

LIFE RULES

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Life Rule Number One: Avoid soft hands. Especially the damp ones.

I've got this thing about hands. It's not a weird thing; it's not like I want to suck on some wonky thumbs or lick a few digits. I just don't like them soft.

Perhaps this is an oversimplified perspective, but hands are hands—you use them for stuff—so they should feel used. It's not as if I think everyone should have rockpits for palms. This isn't some marxist, blue collar bullshit. I fully understand that the hands of Stu-the-tractor-dude and James-the-red-headed-dentist are going to be different. I'm not an idiot. But there is—there is—just something suspicious about overly soft hands. Like, what are those people doing? Or, I guess what aren't they doing? Ok, so maybe it does sound a bit weird.

I blame the whole hands-thing on a book I once read, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I actually stole the book, although I didn't intend to. I was moved to a new foster home before I could return it to the library, so it is now one of the few books I actually own. Which I don't mind because the main character, Francie, she kind of reminds me of myself. She's not an idiot. Anyway, there is this part in the book where a neighborhood pervert is shot, and as he is lying there, everyone is taking turns giving him a couple good kicks. The guy's belly is described as being soft and I remember thinking, *I bet his hands were soft too*. I bet they were like... *marshmallow soft* as they pawed at those poor kids; slipping right over them all gooey, marshmallow soft, and damp. Yeah, I bet his hands were damp too. I can remember hands like that. I know how they feel.

So, that's when I made up Life Rule Number One: Avoid soft hands. Especially the damp ones.

I've actually got a couple of life rules (five to be exact) but rule number one is the first I came up with, and therefore I tend to think of it as having particular significance. You can't ignore rule number one. Obviously, it is number one for a reason.

I think the fact Ben had rough hands is partially why I agreed

to run away with him. He liked to work in his uncle's garage after school, monkeying with radiators and oil pans and head gaskets. All of that yanking, and twisting, and scrapping made his hands always look blistered. You could see the swirls and spirals in each of his fingers where grease tended to get stuck, no matter how hard he scrubbed them. His hands reminded me of roadmaps, covered in twisting curves; or, maybe they were more like star charts, looping together whole constellation and galaxies on the planes of his palms. Ben's hands told you exactly who and what kind of guy he was—there was no guess work. I think that is why I trusted him so much.

God, I miss Ben.

Rule Number Two: Walk away and don't look back.

When Ben and I left together, he was eighteen and I was fifteen. People always get hung up on ages, like they're a decipher to something. Inevitably, people also start thinking about sex when they learn about a boy and girl running off together and suddenly their ages become this super important thing. Somehow Ben's status as a newly minted adult and my status as a minor took on all kinds of meaning when we left.

I know, because for a while, everyone wouldn't shut up about it. The social workers whose office I had to go to a couple weeks ago only seemed interested in talking about sex.

"Is there anything that happened that you would like to talk to me about Annie?" she kept saying in this low, soft tone as though she wasn't a complete stranger assigned to me by some government agency, as though she was some trusted aunt-figure I was supposed to spill my guts to. "Did anything happen...physically? Or, sexually? You're not in trouble here, this is a safe space. I just want to be able to help you." *Yeah lady, you know a lot happened—just not in the way you're implying.*

I am sure, in her mind, she really did want to try and help. I'm sure she really saw herself as one of those bleeding-heart, let's-rescue-the-children saviors. But you want to know what I kept thinking as I sat across from her in that beige cramped office? *Bullshit lady. It's all bullshit.* In my experience, adults don't actually want to hear the truth, because they are already filling in the blanks and coming up with their own conclusions. They just think you're too dumb to see the truth, so they make one up for you.

The funny part is that it wasn't even like that with Ben and me. We never had sex.

Ben was too shy to have sex, and I wasn't sure if I was even interested yet. Occasionally, we kissed. I liked it. But, I never felt the need to push past that particular boundary.

Boundary pushing is for Lucy, my foster sister. Of course, Lucy isn't actually a sister. We aren't related; however, we are expected to refer to each other as such since we were both dumped under the same roof. Unlike me, Lucy has been having sex since she was twelve.

At night, as I'd lay in bed staring at the sagging, paneled ceiling of the room we share, I would hear her slowly wiggling the wire window screen out of its framed socket. Then the soft thud as she'd drop herself to the ground below. I'd listen as she'd crawl back in a couple hours later, trailing the cold scent of an earthy night and stale cigarette smoke behind her. She would flop on her bed with a meaningful sigh. I knew I was supposed to respond to that sigh, but I never did.

"Annie" she would whisper. "Annie, are you awake?"

"Yeah" I would say, knowing to pretend otherwise would be pointless.

