

## The Edge of Everything

I wake at 4 o'clock, pull on some random clothes, and leave my room. In the living room I stop at the fireplace, and I grab a picture off the mantel. It's a photograph of my older brother, Briar, and me, two and three years old, and our parents are surrounding us. Dad is looking sideways at Mom, his overwhelming feeling of adoration and desire for her apparent, and Mom is smiling at the camera, which is held by our household nurse and nanny, Mathilde. Mom is so gorgeous, with small, symmetrical features around large, almond-shaped, clear blue eyes, and caramel-colored hair that waves down to her shoulders. Her warm smile delicately dimples her face.

I look at my mom's face, remembering how she used to wake me at four in the morning twice a year, on the first and last day of my school year. She'd hold a miniature version of her own left hand, swinging our arms between us as we walked along the empty and thin dirt road for about a third of a mile. We'd come to the end of the road, where the world dropped down, with enormous trees growing perpendicular to the ground we stood on, invading the never-ending sky beyond. Mom called this "the edge of everything," even though no one knew, according to her, if there was a flat part of the world attached to the bottom of the cliff. We'd watch the sun rise and enjoy the peaceful, blissfully unnecessary beauty of nature.

Ever since Mom was taken eight years ago, officially orphaning Briar and me with Mathilde, I continued this tradition, sometimes accompanied by Briar. Today is the first day of my junior year of highschool, and Briar's senior year.

I put the picture back on the mantel and go through the kitchen to the staircase. I jump up the creaky old stairs two at a time, eager to get to The Edge before the sun awoke. I turn left at the top of the stairs and bang on the door there.

“Briar!” I wait for a second, and hear nothing from behind the door. “Bri, do you wanna come with me to The Edge for the sunrise?” There is a disgruntled moan from behind the door. “You have two minutes!”

I run down the stairs and find the jar on the kitchen counter of Mathilde’s ashes. She was a wanted felon who had committed one of the day’s worst crimes by being unattractive past age 18. This past summer she had passed away quietly, sleeping in the bed she had spent every night in for over a third of her life. Bri and I had no one but her for over half our lives, and her delicious cooking, habit of looking after a flourishing flower garden in the backyard whilst whistling cheerily, and tendency to find silver linings in any situation would be sorely missed. They already are.

Opening the front door, I hear Briar scramble around the corner at the bottom of the staircase. I cradle Mathilde’s cylindrical container under my jacket, and jog through the light rain down the road. Bri’s big feet land heavily beside me, and as his strides are almost twice as big as mine, he is soon in front of me.

“So,” I begin, pushing my jog into a run and raising my voice. “Are you excited to be a senior now?”

Briar scoffs. “Lane, I turn 18 in three months, then will be either stolen by the Fish for some reason, just like Mom was, or to become a robot-soldier, like Dad was! Not too excited about that, are you?”

I feel intensely anxious at the prospect of losing him, and am irritated that he seems so sure that I will. “Don’t be so pessimistic. You could go to Upper School and get a job. They’ve got to keep the economy going somehow!”

“You know as well as I just how unlikely that is,” he calls through the rain louder than necessary. “Not only do we not have nearly enough kookers, but only semi-attractive people are used for the economy right now.”

“Not entirely true. There are models and actors and—”

“Yeah, cause I would rather have *everyone* staring at me than just the Fishy government.”

The rain suddenly picks up. I can’t think of a response to calm us both down. “I miss Mathilde.”

Briar’s quiet for a moment, then he picks up his pace, disappearing in the brightening rain.

The Edge of Everything. There is a trail, but I don’t know why you would risk your life stumbling down a vertical cliffside that might end in sky. The head of the trail is almost invisible now, anyway, overgrown with bushes, baby trees, and weeds. Maybe I’m missing out by not ever braving the incline, and maybe I’m not. I never have had the guts to find out.

Briar and I sit on the dirt ground and watch the sun rise. I focus on the red-pink shadowing the bright, pupil-less eye opening beyond the cliff, and I try to imagine a perfect world, a world that doesn’t make genetic perfection its priority. A world that doesn’t break up families in pursuit of a global sameness.

It feels like 15 minutes pass, and Briar lays his head on my shoulder. I tilt my head to rest on his dark, loose ringlets, and close my eyes.

Briar and I barely knew our dad before he was drafted, taken away from us and his true love. About five years before the government took our dad, it started drafting fit men 18 and over, forcing them to destroy the world's remaining societies, and fight and frighten whole defenseless populations into submission. Our dad had been turned into a concentrated killing machine, and we have no idea if he's even alive.

