

A Hand-Crafted Family

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The bells chimed and clanged as we walked into the store, and Kaycee and I hurried inside, escaping the chill of early winter. "Hey Mom!" Kaycee yelled as she made her way down the main aisle towards the check-out counter. On her way, she passed rows and rows of hand-made wooden trinkets and characters, each one made with care. If I had taken the time to look at all of them, like I did the first time entering '*Montgomery's Arts and Crafts + Gift Shop*', then I'm sure I would have been astounded at all the small edits and intricate details that were made on each one.

Kaycee's mom, Mrs. Astrid Montgomery, was at the counter, messing with the cash register. "Hey guys! How are you?" she asked with a smile. "Good!" Kaycee said, and I agreed with that response, as I had aced a math test that day, which was rare for me.

"Mom, I got in!" she yelled and slammed down a letter that had been furiously ripped open 30 minutes earlier. Mrs. Astrid picked it up, pulled the letter out of the envelope, and read it out loud, even though she knew that both of us had already read it by that point. "I am pleased to announce that we have received Kaycee Montgomery's early decision application, and she has been accepted into Evergreen Heights University, School of Business." Mrs. Astrid looked from the paper to her daughter and was smiling the whole time. I could just see how proud of her she was; it shone in her eyes and her smile was as wide as I'd ever seen it. They hugged over the store counter.

"Okay, I get off at 5. How about we celebrate at Kathy's?" Kaycee and I looked at each other and laughed. Mrs. Astrid loved ice cream, even if it was below freezing outside, which I'm pretty sure it was that day. She especially loved Kathy's Ice Cream, as it was

close by and for five dollars, you could get more ice cream than you would realistically ever want. "That sounds good." Kaycee said and smiled.

As we were about to leave, I looked to the left of the counter, where the other half of the store was. See, the Montgomerys' art store had two sections: the carpentry gift section, which was mostly run by Kaycee's father, Gentry, and the arts and crafts section, which is where Mrs. Astrid would usually be found.

Astrid was a truly gifted painter. I still believe that she could be a famous painter if she wanted to. If more people outside of our town, Woodbridge, were aware of her work, it would surely blow up and the Montgomery's would be rich. Part of me thinks that they all know this, but just don't really want that type of attention.

"I love her." Kaycee said, smiling as we left the shop. The cold air hit us quickly, and it felt nice after being in the heated gift shop—however, it didn't take long for the refreshing chill to turn into a blistering cold. "Yeah, she's so nice." I responded, not sure if she was talking more to herself than me. "She is! I mean, she's not perfect of course, but she really loves her kids, and Ricky... you know that you're always welcome at our house and the shop of course." She said and laughed at the end. I smiled at her and really was grateful for them.

The situation at my house during that time was always... uncertain, and it was just good to have people that were so welcoming, and willing to accept me into their home.

Kaycee's parents had met in kind of a funny way. Gentry had moved to Woodbridge from Austria—he moved here because he had family nearby, and he wanted to see what America was like. He had big dreams of becoming a famous actor, which Astrid always thought was so funny since he came to probably the worst town to pursue that career, (and sadly, he really

couldn't act). He could build though; he was very good with wood and tools, and he could build a house in six months. This made him very useful to the town, and since Astrid, who had been born and raised in Woodbridge, had always been one to help paint houses if it was needed, they would often cross paths during the building and painting process of new houses in the town.

They fell in love through the creation and decoration of many of the houses in the town, and even though Astrid had denied liking him for a long time, saying "he's not my type" or things like that, they got closer and closer until a few years later when they eventually had started their own family.

"So, how do you feel?" I asked. She thought for a second and then her eyes widened like she had just imagined something amazing but then her expression cooled before she answered. "I do feel really good, of course... but I think I will miss this place more than I originally thought." Kaycee said and smiled a faraway smile. The snow softened and flattened beneath our feet with a quiet shifting crunch whenever our shoes landed on it. That crunching suddenly stopped as Kaycee paused to admire the sky. The sun was starting to get lower, but it was visible for possibly the first time that day, as it had been cloudy (it was cloudy a lot in Woodbridge).

Kaycee was known among her friends as someone who 'liked to stop and look at things.' Some people were annoyed by this, no doubt, but I never really cared. It was good to slow down sometimes and take things in, even if we had both seen those things a thousand times or more.

"Well yeah, I could see that." I said, thinking of her family and how popular Kaycee was at our school. "I've never *really* known anywhere other than Woodbridge," she said, still looking at the sky. "Yeah. That's true." I

thought out loud. "Do you think you're more nervous or excited?"

Kaycee seemed to be satisfied with her time looking at the discovery of the sun because she turned just then, and we continued to walk towards the west side of town where her best friend, Aja, lived. "I think when I opened this note," she then lifted of the envelope she was holding and flapped it around, "I think the only thing I felt was excitement, honestly." She was staring straight ahead. "But now, after processing it a little bit, I just know I'm gonna miss all this." She then looked around us, at the snow-covered trees and cars and houses. It was hard for me to imagine missing Woodbridge, but Kaycee and I were different in that way, I guess.

The rest of the day involved a lot of excited reactions to the exciting news, and I think we were both exhausted by the time we left Aja's house, where some of our friends were hanging out. Kaycee went to eat ice cream with her parents, and I went home.

My parents didn't acknowledge me as I walked in, they were yelling at each other, but I hurried upstairs, and put my headphones on. I started to drift off, when I thought about Kaycee in her new, big, fancy college and wondered what it would be like in Woodbridge without her.

