

DOLPHINS ONLY SLEEP WITH HALF THEIR BRAIN

By Cody Chesmore

The whole lot of us are virgins. Common knowledge until Adrian calls a meeting behind the school at our spot. A thicket of trees leading into the forest surrounding Denton Falls overlooks the blacktop outside. About twenty yards in is a small circle that might look like a campground. Logs form a circle-ish shape around a shallow dirt pit filled with twigs and kindling that any of us are too chicken to light aflame. In a few years it will be filled with cigarette butts and empty wine cooler bottles as our problems became more adult. But right now, we hang onto Adrian's every word as if it is a matter of life and death.

"It's gone," Adrian says, throwing his arms into the air as if there's nothing anyone can do about anything.

Calvin doesn't move at all, simply stares into the firepit. Jerry rolls his sweatshirt sleeves up. Even though it's late October, he claims to always be hot. But Ben looks right at me, scowling his fat face, and practically yells at Adrian, "*What* is? Your mind because they finally kicked you out of reading class?"

"I lost it," Adrian says again, cool as a cucumber. His teeth show, contrasting the darkness of his skin. Somehow, he's leaning back, without anything to lean on. Another secret he means to keep from us, his lesser experienced friends.

"*What* is lost?" Ben says, sounding agitated.

All of us look up at Adrian, who cocks his head and grins, like we all know what he's talking about. Which, we do. I see it in everyone's expressions, saw it when Adrian brought us all here. It was on all of our minds, seeing Adrian's name popping up on our phones, the giddy sound of his voice that can't be expressed over a text message. We all knew. Which is exactly why we pretended we didn't.

"My dude," Jerry says, standing and hooking an arm around Adrian's neck. His sleeves blouse over where he rolled them up, emphasizing his slim frame even more. In a hunkered half-hug, they pound fists.

"What was it like?" Jerry says.

"Bro," Adrian says. "It was fucking *mind-blow-ing*."

"No way," Ben says, nearly falling over from standing up so fast. His face is ninety percent cheek and all of it is red but not from the cold. "No fuckin' way."

"Way, Benny-my-man," Adrian says.

Ben looks incredulously from Adrian to Calvin and me. We all know he hates being called Benny. His mom calls him Benny. Only she says it like she's talking to a small pet. *Oh, Ben-nee! Do you need a snack after finishing your homework, Ben-nee? Remember you're going to have to set your clock back soon, Ben-nee.* I feel for him. If my mom talked to me like that around my friends, I'd simply cut all ties with anyone outside my immediate family.

"Well?" Ben says, his arms spread in a can-you-believe-it gesture.

"What?" I ask.

"This is *obviously* a bunch of bullshit."

"Hey, Ben. What's your problem?" Adrian says, ducking out from Jerry's arm crook.

“My problem is you’re a fuckin’ liar, Adrian. Always have been. Don’t think you’re going to blow smoke up my ass. If we believed everything you said, you’d be all of our fathers and playing the FIFA matches over breaks.”

Ben has a point. According to Adrian, he isn’t a stranger to anyone’s mother. The moment we’re out of parental earshot, Adrian is quick to tell us we’re all lucky he didn’t lay it into our mothers a little thicker. We all know what he’s trying to say but none of us has any idea what he means.

“Who?” Calvin says.

We all turn to Calvin, still sitting on the log, pushing his glasses up. He looks alone, somehow. More than usual. Which is saying something. Both of his parents split town recently. As far as I know, Calvin has only told me, the day before yesterday.

“Who did you lose it to?”

Adrian smiles and we all follow his gaze to Ben, whose world is obviously falling apart. “Lucy Springs.”

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“The fuck he did,” Ben says for the millionth time.

We ride our bikes slow, into the sunset. Light winks over the tops of monstrous pines that occupy the background of every direction you look. It’s beautiful, even after living in Maine for so long, if you let it be. Farther along, the shape of steady mountains hangs like a haze. Like giant mole hills hiding behind enormous blades of grass. One could expect to see a giant ant’s mandibles blotting out the sunrise or the paw of some monstrous cat, crushing the school and relieving all the kids from their classes. Focusing on the trees, the mountains, makes me feel like I can vacate my mind, which is something I do in times of stress.