We were too young at the time to even begin to understand the horrible violence of our world. All across Earth the year 2156, government had crumbled, and a new, tyrannical-socialist government, Waader, formed, and it strived to begin a worldwide system of eugenics. It is all very Hitler-esque, except, unlike about 200 years ago, there's no civilization or even culture big and powerful enough to oppose him.

Waader and its tragic superficiality destroyed lives everywhere, not just my family. Patrolling the streets of an ever-expanding area is a governmental force known as Fishes to commoners and "Beauty Queens" to the upper-forces. Their task is to "eliminate" those they deem, by appearance alone, unfit to help build a worldwide, "flawless" race. Their only limits: unfit people have to be age 18+, and people with artificial beauty were taken in for questioning. Eugenics without the science, essentially.

Anyway, Waader today has achieved world domination, and is frightfully close to having entirely bred out specificities of human imperfection.

A couple more minutes pass, then Briar stands and peers over the edge. "I don't know, Lane...you want to put Mathilde down there?"

I join him. “Just some of her.” He still looks unsure, so I add, “I think she’d like it. I’m going to plant some purple lupine in the front of the house, and she’ll be a part of that, too, but this is the best connection to Mom I could think for her to make, and I mean, you know how close they were.”

He nods and grabs her pot, which I had set in front of us. He holds it tightly and carefully to his chest, and pries the lid off. I reach a hand in, scoop up some of the sand that is Mathilde, and toss the handful into the air above The Edge. The rain has lessened into a mist, so it flies out into a beautiful dark cloud that ornaments the pale orange and lavender sky perfectly, then breezes disperse it into nothingness.

“Wow,” I breathe. Briar grips my shoulder gently, and we walk home in silence.

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Our inherited bus is so big it’s awkward to park, but it fits my bike, so I’m not complaining.

“Laney, don’t forget to get your bike before I leave after school,” Briar says as he hops out of the driver’s seat, once he’s unceremoniously squeezed in to a spot in the Hipalowa High parking lot.

“I never did last year, Bri, I won’t this year,” I call defensively, sliding out of the other side.

“Alright, well, have a great first day. See you in gym.” He punches my arm lightly, gives me a playful smile that I can’t help but return, and jogs off.

I walk briskly towards the junior building, reading my schedule at the same time. “First class – Etiquette – Mr. Valkri – J209.”

I wasn't looking in front of me, so it's no surprise that I walk into someone on the edge of the parking lot. He also had his nose in his schedule, so when we bump into each other, our papers fly out of our hands and flutter on a little breeze about ten feet away. He makes a noise of confusion, I exclaim, "oh!" and we both run after them. We each grab one and face each other.

When I see his face, all I want to do is march him through town to the Attractive Donor Pawn Shop. Seriously, I figure I could probably get around ten grand in kookers for him. Enough for further education for at least Briar, and maybe for me.

I'm stunned. By law, I'm around beautiful people all the time, and here's someone who immediately beats everyone else in the contest of good looks. I'm a little disgruntled by my rapidly apparent prescription to the most superficial of the time's hierarchies, but ignore this and force a smile.

This boy and I enter the same classroom after a crowded, noisy walk through the Junior building, and enter seconds before the bell rings. There're two papers on the front table, and Attractive Boy and I each take one and sit in the last two vacant seats around the giant, oval table in the room. The seats are on either side of the crowning seat, which I presume the teacher will take.

"Hello, I'm Mr. Valkri," he announces, sits, snatches a white napkin off the table before him, and unfolds it with a flourish. He gives us all an exasperated look. "Well, repeat!"

It's hard to pull my attention off of his face—he looks *so* familiar, but I can't place him. In front of each student are five napkins, folded perfectly and gleaming: bright

yellow, deep purple, gray-speckled beige, neon orange, and forest green. We all grab one. I grab purple.

The girl next to Attractive Boy, Laurenni Lucke, a member of the cream of the beautiful crop that makes up the school, or the “Highschool Fishes,” nudges him on the arm. When he looks at her, she holds up her beige napkin and gives him a wink. He doesn’t look away from her flawless face for a second, then picks up his beige napkin and unfolds it on his lap.

He was bound to join them...why not today?

“When I read your name, tell me your color of napkin. This will determine seating arrangements,” Mr. Valkri tells us, then begins reading names. “Carriselle Axe,” *yellow!* “...Sam Hackard,” *purple!* “Ashiffe Pomporecci,” *orange!* He hesitates just enough that I think I know where I’ve seen his face, before he says, in a marginally quieter voice, “Lanette Western,” and looks at me before I whisper my color. Then I know.

