had been ruled an accidental death, the driver heavily intoxicated at the moment of collision, but yellow crime tape still fluttered from the stakes surrounding the site.

This was his first time visiting the scene. Charlie had expected there to be more

trees, but there was only the one, standing alone amidst acres of soy beans. Whoever had initially tilled the field must have been too kindhearted to cut it down. It was a big, thick tree, but somehow the stretches of green surrounding it made it seem smaller.

Haley Cox must have had incredible aim, even when drunk.

The windows had all shattered on impact and it was easy enough to reach through and unlock the door. Glass pinged against the floor of the van. Later, he would find tiny filaments clinging to the fiber of his pants legs, larger shards collected in his cuffs.

It only took a few minutes of searching to realize that the journal wasn't there.

The doorbell had rung a little after midnight. He was in bed and it had taken him a moment to pull on a pair of sweatpants. In the time that it took him to get to the door, whoever was outside had switched to knocking, an asymmetrical pattern of fours.

He knew who it was before he pulled back the deadbolt. Haley stood on his front step. It was the first time he had seen her in a dress. She cradled the journal against her stomach like a baby.

"You shouldn't be here." His voice was still fogged with sleep. He wanted to say, if only for the triteness of it, that he was shocked at seeing her, that her face brought back a flood of memories and emotions, but all he really wanted to do was close the door and return to bed.

"I have an assignment to turn in to you." She held the journal out. He could tell that she was trying to be smooth, confident, but she kept bouncing on her heels.

"I don't need to see your journal yet, Haley."

"It's not my journal. It's the greatest love story ever written."

Now he was awake, a hot splash of fear dropping into his gut. "Haley, what did you write in there?"

"Can I read it to you?" She pulled the journal back and flipped it open to a random page. "When he touches me, it is like heaven and earth collide." She broke her gaze away from the page, grinned up at him for a moment. "The whole thing is like that. I used similes and metaphors and symbolism."

He tried to snatch the book from her hands, but she was too quick, yanked it back. "Are you fucking crazy?" He kept his voice low. "You can't write stuff like that, Haley. You can't even say stuff like that, not where anyone can hear."

"You don't like it." It had come out like a statement. She shuffled her weight from foot to foot. "I wrote you this story about us and you don't like it."

"It's not a matter of me liking or disliking it, Haley, Jesus -- "

"I've given you everything, Charlie, and you won't even look at me," her voice was rising now, and he reached for the journal again, but she took a step back, "And I've given you everything, I love you, Charlie --"

"Don't say that! You can't say that out here, Haley --"

"And you won't even grow the balls to say it back to me."

She was panting, face empty, and for a moment it would almost have been a relief to see her angry again.

"You can't keep that, Haley. Give it here." He reached toward her, slow, careful. "Give it to me and we'll talk about this inside --"

"No. I'm taking this with me. I changed my mind. It isn't yours." She backed away, and he swiped for the journal but she was out of reach and then she turned and she

was running, running toward the battered minivan parked at the bottom of the cul-de-sac.

The journal wasn't in the minivan.

There were a million places that it could be, and none of them was where it should be, which was in his hand.

Charlie didn't like pop music, too many songs trying to be original and none of them succeeding, but he switched on the radio as he pulled back onto the highway. He had no misconceptions about running to, not from. He was running away, because a man can choose to stand and fight, but when he's fighting himself he'll always end up losing.

Life had slaughtered the concept of originality, in its own way.

He'd heard the story at least a dozen times, on the evening broadcast or woven into the plotlines of soap operas and late-night dramas. He'd read it on message boards and heard it discussed on talk shows. He'd seen it in bad novels over and over, the authors flailing desperately for something to set their work apart from the others. He'd watched different reprises playing in his mind since he was eighteen and it had realized that perhaps there was something not quite right about him.

Pervert man meets little girl and everything's hunky dory until someone finds out, or she gets pregnant, or one of them commits suicide, or he goes to jail. If one of his students had turned it in for a grade, he would have told them to come up with something original. His own story was badly overdone, and he knew from experience that he couldn't change it.

Traffic congealed at the exit for Route 1, and Charlie eased to a halt. He had a

college friend up in Rhode Island who he could stay with, at least for a few days. The sky should have been extraordinary in this moment of decision, the sun either rising or setting, rain pelting at the windows of the sedan, but the only thing breaking the darkness was the grid of tail lights around him, orange and yellow and red.