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Close

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MELISSA GUTIERREZ

Close

We were close in age, you and I. I was March nineteenth and you were April third, and we thought it was strange you were younger because you were always taller. Third grade we met when we both got stuck with Ms. Avincula, who wasn't fat but looked like it because her old skin rolled over her knuckles when she had them down at her sides, or on your hands trying to get you to make the cursive "S" right. You were a lefty, that's why it was hard, and you always had to use the red scissors instead of the blue ones, I remember.

You lived close by. I could run around the block in one-hundred-and-four steps and I always thought your house was a castle because you had stairs going up the porch and stairs going up inside and then you had an attic, where we found your dad's trombone and your mom's lingerie that we both tried on, and once we found a bird's nest by one of those little holes. It had six white eggs and when we listened carefully from your room we could hear them peeping when they hatched. Remember how you thought it was cool when we found the dead baby bird, all naked and plucky like when I get goosebumps, flat stuck to the concrete under the eave in the spring? I was sad and you wouldn't bury it so that day I ran home early.

101 Dalmatians came out, the real live version with Glenn Close. Your mom took us to see it after your dad left. She was crying but not because of the movie, you were crying but not because of the movie, but I was crying because I was so scared of her black-and-white hair and how she killed tigers to wear. And your mom hugged you close and I didn't know why because it was the ending where everything was turning out happy, but I guess not for you.

That night I told my mom, "Don't close the door!" that's how scared of getting turned into a cape by Cruella De Ville I was and that's how scared of my dad leaving I was. She told me Cruella didn't live around here and dad wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, but I could

have the door open anyways.

“I love you,” she said, and kissed me on the forehead, and tucked me in tight like a burrito but instead of cheese and carne, sheets and Shelly.

We spent a lot of time down by the creek that summer, catching frogs and you skipping rocks and me trying. You were really good at skipping, your record was seventeen plus all those fast little skips near the end that we couldn’t ever count, “Sixteen, Seventeen, EightnNinetnTwenTwentyontwentwotwentthreefourfive” and then laughlaughlaugh because my tongue turned to knots when I couldn’t count that fast and you were so good at skipping rocks. My record was two, one time I came close to three. I was okay just watching, watching the water ripple when your pebbles hit it, watching tadpoles swim away so they wouldn’t get hit by those huge bombs, watching that funny look on your face, one eye squinty and one tongue sticking out the side, when you swung your arm back to fling.

Some odd years later both of us just turned sixteen and you only heard from your dad two times since the Dalmatian Day. Once he visited while I was there and I had to go home because he wanted to play baseball with you. An hour and a half later you showed up at my doorstep laughing because you were so much better at throwing than he was and crying because he’d gone back away without even trying to get close to you. The other time was your sixteenth birthday when he called and said “Happy birthday, Alex, check your mailbox today.” We camped out in the attic until we heard the mailman come and then I followed you running down all three sets of stairs across the lawn to the mail truck and he gave you a letter with your name all scrawly.

You tore it open sideways across the short part and there were three things. A check for one thousand dollars that you were close to ripping, sixteen one-dollar bills, and a note that you wouldn’t let me read. So I told you happy birthday again and left again but first I gave you my lucky rock so you could get your driver’s license the first try.

My dad let you borrow his Buick so you didn’t have to drive your mom’s pick-up, and you did pass. He let you keep borrowing the

Buick every time we went somewhere because he said the pick-up was so old it was close to exploding soon and he was probably very right, I thought so even more the day your mom drove home and there was smoke coming out of it.

We drove that Buick all over town and usually you felt like driving but if I wanted to we flipped a coin, a wheat penny that we kept in the ashtray. One day, though, when I was driving, the brakes gave out and we were going down the hill behind the Albertson's shopping center and I had to swerve hard left to not crash the Buick head-on on a light pole. It hit the back seat hard, passenger side, glass everywhere and dent like a steely cavern, and I knew I was dead the second dad found out, but we were alive.

"That was close," you said, your heart pounding just as loud as mine was, I could hear it.

My dad was mad but yes we were alive. Pure grace he gave us when he said the Buick he could pay a lot of money to get back in shape but no amount of money would have gotten us back from death. When he left that night, the second we heard the door close, you and me, we were in this for good.

You were still taller and it made my back hurt a little bit having to stand on my tiptoes but it was worth it and it was only a few minutes before we weren't standing up anymore. It was your lips and my lips and your body and mine and we didn't do it but we came close. I knew I wasn't like you, I knew my dad would come back, so I made you leave.