

Collision

By Elin Waring

A bell rang. A long foot, encased in a bright red tennis shoe, ceased its mindless tapping against the metal rung of the desk, and lifted a young boy out of his chair. Step after step carried the boy across the classroom, past the pursed lips of the teacher, and out the door. It was time for the boy to go home and face the long, warm days ahead.

“What am I going to do with all this time on my hands?” he said to everyone in particular.

His feet walked past smiles, nods, frowns, tears, shouts, and hugs. His feet were his ticket out. His feet were his one saving grace.

The boy smiled. The summer was a time for making mischief. The summer was a time for creating memories with important people. The summer was a time for staying up with the excuse of watching the stars, but the ulterior motive of staying away from family for as long as possible.

The boy smiled, but not at the young girl walking towards him, staring at her plain black tennis shoes.

She was counting the scuffs and stains. Though the girl's face was concealed, you could feel an excitement surrounding her if you got far enough into her electromagnetic bubble. She too was eager to get home, as her torn-up feet carried her across hard concrete. The summer was a time for lying in a hammock, reading bad poetry. The summer was a time for long walks without any shoes on at all. The summer was a time for staying up with the excuse of watching the stars, but the ulterior motive of staying away from family for as long as possible.

She was daydreaming of freedom. He was daydreaming of freedom.

They collided.

“Whoa,” said the boy as the girl crashed to the ground. She lay there for a moment, stunned. The boy stood over her and looked down at her dazed expression staring back at him. Her eyes, he noticed, were a very unassuming shade of brown. Like chocolate. But the generic

kind... not the special dark with chili, or salted caramel in the middle.
Plain, delicious Hershey bar brown.

“Right,” he said all of the sudden, snapping out of his cocoa-induced reverie, “you fell.” He began to shuffle around, gathering her books. He intended to continue his bout of chivalry, but as he offered a hand to try to help her up, she began to giggle.

“Are you okay?” asked the boy. Giggle turned into laugh.

“I... do you need help? I understand if you don't need help, but you are on the ground...”

Laugh turned into chortle; the girl was flat on her back, laughing and snorting and maybe even crying all at once.

“Look,” said the boy, “I'm sorry I knocked you over and all, but you really need to tell me if I need to go get help. If this laughing is because you hit your head, I should really know about it because you could have a concussion or be dying or something crazy –“

“Sorry,” said the girl, suddenly sober. “You’re right.” The girl got up, grabbed her books out of the boy’s confused hands, and walked away. She stopped abruptly, shoved her chin into her chest, and continued to walk again.

The boy walked after her.

“Wait up a second. You fell pretty hard. Are you sure you’re okay? Because I was thinking maybe you weren’t okay and I was really worried because that would be really bad, you know? But if you are okay I’ll just go now because I’m probably starting to sound like an idiot but I just want to get to know you and all if that’s all right with you.”

The girl didn’t stop walking.

“It’s just that, it seems like you’re a really cool person and I noticed that all the books you’re reading were huge. You’re probably really smart and I’m not smart at all, but I guess it’s bad to make assumptions about people, even though I’m really just assuming assumptions are bad... Is that irony? Irony is my favorite dramatic device because it’s just so cringe-inducing, you know?”

The girl kept walking, thinking that irony wasn't the only thing that was cringe-inducing.

The boy raised his voice.

“Please, just stop for a second. I feel awful about crashing into you and I understand if you hate me but I think we really got off on the wrong foot. Hit a dead-end, if you will. I just think we could be really good friends and I don't want to have ruined it already. I don't even know your name.”

The girl continued to walk.

The boy was shouting.

The boy started to run after her.

“You had a book of Poe, right? Edgar Allen Poe?”

The scuffed black tennis shoes stilled.

“Edgar Allen Poe. The Cask of Amontillado. The Raven. He’s one of my favorite writers. I used to sit and listen to recordings of his stories and poems.”

The girl stayed where she was.

The boy smiled.

The boy ran up to her.

The distance between them closed.

“You just listened to them? You didn’t sit and devour page after page?” The girl’s words were condescending, but her tone was playful.

“Of course I read them; but, later in life. I was really ADHD so I could never sit and read for very long so I had to wait until I got older to really be able to focus on reading them, so I hadn’t actually read them until last year but I’ve been listening to them for a really long time because noise always seems to capture my attention better than anything visual.”