He is the man in the picture on the mantel at home, the man whose smell of cinnamon and wet, early-mornings still lingers faintly in what was his and my mother’s closet, the man with my guarded hazel eyes and Briar’s high-set, sloping features.

After the class is done color-coordinating itself to my dad, he moves colors to sit in clumps around the table. Purple is placed beside me, so I get to stay where I am, next to him. Beige is at the end of the table, where Attractive Boy, or Olive, sits opposite “Mr. Valkri.” We learn proper napkin folding, unfolding, and uses, then cover the basis of introduction and presentation, then are told to practice proper pronunciation and enunciation of our fellow student’s names, but the bell rings before most of us dictate two people.

As everyone files out of the room and the next class enters, chattering about their summers, I zip over to the front desk, which my dad had returned to, and where he holds his head in his hands.

“Uh, um...” I start shakily. My voice is faint and the nerves between him and I are tangible. “Mr. Valkri, um, can I, maybe, come by at lunch?” I pause. The question sounds rather inappropriate, invalidated like that. He doesn’t respond, just pats his eyes and proceeds to stare at me instead. I rush to explain like an ordinary student, thinking the question has made him too uncomfortable to answer. “I have some concerns about the, uh, seating arrangement.”

He likes this reasoning. “Sure thing, of course, yeah.” He tears his gaze from my face to the clock above the door behind me and stands, entering his teacher persona again, although his voice sounds croaky on my name. “Ms. Western, I’m sorry, but I have to start class, so...”

“Right. I’ll, um, probably have someone with me at lunch,” I say hurriedly, and then I leave the classroom, impatient for lunch already.

I smile to myself, playing over my very anti-etiquette interaction with the new Etiquette teacher in my mind.

My next class is Constellations Connecting Earth and Sixeva with Madame Fersol, then Socio-Economy with Mrs. Pannealus, then Gym with Mr. Woice before lunch.

The day seems to fly into gym class, and I couldn’t be happier. Out on the fields, I immediately spot Briar, surrounded by guys and stared at by girls. I rush over to him, too distracted by what I have to tell him to call greetings back to people who say hi to me.

“Briar, Bri, come here.” I tug him away from his admirers, and whisper the facts, looking intently at his blue eyes so he knows I’m serious. “Our dad is here. He’s one of my teachers. You look *so* much like him, Bri. He knows who I am and that we’re coming by at lunch.”

He holds eye contact with me for a second, then abruptly falls to the ground. He catches himself in a crouch before he hits the ground, and I clutch his arms and hoist him back up. He opens his mouth, and at first nothing comes out. Then—

“I thought he was dead. Why didn’t he find a way to tell us that he wasn’t? Why didn’t he come see us when he came here to Hipalowa? Does he know what happened to Mom? Did he have anything to do with that? Does he still—?”

The only way to shut him up, since he isn’t listening to my commands and pleas, is to pull him into an embrace. I mutter into his hair, “I’ve thought of all those things, believe me. We just have to let him explain, and I’m sure he can and will, okay? Now, let’s get through Gym.” He nods into my neck and I let go.

We do stretches and run around the school, then split into teams to start sports the next day. The bell rings, and Briar and I take off, still in our jerseys and gym shorts. I lead him to the classroom, where he insists on being the one to knock on the door. We hear a muffled noise that we don’t know what to make of, so we look at each other in confusion, and I push open the door.

What we see is so far from our expectations that it doesn’t process right away. I barely even make out my dad, gagged, hand cuffed, and restrained by two big men in Waader uniforms, before more men in tight, charcoal gray body suits grab Briar and me, stuff black bags into our mouths, and roughly escort us outside.

A giant shadow is thrown over the parking lot our bus sits in by a circular, flying, steel gray contraption most of us have only ever seen in pictures. It's a Waader Helome, commonly known as a Waaderbug, used to transport Fishes and their prey from one place to another.

Dad, Briar, and I are dragged into the ominous shadow and up a thin, black staircase. Students and teachers alike crowd the courtyard between all the school buildings, and watch in silence as the black staircase lifts after us, and fits into a perfect mold in the machine. Inside, there is no color. No windows, no movement in the air. Then the Fishes come from a room in the back of the spacious aircraft, march up to us, flick our gags out of our mouths, and order our guards leave us.

"I'm Officer Jamie," a man with a flood of bright blonde hair says. "And this is my partner, Officer Henry." He gestures to a curvaceous woman beside him, whose fiery hair is cut above her ears. "But you kids knew that, didn't you?"

My blood boils and I'm sure Briar's ears turn red. I swallow, remembering...

