A TALE OF TWO BESTIES

SOPHIA ROSSI
To all the Gigglers
Lily (2:46 pm): PuppyGirl. What if, instead of going to the first day of school tomorrow, we just hid out under the pier forever and made a living selling friendship bracelets and seashells? That is totally doable, right? Please say it’s doable.

Harper (2:47 pm): Hang on, Gawkward Fairy! Do you really want to spend the last night before freshman year freaking out? Let’s soak it in! Beverly Hills High won’t know what they’re missing when you go to Pathways!

Lily (2:47 pm): Stop. You’re going to make me do one of those cry-face emojis.

Harper (2:48 pm): Like this one 😞

Harper (2:48 pm): or like 😢

Harper (2:49 pm): Why are there so many face emojis? like do humans even have the capacity to make these faces?
SOPHIA ROSSI

Harper (2:49 pm): 😄

Harper (2:49 pm): I bet it’s the last one that is basically a picture of your face right now and also the rest of the time.

Lily (2:50 pm): “I STILL CAN’T FIGURE OUT HOW TO MAKE MY PHONE DO THAT!” — Your mom.

Harper (2:50 pm): Oh my god, right? “HOW DO I GET THE RINGTONE TO PLAY DRAKE but not the singing part only the part where he ‘raps’?” Ughhh, okay mom.

Lily (2:51 pm): I <3 her.

Harper (2:51 pm): Not the way you <3 Tim Slater. Want me to say hi from the “Fairy” tomorrow when I see him in class? 😊

Lily (2:51 pm): Seriously: NOPE.

Harper (2:52 pm): Playing hard to get, are we? Or have you accepted what a serial weirdo our male buddy is?

Lily (2:53 pm): Man you seriously date someone for 2 months and they crush your heart by not being that into you and you never live it down?? I don’t like him anymore, I just like those comics he draws for us!
Lily (2:55 pm): Only if you bring a sacrificial goat and/or Pinkberry.

Harper (2:56 pm): They are good comics, Gawkward Fairy. And that’s not just me as my superhero PUPPYGIRL with my SUPER EMPATHY talking.

Lily (2:55 pm): Nice try, but the Gawkward Fairy has up her ultra gawkward shield. NOW I AM immune to all forms of kindess!! Let’s face it: the saddest day of my life starts tomorrow and will last FOREVER.

Harper (2:56 pm): FOREVER? So dramatic. No wonder they are sending you to the Pathways School of Creative Angst.

Lily (2:56 pm): Now I’m actually crying face.

Harper (2:56 pm): Okay, that’s it. Emergency BFF meeting. Same secret time, same secret place?

Lily (2:56 pm): Only if you bring a sacrificial goat and/or Pinkberry.

I, Lily Annelisa Farson, thirteen years of age and of sound mind and body, do hereby declare that the following is the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me Zeus.

Here is a list of things I love:

1. Really loud thunderstorms (but in a safe “I’m indoors!” kind of way)
2. Music mixes for and from friends and collages of friends and me
3. My red chucks and sometimes my blue ones when my mom washes my red ones without asking
4. Crazy animals that shouldn’t exist but do.
5. Comic books (and not just the ones people think girls will like. ALL OF THEM. Even DC)
6. BASICALLY anything in a thrift store.
7. Sneezing. (It makes me feel powerful.)
8/9. (Tied) Horses/Vanilla ChapStick
10. My best friend Harper!
And here is a list of things I really, really don’t like:

1. Peppers (sometimes I pretend I’m allergic for dramatic purposes only, promise)

2. Aggro-angry music, where someone just yells into a microphone like...
   Aggressive sounds are so aggressive.

3. Volleyball

4. My hair (too wavy)

5. The smell of airplane bathrooms. I’ve only been on one plane but it SURE WAS MEMORABLE

6. The Mansons—the cult and Marilyn

7. The lady at the mall who works at Day of Knights. It used to be my favorite shop until I accidentally broke a ceramic dragon figurine when I was 11 and she told my dad when he came to pick me up, even though I offered to pay for it. I was planning on being a loyal customer. So really HER LOSS.

