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363 Days Later

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363 Days Later

Andrew Jacob

I walked right alongside the old train tracks for what felt like hours. I took it all in: the worn wood and metal of the tracks, the dying trees with their orange and brown leaves, the slight shiver I felt whenever a bit of wind blew past my ear. I felt like I did on that first night in September, walking down those streets I didn't know in the middle of downtown Milwaukee, growing more and more empty with each step.

It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been so good. July 12th. The beach. Waiting for the sun to set behind our backs because we didn't even bother thinking about which direction the beach faced. Two of us on our backs, shoulder touching shoulder, staring up at the stars and just talking. A deck of cards and a plastic blue keychain she'd made just because she was thinking of me.

And then she wasn't anymore. Everyone seemed less surprised than me when it happened. There were warning signs, I just chose to ignore them.

An early July bonfire crackling in her backyard, although she isn't there. I sit among her friends and wonder why I do when she doesn't. I hijacked the iPad and cued up an old doo-wop song. A deflated yellow ball is thrown around a table that holds only a single bowl of plain potato chips as we all collectively wait for her to arrive. When she does, she is quiet and tired but we are glad to see her nonetheless. I was always glad to see her in those days.

As soon as fall arrives, everything changes. A crowded house on the first weekend of school, walls sweat, LEDs periodically burn my eyes as they flash around the room. I look into an old friend's eyes and see horror: she's there too. I turn and look, only because I pray he's wrong. But the opposite corner holds my dismay: a face I'd never think could make me feel like *that*.

It was storming the day I met her. I didn't want to go but I was begged. When I stepped out of my house to get into the car, the loudest crack of thunder I'd ever heard shook the world around me; at first I thought I'd been shot. The bowling alley we'd decided to meet at was far nicer than the one by my house. There was not an inch of wall uncovered by a TV, each one playing something different. My eyes were drawn to the one screening Spider-Man; I'd rather be at home watching that in my basement than here, waiting

for friends of friends to come bowl with us. But, against everything that had been planned, she showed up too. I never thought a face could make me feel like *that*.

And still, walking along those train tracks, I think back and I feel *that*, and *that*, and so much more. No matter how much time passes, sometimes you don't just forget.