Not really that this is a stressful time, per se. More of an internal battering. Like, somehow, I’m behind everyone else even though Adrian is the only one to have lost it. Jerry’s question hangs in my mind. What *did* it feel like? Not necessarily during, I know that’ll be the best feeling I’ll ever feel. But after. What did they say to each other?

“He didn’t give us details,” Ben says. “Because he didn’t do a god damned thing. He can barely fucking read. What would Lucy want with him?”

“You gonna’ be okay, Ben?” I ask.

“I’m fine, Ty. Why wouldn’t I be fine? Adrian’s just full of shit. It’s him who isn’t fine. The fuckin’ liar.”

“Alright,” I say, knowing better.

Ben’s had it for Lucy Springs since elementary. When he first came in second grade, I found him trying to play tetherball with himself. A couple of kids were heckling him, pointing out to one-another how Ben’s skin rippled each time he jumped to hit the ball. They didn’t give a shit it was his first day and nobody gave enough of a shit to tell them. Except Lucy.

“And just *what* are *you* two sniggering at?” Lucy said, both hands on her hip like a lone gunslinger.

“Step off, Lucy.” Scotty Evers said. “Standing up for Ripple-Nipples isn’t going to make anyone like you more.”

My arms looped through the bars of the jungle gym as I watched. Calvin sat above me, on top, his legs splayed like my arms. Lucy’s face reddened. It’s still common belief that Lucy

only did things to get people to like her. If one of the girls helps her mom work at a homeless shelter, Lucy runs to the shelter and works double.

“Scotty Evers and Brian Kristy, maybe I should just tell both your parents about what I saw you two doing under the bleachers last week.”

Color drained from their faces. Everyone knows Scott and Brian are gay for each other now. It wouldn't have changed anything if we all found out back then. They're still together, even in ninth grade. A little less asshole-ish in their true love and their dads had been good golf buddies ever since. That day, Ben's face flushed with a different sort of red. He'd been in love with Lucy Springs ever since.

“Try not to think about it too much,” I say as we hit the brakes on our bikes in the cul de sac.

“I'm *not* thinking about it. That's just what Adrian wants. To get in my head. I don't get, or care, why he's got to be such a dickhead.”

We both hop off and split ways, walking our bikes to our houses. Before Ben gets too far, I reach out and pat him on the shoulder.

“Be the bigger man, Ben.”

“I already am. Because I'm not full of shit.”

That's what he leaves me with as he walks his bike up his driveway, grabs it by the seat and pushes it forward. Riderless, the bike plows into their trashcan, making an explosion of buoyant plastic on concrete in the chilly air.

Before I go in, I just barely make out Ben saying to himself, “She wouldn't. She *couldn't*.”

*

Ben's dad works at the factory with mine. They're in separate departments and work separate shifts so they aren't really friends or anything. Dad says the man is a relic from the eighties. Everyone in the eighties must have had a fro and a fake tan because that's what Ben's dad has. He enjoys calling people smaller than him “Big Kahuna” and people bigger than him “Little Guy.” His friends he calls “Pal” and for Ben, it's “Champ.”

“You here to see Champ?” Ben's dad asks when I knock on their door the next morning.

I nod. “We usually ride to school together, Mr. Boscutti.” The truth is, I'm worried. Haven't heard anything out of Ben since last night.

Ben's dad shakes his head in an oh-you-kids kind of way. “Sorry, Big Kahuna,” he says, putting his hands on his knees even though he isn't much taller than me. “The Champ-man isn't feeling so hot today. You gonna' be able to get to school on your own?”

“Sure, Mr. Boscutti. I hope he feels better soon.”

When Ben's dad smiles, his eyes follow suit, like a cat. “That's what I like about you, Ty. Always polite. Have a safe trip now.” He laughs at his joke and shuts the door.

Because of this interaction, I'm late for first block. I don't see Calvin, Jerry, and Adrian until lunch. When I sit down, Calvin asks where Ben is. I look at Calvin, glance at Adrian quick, and look back. Adrian.

“Home sick,” I say.

Jerry and Adrian don't notice, their faces too full of FDA approved vegan patties the school tries to pass as hamburgers.