8. PATHWAYS!!!

9. Hashtags (Remember when it was just the “number” symbol and nobody used it, ever, because it was super ugly?)

10. Traumas

   I scrawled my signature at the bottom of my note. Mom and I were keeping a scrapbook of my lists and journals, and she told me that she was even thinking of doing some capital-A Art based on them. There wasn’t a lot of room left on the fridge, but I made an executive decision and replaced a postcard Dad had sent from his
last trip to Brazil with my note, using our “Got Milk?” magnet to keep it in place right where Mom would definitely notice it.

“Are you ready, Lily-Jolie?” My mom has a way of sing-talking my name like she was an old black-and-white movie starlet. It immediately evokes nostalgia for a time and place that doesn’t even belong to me. She was standing shadowed in the doorway with the light behind her, looking like a classic beauty in her wide sun-brim hat and paint-splattered denim dress. On anyone else it would have looked frumpy, but on her it looked like couture. “We’re going to be late meeting Harper at the Pier.”

I stepped back to view the note within the larger context of the fridge. Did it draw the audience’s eye? Yes, it did. But would the audience (my mom) understand that the last item—the dreaded Pathways Academy—was the most important? I hoped so. It was only eighteen hours, thirty minutes, and nineteen seconds until I descended into the darkness otherwise known as freshman year at a totally new school where I would know exactly zero people.

“Okay, coming!” I turned and grabbed my shimmery blue fairy wings off the back of one of our red, mismatched kitchen chairs and stuffed them in my backpack. Within minutes, Mom and I were in the car zooming toward the ocean, on our way to the Santa Monica Pier to say goodbye to summer. I closed my eyes and tried to smell the salt in the air.

Besides Harper, my mom is my best friend. She’s always under-
stood me, and even when she hasn’t agreed with my decisions, she’s supported me. Just one example: In third grade, when we were living back in Maryland, I had the brilliant idea of cutting off all my hair—really short, like Felicity in *Felicity*, which is this old show I found on Netflix and watched because they said it was made by the same guy who did *Lost*, which I was psyched about until I realized it didn’t feature any smoke monsters. Anyway, I needed short hair to pull off a rattail, which I desperately wanted. Most kids’ parents would have laughed in their faces and told them to get real, but my mom took me to her friend’s salon in Baltimore the next day. She said my new look was *au courant*.

Now, speeding down the highway, I wiggled my toes and told Mom that I had heard something interesting the other day.

“What was it Lily-Jolie?” My mom’s family is from France, where “jolie” means “pretty.” It’s not even my middle name, which is Annalisa, but it might as well be.

“It’s just about how students who go to public high schools usually have an easier time of it, you know, academically, than kids who transfer to private schools. Same with getting into college. Because they have better extracurriculars, you know, with public funding? And I also read an article about how private school students are more likely to join a gang or do drugs than regular kids, because they are more susceptible to peer pressure. Like in *Lord of the Flies*, but with heroin.”

My mom sighed. “Lily, we’ve been over this. You are going to Pathways.”

“I know.” My feet were fidgeting so much that the sole of my sandal was almost entirely detached from the actual shoe at this point. “But maybe if I transferred af-
ter first semester? If I really, really hated it, maybe . . .”

We pulled into the parking lot for the Pier, the Santa Monica amusement park only a quick trip down the boardwalk, which was made even faster when I wore my chunky purple rollerblades with the vintage stripes. The Pier is where Harper and I had our secret spot.

Mom turned off the car and took my head in her hands, wiping away my tears. I didn’t even know I had been crying.

“Oh Jolie,” she murmured. “I know you think you won’t be able to make friends, but you’ll see . . . everyone will love you!”

*Easy for you to say,* is what I wanted to tell her, but didn’t.

I’d told my parents from the beginning that I didn’t want to go to a private high school. “But Pathways will help nurture your individuality!” Mom would keep telling me, as if individuality is something I have a problem with. If anything, I’m too much of an individual.

“You’ll find your passion there,” my dad would insist. “You’re so creative; you just need a nurturing environment.”

