

Blue

A m a n d a M e i d a a

Today, you will be sad.

I shudder at the thought and a wave of emptiness sweeps through my stomach. I lay in bed, stare at the ceiling, and fixate on the corner that's cracking, getting bigger by the day. I notice it on the other days, too.

Not today. Please, not today.

I wait for the speaker to say this was a mistake. It's never happened before. It's never made a mistake, but I can't help myself. I need today to be happy.

I'm tempted to smash the speaker into the wall. It can't dictate anything if it's a smashed pile of plastic. The last time I tried, I woke up the next morning to a brand new speaker, shining and taunting me.

A small oval-shaped speaker that only spoke five words a day. Capable of paralyzing me.

It takes me an hour to get out of bed and I go through the motions of getting ready slowly. My mind whirls with different excuses I can tell Mr. Greenburg. *I'm throwing up. I'm sorry. My ankle's sprained. It hurts too bad. The world has swallowed me whole. I can't get out.*

I'm still thinking of excuses as I walk down the sidewalk to the bookstore. I have earphones shoved in my ears, but the end isn't connected to anything, the excess chord crammed into my pocket. It's my best tactic, no one talks to you when you have earphones in. I stare at the ground mostly, stepping over the cracks and weeds that grow through the concrete.

Sometimes, I wonder how they got there, life bursting through the hard earth. Sometimes, I wonder how I got here.

I hear someone say something that sounds like my name, but I don't shift my head up to look. *Maybe, they'll think you can't hear them.*

When I finally arrive at the bookstore, I glance at the large clock on the wall and it says I'm fifteen minutes late. Mr. Greenburg looks up from behind the counter and frowns for a moment.

“What will today be, Blue?” He knows but he still asks. Some days, I don’t answer him.

I take a deep breath, swallowing the lump forming in my throat. I shake my head slowly and he nods in acknowledgement.

I go through the motions slowly. It’s hard to be motivated, to do things that usually make me happy. I stack books on the shelves, finding no interest to delve into any. Nothing triggers a flicker of excitement. I don’t eat a scone today, it won’t taste the same. Not because the recipe has changed, but because I have. Mr. Greenburg’s cat Whiskers floats around me all day. I don’t give him any attention, but I can see his movements from the corner of my eye. I don’t know what he thinks he’s protecting me from. He can’t help me. I make myself a cup of tea during lunch. I take it, set it on the coffee table, and sink into the couch. I slouch and stare at the cup, watching the steam rise.

I almost consider skipping my break altogether when Theodore walks into the store, making the bell above the door jingle. He saved Whiskers when he got stuck in the fire escape last year. I apologized profusely and he said his job wasn’t only about putting out fires.

I wish I could sink further into the couch. I don’t want him to see me, but it doesn’t take long for him to spot me.

He looks away from me for a moment and says something to Mr. Greenburg. They both look at me briefly then continue on. I stare between the two of them, wondering how they’re both impeccably put together while I fall apart. *What am I doing wrong?*

“Blue,” Theodore says. He’s standing in front of me now. He cautiously looks at the seat next to me and slowly sits beside me.

“Hi,” I mutter. I almost don’t say anything at all. He’s here, but my heart doesn’t flutter the same way it does on the happy days. I want to crawl into my skin, far away from him.

“You want to share a scone,” he says.

Yes, just not today. I shake my head. “No.”

He’s here, but I still feel alone.

“Okay,” he says. “Maybe tomorrow.” I shrug. *Maybe.*

This has happened before. I don’t know why he comes back.

I swallow hard, hoping I'm not trapped in a sad day the next time he's here.

When he's gone, I'm alone with my thoughts again. I take a deep breath, slowly and gasping all at once.

Night time is the hardest. My thoughts feel magnified, banging against my skull.

When it's time for bed, I dread the darkness. But I dread the sun rising even more. I shiver in my warm bed, wondering what the five words will be in the morning. I try to conjure a speck of happiness but nothing comes. Not when I know sadness will come again.

I lay down, staring at the black air above me, and remember my first day with the speaker. The majority of my first year with the speaker was happy. I was young and my mind still had a quiver of control.

The speaker sat on my nightstand and gave me instructions. That was the only time it ever said anything else. *Never reveal your speaker's identity to anyone around you.*

My mom couldn't see it. Neither could Dad.

It only burdened me.

Today, you will be happy.

I breathe in, a sigh of relief escaping me, and continue staring at the ceiling, still and wide eyed. It's been a week since the last time.

I turn over to my right and feel the bed springs squeak beneath me. I smile to myself, knowing today will be better.

I get out of bed and go through the motions of getting ready. I do everything quickly, brushing my teeth and my hair and then getting dressed.

When I finally get outside, I trip over my toes, eager to get to the bookstore. Happy means I'll be on time today.

I decide to take the long way. I follow the dirt path beside the field of trees instead of the sidewalk, embracing the trees and the

colors, red, orange, brown, and yellow. I watch the others on the path, walking their dogs or jogging. The cool fall breeze sweeps past the back of my neck and the warm sun creeps against my cheeks.

“Morning, Blue.” I turn towards the voice and see Theodore.

“Morning,” I say, waving.

“You look happy this morning,” he says.

I wonder what I must have looked like the other day.

“We got a shipment of new books. I’m excited to... dig in.”

“Anything I’ll like?”

“You’ll have to come and see for yourself,” I say. He waves me off after promising to be by later.

When I get to the store, Mr. Greenburg is behind the counter looking at something I can’t quite see. He has a steaming cup of coffee in front of him, and the smell of coffee mingles with the smell of books.

“Morning,” I say. He startles and looks up, his eyes softening as soon as he sees me. He squints at me for a moment, the wrinkles by his eyes becoming more prominent.

“What will today be, Blue?” He stares at me, hopeful.

“Good,” I say, digging my hands into my jacket’s pockets. “Today will be good.”

His shoulders slouch in relief.

Me too, Mr. Greenburg. Me too.

I spend the day going through the boxes of new books that need to be put away. I’ve always enjoyed putting things away, and Mr. Greenburg revels in the fact that he doesn’t have to now.

I get lost in a book here and there, making a connection with the pages beneath my fingertips. Every time Whiskers brushes up against my leg, I move on to the next book. I scratch behind his ear and he meows in pleasure.

I always keep a piece of paper in my pocket. I pull it out, write the title of the book that I know I need to come back to, and then shove the paper back into my pocket. I help a few people find the books they’re looking for.

I nibble on a scone that Mr. Greenburg has waiting for me on the

counter. My favorite is blueberry. I drink a cup of tea and sit on the lush green couch in the corner on my lunch break.

Shortly after I sit down, Theodore comes in and we talk about our favorite books. He drinks his coffee and laughs when I tell him I read romance novels. He eats the pieces of my scone that I've left behind, the pieces without any blueberries.

Happy days always go quickly.

"It's almost time to close," I hear Mr. Greenburg say hours later. "Would you just close the back door for me?"

"Sure thing," I say.

After I do as he says, I take the two books that I set aside earlier, and leave for the day.

Today, you will be sad.

The crack in the ceiling has spread past the middle of the room. I stare at it until it goes blurry.

I sit up in bed, take the speaker, and throw it against the wall in front of me, using all the strength my tired bones can muster.

But the sadness still festers.

"Does your speaker always tell you to be happy, Mr. Greenburg?" He looks up at me, puzzled. "Speaker?"