I think she got a kick out of giving me the particulars. Although she was only a year older than me, she considered herself vastly more knowledgeable. If people had been taking bets on which girl was going to ditch high school and run away with a boy, I guarantee all the bets would've been on Lucy. No one thought I was the type. I was that quiet girl always hiding in a book.

Ben once said that if I could, I'd build a wall of books around myself and feed my hunger with words. He could be insightful like that. It's one of the things I liked most about him. He didn't talk a lot—always disappearing beneath a car or truck—but I think while he was down there, he'd save up his thoughts, waiting to say only the really important stuff.

What no one seems to understand is that, of us two girls, I was exactly the one that would run away. It all came down to Life Rule Number Two: Walk away and don't look back.

Maybe the rule sounds harsh or melodramatic, but I consider it a necessary one. I'm sure a therapist would say that this rule is rooted in my early childhood, a time marked with constant shuffling from one home to another. Never a permanent resident.

Never having anything worth looking back at. And, perhaps that assessment isn't entirely incorrect. One thing I've learned from life is sometimes it's just better to move on to something new and forget. That is why I wasn't afraid to leave with Ben. I wanted something new. I wanted to forget.

The night I left with Ben, I wiggled the same wire screen out of the window, dropping to the ground below. Unlike Lucy, I didn't pop it back in place a couple hours later, flushed with the idea that I was somehow a rebel. I didn't get my kicks from sliding my ass across the back seat of a car, fumbling with zippers and damp skin, somehow thinking I was escaping the bullshit of my life, only to crawl back to it the same night. No, I walked down the gravel drive, climbed in Ben's truck, looked up at his nervous face and said:

"Let's go."

Life Rule Number Three: Make a choice. Make a change.

During my freshman year, our high school hired a motivational speaker for one of its assemblies. The guy basically stood on stage, pit stained and rumpled, waving his arms about, as he tried to get a gymnasium full of teenagers to join in on his chants. It was fairly pathetic. However, he did say one thing that stuck out to me:

"If you are coasting through life there is only one direction you are going, and that is downhill."

It wasn't exactly profound, but I found the simple science of the statement attractive. Essentially, there always has to be something either pushing or pulling you forward. I mean, sure you can coast for a bit, but after a while, you're basically relying on gravity. And, sure as shit, gravity is going to keep you down.

The speaker followed up this bit of wisdom with a lecture on choices, and how the choices we make in life can change us, define us, and direct us. He said something like:

"Choose not to coast through life. Choose to live life."

I'm certain he wasn't thinking of the choice to run away when he gave his pep talk, but his words were what helped me to form Life Rule Number Three: Make a choice. Make a Change.

It's that rule that made the choice to leave with Ben so easy.

When Ben asked me to leave with him, we had been hanging out for nine months. We were at his uncle's garage after school when life offered me up a choice, and an opportunity, for change. I sat

propped in an old swivel chair, reading a book, half listening to the crackled rock music coming from an old radio in the corner and the metallic pings of Ben's tools. Oil stains had turned the cement floor into pools of dark and light, spilling across the ground like ink blots. I had always intended to ask Ben what he saw when he looked at them.

Ben was tucked beneath a truck, and after a while, I noticed the scrape of his tools had stopped. Only the rock music was playing. I closed my book and waited, knowing he would eventually emerge to say something he'd been saving up.

"Annie," he finally said, after pulling himself off of the ground. He stood wiping his rough fingers against a rag and not looking at me. "If I asked you, would you leave with me? Like, really leave." Slowly he looked up. "Because I think we can do better. I think we can do a lot better."

I never once pried into Ben's reasons for wanting to leave. Mainly because he never tried to pry anything from me. We had a mutual understanding that somethings are private. Although if I really had to, I could probably guess his reasons.

Although Ben wasn't a foster kid that didn't exclude him from the reject pile. Not everyone's scars come with such a fancy government label. Sometimes a person's scars can be as subtle as an alcoholic parent, or an uncle with marshmallow hands, or just the plain old stench of unhappiness. I don't know exactly all of the scars Ben wore but I knew he wore them. Raised rings of faded red were visible on his forearms, like little mementos of his childhood stamped into his skin.

I suppose most people would hesitate when presented with the choice I was offered. Most people probably wouldn't have immediately said yes, like I did. But, you see, making a choice is easy when you know what you want, and I wanted to leave. I didn't want to keep laying in the same bed listening to Lucy as she crawled through the window night after night. I didn't want to remain anchored to a home that didn't belong to me. I wanted to get the hell out of foster care, and I wanted the opportunity for a different life headed in a different direction.

Life Rule Number Four: No gas station bathrooms. Ever.

