

The Lost Sound

by Alysha Hoffa

I suggest getting a person like this as early as possible. Get one as soon as you can form the words. In pre-school if you are brave. Her name will be poetic, unique, better than yours. If it is Amber it reminds you of something you saw on *Discovery Kids*. Like orange juice only darker, this tree-jewel had a bug stuck, crystallized and frozen. You didn't think people could be named after tree resin, but when you meet you are glad she is. Fifteen years later your grandmother will die and will leave you an earring made of this stuff. A beetle death-print surrounded by silver. You add it to a chain and think of this girl and your grandmother every time you wear it. You will be sad.

But, for now you are shy and in first grade and not liking it. Last year you tried to avoid recess because you were too afraid to talk. You heard germs were everywhere so you started licking Formica countertops hoping for a sniffle. When that doesn't work you lick dressers and handles where hands touch. You go to school. Your last name is very close in the alphabet to Amber's. This means you are standing next to her on the first day of first grade when lines for recess separate by family history. For the first time you ignore the "be quiet" rule.

You talk.

She is nothing like you. She has dark, dark hair (like the soil that grew the tree with the Amber-resin, you think). She has olive skin and wolf eyes. Everything about her is dark but you are blonde and pale and look nothing like soil. Minutes pass and you learn her father is dead and she lives right across the street from school. You don't really know death right now. Goldy the goldfish and Leonard the lemon tree (both killed from lack of water) don't count. You don't understand this kind of pain except through its relation to her. You and she both cry when *Amazing Grace* is playing like cogs turning in tandem with the others. Like clockwork.

Amber will lose more people than you. She will lose family members, friends and every time she will call you. She owns more than one black

dress and you own none. The one funeral you attend, for someone you've never met, you are wearing denim. You cry with her because you have commandeered her sadness, as if you didn't have enough of your own. When you are nineteen you see your grandmother unplugged, unbreathing, unliving. You think of all those funerals and all those phone calls. You cry harder. You have seen a dead body and now, only now, you understand.

Back in that first grade line Amber will ask you to play. No one has ever taken the initiative with you like this and you never would have. For the rest of your life people will have to ask you to play before you do. You will be too scared that they will not like you, and then scared you will not like them until you are just scared. You play with Amber and you dance with the wind as if it were alive. The playground is gusty, the wind strong in your circled arms like you cradle the invisible. "Wind Babies" is your favorite game and you no longer dread recess.

You tell your mothers you have a best friend and they ask to meet. You go to play dates and soon have two houses. You each like the other's better. You have more toys and a snack cabinet but she has a jungle gym and happier parents. You start going to church with her but you don't fit in. Church people scare you so you both play games in the hallway. You will get in trouble for being too loud. Something no one accuses you of unless Amber is around.

She will make friends everywhere you go. You will kind of make friends with her friends and she will push you to talk. You go on trips with her family, spend your summers at Girl Scout camp, and call her on nights when your parents won't stop yelling. It gets bad when they throw things. She is the only friend you let into your house because she is the only one who understands. She makes you laugh.

Amber moves to another school and then you move to another school, both of you displaced. She makes more friends and you get jealous because she is yours. You see her every weekend and then gradually less. Her

parents want you to visit often because you are "a good influence." They don't understand it is the opposite. Amber's mother remarries and her last name moves up to A. If you are in line alphabetically she is not standing next to you.

In high school you will both lose your virginity and not tell the other. For two girls who obsessed over menstruation for months this seems like a big deal, this secret. For your sixteenth birthday she will give you a tape she recorded. You don't have a tape player. You forget and stick it back in a box. You are afraid to listen. You both graduate on the same day at different times and make no effort to watch the other's. You go to college and she stays behind to work at Payless. She never liked school.

You are home from your freshman year when Amber calls, tells you she is marrying a man she just met. You drive to the courthouse and hug her mother. You bring your pink video camera because you want to remember. You tell them you will make a tape of the wedding but never do. She hugs you in a black and white dress and you take pictures. You don't cry until you get home and look up this older man on the internet because you are suspicious and judging him. He has three children and you have no right to do this.

You will not find out Amber is pregnant until you get the invitation to her baby shower. You spend hours and hundreds of dollars making a baby book from scratch. You want this to make up for everything but it doesn't. She is having a girl and you will drive to her a few months later after waking up to a phone call. You impose yourself upon a family you hardly know and a girl you hardly know anymore because, at age eight, she told you she wanted you in the room while giving birth. You hold her to it.

You love them both. You are upset her daughter isn't named after a tree part but you understand. You take pictures and video and know then you want to see this baby grow. Once you are back at school and in your other life this seems impossible. You call Amber but she doesn't know what to say. You want her to take her baby and come live with you. You want to give her a better life. You will go anywhere with her. You always have, if she asks first.

You say none of this.

You are moving into your first apartment with a

man when you find his tape recorder. It will play what Amber made on your birthday, that tape you've never thrown away. You take a breath. Her voice fills empty space and tells you she loves you. She sings a cheesy song about friendship which is fitting because you have always been cheesy. She stops singing and you swear you hear tears slide across her nose and fall. She tells you she will always be there and her voice ends. You listen to the white noise and hope there is more, some hidden message. This is when you should call her and you know this but apologies are thick in your throat.

You hit stop.

You listen to silence.

There is no happy ending here.

