

COMING BACK
by Noley Reid

*****content warning: suicide*****

When the suicides start in my kindergarten class, they're just a game. Last Sunday, Krista's grandmother pulled a radio into her bathwater to prevent the Parkinson's going any further, so the kids now sit straight-legged on the play mats, pretending to run a washcloth over their bodies, then tug a length of yarn onto which they've pasted large construction paper squares and rectangles that read CLOCK or HAIRDRYER or TOASTER. Now they really ham it up. They go into all sorts of convulsions to simulate being electrocuted, smashing through their imaginary bathtubs right into one another, until they are finally out of energy and breath in a pileup on the mats. I let them sleep it off in place and when they wake, one by one peeling themselves from the pile, I rebraid, recomb, or repony their hair and tell each one in a whisper, "Suicide is forever. It isn't a game," and they go sit in their seats, looking glum.

Krista is at the bottom of the pile and, so, is the last to wake and the last I rebraid and tell, "Suicide is forever."

She turns around so fast her hair burns the palm of my hand. "It's not," she says on the way to her seat and the class perks up. "There's Jesus and heaven. My mom and dad say so."

"Okay," I say, because I know the surest way for a teacher to get fired is to fuck with Jesus. "I just mean your grandma can't come back to Earth."

"She can if she wants," says Tegan.

"Can if she wants," says Ally B., swinging her legs under her desk.

"What does that even mean?" I say. "In what way could she possibly come back?"

"Jesus came back," says Krista.

"Well," I say, "that's debatable. But also remember that not everybody in the room believes the same thing your families do. It's important to respect everyone's beliefs."

"Who doesn't believe in Jesus?" says Lipman, holding up his hand and looking around the room. "Raise your hand."

“No, don’t raise your hand,” I say. “We’re not giving friends a religious litmus test.”

“What’s that?” they say.

“A Jesus test,” I say.

“I’d pass,” Brian calls out.

“Me, too,” says Quinn.

“Me, too,” says Finn.

“I’d pass,” says Min, but I know her family is Buddhist.

“You know I would,” says Goldy.

“Stop it!” I say. “Children, stop it! You don’t need to prove your Christianity. In fact, doing so is hurtful to others. You’re setting yourselves up as a powerful ruling class against a silent and powerless minority. And that’s scary.”

“We don’t know what you’re saying,” says Arthur.

“I think you do,” I say, shutting my eyes for a moment.

“She’s saying we’re being like our parents,” says Ally T.

I pop my eyes open again. “Exactly,” I say, but Ally T. has her pigtail in her mouth and is looking out the window.

I turn off the light. Min passes out the cups of juice I pour, and Finn distributes the graham crackers. They sip and nibble in silence. I don’t tell them not to talk but they must feel the need for quiet, for thinking things through, because no one says a word.

Afterwards, though, we go outside and I seek out the second-grade teacher, who is not quite a friend but someone I talk to at school on days like these. His kids have the kickballs and jump ropes out, and they share with some of my kids. Kyle and I stand around the edge of the cafeteria wall, which blocks a bit of the view, because he vapes and can’t let the children or roaming administrators see.

“Did you watch the game last night?” he asks me.

“No.” I don’t even know what sport he means. This is March, so basketball? Baseball, soccer, volleyball? I haven’t a clue. I read at home with my dog on the futon next to me. Or I watch

baking shows. That and affix colored stars to handwriting and phonics worksheets. That's truly all I do.

"It was a good one," says Kyle. He sucks on the vape pen. "They took it in overtime. It was tight."

"Sounds exciting."

Electronic smog comes out his nose. "You know it."

I decide not to tell him anything. "I'd better go check on my class."

"See ya."

I round the corner and make my way through Kyle's taller students, and then I see it. Krista, Finn, Quinn, Min, Brian, Tegan, Goldy, Ally B.—half of them with jump ropes wrapped around their necks, the other half standing on the jungle gym trying to hoist the ropes up to hang them. I run to stop them, to keep them from being seen and keep the hangings from progressing any further.

We go back to the classroom. I say, "I told you 'suicide is forever.' What's wrong with you? What's going on? This isn't funny."

"We aren't joking," says Brian.

"Then what are you doing?" I ask, rubbing my own neck where they have red marks from the ropes' plastic beads.

"We don't know," says Min.

"We don't see a point anymore," says Tegan.

"A point?" I ask.

"Why we're here in the first place," says Quinn, shrugging.

"To learn and prepare for lives as informed citizens of the world," I say.

"No," says Krista, "she means why we're here on Earth. Why we're even alive."

