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Losing Sienna
By Christina Roscoe

Names have been changed to honor privacy.

Sienna was all baby lamb, gangly and vulnerable on the ice. The straps on her equipment wrapped around twice, the manufacturer having failed to account for such delicate bones. After practice, we'd change: she into boys' undershirts and Adidas shorts, I into floral skorts. At ten, I had a mouthful of wire, octagonal glasses, and bangs like a five-year-old. Sienna had perfect teeth and vision. Her ivory-blond hair, perpetually uncombed, was nevertheless silken, hyper-clean. The roundness of my face was a constant torment to me, but Sienna had a face like a heart. She loved soccer and dogs. I loved my dolls and God. Still, an embarrassing deficit thrust us into shared orbit. We were the only girls on our 1995 Minneapolis ice hockey team who could skate but not stop. In this way, I met her—hurtling down the rink with no end game.

During our first carpool, Sienna said, "I can tell you anything you want to know about Pembroke Welsh Corgis, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Bernese Mountain Dogs and, like, dozens of others."

"Oh!" I said, alarmed. "Um . . . the mountain dogs, I guess?" On Sienna's carpool days, her mother used the McDonald's drive-through. I'd given up meat for Lent, an act too mortifying to share

with these non-believers, and anyway, I could count on one hand the times I'd suffered fast food. While Sienna chewed, I cast about for a witty remark. Desperate, I apologized to Jesus for steamrolling Matthew 7:12—"Do unto others" and all that—and said: "Is it just me or does Coach seem like he's got a body or two in his basement?" Sienna choked so hard on her fries her mother had to pull over. Having decided I was funny, Sienna overlooked my breathtaking ignorance about everything that mattered to her: MTV, video games, the World Cup, and canines.

At first Sienna was a "hockey friend," reserved for winter months. But the summer I turned twelve, it occurred to me that *freedom* sat in our garage taking on rust. I called Sienna's house. "Can I bike over?" I asked, twisting our phone cord into an intractable helix.

"Sure," she said. "We don't have anything to eat though."

"Let's cook."

"Um, no. Can't use the stove," she reminded me. We microwaved marshmallows instead, shrieking as the candy melted through melamine.

The first time Sienna saw my bedroom, her gaze settled on my dolls. They occupied every corner—here asleep in cherrywood cradles; there, reclining in wicker rocking chairs; the rest in the corner, anticipating tea. Sienna's bedroom was plastered with soccer

posters and contained exactly no dolls. “What’s in the storage trunk?” she asked. This question made me nervous.

“My doll clothes,” I admitted and, afraid she would lift the lid to see for herself, added: “And formal invitations to tea parties, and my tea set. Doll books. Their winter boots and extra shoes, straw hats—stuff like that.” Sienna was eternally skeptical, and her wit could leave a mark. She might have been cruel about my playthings. Instead, she grinned.

“You definitely need more dolls,” she said.

One day, I biked over to find her mother locking up. “Hey! Want to come to a professional women’s soccer game?” Sienna asked. Sitting on the metal bleachers, I licked the salt off my giant pretzel.

“Why don’t they pass the basketball more?” I asked. “They—wait. What?” she said.

“I thought basketball was all about passing,” I said, feigning seriousness.

“You—but this is a . . . what?” She cocked her head and looked at me, unsure. *My God, it’s too easy.* I erupted with glee. “You’re such an idiot,” she giggled, shoving my shoulder. After the game, I followed Sienna onto the field. Cast long, our shadows drew close, her fingers through mine if only on turf. Longing radiated down between my legs and clenched, leaving me wet and bewildered.

I noticed the light like never before. The cerulean sky, normally so evocative of Heaven, seemed irrelevant: a scrim behind the setting sun, obliterating and fierce. I turned to Sienna, and she turned to bronze. Her eyes in sun were the gray of my beloved agate, a depthless color no one else would ever see. Her lashes were longer than I knew, lit to the tips by that searing light. *I wish this day would never end.* Already, the wish felt like tragedy. In a moment of clarity, I realized I would never have enough Sienna.

The summer after seventh grade, Sienna's aunt took us fishing, and I—by then a button-wearing member of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and a strict vegetarian—reeled in one sunfish after another, stringing them up on twine. Sienna's laughter extracted from me such unbridled joy, it was like meeting myself for the first time. I was willing to forget who I was for her. In a mishap calculated to summon her laugh, I cast my hook in a tree. "You caught a branch, dummy!" she shouted.

"I'm not the first one!" I protested. "Someone's bobber is up there." Delighting in my predicament, we yanked together on the line. Sienna's pale arms moved against my tanned ones, electrifying the fishing pole.

In eighth grade, Sienna's father pulled up outside my school in his black Miata convertible. He rolled down Sienna's window and leaned over her, said *sotto voce*, "Hi, Christina."

