

SLATE & ARROW
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You don't have a soul.
You are a soul.
You have a body.
—C.S. Lewis

1. Scrying

I'm always at odds with the odds.

Luck favors the extroverts, the snarky siblings, the smartphone gurus, the hipster smokers, all people not me. The only time the odds are on my side is when it comes to being odd.

So I'm not surprised when I swallow a heap of oatmeal and something sharp gets lodged in my throat. I'm used to words and emotions getting stuck there, but this is different. For a moment, I can't breathe.

I'm going to die with a bone in my throat on Halloween day.

"What are the odds," someone will say when they learn the news of my death. And someone else will shrug, writing me off as that peculiar girl that they've already forgotten about.

The morning sun slices through the kitchen blinds as I cough and sputter around the table clutching my neck, but it's the one moment in history when Mom isn't hovering over me with a scrutinizing scowl. My kingdom for a pat on the back!

My eyes tear up and for a nanosecond, a shimmer of light, then darkness fills my head until I manage to swallow the thing down just as Mom enters the room, oblivious.

"I just choked," I choke, but her only response is mindlessly pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Did I just have a near-death experience? A light flashed and then everything went black: the summation of my life.

How pathetic.

I rub my throat and keep swallowing, looking for a bone chaser to wash it away.

“Careful,” Mom says, when I grab a glass, nearly knocking over the coffee cup on the table. She doesn’t even look up from her drink. I kinda wish I *had* spilt the thing. When Mom isn’t ignoring me in times of need or interrogating me for no reason, she’s staring into space donning her overdone makeup and gaudy gold-toned jewelry. Maybe she needs a broken coffee-mug puddle to wake her up.

I lunge for the fridge to get some juice, but Dad intercepts me, his camo vest contrasting with Mom’s dollar-store pumpkin decor.

“Where are my fish bones?” he asks me, squinting his eyes as if in any version of the universe I’d want his prized possession.

I glance at the table where the empty oatmeal bowl glares back at me. Dad looks from the bowl to me as I clutch my throat. Then laughs maniacally.

“Did you just...?” He can’t get the words out, he’s cracking up so hard. He points back and forth to me, then to the soiled bowl. Apparently I’d just eaten oatmeal out of his nasty fish bowl.

“I just choked.”

This only fuels his laughter, his dark-olive skin crinkling around his eyes.

I exhale sharply, grabbing the juice and slamming the fridge. “Glad my near-death experience could be a source for your amusement.”

“I was saving those bones for the garden. Good fertilizer.”

I roll my eyes. Only Dad would eat fish for breakfast and save the entrails for a backyard experiment.

My throat's still dry and now I have the foul aftertaste of something fishy.

I tip the last two drops of orange juice from the carton into my glass. *Typical*. Things are always running out in this house.

"What did you say?" Mom asks.

"Nothing." For a minute, I wonder if I spoke out loud without meaning to. "I gotta go. I need to get to school early." *Lie*. I just want to roam the streets on my bike and clear my head before getting to class. It's not everyday I swallow a leftover bone. I stuff my bat hoodie into my pack and head to the garage for my bike.

In my haste, I bump into my little brother, stepping on the toes of his white sneakers.

"Watch out, psycho!" Clark says from under his stupid skater haircut that every single boy in his freshman class sports. He stoops over his shoes to access the damage. He could never afford a new pair, these were a gift from a friend because despite being a scruffy pest, he's somehow popular.

"That's what you get for drinking all the OJ," I scoff, but grab a towel and run it under the tap, taking a slug of water while I'm at it. I toss him the towel, which he ignores.

"You're lucky they're okay," he calls out as I open the garage door and disappear into the void.

As the door closes behind and I flick on the light, a tingling feeling ignites in my chest. Must be mold spores or mildew having a party at my allergies' expense.

I lodge my bike Whiz from our overstuffed garage and inadvertently whack the storage shelves, inching a dusty shoebox too close to the edge until it falls, spilling its guts onto the cold cement floor.

I stoop and gather the contents of the box: a series of old cassette tapes with handmade covers and a smooth, black pendant in the shape of a raindrop.

“Ahhh!”

As I run my thumb over the sleek surface, it glistens in the half light and I imagine it vibrating with mumbled whispers and secret codes. I don’t have to know where it came from to know that it’s special. I drape its leather cord around my neck and am simultaneously invigorated and soothed with the stone resting on my chest. It feels at home there. Complete.

“Are you okay?” Mom calls from inside the house. She must have heard the ruckus.

“Fine!” I stuff the shoebox into my pack, open the door to our S-shaped street of Tigertail, and hop on Whiz, escaping into the crisp autumnal air before anyone can stop me.

↔

It’s just too weird, I think as I park Whiz and head to the school library before class starts. *First I swallow a bone, then I find you.* I clutch the pendant, camouflaged in my long, dark hair.

“You need a name,” I say to the black raindrop staring back at me. Because everything important deserves to be named.

This isn’t my first time bonding with a stone. I used to carry crystals in my pack, hoping they would exude some magic into my life. They never did. But this one is different. There’s something about the energy around it that speaks to me.

