

Chelsea Yedinak

Bluebird



Finalist

She just wanted to know what it was like to fly. But no one believed her. She just wanted to be free for once instead of tethered to the ground; to have wings instead of limbs and leap.

But the paramedics didn't understand that. Neither did her parents.

The Monday after she tried to fly, she learned that her classmates thought she was lying, too. They saw her and her broken arm in a sling, paired with the bruises on her face and neck, and pitied her.

"Hey, freak," said the boy behind her in Spanish.

"Maybe next time," said a girl in gym.

"My name is Eliza, but you can call me Blue," she said on the first day of 5th grade. Mrs. Whither was unimpressed.

"Blue is a color, not a name, Eliza." Her lips were pursed in constant frustration. Mrs. Sharon Whither could have been an actress, had she not gotten married, as she liked to remind Mr. Whither.

"I picked it because I like bluebirds. Did you know that they hunt by perching and swooping to their prey?" She saw that in an encyclopedia.

“How fascinating, Eliza.”

The other kids snickered at her and called her “Birdbrain” for the rest of the year, but their words meant nothing. She knew that she was Blue and someday they would, too.

That was the year her parents started fighting. When they began yelling, usually after dinner, throwing accusations at each other like knives, she would escape to her bedroom and watch the birds in the tree outside. At the time, she didn’t understand what was happening. All of her friends’ parents were still together, and when they sat her down and explained what divorce meant, she nodded quietly. It was only when her mother moved out that she realized, but by then it was too late.

Blue was crying by the time she reached the top of Horseshoe Lake. She was only 14, but she had seen too much. She was ready to fly away. It was January, and the lake was frozen, but she needed to jump more than ever before. Every winter, the seniors would go to the lake and roll boulders off the top to break the ice so they could dive.

There was a stack of rocks to her right, and she set to work. Wiping off her face, she picked the largest one and dropped it below. It took a worryingly long time to arrive at the bottom, but it took a large chunk of ice with it as it sunk. She didn’t want to hit ice, so she dropped two more rocks to widen the hole.

Blue surveyed the scene, satisfied with her work.

When someone shouted “What’s up, Birdbrain?” during lunch in 6th grade, Kennedy was the one who stood up for Blue.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size, twerp?” Kennedy was the same age as her, but she had experienced a growth spurt over the summer and now stood taller than many of the guys in their grade. She punched Jack, the kid who’d shouted, in the stomach and introduced herself.

They were best friends from that point on. Sleepovers every Friday night, joint parties that girls would kill for an invitation to, and promises to stay together forever.

But the summer after 8th grade, when everything was in flux before high school, Kennedy confronted Blue.

“I think it’s time we talk,” she’d said over their milkshakes.

“About what?” Blue really had no idea.

“Well, I’m just not sure how this is going to work in high

school.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. Us. I want to try out for cheerleading. You said you want to look at the debate team. Those don’t really mix. I just think it would be wise for me to move on now, to save us both the trouble later.” And that was that.

The next day, Kennedy told everyone that Blue was practically a stalker, was insane, and that she got a restraining order. Blue didn’t understand what had happened. Everything was fine one day, but the next, she was out of Kennedy’s circle forever, the object of lies and daily insults. No one asked her if any of it was true. They didn’t care.

Blue stripped to her underwear, setting the clothes in a pile under a pine tree. It was freezing, and she shivered in the snow. No birds were out. They had all flown away. She was ready to follow them. She closed her eyes and jumped.

Her mother remarried that summer, too. She moved three hours away and had a whole new family, complete with step-kids. Blue and her father weren’t invited to the wedding. They only found out because someone at church mentioned it. When they got home, her dad drank a case of beer and passed out in his recliner.

Blue left him there and met up with Derek, her crush. He was new in town and didn’t care about the gossip surrounding her. He paid attention to her like no one else ever had, even Kennedy. She could be herself with him. When they were together, she truly felt like she could leave Eliza behind.

“Are you sure?” He whispered in her ear. They were in his basement bedroom. His parents were running errands and wouldn’t be back for hours.

“I’m sure.”

She closed her eyes until it was over, which didn’t take long, and checked to see if she felt any different, any happier. She didn’t.

When school started, Blue continued seeing Derek, although their “dates” were almost always in his basement bedroom. They didn’t go out like normal couples did. They just slept together and drank stale beer he stole from his parents.

She never thought to wonder why they didn’t go out. It was kind of nice, having a secret life no one else knew about.

Blue and Kennedy hadn’t spoken in a few months when she saw them together. Kennedy and Derek, on a Saturday night, in his

car, heading to the movies. His arm was around her neck. They were out, like a normal couple.

She confronted him the next day. "I saw you! With her! What about us?"

"Whoa, babe. I thought we were just having fun. We can still hang. We're just...really cool friends, okay?"

"Friends don't fuck, Derek." She walked away from him and headed home, but turned right instead of left and found herself at the top of Horseshoe Lake.

Someone hiking had called 911 when they saw a nearly-naked girl jump off the cliff. An ambulance arrived and found Blue in the water, hurt but alive, with a smile on her face.

They pulled her to safety and wrapped her tightly in brown wool blankets nearly the color of her skin. Someone carried her into the back of the bright red ambulance while the driver started the sirens.

"What were you doing up there? You could have killed yourself," one paramedic asked her.

"I was flying."