“Hi, Jeffrey,” I giggled. He was all camp, this gorgeous gay man.

“Ready for the tournament?” Jeffrey asked, batting his eyes.

“I guess,” I said. For me, the “hockey” of it all had become secondary. I played for time with Sienna.

He stretched out a bag. “Twizzlers?”

“No, thank you,” I said, settling in.

“Oh, don’t be so polite, Ms. Thing,” he said. “I can’t eat this whole bag. Take some.” He thrust it in my face, and I pinched off a strand of strawberry pull ‘n’ peel. I noticed the bright “FAT-FREE” banner across the package. My body relaxed into that expanse of new leather and my pulse took a stroll. I was so happy to be warm, with the girl I loved and a whole bag of fat-free sugar.

Finished with my licorice, I unzipped my maroon Jansport backpack. “I brought something, too,” I said, pulling out a bag of red foil-wrapped hearts. Sienna turned around to look. Her eyebrows lifted.

“Ooh, chocolate!” she said happily.

“Keep those away from me,” Jeffrey said. “I’ll get fat.”

“Oh please,” I said, “you’ll never get fat.” He rolled his eyes. “Happy Valentine’s Day!” I managed, handing the bag up to Sienna. There was spectacular hope coiled in this gesture. *Seventeen* magazine, which circulated in art class, insisted today was the day to tell that special someone how you feel . . . with chocolate!

In my daydreams, Sienna's hand would brush my own. "Happy Valentine's Day," she would say, uncertain, looking at me hard. We'd be in the back seat of her father's car, "Dancing Queen" playing so loud up front that we'd be alone with our words. "Huh," Sienna would say. "Hearts."

"Did you get any other valentines today?" I'd ask.

"Is this supposed to be a valentine?" she'd say. I'd nod my head and brave a shy smile.

"No," she'd say. "Not like this."

"Not from a girl, you mean?"

"Not from someone I actually like," she'd say, and my face would flush hot. I'd seek out the imperfection in her green-gray iris, that tiny dark fleck I adored, so sure it was known only to me. Emboldened, I would lean in, but hesitate. Then she would kiss me so fiercely our teeth would clash. I would press her against the seat and straddle her, knees digging into leather as I ran my tongue along her neck, her collarbone.

In real life, Sienna took the chocolate and smiled. "Thanks! Want some?"

"Nah," I said. I was already full, bones to skin, by a wrenching desire to put my lips on her mouth, her breasts, her stomach, and lower.

That spring, the smell of Sienna haunted my dreams and made my stomach quiver, made me want to tear my hair out. There

was no one to tell, no way to bottle it up, no way to have her in the way that I wanted her, ever. No way to make myself right. One day I suggested we surprise her mother and clean the house. This was a compulsion of mine, gratifying grownups. In this way I was cursed. Trudging upstairs with a pile of clean shirts, I suddenly understood. Sienna smelled like her laundry detergent. “What detergent do you use?” I called down, casually.

“My mom does my laundry,” she yelled. “It’s probably Tide.” *It isn’t Tide. We use Tide. When I’m not with you I can’t find you anywhere.* Down in her basement, I found what I was looking for: a bottle of Downy.

“Why don’t we buy Downy?” I asked my mom that night.

“What’s wrong with Tide?” she asked, confused.

“I love her,” I wanted to say. “It’s the closest I’ll ever come to having her,” I wanted to say.

“Nothing,” I said.

At thirteen, I joined Sienna’s family on vacation. Jeffrey took us to the movies to see “My Best Friend’s Wedding.” Rupert Everett played the first openly gay character I’d encountered—on screen or onstage. It was at once exhilarating and unimaginable. We passed the popcorn and howled with laughter. Suddenly Sienna—filled with the jubilation of the moment—turned and planted a kiss on my cheek. In the darkness, a flight of horses wilded across my heart. *Does she want to . . .? Would she ever . . .?* Exiting the

theater, I walked into a garbage can, dazed. I should ask her if she's kissed anyone. Tonight. After we've turned out the lights. I should say, "Let's just practice on each other."

Back at the rental cottage, I stared at the lake. I tried to appear lost in thought, waiting for Sienna to ask what I was thinking about. The answer was, of course, *her*. Truth turned to tiger beneath my ribs, pacing, crazed. Sienna spun in her swing, toeing a circle in the sand. Finally, I said, "Should we play that game where we guess what the other person is thinking?"

She shrugged. "Nah," she said.

In ninth grade, I went to the library as often as possible to test my gayness. I'd take a non-linear route to the barely-there section on "Homosexuals and Homosexuality." I used a decoy book, wide and tall, to hide whatever queer thing I was reading. *Being Homosexual: Gay Men and Their Development* had no answers for a fourteen-year-old girl. *Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences* opened with parents explaining that, when their child came out, they considered mutual suicide. This only confirmed my fears. But the book I returned to, again and again, contained the Kinsey scale and a test to determine one's sexual orientation:

"Question 1: To whom are you attracted?"