My parents think Pathways is better than Pali-sades or Beverly High, because it’s exclusive and a lot of “artists” have come out of there. “Plus,” they kept saying, “you get to call your teachers by their first names!” I told them that I’d much rather hang out with Harper than call my teacher “James” instead of “Mr. Franco.” (Yes, *that* James Franco. But he was only a visiting teacher so it doesn’t really count.)

While I was still sniffling in the parking lot, Mom reached over the seat and handed me my roller-blades. “Mrs. Carina or Rachel will pick you up at four
and drive you guys back. You’ll have dinner over at Harper’s, and I’ll pick you up at eight.” She kissed me on top of my head and gave me my knapsack. “Now, you go have fun, jeune fille!”

I breezed down the boardwalk in my scuffed-up rollerblades, which were covered in sparkly stick-ers and flaky scribbles from an old Puffy Pen. I took in the life around me: peddlers of all kinds of wares, artisans of chintz and bongs and bongos. Harper and I have our special place outside Pacific Park, not quite underneath the boardwalk, but almost. We found it two summers ago, an empty stretch of beach where you can look to your left and see the Ferris wheel; look to your right and see the ocean. It’s where we listened to Lana Del Rey’s “Video Games” for the first time, sharing an iPod, dancing around like witches attached at the ears. It’s the place where, last summer, those two skateboarding boys followed us, trailing drips of the ice cream they’d bought for us, the sugar sizzling on the boardwalk. Our stomachs stretched tight as drums, we lovingly set down the oversized teddy bears, useless things that Josh and Ben had won for us at the Playland Arcade, and all four of us had run into the water with our clothes on, shrieking. Harper Snapchatted them a picture of us making goofy faces that August, but they never messaged her back. Harper said that was really rude, because you shouldn’t buy two pretty girls ice cream and then never reach out again, especially if those two pretty girls didn’t even ask for extra toppings and were very chill. I don’t know much about this but I believe her. We would have burned the bears in effigy in her yard to cleanse ourselves of their memory, had we not been worried about toxins.
I came to a quick stop at our spot, where I found Harper already waiting for me. She was wearing her go-to beach gear: a blue and white striped Topshop bathing suit underneath a sheer, oversized white cotton shirt that came down to her knees. Her hair was pulled back in a messy bun, highlighting her big brown eyes and the freckles dotting her high cheekbones. Harper’s only accessories were her friendship bracelets that both of us wore all the time—we didn’t even need to remind each other to put them on, though they sometimes fell off my bony wrists (the only parts of me that are still bony).

Harper is my muse: One time I had her dress up in a big, white gown and this pink wig I found at a thrift store on Melrose, and we shot an entire movie on my cell phone. I wrote and directed and provided the soundtrack, and she was the star. It was about a ghost who doesn’t know she’s dead, waiting at the shore for her lover to arrive. It had a lot of shots of Harper looking intensely at the sea, and doing romantic stuff like running down the steps of the boardwalk crying “Where are you, Walter? My darling!”

I would say my inspiration for that film was sixty percent Godard and forty percent these cool Vines I saw where everyone looked like they were in Girls. Harper posted it online and we got a bunch of comments, including one from one of our favorite TV actors, from that show about the moody cop who always solves impossible crimes. He wrote, “Will be looking for you two next pilot season!” We almost died.

“What took you so long?” asked Harper when I finally took off my skates and skittered onto the sand. She was standing up on her blanket, a vintage copy of Lemony Snicket with a cracked spine lying face down
next to her coconut water and bag of carrot sticks. “I’ve been waiting forever!”

“I couldn’t leave Mom without one last plea for mercy,” I said, slinging my backpack off my arms and unzipping it. “And I had to bring this, too, of course.” I smiled. Harper looked inside the bag and pulled out a mangled corpse of wire and fabric.

“Oh no, Lily! I think you bent your wings!”

They were definitely crumpled. The frame had bent completely, and in some parts the wires were sticking out of the purple and blue mesh. It made me sad; they were the last gift my grandmother ever gave me before we left Maryland, and even though I was too old to be wearing a costume, I put them on that very day and promised I wouldn’t take it off until the next time I saw her. I’m sure she didn’t expect me to keep that promise, but, to be fair, I didn’t expect her to pass away before my tenth birthday.