Saying goodbye a few months later was not easy, but I could see how excited and hopeful she was, and that helped ease my mind a little. On her last night in Woodbridge, after we had spent an amazing day together with a bunch of our friends—Kaycee, Aja, and I sat atop our favorite place to hang out, *'Juju's house.'*

Juju's house was named after Juju, one of our friends who moved away a couple years ago. There were rumors that he was homeless, and really everything

about him didn't make a lot of sense to most people in Woodbridge, but I think that's what we liked about him. Anyways, Juju, homeless or not, spent a lot of time in a creepy abandoned house that sat on the south side of town. Everyone thought that the house was haunted since it had been there for such a long time, but Juju changed it from a place that people were afraid of, to somewhere fun to hang out after school.

"I am gonna miss you, Kaycee." Aja said in a monotone voice, almost like she had let a thought slip out without even meaning to say it. I know she sincerely meant it though. Kaycee had been friends with Aja before I had known either of them, and they always had a strong bond.

We were gazing at what we could see of the town from the roof of Juju's house. It wasn't a crazy view or anything, but it was probably the best view of Woodbridge that we knew about. "Yeah, I'll miss you guys a lot." Kaycee replied. The air was thick that night, it was humid, as it always was in the summer and if it were earlier in the day, there was no way we would be able to sit outside for more than twenty minutes before sweating through our clothes.

"To be honest I've been having second thoughts about school." Aja and I snapped out of being lost in thought and both looked at Kaycee. "What? Where is this coming from?!" Aja asked quickly. Kaycee had been looking forward to going to college for pretty much as long as I can remember knowing her, which was at least three years.

"I know! I know, but I've been thinking. Amir is so creative; he has his own business selling clothes that *he* designs! Meadow makes amazing music and can just sing like an angel. Mom is probably one of the best painters in the world, and Dad is such a skilled carpenter."

Amir and Meadow were Kaycee's siblings. Since Gentry, their father, had grown up in a missionary family who had lived in a few different places, he had seen different cultures and people and ways of life. Because of this, it was always in the back of his mind to adopt one day. So that's what they did. Kaycee's older brother, Amir was adopted from Uganda, and Kaycee herself was adopted from India. Her older sister, Meadow, (the middle child) was not adopted, but was born to Astrid and Gentry.

"I just feel like... even though I'm not *technically* related to them, I feel like I should be way more creative than I am. Going out there and studying business—it's very exciting, but I want to *create*." When she said the word 'create' I saw the hunger in her eyes. The same flash, the same look, the eagerness that shone when she talked about going to college—it had now been replaced with something new.

However, Kaycee did still end up deciding to go to school. "I'll give it a try," I remember her saying to me before she left.

It made sense—she had been borderline obsessed with Evergreen Heights for so long, and although she may have had a few second thoughts, she eventually decided it would be foolish to just ignore the opportunity that was presented before her.

Six months went by, and things kind of just dragged along. Nothing exciting was happening, but phone calls with Kaycee became fewer and fewer, and after weeks of wondering how she was and what she was doing, our connection grew weaker, and I decided to focus on the life that was in front of me.

One night, in the middle of December, Mrs. Astrid was taking me home from basketball practice while my car was being fixed for some issue that it had. My

parents were no help, of course, as by this point, they were more distant than ever.

“How was practice?”

“It was alright. Coach really likes this new guy, Jonathan, and he’s been changing our plays to run them for him.”

We both shifted to the right a little as the small car managed a tight turn. There were ‘mountains’ in Woodbridge, well, really it was more like hills, and it had always made me a little nervous driving by the steep cliffs.

“That’s hard, is the team upset about that?”

“Yeah, a few of us are pretty upset. Jonathan is good, for sure, but he just got here. He hasn’t even really proved himself yet. Basketball is about respect... but that respect has to be earned. I just feel like he hasn’t really-”

“Didn’t you just say that he was good, ‘for sure’?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I’ve only ever heard you call Tyson good.”

“Well, Tyson is good. He’s really good.”

Tyson was the only guy on the team that I would not want to play against. He was big, athletic, and he had the right mindset for the game.

“Well, it sounds to me like you’ve already given this new guy respect then. Maybe you’re jealous?”

“Um... well.”

Silence.

“I guess I am a little jealous.”

Mrs. Astrid laughed.

"I've missed you, Ricky. Why don't I see you anymore?"

"Well, you know... Kaycee's in school... and I've just been busy."

That question had always struck me as odd. I guess I never realized that the Montgomerys loved me. They really did. I think I just thought they were nice people, and they were, but I've realized over time that it was more than just kindness that they had shown me.

"You should know that you are always welcome in our house Ricky, even though Kaycee is away."

"And in your store?" I asked, smiling.

Mrs. Astrid laughed.

"Yes, and our store."

We continued driving for a while. I was thinking about seeing the Montgomery's more as I had missed them as well, when I noticed something on the cliff ahead of us. Some snow and rocks came loose and started to fall, towards the opposite side of the road from us. A van going the other way swerved to avoid the debris, and hit us hard, head-on.

My body jolted forward, then slammed back from the force of the airbag. My ears were ringing, and it took me a while to realize what had even just happened. It was so much force, and I was already confident in the fact that I had a pretty bad concussion and perhaps some broken bones. This was before I even moved. I tried to open the door and get out, but I looked to my left and realized Mrs. Astrid was not moving. Carefully, I shook her after shouting her name several times to no avail.

There was no response.

"What about you, Kay? What is your '*greatest wish*'?" Darnell asked, dramatically. Everyone laughed at the way he said it, and Kaycee looked out past everyone