“Where's Lucy?” I ask, just in case.

Adrian lurches and coughs. Jerry laughs a little and smacks him on the back.

“Jesus Christ, Ty,” Adrian says.

“What?”

Adrian looks around frantically. When he talks, he speaks low. “Keep your mouth shut, here. It’s not like I’m just going to bring her with me everywhere I go.”

“But,” I say. “I thought you two were dating.”

Adrian looks at Jerry before looking at his burger. It’s Jerry who laughs, shaking his head, surprised that I could be so stupid.

*

Lucy Springs sits a couple rows ahead of me in Spanish. Everyone knows where Lucy Springs sits in any class because Lucy tries to answer every question the teachers ask. Lucy is also beautiful. Dark straight hair flows over the back of her chair like a chestnut waterfall. She’s telling our teachers about proper verb forms.

I try to imagine her and Adrian together again. Have I ever seen them interact? Is Ben right and Adrian is just yanking our chains? Or has Adrian really done it? Nude, under blankets, maybe in his parent’s basement, or her room, which I can’t imagine at all, and they stare at each other and do... what?

The bell rings abruptly, yanking me out of my thoughts. I hold my books low so no one can see. Lucy walks past me, not stopping or glancing, and I think, yes, Ben has to be right. Because Lucy would know Adrian and I are chums. She would give me a ‘Hey, Ty,’ or ‘Hi, Tyler, what’s up?’ I’d even settle for a ‘Howdy, Big Kahuna.’ But there’s nothing. I follow my class out into the busy hall, wondering what took place between my friend and this girl beneath covers.

*

They’d shown us sex ed stuff. Which was fine. I got that stuff. Condoms went on bananas and you had to account for the curve of your penis when you set it in a girl’s vagina. Calvin showed me a picture of a naked Asian woman on his computer once. Porn is something I’ll never access on my devices. Even my phone has some kind of firewall on it as per my mother.

I have the mechanics of the act down. But what still perplexes me is *how*. When they lay under white covers in a softly lit room of my imagination, does he just set it in? Do they talk about it? Plan it out? Because, I would want a plan of attack when I brought down my virginity. You need one to shoot a curved spear, wrapped in a condom, through the sky and slay the dragon named Virginity. Hell, I would want a fucking map.

Thoughts of what that map might look like carry me to the end of school, to the bike racks, wondering if we would go back to our spot in the trees for another conversation. Where Adrian would give us the details we all so desired.

Calvin watches Jerry and Adrian, both talking heatedly.

“Just ask him, already,” Jerry says. “It’ll be fine.”

“Hey, Ty!” Calvin shouts.

Jerry looks over his shoulder at me. Calvin suppresses a smile. Adrian looks everywhere but me.

“Ask who already?” I ask.

“Yeah, Adrian,” Calvin says.

“Just do it!” Jerry says, weaving around to Adrian’s side. “Don’t be a pussy.”

“Piss off, man,” Adrian says, turning to him and putting a finger in face. “I swear to God.”

Jerry throws his hands up in surrender and points at me with his eyes. Slowly, Adrian turns back, still looking anywhere but at me. “You wanna’ go out with me and Lucy tomorrow night?” He asks a bird in the tree above me.

“Go out with you and Lucy?”

Calvin and Jerry crack up.

“Not just us!” Adrian says. “Jesus Christ, guys, shut *up*.”

They quiet down but still smile, their eyes twinkling.

“She’s got a friend that likes you,” Adrian says, finally looking me in the eye.

“Likes *me*?”

“Do you want to go or not?”

“Which friend?” I ask.

Adrian looks at his fingernails. Then, over my shoulder. “You have to tell me if you’ll go or not first.”

“Woah. What?”

Adrian looks into my eyes, pleading.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll go.”

“No way!” Jerry cries, throwing his skinny arms on top of his ball capped head. Calvin cracks up again.

I dance eagerly from one foot to the other. “C’mon. Tell. Who is it?”

“Kaytie Evers,” Adrian says.

Which takes a while to sink in. “Kaytie Evers,” I say, trying it out.

Adrian isn’t looking at me again.

“She’s in junior high,” I say.