“I can tell.” The girl turned around to face the boy. Dark eyes glinted with playful chagrin. “Why do you always do that?”

“Do what? I really wish I knew what you were talking about.”

They stared at each other.

“Is it bad?” he asked.

The girl looked at him curiously for a moment. She was thinking about all the things she wanted to say to this odd boy in his red shoes and white polo. His clothes looked like an American Flag that had been sewn together by someone with OCD. Every color was in its place; his red shoes were below blue jeans below white shirt below green eyes below black hair.

She wanted to know why he always said everything he thought. But she had said enough. So she didn't respond.

He waited a moment, his eyes darting between her closed, pink lips, her shaggy blonde hair, and her clenched fists.

Another moment.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, you know? I’m not going to hurt you. I think you’re pretty cool. Anyone who reads Poe is automatically cool in my book. And it’s not a very big book because most people aren’t cool. Most people don’t even read. I think that’s lame, because all the smartest and coolest people read, but I guess I already said that. Not the intelligent part though. But it was implied I guess. Speaking of, isn’t implicated a great word?”

“Yeah. It’s very fitting.” The girl tried to keep a straight face, but ended up smiling anyway.

“Did you just make fun of me?”

The girl’s teeth sparkled behind chapped lips.

“Wait, you’re funny too? This is too much. I think you’re my dream girl and you should come to my house and meet my parents right now.”

The grin disappeared.

The girl stared at him, chocolate eyes as wide as the sky.

“I was semi-kidding. You could very well be the daughter of a serial killer with a tendency to rip out the hearts of unsuspecting boys and dance naked on their graves. In which case, you might still be my dream girl. But I need to get to know you first, don't I?”

“What if you're a sociopathic demon with 10 heads and – “ The girl cut herself off.

“And what? A light saber? You can do better than that, Dreamgirl. Get coffee with me.”

She shrugged and gestured for him to lead her to the coffee.

“You know, I really hate coffee but asking someone to get coffee with you always seems better than saying ‘get a non-coffee beverage with me at a crappy coffee shop’.”

He laughed at his own sense of humor.

She rolled her eyes.

The coffee shop was dimly lit and smelled strongly of stale smoke that lingered too long behind the lips of diseased poets. The boy walked audaciously up to the counter and “I’ll have a green tea with lemon and honey please. And... hmm. I’m going to guess a green tea with mint for the lovely lady. Then again, that is only an assumption. The irony is killing me.”

The girl smiled.

“Green tea with mint it is. I’m nothing if not a tea expert,” he said.

“That’s a silly thing to be an expert about,” said the woman behind the counter, the dragon tattoo on her arm snarling at the girl.

“You work in a tea shop.”

“Living the dream, darling. Two teas, coming up shortly.” She glided away behind the slinky beaded curtain.

The boy gestured to the empty tables.

“Only the best seat in the house for my lady. You really should pick the seat right up at the front window though, so we can pretend

we're in a frilly French café on a rainy day and all the people passing by don't know a thing about us, but we act like we're more important than all of them, regardless... You seem like you would like Paris."

The girl nodded.

"Right again? Man, I am really killing it today."

The girl cringed.

"I'm sorry, did I say something? If I said something wrong I'm sorry. I don't always think before I speak and I just really want to say the right thing in front of you but you make me so very nervous, Dreamgirl."

They sat across from each other in the café, shadows dancing across their faces as the AC blew the tacky stained-plastic light fixture in lazy circles. Rain fell gently outside, bouncing off the tin awning with melodious pings. The windows began to fog as the hot, steamy summer air collided with the artificial cool of the inside world, separated only by

a thin layer of glass and a shiny layer of paint reading The Dragon's Lair Coffee Shop in bright red script.

The girl thought about how much she wanted to tell the boy he was pretty. She wanted to talk to him about Edgar Allen Poe and Robert Frost and Freud and her theories on consumerism and education she knew she was lame and cliché but doesn't anyone else think about how no one can possibly have all the same ideas because how does one person get so many ideas in their head anyway? How does one person put those thoughts into coherent sentences, and then into speech, and then put those fragile thoughts into the hands and then the minds of another individual? Sharing words was like sharing coffee, she thought as two cups were set in front of them. Love or hate. Either or.

“Good thing we drink tea,” she said aloud, then looked up, eyes mortified at her own outburst. The boy was staring at her, searching through those open brown eyes.