"I see." I don't see. I don't see at all. Several of the kids rest their heads on their desks, but they all look to me for an answer I don't have. "Some say death is what gives meaning to life."

"Yes, dying!" says Robbie.

“No,” I say, “not the act of dying or how you die—just the fact that it will happen means you have to fit all the good parts of living into a limited number of days.”

They stare at me.

“You can only eat ice cream every day of your life that you’re actually alive, do you get it? Once you’re dead, you can’t eat it anymore.” I move around to the front of my desk and sit on it. “Let’s try this: your best friend moves away but she’s coming back to visit for four days.”

“Why is she a girl?” Robbie asks.

“Because you’re not a jerk,” I say.

The kids laugh; Robbie pouts.

“Okay, now listen, everyone. She’s coming to visit for only four days. Won’t those four days be the best days? And won’t the days afterward feel long and tiresome? Won’t you feel bored and lonely on those days after she leaves?”

“Where are you going with all this?” asks Finn.

“My head hurts,” says Min.

“My head hurts, too, Min,” I say. “What I’m trying to say is—I don’t know.” I sit down behind my desk with my face in my hands. “I’ve become tangled around and all I really want to say, I guess, is please don’t die.”

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The next day, Krista brings in the program from her grandma’s funeral. In the morning playtime between drop-off and Vocabulary, the children bury one another under heaps of their coats and shoes, the dress-up clothes, books, and magnet blocks. All across the classroom floor are these strange burial grounds, with maybe a blue-socked foot poking through or the tip of a brown braid, until there is only one student left standing.

It’s Min. She packs the last of a game of checkers, board and all, around Tegan’s face then comes and stands in front of me. “Kill me?” she asks.

“Oh, Min,” I say and I sweep her long, black bangs out of her eyes.

“It’s okay.” She lies down in between a mound of princess dresses and another of milk carton bird feeders. She closes her eyes.

I look around for whatever's left but the room is bare. They've used everything that wasn't nailed down. All in their quest for death, their quest for meaning. And who am I to say they're wrong? Maybe death is transformative or transcendental and not just nothingness.

I drape my gradebook over Min's middle and I lie down next to her. I shut my eyes and imagine the dirt piling up over top of me. I lie here listening to the children breathing, their little inhales and exhales, so warm and moist like puppies.

And then there are faces over me. Krista and Goldy, Arthur and Robbie. "You were asleep," they're saying. "You fell asleep." "Do you know you snore?" "You do."

I sit up and try to stand, but they're kneeling on my skirt. I move them back and start to rise but stop. "What if I hadn't woken up?" I ask.

"Then we would have woken you," says Arthur.

"And if you couldn't? If I weren't simply asleep?"

"We would go get the nurse," says Goldy, her clammy hand on my arm.

"That's a good idea," I say. "But what if I had died in my sleep?"

They come flying at me from every side now, landing on me, knocking me back onto the mat, sitting on my knees and feet and hands. "Then we'll love you forever and ever and ever!"

"We'll always say a prayer for you before we go to sleep, every night," says Brian.

"We'll name daughters after you," says Quinn.

"If we live that long," says Min.

"Is that what this is all about?" I ask. "If I die, I become famous to you?"

"If we die, don't we become famous to you?" they ask.

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The next day, all of the children look like French poets, dressed in black head to toe. I don't ask. Ally B.'s mom drops her off with jellybeans and cupcakes for her daughter's birthday. After the kids eat the cupcakes, they decide the jellybeans are pills. They overdose and die in their seats. Tongues lolling out of their mouths. Bodies sprawled across their desks. I think of my dog Betsy curled up beside me, of TV dinners and streaming Nailed It!, and the sensation the red star stickers make when they cling to my fingertip instead of the worksheets. I collect the empty juice cups and crumbly cupcake plates. And I begin to prepare the whiteboard for the morning's

Vocabulary lesson, but, instead of chapter 31.2, the words I write on the board are: dead, grave, tomb, mausoleum, funeral, cemetery, pyre, kamikaze, wake, shiva, and suicide.

There is a tug at my elbow.

It's Min and she tries to smile now, looking up at my words.

Suddenly I'm full of shame. I turn my back to the board, try to block as many of them as I can. She's a good reader and her eyes study them, seem to imprint them.

"Will we need to know these?" she asks.

I turn back around with the eraser and smudge them all out. "No," I say, "these are—no, they're not for you. They're not for class."

"It's okay," she says. "We always come back."

"What?" I say. The board is clean again.

"Buddhists," she whispers.

I turn back around to her and Min smiles again. She returns to her seat. The rest of the class is coming back to life, as well. They stretch and yawn, wipe the drool from their chins and laugh at one another's death sprawls.

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