Adrian nods.

“Is that even legal?”

Jerry cracks up.

“We’ll meet at my place,” Adrian says, kicking a rock. It rolls along the sidewalk, striking the cracks in the cement, bouncing off in a new direction before hitting another jagged edge and veering off again. “We’ll go over to the football game together.”

*

School flies by the next day. Ben is gone again and I wonder if Jerry told him about the double date. Adrian and Ben aren’t talking and I know Calvin didn’t. After the bike racks last night, I followed Calvin to his place. The air blasted heat even though it wasn’t cold out. The small sofa took up most of the living room. Crumpled blankets and empty potato chip bags littered the cushions. I almost asked what it was like to live in a house without parents but Calvin ran from room to room the moment we arrived, leaving me to stand by the door. I didn’t feel much like asking after.

I convinced him to come over to my house for supper where my dad steamed veggies while mom grilled burgers and potatoes. Calvin was uncomfortable until I promised him it was better than the burgers they served at school.

“God, I should hope so,” was all my mom said and everything was fine after that. My parents don’t know about Calvin’s parents yet but I’ve been thinking about telling them. They also don’t know that when Calvin walked out the front door, he looped around to my bedroom window and crawled in. This morning, Calvin was up and gone before I woke, like he’d never been there at all.

In Spanish, I stare at the back of Lucy Springs perfect head, wondering what the night will bring. Will she and Adrian sneak off to diddle each other’s privates while I entertain Gay Scotty Ever’s little sister? At a football game of all places?

The bell rings, ending class in what seems like a heartbeat. I gather up my books when Lucy Springs stops in front of my desk.

“Hi, Ty,” she says.

Rumor confirmed. Adrian isn’t full of shit.

“Hey, Lucy.”

She rolls her hair behind her ear, bouncing to music that only she can hear.

“You excited for tonight?”

My stupid Spanish book isn’t going into my stupid bag. The edge of it is getting caught on the lip of the bag. “To-night?” I say, trying to shove the book in with each syllable. “Ye-ah. Of-course.”

It finally slides through. I smile, cocking my head and looking back at Lucy, whose eyebrows are raised in a way that doesn’t make me feel good.

“I know Kaytie is excited,” Lucy says, like an afterthought.

“Good. Good.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

We stand there for another second that feels like a year.

“See you tonight,” she says.

“See you tonight.”

The rest of school is spent hovering over my textbooks, hoping no one can see how red my face is.

*

Mom drives me to Adrian’s because she knows I’ll cut through yards, which could equate to dirty clothes. The Boscutti house stands like a dim beacon in the twilight. Behind it are the tips of trees, tickling the purple underbelly of sky. Ben’s bedroom light is on and I imagine him sitting on his bed, playing Uno with his dad. Mr. Boscutti is cracking jokes like, *Go fish, champ, har-har*. Ben’s mind is elsewhere. Maybe wondering about tonight. I stare at his window as we drive by, waiting for a flutter of curtains and a jowly face that never comes.

Before I know it, we’re pulling up to Adrian’s. Mom speeds a little and I appreciate it. She offers to walk me up to the door but I don’t appreciate that. Still a few years before she’ll start making sure I go where I say I’m going to go.

“Where have you been?” Adrian says. He’s wearing a striped collared shirt and closes the door, cutting off his mom’s hello.

“Hello Mrs. Katz!” I call through the closed door.

Adrian shakes his head, grabs my arm and pulls me around the house. The bottom of the hill Calvin and I sledded down last year is just past his backyard. We climb it like mountaineers,

both careful not to get our clothes dirty while trying to hide the fact that we aren't trying to hide the fact that we're being careful not to get our clothes dirty. Our breath comes out in plumes now. The static of the crowd gets louder as we climb. Hundreds of voices clashing and mixing together with a break of screaming or laughter. The announcer bellows a mic check and the whole town can hear. We reach the top, and the football field is bright. A real beacon. Stadium lights touch the four corners of the field, shining down on painted grass like sunlight through a magnifying glass. The stands are already full and we walk toward them, giving the field a wide berth.

Adrian walks slightly ahead of me, scanning the crowds near the vendor stands. The farther we walk, the more I think about Ben. I'm about to say something when Adrian waves, jumping a little in a way I don't think he notices.