“Coffee turns your teeth brown and stunts your growth,” said the boy. “It is good indeed that you and I both prefer tea. Otherwise I

wouldn't be able to talk to you without focusing on the brown stains on your teeth, which would be a shame because you have lovely, white teeth right now."

The girl nodded. "Thank you," she said.

"How do you get them so white, if I may ask?"

"Toothpaste."

"Is this a magical toothpaste? Colgate Total certainly doesn't do my teeth nearly the favor your toothpaste does yours. Unless I happen to be brushing wrong. But I don't think I'm brushing wrong because I've been doing it for quite some time and have never gotten a single critique other than "floss once a day" and who on this planet has time for that? No one! No one but my mom and dad, that is." He thought for a moment, before calculatedly stating, "People who floss every day either have their lives together, or they're psychotic."

"Which are your parents?"

“Definitely psychotic. They think opinions are sin, which is obviously completely ridiculous because they have the opinion that opinions are sin. It’s a paradox of idiotic proportions, which is why I left.”

“Left?”

“They don’t want me there.”

“I’m sure they do.”

“No. They don’t trust me. They hate that I talk so much. They think it’s unnatural to ask so many questions and be so ‘curious about the world’. Their words.”

“I’m sure they love you. Parents don’t abandon their kids unless they have to...” The girl’s eyes grew cloudy, and the boy watched her as she grew completely still, staring off into space.

He let her daze for a few minutes, not wanting to interrupt the moment.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Huh?” The girl’s gaze returned to see the boy searching for an answer.

“What do you think I should do?”

He actually values my opinion, she thought. She took another calming sip, set the teacup down, and opened her mouth.

“Go home.”

“No.”

The girl looked at him. His eyes were intense, firing cannons at her defenses.

“I can’t, Dreamgirl. I can’t.”

“Echo.”

The boy stared at her.

“Echo?”

“Echo.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yours?”

“Ben.”

“Ben.”

“Echo and Ben, sitting in a tree – “

“Shut up, Ben.”

“Okay.”

Echo and Ben sat inches apart on the curb of a simple suburban sidewalk. They had walked for miles, going nowhere and everywhere, going neighborhood to neighborhood until their tennis shoes could no longer bear it.

They sat in the dark, silent, looking at the stars. They didn't have to have an excuse to stay away from family anymore. They could enjoy the stars shining freely in the sky.

They sat in the dark, silent, watching the occasional car go past.
Going... going... gone.

Echo looked out of the corner of her eye at Ben. His outline slumped over. The weight of the knapsack on his shoulders was causing the straps to dig into his skin through his thin t-shirt.

“Why do you always do it?”

“Do what?”

“You always say everything you think.”

“Oh. My parents never listen to me. I guess I talk ‘cause I keep hoping someone will hear me.”

“Oh.”

“What about you, you hardly talk at all. Why’s that?”

“Same as you. No one wants to listen.”

Echo knew deep down she should speak up. But she didn’t understand how some people could talk so much when no one wanted to

hear them. They wasted so many words on mindless conversations, and so much time speaking to closed ears.

She didn't want to waste any words.

Looking out of the corner of her eye again, she discovered Ben was looking directly at her.

He wouldn't be a waste of words, she thought. Look how much he's wasted on me.

"It's organic toothpaste," Echo said.

Ben laughed.

"Not magical?" he said.

"My mom makes it from things in her garden. I don't really know much about the herbs and such; I guess they're good for you. They used to garden together."

"Your parents? What happened to your dad?"

"He died. My parents... They were hippies. My mom still is."

“How did he die?”

The girl looked at the boy. The boy looked at the girl. She took a breath.

And as he held his words back, hers slipped out. Ben laughed at the light in her eyes when she told him how her dad would keep her away from fairy rings by building their own human rings out of apples from the giant tree in their yard. He gently took her hand in his when she mumbled through the explanation of her dad’s obsession with hallucinogens. His eyes grew soft and wet when Echo described, stoic and detached, how her father had passed away from heart failure.

“I know it was the LSD. But sometimes I feel like it was me.”

Ben smiled and kissed her gently on the forehead.

“Run away with me, Dreamgirl.”

The boy looked at the girl. The girl looked at the boy. They were both dreaming of freedom.

“Okay.”

They both leaned in for a kiss, but, unfortunately, they were both unlearned and uncoordinated.

So;

They collided.