“Slate,” I announce, without thinking too hard, because it’s blank and it feels right and why not. “Hello, Slate. I’m Sable Daigo. Pleased to meet you.”

Maybe it's my imagination, but it seems to buzz in response. It's more than anyone gives me at school. Certainly not my crush, Pascual. Even during roll call yesterday, Ms. Diaz forgot to say my name. I might as well be invisible.

"But you see me, right?"

The polished stone reflects my image.

Inside the library, there's a display of seasonal books featuring the pagan origins of Halloween and various rituals and divination practices. I read about this thing called "scrying" where if you look into a crystal ball or a blank surface and squint just right, it can show your fortune, or *misfortune*, as the case may be.

"Scry," I turn the word over in my mouth, tasting it for the first time. It seems like a combo of "spy" and "cry," which immediately makes my heart sing. But when I look up the etymology of the word, it's apparently derived from "descry," or "describe."

Maybe it'll describe how to find my tribe of friends.

I exit the library and search for a secluded spot on campus. This time of day it's too risky to go to the rooftop of the science building, and there's no time before class to walk across the street to Grit Park. I settle on a patch of grass in the half-shade of a eucalyptus tree and hope it's shelter enough from onlooking haters.

"You wanna scry with me?" I ask Slate with a half smile.

Might as well. After all, it's Halloween and it's not like I've been invited to a party or anything with a social pulse. Maybe the stone will show me something inspiring. Or just a break from my loner existence.

I release the leather cord from around my neck, hold the shiny raindrop in the palm of my hand, and am about to stare into it like an idiot, when the first bells rings.

Smeg. Five minutes until class.

But I continue to sit and stare into the stone. The glossy black surface sucks me in, like a victim of a tar pit. Slowly, without meaning to, my eyes glaze over and my mind begins to clear. Time seems to dissolve as the space around me warps. A solar flare sparks through the leaves, lands on my palm, bounces into my eyes, ricochets off the stone, and jumps back up to the sky where the sun warms me below.

My eyes blur and Slate turns to a misty blue-gray fog.

At first it's just a feeling of something coming.

Then the fog lifts.

The stone glows with metallic hues blending into each other like drops of iridescent ink.

Then a pair of eyes blink open.

Oh my god!

I fling the pendant on the lawn a few feet away just as something envelops me with warmth. I realize I'm not scared. Startled, maybe. Surprised definitely. But any hesitation is replaced by a glimmering ray and it's too strong to let slip away.

I snatch back the stone and find the eyes waiting for me. They remind me of the rainbow patches of oil on asphalt after a rain. When I stare into them, it's as if I'm traveling through the outer reaches of the universe. There are no voices, but I hear something. No words, but I feel something. It could just be my mind playing tricks on me. But it makes me feel good, this "talking" to Slate, so what's the harm?

“Hello, Sable,” the eyes say wordlessly to me. I hear his voice in my head.

“Who are you?”

The iridescent rainbow eyes twinkle without mocking me. “Why don’t you ask yourself that question?”

I glance toward the science building and nearly lose focus. When I look back at the stone, the eyes are bigger, brighter.

“You can call me Arrow,” he says.

Chills run up my neck and scalp, I swallow hard. There’s a familiar feeling to hearing his name. It’s as if I’ve known him my entire life.

“Where did you come from?”

“There is no ‘from.’ Just like there is no ‘to.’ We are infinite, you and me.” His eyes spin and turn to shimmering wheels of light. No beginning, no end.

“Why are you here?”

“To talk to you, of course.”

“But why me?”

“Because we’re part of this, together.”

“Part of what?”

Arrow’s eyes blink and display a whirlwind of images: a pine forest, a coral reef, a misty waterfall, a snowcapped mountain, a lavender field, an erupting volcano, the sparkling bay water at Enola Park.

I squint harder, trying to make sense of what I’m seeing.

“Should I go to Enola Park?” It’s one of my favorite hangouts, after all. It’s a good place to take pictures.

With the sound of footsteps in the grass and a shadow now blocking the dappled sunlight, I lose focus and Arrow’s eyes disappear.

“What the—” a girl’s voice says.

Ding! The final bell for class rings, jolting me to finally look up at the girls in front of me.

Lexy and Roxy tower over me sitting cross-legged on the lawn. Roxy snaps her chewing gum in a loud pop as Lexy taps her phone screen.

“I always knew you were a freak. Now I have evidence.” Lexy flashes her phone, which plays a video clip of me caressing Slate and muttering like a lunatic.

Roxy spits a wad of gum on my lap. “Oops.”

Both Lexy and Roxy laugh, flip their perfectly highlighted hairdos, and walk away, not bothering to look back at me tucking Slate under my shirt and grabbing my pack. Just what I need, the resident mean girls on my case.

As I scrape the sticky gum from my faded black jeans, I wonder if I’ll ever find a real friend who wouldn’t care that I’m such a weirdo.

Then something stings from within my chest like a needle in my heart.