Lucy walks toward us, the crowd parting for her. She looks different than in class. Hair all done up in a bun, the tips spiraling out like fireworks. She's wearing a dress with spring floral patterns on it. Adrian is impressed but before the night's over, she'll be cold.

"Hi," says a voice behind her and now I'm looking at Kaytie Evers. She's about my height. Shoulder length blonde hair and big eyes. The stadium lights reflect off them. Are they blue? Green? She's wearing a light blue shirt with long sleeves above jeans. There are little designs on the shirt that I can't quite make out in the shadows behind the bleachers.

"Hey," I say.

Adrian and Lucy are looking at us. No doubt, they've talked about this moment. Or, maybe, Lucy has, after, when Adrian is slipping back into his pants. Lucy will say, *I wonder what it will be like? What?* Adrian will say, pulling his shirt over his head. *When Ty and Kaytie meet. Do you think he'll like her?* But Adrian doesn't have an answer for her. He only shakes his head and stares at the ceiling.

"So," Adrian says. "Find seats?"

Lucy looks from Kaytie to me, obviously pleased, before following Adrian. I follow Lucy and Kaytie follows me while I pretend to hear things and look around like I'm interested in something I'm not, catching glances of her out of the corner of my eyes.

After we sit, I immediately want to get up. This is football. Not just football but high school football. People get into this more than the NFL and I have a sudden desire to express I'm not like Ben's dad, who *is* one of those people. Ben went out for baseball with Calvin, Adrian, and me in fourth grade. A background chorus swayed around the field, following the umpire, of Bob Boscutti saying, *Ump, no offense, but are you kiddin' me?*

"Do you like football?" Kaytie asks.

Adrian and Lucy are already deep in their own conversation. So much for comradery.

"Not so much," I say.

Although the picture up here is nice. Both teams on the field, a whistle blowing. I recognize players on both teams. This is a scrimmage. Not even an official game. The ball snaps and the teams mingle, their shadows racing to catch up to them, running toward futures of manhood and victory. Never mind that they were friends minutes ago. Now they were understanding opponents that would accept defeat if they couldn't win, running at each other in a green and white field. Past it, hidden in darkness, I know the trees are touching the sky, looking down on us, mountains rolling behind them.

"I don't really, either," Kaytie says.

"Isn't your brother in football?"

"Why do you think I don't like it?"

She smiles. Then, I smile.

“My dad doesn’t even really like football,” she says. “He’s been trying to get Scott to play golf forever. But Scott is very particular about whose balls he plays with.”

A laugh creeps up my throat and I look to see if its okay to laugh when I know I shouldn’t. We both crack up and I instantly feel better. We watch the game and talk about what happens in school. The things we like to do and things we don’t like that our parents do. Her dad pressures Scotty about golf and is a bit of a racist. My biggest pet peeve being mom occasionally sneaking cigarettes if she’s had a long day.

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We don’t walk toward Adrian’s house after. We all follow Adrian past the school, into the trees. Once we are far enough in to not get caught, Adrian pulls his phone out and shines light over our spot and I follow suit, wanting to be friends with Adrian in some way that I can show. This is the first time girls have ever seen our spot. Echoes of all the times we’ve been here scream louder than they ever have. Of when Adrian had first introduced us to Jerry and how Calvin and I still don’t know how we feel about him. Or when Adrian had stolen his dad’s can of chew and we each put a dip in our mouths before we all threw up. Of when Calvin and I first took Ben here, when he plopped down on a log like he owned the place and asked us about Lucy Springs. I flinch, swearing I hear Ben screaming at us, *What are you doing? This isn’t supposed to happen! Not like this.*

“Cold?” Kaytie whispers behind me.

The bumbling of tree branches bending and twigs snapping drowns my answer. Adrian walks toward me, fat frogs of breath coming out in dark clouds in the light of the phone. “We’re going to be in here a ways, alright?”

He looks at me like I should understand the weight of every word he says and I do. But here? Outside in the cold darkness? Where was the enjoyment? Sticks would poke them, grinding under Lucy’s body as they hugged. But, that was their choice. Not mine.