When we left we drove west. For three days we drove and watched as the landscape slipped from wide midwestern skies to

rusty brown hills pockmarked with sage brush. We slipped from two teenagers running away to two people enjoying the independence of an unending highway, and the belief in possibilities. We slept in the bed of Ben's truck, crammed into sleeping bags, listening to the new sounds of night that surrounded us.

Ben even began to talk more. He told me how he didn't think his parents would call the cops but were probably grateful he had left. He talked about his plan to find work as a mechanic. In return, I told him about the few jagged memories I had of my mom, a blond-haired woman with rough hands and an unyielding addiction to opioids, who would sometimes pull me into her lap and read aloud to me.

When I told Ben about Life Rule Number Four, he didn't laugh at me. Life Rule Number Four is: No gas station bathrooms. Ever. Besides the obvious ick factor of gas station bathrooms, with their damp floors and empty soap tins, I one time got left in one. I don't remember exactly how old I was, so I must have been pretty young, but I was accidentally left behind by one of the foster families I was staying with. Needless to say, it freaked me out. While I should probably have outgrown what I know is an irrational fear, I haven't. So I don't use gas stations bathrooms, and Ben didn't seem to mind.

As we crossed another state line and pulled into another city, Ben turned the truck off of the highway and into the parking lot of a diner.

"Let's stop here for breakfast. You can go pee," he laughed. "And I can run across the street to the gas station and see if I can get us a new map."

The thought of food that wasn't wrapped in plastic and a decent bathroom had me hopping from the truck without hesitation. After using the bathroom, a woman with acrylic red nails and a name tag that said "Linda" showed me to a window booth.

It had just started to rain, and fat wet drops were starting to smack and twist in little eddies down the broad window.

"Looks like it's about to turn nasty" said Linda, flipping a brightly colored menu onto the table. I just shrugged, not really sure if I was expected to offer up a reply. I was already eyeballing the images of pancakes and crispy fried potatoes.

"What in the hell?" Linda suddenly said, leaning across me and pointing out the window. "What does that kid think he's doing?"

I looked up just in time to see Ben make a mad dash across

the wide sweep of the highway, holding his thin coat bunched around his head to protect himself from the rain. *God, what was he thinking putting that coat over his head?* And, why did I have to watch as he disappeared once again into the underbelly of a vehicle, sucked up and out of sight by a truck he didn't see coming? *Why?*

Life Rule Number Five: Believe the freaky shit, because it's real.

People don't like to believe in the freaky shit. Sure, they will make bumper sticker and tee-shirts spouting off that "shit happens." But when life comes up and unapologetically smacks you across the face, knocking you back to nothing but bones—people don't like to believe it. I think it's because the freaky shit is like a reminder that no one is really in control, and that tends to make people angry. It's why movies and books are always so predictable. Don't piss off a paying audience. Nobody wants to read about how some guy just suddenly dies without warning or reason. Where is the enjoyment in that? But the truth is—the truth is—people just die. Ben *just* died. Freak accident. One minute he is leaving the gas station with a road map tucked into his back pocket and a coat draped over his head, and the next he is dead. Just like that.

You would think the freaky part would have been Ben's death, and in many ways, it was. I sat in that diner, a fifteen-year-old runaway watching my best friend die. I'm not going to minimize that; I'm not an idiot. But the really freaky part, the part that clings to my skin keeping me up at night and making my stomach turn into knots, is how quickly everything slipped back to what it was before.

When the cops found me crying, shattered like a broken bottle on the side of the highway, they scooped me up pretty quickly and dumped me back into my old room with Lucy. I suppose I could have resisted. I could have stayed in the diner or slipped into the truck and not ran out to where Ben lay. I could have avoided telling the cops everything, including how to get ahold of Ben's parents, and exactly how I knew him. Sure, I could have done those things.

I had a choice—just like I had a choice when I ran away with Ben. But the truth is, this time it didn't really feel like I had a choice. How could I leave Ben? There was no life rule for something like this.

So, I'm back here and everyone seems to want to pretend

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nothing happened. For a couple weeks, I was getting these alternating lectures where they kept asking me if I was ok, and then followed it up with telling me how lucky I am. How can they say that to me? What about my life suggests luck has ever been a thing? And then eventually, everyone stopped talking about it, because they wanted to forget the freaky shit. They didn't want to believe it was real or that it could happen.

And the truth is, sometimes I wish I could join them and pretend too. Maybe then I wouldn't have to wonder if my stupid rules got Ben killed. I wouldn't have to think about how Ben was a sad boy abused by his parents and how I am a sad girl left without parents, and why did either of us deserve that. I wouldn't have to wonder about what scars I will wear now, and what direction my life will now curve. Maybe if I could just pretend the freaky shit never happened, I wouldn't be left with so many unanswered questions.