“They look like a mangled Muppet!” I said. Maybe it was the memory of my grandmother, but now I felt completely desolate. Meanwhile, Harper, being Harper, pragmatically got to work trying to smoosh them back into shape. “You know, you know, this is a bad omen! Something is trying to tell us that going to different high schools is a bad idea.” I shivered.

“Don’t be silly,” said Harper. “It’s not a bad omen, it’s physics. That’s what happens when you crush something into your bag. Plus, they’re old, anyway.” I must have had a horrified look on my face, because she
smiled and gave me a big hug. “Look, I think I can save them. We’ll have our superpowers back up and running in no time!”

Harper always knew what to say to distract me from my looping thoughts—including saying nothing at all. “Didn’t you bring your towel, Lily? Here, you can share mine.” Harper scooted over. “Help me Instagram some final summer memories of the Ferris wheel.” She pulled out her phone—which had on a pink rubber case with big bunny ears—and we made funny faces with the park behind us, pretending to be happier than we were. The shrieks of delight from the roller coaster almost overpowered my thoughts, and the heat from the California sun tried to soothe me into drowsiness. My mind was suddenly flooded with the realization that, from now on, Harper and I would be taking selfies in different places, with different people. Before we knew it we were going to become “Like” friends—those kids you see who heart every photo but never even hang out.

After a couple of pics where I must have looked a little too lost in reverie, Harper turned on her side to face me.

“Thinking about Pathways?” she asked.

“Are you a mind reader?”

“Yes. Maybe I should make my own Tarot app,” Harper giggled. She stopped when she saw my face.

“Come on, it won’t be so bad. I bet you get to take all the macramé and collage classes you want! And you probably won’t have to dissect frogs, or do math.” Harper’s biggest fear in life was cutting into an animal, which was thanks to her older sister, Rachel, who almost got expelled her freshman year after bringing in fifty live toads to biology as part of a protest. The funny
thing is, Rachel isn’t even the big animal lover in the family. It’s Harper who spends all her time taking care of sick dogs at the rescue center.

“I don’t care about any of that,” I said, picking up a carrot stick and nibbling on it, hoping it would calm my knotted stomach. “I’m not going to have any friends there. Everyone is going to think I’m a weirdo.”

“Starting high school is scary for everyone.” Harper made a face. “Look, who will I know besides Rachel and her friends and Tim?”

“At least you’ll have Tim,” I said, morosely thinking of my cute ex-boyfriend with his slouchy posture and perfectly hidden tickle spots.

Harper rolled her eyes. “Ugh, Tim.” She had never understood my infatuation with her oldest friend. “You’re going to find yourself a bohemian boyfriend in ten minutes at school and forget all about him.” This was Harper’s biggest blind spot. She didn’t have any sense for romance. She traded out her guy crushes daily, obsessively checking their stats and info online like she was creating a personal fantasy draft of cute boys. She felt the need to virtually stalk every boy we’d ever meet for weeks, obsessing over his social media history—who he tagged, who he’s faved, who he retweeted and whose stuff he “liked”—and determining his crushability entirely on the results of her Internet detective-ing.

I’ve only liked one boy ever: Tim Slater, who was actually more like our third sidekick and has known Harper since they were both in diapers.

Tim is the perfect kind of guy: sort of geeky in a Wes Anderson-y kind of way, knows the origin story of every super villain from Marvel, and can make any type of nautical knot in under sixty seconds. He’s really
funny but totally hates the idea of improv groups, can whistle the theme song from every TV show ever made, and—most importantly—has no idea of how attractive he is. He’s like a girl in one of those high school movies where you take off her glasses and oversized “Save the Direwolves” T-shirt and brush the hair out of her eyes and voilà! He’s like Clark Kent—dweeby and doesn’t look like much—that is, until he turns into Superman. He’s even got a really square chin, like a superhero, and very straight, white teeth which, combined with his crooked smile, are totally devastating. His fingernails are never, ever dirty and he has very soft hands, which he used to gently break my heart into a million pieces. Ugh.

