

Flat Root Beer  
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If she doesn't shut up soon, I'm going to snap her neck with my bare hands. She sprawls herself on the sofa in the living room all day, her complaints carrying all the way to the backroom. But Aunt Andria couldn't care less; she's too busy telling everybody how expletive expletive expletive her boss is. She doesn't mind that my six-year-old and seven-year-old cousins are in the room, listening.

I get up to close the door. The cousins' air mattresses make me feel like I'm walking in one of those padded yellow rooms. Aunt Andria's voice fights its way through the door, so I kick a pillow against the bottom. I moon bounce back to the denim couch and collapse. The room is still, except for the small fan twirling dust particles into the rays of sun. I stare at the ceiling kernels and hope nobody comes in.

"Hi, Jacob!" Natalie skips in the room on cue. Her straight blonde hair bounces on her shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking at the ceiling," I say without looking at her. Natalie stands by the couch. Her big gray eyes are filled with anticipation, then mix with confusion, and finally give way to disappointment. I've seen that process on every one of my little cousins' faces over the past week. I used to be the funny guy of our family reunions. Now I'm throwing people off.

"Oh," she says. She stands by the couch for a second, playing with her plastic star necklace. "Are you making the movie with Kylee today?"

I smirk at the ceiling.

"Probably not," I answer. Even if Kylee and I still got along, I wouldn't want to make it, unless people didn't mind the movie being about me looking at the ceiling.

Natalie sits on the edge of an air mattress, chewing on her necklace. I say nothing. My cousins usually leave if I don't crack a joke in the first few minutes.

"Are you still sad about your friend?" She asks. I clench my fists and take a deep breath.

"I'm fine," I reply.

"Natalie!" Cidney appears in the doorway. Her chestnut brown hair is as messy as usual, and her black rimmed glasses are sliding down her nose. She glares pointedly at Natalie. "C'mon. Dinner's ready."

"K!" Natalie skips out.

"Sorry about that. You can come get dinner whenever. The cousins are eating out on the porch table." Cidney backs out of the room, closing the door after her. I sigh. I'm not a wreck or anything; I just don't want to deal with the Mayes Family Reunion, especially Aunt Andria. She's been talking so much that I now know everything about her work, her child Kylee's rebellious ways, and her soon to be ex-husband's social habits. Even when she's in a good mood, I can see tears welling up in her dark eyes. Her curly orange hair makes it look like her brain froze in the middle of exploding. It's like having an edgy banshee to the reunion.

I sit up and look around the room. Pillow cases with spiky haired anime characters are smiling at me the same way my family's been smiling. They think they can compensate for my mood when really they're just digging deeper wrinkles.

I sigh again and lie back down. The room remains still. There's nothing to distract me. My mind flashes to the third grade.

Robbie and I made a fort in my room out of blankets. I had a bunk bed, which made for the best secret spots. He brought rubber bands to tie the blankets, and I brought a "Don't Worry Be Happy" singing bass to be the fort's motion detector. That was the summer he began flipping his bangs up, and I was quick to follow. I copied most of the things he did.

"I say that when we get to high school, we start a lawn mowing business," Robbie announced.

"Why would we do that?" I asked.

"Because, then we can get money and go to New York or Hollywood."

"Do you even know how to mow?" I asked.

"We'll learn," he said, and we agreed on it. Then his mom called, and I was left alone in the fort with the rubber bands and the sounds of a fish telling me not to worry.

I sit up and shake my head. I don't want to sit with that song bouncing around in my head. At least food will distract me. Besides, I know if I wait too long, one of them will come in and tell me how great the tortillas are and how I just have to try 'em, so I might as well get up.

The dining room table is covered with pots and plates. I scoop the soggy strings of beef and peppers into my powdery tortilla. The back door is open, with the voices of my young cousins coming through it. I grab the red cup marked "Jake!" and walk outside.

My cousins are sitting around the plastic table with mismatched chairs. Natalie's put her hair up in a ponytail, and Sidney is wiping food off Natalie's face. I don't know how Sidney can be so patient with her. If I were Sidney, I wouldn't be able to look at Natalie. But Sidney sits there as if nothing ever happened, smiling and caring.

I sit down across from Kylee. Kylee is currently going through the way-too-much eye makeup phase. Even worse, her way-too-much-eye-make-up face has intersected with the everything's-better-in-purple phase. The ends of her blonde hair are fringed with purple to match her purple eye shadow. I'm tempted to ask her for my fortune.

Kylee nods at me as I take my seat.

"What's up?" she says.

"Nothing much," I mumble. Kylee stares at me. She wants me to say what's wrong. She likes to think of herself as a person who isn't afraid to ask hard questions. She bothered Sidney about how she felt for months.

The first time Kylee asked Sidney flat out:

"Do you still miss your mom?"

"Kylee!" I scolded. Kylee scowled and shrugged like I was the ridiculously inappropriate one. Sidney didn't say anything. Her long hair was an even frizzier mess than it is now. She hung it over her face so nobody could see or talk to her. Kylee asked the same question every family reunion until Sidney finally said "Yes," and Kylee didn't ask again.

I ignore Kylee and take a bite out of my fajita. The table is unnaturally silent for a moment.

"Let's play a game!" Natalie suddenly shouts. The younger cousins shout in agreement. Last reunion, Kylee and I started making up dinner table games. Like, each

cousin would have to go around the table and sing a ballad for something on their plate. Once I let the little cousins put something in my drink, and I had to guess what it was. The games were a huge hit, and now they won't let me forget, always begging to have my cup with bottles of salad dressing in their hands.

"Ok," I grumble. "Let's play Who Knows How Many Beers the Adults Have Had."

Natalie's mouth falls open. "You mean alcohol?"