I was eight, Briar was nine, and Mom and Mathilde were fixing us breakfast.

The giant armchairs crammed around the homemade table dwarfed my big brother and me, and Briar sat up on his knees to draw a Tic-Tac-Toe board on the dewy glass beside us. Mom was scrambling eggs with a fork in one hand, and Mathilde was pushing toast into the toaster. I drew an X, Briar drew an O, then we were shocked by a bang on the door, lost our balance, and slid down in our enormous chairs, giving each other wide eyes. We turned to Mom and Mathilde, who were frozen, staring with terrified eyes at the door.

“Beauty Queens, open up,” came a stern woman’s voice, and Mom dropped her scrambling fork, ushered Mathilde out of the room, and ran over to Briar and me.

She caressed our heads, stared at us with love and longing dripping from the corners of her eyes. “I love you both so, so much.” Briar and I both said soft I love you toos, and she let out a little cry.

“Beauty Queens don’t like to wait!” This voice was louder and male. Mom wiped her cheeks and went to open the door.

“Hi, officers,” mom smiled, and her lovely face was flooded with light. One of the Queens was shining a big flashlight at her. “Come in, I’m just making my kids breakfast.”

She walked calmly back to the stovetop, poured the eggs onto two plates, then painstakingly buttered the bread while the “Beauty Queens,” who weren’t very pretty, kneeled down to chat with me and my brother.

“Hi there, I’m Officer Jamie,” said the man, who had long, straight blonde hair and a slender nose, “and this is Officer Henry.” He pointed to the woman beside him, who had short red curls and huge gray eyes. “What’re your names?” Officer Jamie continued.

It sounded like, “Briary,” in unison, and Briar kicked me under the table. “Laney,” I said, and my voice was barely a whisper. “Briar.” His voice was failing him, too.

Officer Henry ignored the tension and fear infecting the room. “What lovely names! Do you go to school nearby?”

I shot my arm to point behind me.

“Down the road, at Hipalowa Starter,” Briar offered.

“Oh, Hipalowa!” Officer Henry said. “We stopped by the school offices last week! We liked it there!”

“Yes, we liked it,” Officer Jamie hastily confirmed. “Do you like it there?”

I was getting the feeling we were being the best citizens of Sixeva that we could be, so I spoke up and told them what I thought they wanted to hear. “Very much. We really like learning about politics.” I forced a smile and saw Briar nodding out of the corner of my eye.

Both officers looked shocked at this, but then smiled hugely, standing up as our mom clanked around behind them. “What a precocious little girl you are!” Officer Henry exclaimed, and I beamed.

“We’ve got to talk to your mom, okay?” Officer Jamie said, grabbing his partner’s arm and backing up to watch my mom move in front of them and place plates of food in front of us.

Her soft blues eyes were so sad as she gave us a small smile.

Mom followed them out the front door, and left our lives forever.

Briar takes a step forward, and I hear something between a gasp and a yell and a sob escape my throat. Jamie chuckles and Henry moves to stand a couple feet in front of us, hands low and flat, beseeching calmness.

“Kids, we’ve decided to put your family back together. That’s why we brought your father here. His memories of love for you were too strong to erase completely, and we are touched by that.”

Briar gives a disbelieving, frustrated huff. “And what about our mom?”

Henry opens her mouth, but Dad holds up a hand and turns to face Briar and me. “I don’t know where she is now. Waader informed me during my year of War and Communication School that your mom demanded to become a Fish to save me, and she was probably told that I would be sent home to you immediately, but they kept me to run memory-washing tests on. They sent your mom to the other side of the world so you two would become strong and independent, perfect Waader figureheads.” He turns to Henry. “Are you still going to take them to become Waader Leaders?”

Henry hesitates, and I fear her answer. “Yes, we will. But we’ll wait until Briar is 21 and Lanette is 20, since it’s easier for the people of Sixeva to accept adults as leaders...Oh, and we’ll also take you and Mrs. Western.”

My knees turn to rubber, and I lean on Briar. I feel him leaning back on me.

Dad takes a rattled breath. “Clarence?” It sounds like his actual heart utters it.

Up a broad white staircase there are a pair of black doors, and these slide open, allowing a petite woman with a bowl of hair the color of sand atop her dainty head to race into her loved one’s arms.

Briar and I refuse to let go of our mom as our dad and her kiss, and I feel love surround the four of us like a multicolored, protective blanket.

Months later I decide I know what Mathilde would say about all this. She’d rub my back and she’d say, her guttural accent rubbing the words together softly, “All the pain in your family has made it that much stronger.”

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