I shook my head to clear away the spider webs. I had liked Tim and we dated and it didn’t work out for a number of reasons, and it was time to stop thinking about him.

“I don’t want a boyfriend,” I explained for the billionth time. “No boyfriend is going to know that ‘Cups’ song is from summer camp and not an oversampled Anna Kendrick single. No boyfriend will help me on an intelligence mission to the teachers’ lounge to find out if Ms. Bulgari is actually a witch. No boyfriend,” I added slyly, “is going to spend a day walking around with me with Skittles in our bras to see if Tim Slater notices that we’re candy-padding.”

Harper broke out into a big grin. “You don’t know that. Pathways is supposed to be full of guys in candy push-up bras who love anything campy.” We both erupted into giggles that felt relief personified. Laughing with Harper feels like catching my breath after I didn’t even know I was holding it in.

Harper scooched over and gave me a big hug. “Lily,
you are going to make TONS of friends!” she whispered, stroking my hair as I began to morph into a cry-baby yet again. “You are the most magical person I know!”

That was such a Harper thing to say. She’d always been super popular. People just wanted her in their circle, and not just because she looks the part of a Californian Dream Girl. Harper’s style is pretty understated—her signature look is something like a dove gray tank top paired with jeans and her beach-ready mermaid hair, which sounds super minimalist but she pulls it off, especially thanks to her beautiful dark eyes and her yoga-perfected posture. She’s like a Disney Princess in Rag & Bone. She never tried to “express herself” with fashion, always letting herself bring personality to her clothes rather than the other way around, which was such a rarity in LA. People were always stopping her on Melrose, assuming she was an actress. Not in a “Oh, weren’t you on that ABC Family tween comedy?” way, either. It was more that you got a sense from Harper, could feel something that radiated off of her telling you that she was someone Special. You could tell just by the way she looked at you, no matter what she was doing, that she was having the best time and wanted to make sure you were, too.

But even if Harper wore a bag over her head, she’d still be picked for captain of the step team and probably class president. The thing is, Harper is classy. She actually listens when people talk, and you can tell she isn’t just trying to think of what to say next, or worrying if there is spinach in her teeth. She’s very “present,” which is a term my mom uses a lot to describe people who aren’t wracked by social anxiety and neuroses.

“I’m not like you, Harper,” I said. “I get nervous
around new people.”

“So we’ll text each other during every class!” Harper pulled out her cell phone and waved it in front of my face. She was a stealth ninja at not getting caught by teachers with her phone out. “If something’s wrong, you text ‘GAWKWARD SOS’ and I’ll tell you what to do! And then at the end of the day, Rachel and I will pick you up. If anyone is giving you trouble . . .” Harper mimed a punch. “KABLAMO!” She picked up my broken wings and studied them. “These actually might be fixable.” She began to dig in with her fingers, refashioning the wires and massaging the cloth back over the broken parts. You had to love a friend willing to chip her nails on your wings the day before her freshman year in high school.

I’ve been gawkward—which is a portmanteau of gawky and awkward—for as long as I can remember. But it was only after meeting Harper that I discovered that being different could be a power instead of a curse.

On my first day of school in California all the way back in fourth grade, I discovered my two good luck charms. The first was Harper herself. She was like a human amulet who warded off bad vibes and made me even somewhat accepted . . . or at least, not a totally shunned outcast. The second charm was my iridescent fairy wings, which transformed me from the creepy, weird new girl named Lily into my true persona: the Gawkward Fairy, who could save the world with her social anxiety, making the bad guys so uncomfortable that they would forget about fighting or blowing up the world and just call it a day and go home early for some TV and snacks.

“Hold on one second, I need to get something,” Harper said. “You stay right here.” She carried my
wings with her, but left me on the towel with the rest of her stuff. After a couple of minutes, her phone made a chirping noise, and I picked it up.

It was a text. From Tim. His name on her screen still had the power to make my heart race, which I hated, but the breakup had been mutual, and I knew we were better friends than boyfriend/girlfriend anyway.