Well. Cole from Spanish class. He's gay but he still counts. I think he counts. Does he count? Either way. Sienna. Liza, I guess.

Chloé on that Boundary Waters canoe trip . . . gosh, that was brutal.

I selected “mostly people of the same sex as mine.”

“Question 2: Who have you had sex with?”

Um. Next.

“Question 3: Who have you had sexual fantasies about?”

Sienna. Matt Damon, when he breaks down in “Good Will Hunting.” Sienna. Angelina Jolie in “Gia.” Sienna. The guy in “Ordinary People” who tries to off himself. Sienna.

The Kinsey test didn’t work on me. It couldn’t tell what I was. I usually got a “3,” which meant I was equally heterosexual and homosexual. Some days I got a “2,” some days a “4.” None of it was helpful. I wanted to know whether this terrible condition was reversible. I wanted to know whether lesbians could ever be happy.

By the tenth grade, I had three new coaches. As far as I knew, these were the first queer women I’d ever met. The new assistant coaches moved through the world like the men I knew: reserved, hands thrust deep in their pockets. The new coach, too, kept her own counsel. She wore heavy work boots and drove a pickup truck. It was clear, based on all available evidence, that people like me grew up to be butch. This was a bleak discovery. I couldn’t find myself anywhere in my coaches. I scavenged for similarities, came up empty, and wept with rage. I imagined my adulthood and vomited, great waves of self-hate, despair. *I don’t*

want to coach hockey or drive a truck. Still, I couldn't bear to be this lonely for the rest of my life. What is the point of growing up, only to be alone?

On Christmas Eve, I stopped by Sienna's house. We were losing the light. The sky looked like *melancholy* rendered in watercolors. Sienna's couch smelled like dog fur. Sienna smelled like Sienna, like everything I'd ever wanted. Sienna paged through her favorite dog training manual.

I had a plan, but broad strokes, without detail. "My mom and I are fighting," I finally said. It wasn't true, this, but I didn't know how else to begin.

"Uh huh," she said.

"She wants to know why I don't have a boyfriend," I said. By now my heart was riotous in my throat. "I want to tell her, like, Mom, I'm never gonna have a boyfriend, okay? I'm attracted to girls." Sienna looked up.

"You . . . what?" she said.

"Yeah," I said, exhaling with a weariness that transcended our years: "I like girls."

"Oh. Wow," she said. She looked confused, like she didn't know if she'd heard right. "Really?" she said again, after a long silence. I saw her tumbling thoughts, the question at the center of it all. I longed to answer and say I was terribly, desperately in love with her. I wished I could tell her she was my sun, that my waking

hours were an orbit in her honor. That I was tormented by her smell, agonized by the thought that I would never, ever, have her. That she had replaced hunger, thirst, and fatigue, leaving me with nothing but a giant Sienna-shaped hole. That she was everywhere at once, and nowhere near enough.

“I like girls,” I repeated. I was suddenly exhausted. I felt the crushing weight of my own homophobia only as it lifted. The feeling of release was so real that I turned to look behind me, but there was only sky—that giant canvas without hope.

“Can I tell my dad?” she asked. Jeffrey, whom I adored, was the only gay man I knew.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, “but no one else.” Sienna smoothed the manual’s cover in a repetitive circular motion. I worried the cuff of my khakis. Finally, a car pulled up outside: my parents, come to take me to church.

“Hey,” she said as I rose to go.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Thanks for telling me,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. In that instant, I saw that she had understood everything, mistaken nothing. For the first time in my adolescence, I was un-erased. If only one person knew, well, one was more than none.

On Christmas morning, though, I awoke with a terrible realization. Sienna had not said she liked girls. In this gentle way,

she had rejected me. The shame that quit me with ferocity on Christmas Eve surged back with equal violence. I became self-conscious in the locker room. *Does she think I'm watching her undress?* Our conversations in the car became stilted, or maybe I was projecting. We—I—had lost the levity from before I came out, an act so serious and irreversible that, in that time and place, it changed everything. It struck me that I had killed something we loved. When the season ended, I was too ashamed to call her. *What will I even say?*

Or maybe it was Sienna who fled, moving on to soccer, to friends who were not drowning in lust for her.

Maybe there was just nothing left to hold on to. The joy I felt when we were together emanated from that truest hope: that Sienna might love me, too. Without any hope, I couldn't find joy.

Maybe all of these things were true. Maybe none of them were. Or maybe I lost Sienna because she did not love me back—nothing more, and nothing less. Just enough to lose her.