I smirk at my plate. Cidney tells Natalie to eat her food. Kylee smiles for a second, but it disappears when I look up.

I look over at the edge of the yard by the trees. The adults are sitting in a ring of lawn chairs with a cooler of Miller Lite cans in the middle. Aunt Andria is laughing, or maybe crying. Or both. She does that. Grandma is holding one of the baby cousins in her lap.

"What was his name?"

"Quiet, Natalie." Cidney puts her hand on Natalie's shoulder.

"Who?" I spit. Natalie's mouth falls open a little.

"You know who." Kylee rolls her eyes. "That friend of yours."

"He wasn't my friend, and his name was Rob," I say. Everybody except Natalie and Kylee suddenly becomes engrossed with their tortillas. I grab the open two-liter of root beer to give my hands something to do. It pours into my cup with a weak fizz. I put the cup to my mouth and instantly cough. The root beer is warm and flat, weighing on my tongue like syrup. I keep drinking it; I don't want to put the cup down and meet everybody's stares.

"Hey, anybody want to go down to the beach?" Cidney suggests, sitting up. The younger cousins bark their enthusiasm, their lips orange and sticky from soda. Natalie hops up and runs to her pink tennis shoes by the porch stairs. Cidney starts picking up the plates around the table.

"What do you mean he wasn't your friend?" Kylee asks. I slam my cup down, but the root beer swishes lazily in the cup. Kylee stares at me, her eyes in a purple grave.

"We used to be friends but we weren't close when he died, ok?" How could she not understand that I didn't want to explain this? Why should I tell her that Robbie found better friends than me? I don't know why it affected me so much. He was an old friend whom I hardly ever spoke to anymore. But when the principal announced it over the speakers, I shattered.

Kylee scrunches her nose at me.

"Cidney lost her mother, and Natalie never even got to know her, and you're torn up about--"

"Look, I don't want to talk about it!" I snap. Cidney freezes in the middle of picking up plates, a few strands of her hair dipped in salsa. "Not everybody is like your mom, blurting out all their problems to anyone who will listen."

Kylee stares at me for a second, and a part of me wishes I had shut up. I almost apologize, but Kylee scoots her chair back and storms off with her plate, so I sit back and sip my off brand root beer. Kylee and I used to look forward to family reunions. Last year we sang a duet for the mandatory cousin talent show. We burst into laughter half way through an "All that Jazz" routine and couldn't finish. Everybody liked our act the

best anyway. That was when I still made everybody laugh, and Kylee wasn't allowed to wear makeup.

I stand up and throw the root beer off the edge of the porch. It disappears into the grass with a splat.

"Are you going to come with us?" Cidney asks. She is emptying greasy plates and cups into a trash bag. I can tell she wants me to come. She would never say it, though. She was silent for months after her mom died and didn't get much louder afterward.

"Sure," I say and follow her down the porch.

"We're going to the beach!" Natalie shouts at the adults. She grabs a book lying on the porch rail.

The houses we pass on the way to the beach have flags hanging above the doors with pictures of cloudy skies and sunflowers. Some yards have small square gardens, and others have inflatable pools and water guns. Natalie's sneakers blink red in front. Kylee walks a few paces behind the rest of us.

We arrive at the beach as the sun disappears under the ocean. The beach is covered with large masses of yellowy brown sea weed, the shore speckled with brown and gray. Natalie and the younger cousins run to the edge of the water while Cidney sits down and opens her book.

Kylee crosses her arms next to me. Neither of us says anything, but I know we're both thinking about the movie we made here last year. She was the superhero, and I was the bad guy. We choreographed what we thought was the coolest fight scene ever. We showed it to the family, who of course gave us a standing ovation. Our little cousins asked if they could be in the next one we made. We said they could, knowing that next time we would still sneak off and film it by ourselves. I had decided I wanted to be a filmmaker.

Today was supposed to be the next time we filmed. I glance at Kylee. She is kicking a pebble on the ground. I try to think of something to say, but she turns and walks down the shore. I could go after her, but we have nothing to say to each other. I sit down next to Cidney instead.

"Kylee's really sensitive about her mother," Cidney says quietly. I don't reply.

Natalie's sneakers still blink as she runs away screaming from the tide. The water sparkles with white lights, flipping and swaying over itself. Slowly the red in the sky grows darker and darker. The tide crashes into the rocks on the shore, spraying vinegary mist in my face. I can't think. My eyes begin to water and my throat constricts. There's nothing to distract me here.

Rob and I never went to Hollywood or New York. We joked about it the few times we saw each other in high school, but we never started the lawn mowing business and we never went anywhere. I went to a family reunion, and he went to sleep in front of a steering wheel.

I sit as still as I can. Everything around me is moving again. I can't keep up if I can't breathe.

"I know how it feels," Cidney murmurs beside me. She is resting her chin on her knees and watching her sister dance around the tide. Her book is open and pressed into the gray sand. I bury my face in my arms to hide my tears. Cidney's breath shakes. We've never spoken about her mom.

“I felt like my life stopped going anywhere. Everywhere I went I was reminded.”  
My stomach shakes and my eyes burn, but Cidney continues. How could she compare our losses?

“I didn’t realize how much she meant, how stable my life had been, and when she was gone, I didn’t know what to do.”

I lift my head and see Kylee far down the shore, kicking rocks around, and wonder if her home has ever been stable.

“How did you get better?” I ask, turning to Cidney.

Cidney starts kicking off her shoes.

“I don’t know,” she says. “One day it wasn’t so bad. I remembered all the things I still wanted to do. I remembered a book my friend recommended to me.” Cidney picks up the book and shakes off the sand. “This one, actually.”

Cidney stands up and joins Natalie by the water, her hair tangling even more in the wind. I grab the book and flip it open, just for a distraction.