

## What I Noticed

Jamie. That was her name. I met her my senior year of high school, and she was pixie like. Short. Cute. Hair choppy and blonde riding at her jaw line, and she had those big dorky glasses that only look good on certain people and yeah, she could pull 'em off. We met in a class for future teachers, where we got to volunteer at any grade level. She wanted the little kids, loved them to death. It was her passion, to teach. She did great too, won awards, scholarships. She always smiled, her thin lips pulled back, a sparkle in her green and blue and grey eyes, those eyes that changed color in every light so that you could never pinpoint the exact shade. She always wore floral dresses, combat boots, things like that, that didn't seem to go together but on her they *did*. It's like she was magic, almost. I mean, she *hand-made* cards for everyone in the class on the holidays. And I mean *every* holiday. Personalized cards. She was just *good*. When the year ended we stayed in touch, had each other's numbers. We went to different colleges but we met up from time to time. There's one time I remember, one of the first. We went to a park and were the only ones there because it was already starting to get cold and we were on the swings and she just looked at me and said "Do you ever wonder if we could fly if we tried? If I just swung high enough could I jump into the clouds and live in a world that we don't even know about?" and she kicked her shoe into the gravel and looked down and asked again "Do you?" and when I said what do you mean, she just kinda shook her head and said never mind, smiled, but it looked like it hurt her cheeks, like it wasn't natural anymore. I noticed, but I didn't say anything, because maybe I imagined it? We met again later and I spent the night at her fourth floor dorm in the North Wing. When she came out of the shower her hair was a little longer, a little shabbier, and her shorts showed a lot of her legs, more than she usually let show, and when the light came across the, from the lamp in the corner I saw all these cuts thrown into relief, some pale others bright red, like someone had marked out a thousand letters on a word-find puzzle. I noticed it, but I didn't say anything, pretty sure if she wanted to talk about it she would. And besides, her wrists weren't cut, so there couldn't be too much damage, right? She would be okay, right? About a month and a half later we went out to eat, and she seemed thinner, paler, her eyes more hallow, the sparkle dulled. Her hair was stringy, lost its bounce, its spring. She wore a lot of clothes, too many for March, too many for the warm night. We ate and she ate a lot so I figured she was okay, and then right after she went to the bathroom. When she didn't come back for ten minutes I went in there and almost said her name when I heard something I probably shouldn't have, so I backed out and closed the door quietly, and was back in my seat when she returned. I pretended not to see her blood-crusting knuckles, or her too-tight smile carved between her cheekbones and her too-pointy chin. When she said "Let's go" I said okay and didn't say what I knew she didn't want me to notice. And then, in May, when I was with her again, she smelled like cigarettes. Like, a whole pack of cigarettes shoved into a fire and the ashes dumped directly into her blood stream. I saw her shoulder blades and the knobs of her knees and knuckles, and the way her head seemed too big for her body, like a balloon held by a child, larger than they are, because it didn't seem to fit right on her shoulders anymore. She seemed a little drunk too, giggling at all the wrong parts of the movie, sloshing her diet coke on me, the only thing I'd seen her drink or eat all day, but you know, I didn't say anything, felt she had the right to have some fun, to do what she wanted to with her body, and what I said probably wouldn't change her habits anyway, right? And then I didn't see her for a while. She texted me when she got her first

tattoo, then another, and another, all within eight weeks. And one night she called me, the middle of the night, I just happened to be up working on a paper that I should've done a week ago, and she was sobbing, hysterical, saying how she couldn't find her key, how she thought someone stole it. "Where are you?" I asked. My dorm. "Where's your roommate?" Asleep. She didn't know where she'd last had it, didn't know who could've taken it, but she *needed* that key, that key was *so* important, it was *everything*, and it was the only thing she could focus on. And I sat while she practically screamed for about thirteen minutes and when I finally heard her take a breath I asked if she was okay, and I noticed how she shifted almost immediately and seemed startled I was on the phone, and that she was still holding it, and she said in a voice thick with mucus and probably blood from when she'd bit her tongue eight minutes ago "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I'm sorry" and she hung up. When I woke up the next morning I had a text from her from 3:07 saying "i found it" and when I saw her the next day she was smiling, like, not the high school smile with the white teeth and the crinkled eyes that sparkled with constellations and depths of oceans that hadn't been explored yet, but it was a smile, I guess, because her lips were pulled back and her slightly yellowed teeth were showing and even though her eyes seemed dead and the lines weren't there because she no longer had enough skin to spare for wrinkles, it was still a smile right? So I didn't mention the differences I noticed because as long as she said she was happy she must be, right? And then, towards the end of our sophomore year, there was an alert on the news. They said someone, a student, a female, had thrown herself from the fourth floor dorm of North Wing at Jamie's college, and in the crowd I noticed people with hands over mouths, and tears in their eyes, and heads shaking no, and yellow tape and chalk lines and camera flashes and even though they didn't say the name or show the face I just knew, and I fell to my knees and I screamed for a while, then I went to my bulletin board and pulled of the card she had given me for Christmas our senior year, her happy year, the one she had made herself, and written, personalized, for me, the one I had kept with me, I mean I kept them all but this one was different, I brought it with me to school, something of her to keep with me. And I opened it, and looked at her looping, sloping letters, stringing them together through my blurry eyes that could finally link together all that I had seen, all that I'd noticed but never acted on, and I read with shaking irises what she had written: *Thank you for always being there for me. Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for always making me smile. I know you'll be there 'till the end.* And then I crumpled the card, because it was a lie, I was a lie, life was a lie, because I had noticed it all, seen it all, been there for it all, but not really *been* there at the same time. Because maybe, maybe if I'd told her what I'd noticed I wouldn't be sitting in a room forty miles away from where she was being placed into a body bag, where her last resting place was memorialized by a chalk line, where there lay a note on the desk in her looping, sloping letters saying only one word, her last to the world: *Free.*