Still, I won’t pretend it didn’t still get under my skin that Harper was the one Tim always ran to first with big news. I guess maybe it made sense though—I wasn’t big into my cell phone the way Harper was—for me it was just a tool for texting, not Internet stalking. And even just cellular communications can sometimes get out of control. I found most people’s emails and texts to feel very emotionally violating. Like, people send the most intense texts while you are just walking around the world. You could be in a mall casually browsing for crop tops (ew, but never crop tops) and someone you’re not even that great friends with will just send you the most insane text, like, “MY PARENTS ARE DIVORCING!??!” And what do you respond? “BRB”? Ugh. Every time you send a text instead of reaching out for real, a little bit of your soul dies. I’m one hundred percent sure that is true.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder why Tim hadn’t texted me, too, as I clicked his message on Harper’s phone.

“Watch this!” it said, with a link to a video. By the time Harper came back, I wasn’t warm anymore. I was cold, cold, cold.

“Ta-da!” She said, holding up my wings. She had gone to buy some scarves on the Pier and was waving them in front of my face. I tried to ask her what they were for, but it was like my throat had swollen shut. “What is it? What are you watching?” she asked. “Is it
another ah-mazing cat video?”

Harper delicately pried the phone out of my trembling hands.

“Why are you looking at SchoolGrams?” SchoolGrams is an app that allows anyone with a student ID number and PIN to upload and access movies and pictures tagged with a school’s name. You’re only supposed to be able to look at things from your own school, but people share their passwords all the time, and things go viral pretty quickly. The video was tagged #Hollywood-Middle. My stomach sank as I pressed Play. There were very few positive or uplifting videos that got uploaded to SchoolGrams—most of the time they were taken without people’s permission and used for humiliation purposes. The school system had tried several times to ban the app after kids complained of bullying, but the developers always made the defense that SchoolGrams was just a platform and it was up to us to determine the kind of content we put on there.

The video was shaky and there was a lot of audio distortion—very amateur. All I could make out were two girls on the park bench having drama. One of them was crying and the other was patting her shoulder and talking very fast and in this really, really high-pitched voice, like she was half-trying to sound reasonable and half-screaming.

“Is that Jessica Samuels and Stephanie Adler?” Harper brought the screen closer to her face and frowned. “No way.”

Stephanie and Jessica were girls in our class who were kind of nice, but also kind of NOT nice. We ate lunch with them, but they were mostly Harper’s friends from growing up. Until last year, they dressed the same,
did their hair the same, they even laughed the same flittering snicker-giggle. Last fall, though, Stephanie’s style all of a sudden got all Coachella-street-blogger, while Jessica was still wearing Lacoste Polo shirts and Uggs and doing her hair in tight, Ariana Grande–style ponytails. Then one day, Jessica wasn’t even sitting with us at lunch. You could see her blond tresses, fi-

nally relaxed from their tight bun, draped over Matt Musher’s shoulders as she lovingly fed him French fries dipped in ranch sauce.

“You stole my boyfriend, you slut!” One of the girls—it was hard to tell with all the Shaky-Cam—screamed at the other. “I can’t believe you kissed . . . *garbled*. You were my best friend!” Here, the angrier of the girls had wrestled her way on top and bent her former bestie’s arm back, punctuating her words with a quick, upward yank.

The other girl howled, and the video cut off after some fumbling by the intrepid cameraman.

“Wow, did Steph . . . hook up with Matt?” Harper asked, sounding confused on multiple levels. Matt Musher was a boy in our class who was okay-cute, but kind of a jock.

This was exactly why I hated the Internet: Clicking a link allowed you to peer into someone’s personal hu-
miliation file, making you feel dirtier than if you were the one who made out with your best friend’s boyfriend. We couldn’t think of much to say after that, so I put my head down and closed my eyes, pretending to take a nap. Harper picked up her book and turned over to tan her back.

That afternoon, the minutes flew by between us. I was unable to keep them there, though I wished they’d come back. I wish I could have gathered up those min-
utes like flowers to hang upside down in my room, until they were dried out: less fresh, but more permanent. So they’d stay with me forever and never die and never hurt.