Kaytie and I sit on a log as Adrian stalks off into the trees like a hungry predator.

“Where are they going?” Kaytie asks.

I shrug. “I think they want to be alone for a while.”

“Oh,” she says. “My dad wouldn’t let me come if I didn’t go with someone.”

“You’re here with me,” I said before realizing how stupid that sounded.

“He wouldn’t like that. Just like I’m sure Lucy’s dad wouldn’t like her with Adrian.”

Everything goes quiet. My phone light is the only thing that’s shining. Clouds above us block out any moonlight that might try to wink through the branches. The designs in her shirt are visible in my phone light, though. Little dolphins, mid-jump.

“Do you like dolphins?” I ask.

“They’re my favorite animal,” she says, smiling. She shivers and scoots closer to me. The only thing I know about dolphins are that they’re mammals and they’re one of the few species that have sex for pleasure.

“Did you know dolphins only sleep with half their brain?” Kaytie says.

“No,” I say. “Why?”

“The other half stays awake so they come up for air.”

“Oh,” I say.

It's quiet again. I listen for the sound of twigs breaking. Of soft little moans of pleasure. Of Lucy saying, *Here? Are you serious? It's fucking cold.* But there's nothing. Only the wind whistling through the trees. Distant car engines firing to life to take their families home. And the soft breaths of Kaytie Evers.

Her hand is in mine now. My heart jumps to my throat and, despite the cold, I'm sweating. For some reason, I think of Calvin in his empty house, the heat cranked to replace the temperature of two missing bodies. A blanket wrapped around him to stand in for a mother's embrace. I wish it was him here, kissing Kaytie Evers, because I'm absolutely in love with this moment and he deserves it more than I do.

Then, my mind dips somewhere between a dream and wakefulness, I find myself with Katie. Her fingers interlocked in mine. The phone is gone and so is the light. Our faces touch and I feel like I might drown. But our minds are half awake and we both remember to come up for air.

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I go to find Adrian on wobbly legs. My phone is with Kaytie. Whatever it is that Adrian and Lucy are doing, I don't want them thinking I want to see it. My heart is still pounding, my mind still between dreaming and awake and I remember to breathe. Even the darkness is vibrant to my eyes and it isn't hard to spot a light a little further out in the trees. I close my eyes and inch forward. If I hear anything, I'll turn back. Only quick glances at my path guide me forward, so that I see a bunch of still frames. Adrian sits with his arms around Lucy. He's holding a flashlight, a real one. Both look down at a book. She takes his hand, the one without the flashlight, and guides his fingers along the words. Lucy shivers and Adrian pulls her tighter with his other arm, struggling to hold the flashlight. I can barely hear him stutter along.

Lucy mumbles something and Adrian laughs in a way I've never heard. Higher, like he's not afraid to be happy and I think about Calvin again for a second. Then Ben.

I turn to go and a twig snaps.

"Hey!" Adrian calls.

"Just me," I say.

"Kaytie?" Lucy calls.

"She's back at the spot."

"The spot?" Lucy says to Adrian.

"The logs and stuff up there," Adrian says to Lucy.

"Wanna' go?" Adrian calls to me.

"We can meet up with you later," I say.

"Okay."

"Okay."

I wave but I don't think they can see me. Something nags at me. Like I shouldn't to leave my friend here even though this is where he wants to be.

"They're going to catch up with us," I say to Kaytie back at the spot.

We walk toward her house together. Her fingers are interlocked with mine and we chase our wisps of breath down the street. Our shadows bounce behind us in orange streetlight and when we look at each other, we smile like we've never smiled before. After she walks into her house, she's still with me in my head as I wander home.

It's completely dark but the cul de sac is lit in the same orange glow as the rest of the streets. There's enough light to see a shape moving around and around the cul de sac as I walk down the road. I stand in the center and Ben circles me on his bike like a fat shark.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," he says, not looking at me. He starts doing figure eights.

I'm not sure what to say so I don't say anything. Neither does Ben. Around and around he continues to ride. I watch him and notice snowflakes beginning to fall, sleepily. They dance around Ben in the glow of streetlamps as he rides in circles in the cul de sac where we grew up.

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