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Amanda Schmidt

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WHAT WE WERE

amanda schmidt

I'm seven, running down the Big Hill in the backyard with my sister, slipping a little, stumbling, staying on my feet though, barely slowing down. It's summer. It's summer, and the leaves on the trees are all this bright shade of green, and I can hear dogs barking, and one of my neighbors is in her yard swimming. I can hear the splashes. My sister reaches the bottom first, sliding into the fence, laughing. I look up when I catch her, and we stand still for a moment under the willow tree, which, at seven, I imagine will grow to be very, very big, but which will never grow much past its current size, because it will die in the ice storm two years from now.

I will be nine then, and the power will go out for days, and we will live in the basement because that's where the furnace is, only venturing upstairs into the freezing kitchen to get food, only when we really have to. Outside there will be snow on the ground, but mostly ice—ice hanging from the trees so heavy they won't make it to spring; ice layered on the ground in sheets, the kind you have to take tiny, measured steps on to keep from falling, so much of it that we will dare not go outside except to let the dog out to pee. Instead, we will huddle together and sleep on fold-out couches and play Risk in the basement by candlelight.

I will cry when I lose as I cried every time I lost Risk or Monopoly or Mario Kart for years, frustrated tears welling up in my eyes, so much pressure building in my throat that I couldn't speak, legs and arms shaking like they wanted to kick floors and table legs, bang walls and my parents' chests, it's not fair it's not fair it's not fair. Still, we would play games. When I was six and seven and eight, our grandparents and aunts would come over and we would sit around the big table and play poker. We would have to pull up extra chairs, because usually there were only four, and my sister would sit in hers, brown with spindly legs, and I would sit in mine, the worn white one with the wobbly leg and the stickers on the back, which would be bright and new and exciting at first, but which I would put on clumsily, so that they folded a little, and there were bumps and ridges along the should-have-been-smooth surface.

"Ice hanging from the trees so heavy they won't make it to spring"

One day I will be eleven, and I will try to peel those stickers off, those Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh and kitten stickers, those clumsily stuck stickers which will not come up easily. I will spend five minutes, ten, fifteen, working away at the edges with my fingernails, occasionally thinking I've made progress, only to peel some tiny strip away, some tiny, irrelevant strip. After twenty minutes, I will have made enough progress that they are unrecognizable. All that will be left are sticky lines of white paper and little slivers of dark color, the only indication that once, there had been pictures here.

I was four when I stuck the first one on. It was of a cat, a little brown cat, because I was four and it was before the point in my life when I cared enough about TV shows and video games to ask for stickers of characters, and I loved cats. My mom and I drew cats on poster board sometimes. She brought me this poster board and we sat down and drew together. My cats were big and wobbly, with whiskers as long as their legs, eyes of two different sizes, tails which were very straight and thin, and coats of colors that cats tended not to be, like purple and green and my favorite, bright blue. My mom's were small and dainty and realistic, and I, four, was constantly in awe of their similarity to actual cats.

Years and years and years from then, I will be very good at drawing cats, but I will do it very rarely because I will be busy watching football games and having lunch at Panera with my friends and working at the children's library, where sometimes I will be given very sloppy drawings of cats or dogs or books. And my own drawings will be buried under stacks of paper in the basement somewhere, in the basement where one Saturday, I will sit down with my sister and her friend to play Risk. This time I will not cry when I lose. I will laugh. My sister will be back from college for the weekend, and she will be the first to lose the game, and her hair will be dark red. In another month it will be bleached blonde, and I will be sitting at the table with her, talking about something that happened ages ago, and I will suddenly try to remember what her hair looked like when it was brown and I was seven, and not quite be able to.