But instead I could practically hear the countdown clock ticking: eighteen hours, forty-five minutes and thirty seconds till Pathways. Make that twenty-nine seconds. Twenty-eight. Twenty-seven. Twenty-six.

It must have been a little bit later—but not too late, because the sun was still out—that I heard a strange, sad call coming from underneath the boardwalk. A chill coursed through me.

“Whoa,” said Harper. “Is that an owl?”

“Yeah, we used to have a lot of them in Maryland.”

“What is it doing up so early?”

I sat up, remembering something. Something foreboding. “Harper, have you ever heard of the owl of Minerva?”

Harper sighed and lay down next to me on the blanket, folding her arms above her head and closing her eyes. “I love story time.”

I continued.

“Okay, so this owl flew around, crying out warnings for travelers who’d stayed out in the forest past dark, and so were in great danger of getting lost there forever. But the thing is, the owl always flew super close to nighttime, so by the time you saw it, it meant you were already doomed. Harper, what if that’s our owl of Minerva? What if we’re already doomed?”

I knew how intense I sounded, but sometimes intensity is the way to the truth. Or maybe I was just FREAKING OUT.

_Sixteen hours, ten minutes, and eleven seconds._
_Ten seconds. Nine seconds._
“Lily, you’ve got to snap out of it!” Harper was using her annoyed voice. “We are not doomed. We’re just freshmen! But it is getting late, and we still have two items on the agenda.”

“You’d be a great events planner,” I said, only half-sarcastically, because Harper is actually fantastic at remembering all the details that I’d never remember. Like: Turn off the lights when you leave the house. Don’t put on lotion right before you put on jeans and don’t fall asleep with your hairband on if you don’t want to lose circulation for like ever. Don’t leave KIND bars in your backpack for too long or they’ll turn into a sticky, backpack-ruining mess.

Like: Oh man, Harper’s birthday was coming up. And I knew she was about to ask me about PuppyBash. Every year, on the night before her birthday, Harper arranges for one of the volunteers from PuppyTales, a rescue organization for strays, to drive up to a park or some other public location with about fifteen dogs in mobile cages. We take turns playing with them and giving them exercise, and instead of presents, Harper always asks for donations to PuppyTales. Last year our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Beatty, even took home a puppy to adopt: a tiny little Shih Tzu named Maxine. It was brilliant. I guess you could call us activists, kind of.

Actually, please call us activists, it feels very grownup.

“At least you have PuppyBash to look forward to! And whatever else we do . . .” Harper said.

She was always so obstinately vague about her birthdays. She always goes all-out planning PuppyBash, but when it comes to her real birthday celebration, it’s always up to me.
“Yeah, there’s always that,” I said, trying to cheer myself up, at least for Harper’s sake. “That will be fun!”
When I didn’t say anything else, Harper dropped the subject, turning her back to me and rustling my wings. “Ta-da! Here! All better!” She had bandaged up the broken parts with the gauzy fabric of the scarves, turning them into something a winged Katniss might wear.

“Oh my god, they’re perfect! You made them perfect again!” I tried to hug her but of course I almost smooshed them all over again, so I had to just be okay with spiraling into a sea of thank yous, over and over.

“How it was true bestie love at first sight?” I said. My skin was pricked with goose bumps. “Everyone remembers the day the weirdo girl in a fairy costume showed up to be eaten alive by the sharks of Beverly Hills.”

Harper grinned, digging her feet into the sand next to mine. “I remember it as the last day before I realized life could actually be magical.”

“Um, I have told you I don’t actually grant wishes, right?” I teased.

“Dummy.” Harper gave me a light punch. “The
magical part was that I met my best friend that day.”

“Come on, the magical part was where the coolest
girl in the Hills decided to talk to me.” I tried to say it
lightly, like it was a joke, but it was how I really felt.

Harper pulled her feet out of the sand, showering
us both in grainy clumps. She turned toward me and
pulled her legs up to her chin. “For the billionth time,
being cool has nothing to do with how many people say
hi to you in the hall. Being cool means saying hi to peo-
ple and not caring if they say it back.”

“I care!” I protested, feeling the well-worn tread of
this debate we had at least once a month. “It’s not like I
try to stick out. I just do. I can’t help it.”

