

Brooke Marshall

Yellow Light



Finalist

Her name was Audrey Seigle. She was hit by a train the summer after my junior year of high school. We weren't very close. In fact, it took me the past thirty minutes to remember her last name. While I wanted to introduce her as someone who opened the door for me when my hands were full or gave me a pencil when I needed one right before a test, I don't remember either of those things happening. To be honest, I barely remember her at all. I recall she wore a hearing aid, that her hair was short, but that's it. Oh, and that she committed suicide.

I remember the night she died more than I remember most years.

It was a little past 1 a.m. when Zach texted me. I crept down my stairs to the living room, gently opened the screen door, and then ran outside. The backyard's dry grass felt rough beneath my bare feet and the breeze felt cold against my thin pajama shorts. I ran across my backyard, up the hill on the side of my house, and then to Zach's car. When I opened the door of his car, I was out of breath.

Zach was anxiously tapping his steering wheel and glancing into his side mirror. In a blue sweatshirt that I recognized, I was surprised

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by how his hair was poorly kept, even sticking straight up in places. I climbed into his car, and then shut the door. He didn't look at me. He just put the car into gear.

I pulled my feet onto the seat and wrapped my arms around my knees. Looking out the window, I saw darkness everywhere. No house lights were on, and no dogs were barking. When we drove through traffic lights, we never had to stop; it was too late for them to change colors. They were just blinking yellow.

He rubbed his eyes, then ran his hand through his hair. I watched him carefully; my cheek pressed against my knee. *Should I say something?*

Luckily, he broke the silence between us.

"How was Washington, D.C.?" he asked with fake enthusiasm.

I bit my lip. Memories of the trip filled my mind. Happy, fun memories. They all felt wrong.

"It was fine," I replied.

But as he looked at me, eyes tired and dark smudges underneath, I knew that was not what he wanted. He wanted a distraction.

"The lady I stayed with made us drive 2.5 hours to see her boyfriend because 'God told her to,' and while we were gone, this other lady that was staying in her house actually set her oven on fire. She completely ruined the oven."

Looking out at the road in front of him, a small smile formed on his lips. I could finally take a breath.

When we pulled onto the highway, my phone buzzed. It was a notification saying that Jane Nelson had posted on a Facebook page called "Rest in Peace, Audrey <3." I went onto Facebook and read her post. She had written about how wonderful of a person Audrey had been, how she was a kind and loving person. How she will be forever in her heart and would be missed very, very much.

Ugh. Bullshit.

I knew Jane. I knew who Jane's friends were. She had never spoken to Audrey one day in her life. So why pretend?

Only a few cars were on the highway. Every once in a while, we passed a semi-truck. Sometimes I would glance through their windows, often finding an overweight, middle-aged man smacking on his gum. He looked nonchalantly towards the road, like he had drove it hundreds of times. My mind drifted.

Who found her?

Leaning back in my seat, I suddenly felt deflated. *How could I not know the answer?* I thought irritated. Looking over at Zach, I thought about asking him, but I wasn't sure if he knew, and I didn't have the

courage to ask. I shivered, imagining finding her mutilated corpse on those railroad tracks.

“Are you cold?” Zach’s voice cut through my thoughts.

Still picturing Audrey, I didn’t register his question. He took my hesitation to equal agreement, and he shrugged off his sweatshirt. When he handed it to me, I blushed, and then put it on.

“How long until we’re there?” I quietly asked.

“15 minutes. Where the newspaper said it happened was just down the street from the Coney Island on Washington Avenue.”

I nodded.

We were silent for a while longer, listening to a rap song quietly radiating out of the stereo.

Zach’s phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket, glanced at it, and then turned it off. He looked forward, and I followed his eyes. The road in front of us was dark—only trees surrounded the highway and one set of tail lights were visible. Closing in on an overpass, we drove underneath it quickly. I noticed graffiti, but I wasn’t able to make out what it said. A few seconds afterwards, I hear the sound of wind whistling. The window was open. Glancing over at Zach, I watched him pull his arm back and then hurl his phone out the window. I tried to watch it hit the asphalt, but it was engulfed by darkness.

“What the hell?” I screeched.

As the anger pulsed through him, Zach’s face became a deep shade of red. He stared straight ahead, and I could feel the car beginning to speed up.

My eyes widened. “Zach!”

He gripped the steering wheel tightly, so much so that I thought his knuckles were becoming white. When he started to speak, he was loud; his voice echoing off the close car interior. “I can’t take that stupid fucking Facebook page! ‘Oh she’s so great, oh I remember her.’” His voice became even louder. “I killed her. Okay, I killed her.” He jabbed at the button turning the radio off.

The arrow on the speed dial was quickly moving higher.

I could feel my heart widely beating. The sound of the wind beating against the car was loud through Zach’s open window. When Zach pulled onto an exit ramp, the car jeered.

“Stop the car!” I yelled. “You didn’t kill her, ok? A train did. Not you. The train killed her.”

“But I was mean to her!” The look in his eyes made my stomach crawl. “I made fun of her. If I had just been nicer, then maybe she wouldn’t have—”

“It could’ve been an accident,” I suggested.

He shook his head.

Letting the car cross the yellow line, Zach abruptly steered back into the right lane. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. “Please stop the car,” I whispered.

Approaching a blinking yellow traffic light, he slammed on the brakes. My chest rammed into my seatbelt and my neck snapped back. While the pain made me wince, I felt like I could finally take a breath.

Breathing unevenly, he put his hand over his eyes and sunk down in his seat.

My mind whirled. It took me a minute, but I started breathing normally again. I looked over at him, taking in how his hair was still out of control, how the hem of his t-shirt had a coffee stain, and how his body shook from both the anger and the guilt. He was falling apart, and suddenly I wanted to kiss him.

The thought slipped in unconsciously, but then I was overcome by the possibility. I imagined how I would just lean over, put my hand on his cheek, and then kiss him as hard as I could. And that’s when I realized it: I didn’t care about Audrey.

I didn’t care if she was hit by a bus or a boat or an airplane. All I cared about was the boy sitting next to me. All I wanted to do was kiss this boy that I was completely and utterly in love with. *How wrong is that?*

Shouldn’t I have been mourning Audrey? Shouldn’t I have been feeling sorry for this girl that was hit by a fucking train?

I looked at Zach again. His hair was a mess, a tear escaping from underneath his hand. The urge to kiss him returned.

No. No. No. This is about Audrey.

I wanted to care. I wanted to cry about this girl that I went to middle school with.

But I couldn’t.

The yellow traffic light caught my eye and I watched it for a bit. Then suddenly, I remembered Audrey. The only memory, to this day, that I remember of her: she stole my gel pens. These gel pens I bought from Target with my birthday money back in middle school. I accidentally left them on a table where she was sitting. When I came back, both her and the gel pens were gone. Two weeks later I saw her using one of them, but I never said anything.

This was the Audrey I now saw. Not the girl described on that Facebook group. Not the perfect angel who was accidentally run over by a train. I saw the truth. And I started to cry.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Zach sit up straighter in his

chair. But I kept looking at the yellow traffic light. The light blinked.

Yellow.

Nothing.

Yellow.

Nothing.

I registered Zach's voice, but just barely. He wiped the back of his hand against his eyes, and he looked out onto the road. Then he asked, "Ready?"