“Um, exactly.” Harper shook her head, exasperated
that I wasn’t understanding her. When it came to
most things, we were on the same page. But this was
one topic we could never see eye-to-eye on. Secretly, I
knew Harper was giving me too much credit for being
“unique” when really I wasn’t trying to make a state-
ment or anything. I just liked the way the wings looked.
It reminded me of Gram, who had been a dancer in a
traveling vaudeville group when she was younger and
was the most glamorous person I’d ever seen.

Harper tilted her head, regarding me with a crin-
idea. Let’s make a pact.”

“A pact? You want me to join your cult or some-
thing?”

“No! A non-creepy pact.”

“Oh, well if it’s a non-creepy pact, then sure. But
please tell me it involves ritual animal sacrifice.”

I tried to laugh it off as a joke, but Harper grabbed
my hands and looked at me straight in the eyes. “I know
you’re nervous about Pathways, but you know that a school can’t change you from being yourself, right? Promise me we’re not going to fall into this *Pretty Little Liars*-y trap where one moment everyone’s best friends and the next everyone changes. We’re not going to give in to that basic stereotype, right?”

I shrugged. I didn’t have as much faith in me as Harper did, but I guess that’s what best friends were for: to believe in you when you didn’t even believe in yourself.

“Since we’re not going to be around to help one another every second of every day anymore,” she continued, “we need to solemnly swear that we’re not going to be one of those kids who do this dramatic makeover or have a personality transplant the moment they get to high school. That stuff only works in the movies, anyway. You’re the Gawkward Fairy. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.”

I looked off to the water and thought about Harper’s words and what they really meant. “Okay,” I said slowly. “Then you’ve got to swear something to me. That you’re not going to go to Beverly High and forget all about me. That while I’m ‘being me’ you’re not going to go off to bonfires on the beach and not invite me to come along to document everything. That you won’t ever start doing duck-face selfies with girls who all have the same messy-perfect hair as you and you won’t start dating some guy named Thad or Chaz or whatever and totally stop texting.”

Harper’s smile broke open wide, and my heart along with it. “Only if you promise not to read from the Pitchfork comment board in a silly accent without me.”

“Promise. Pact made,” I said, offering my hand for a
business-deal shake. “But only if you know that you’re getting, like, the raw end of the deal. You’ll be stuck with me by your side forever!”

“Okay. Promise,” said Harper, shaking my hand and immediately enveloping me into a big hug.

We sat like that, eyes half-closed, listening to the waves crashing louder and louder as the light grew dimmer.

“Hey,” Harper said gravely, the first to pull back. “I didn’t mean to sound like you had to walk around high school in your wings all the time, if you don’t want to.” Why did she have to say that? Did she know something I didn’t? Was Pathways really anti–fairy wings or something? Was there some rule in the dress code I didn’t know about?

She must have seen the worried look on my face.

“Stop spiraling!” She admonished. “I can always tell when you are overthinking things! I just mean, wear what makes you feel comfortable, not what makes you look like everyone else. Listen, as long as we are our dope selves we are ALL GOOD. And I’m sure you will find some magical creatures there and I’ll have to get my own wings just to fit in with you guys. And maybe our mission in high school is to help people break free of the stereotype that all high schools are just made up of mean girls, jocks, and nerds. Between PuppyGirl’s Empathy powers and the Gawkward Fairy, we help those in social distress. We use our powers for good, not evil.”

“Oh, darn, and here I was, planning to become a super villain the moment your back was turned.” My voice was sarcastic, but I was still spiraling: Why would Harper even say that thing about bullying? Did she think I was a monster? I had never made fun of anyone, ever, but now that she’d mentioned it, I wondered
if Harper was secretly scared that without me, she’d become one of the mean girls.

We sat a little longer, but the magical moment had passed. It was getting dark and cold. I could almost hear my own personal Minerva hooting in my ear, and there was nothing more I wanted in that moment than to run off toward the amusement park, away from the Pier, out of California forever, only looking back to cry over my shoulder, “Too late! Too late! Too late!”