

## Pirates and Princesses

“Can you keep a secret?” Dahlia whispered, green eyes wide and full of wonder. Henry’s brow furrowed, and after a quick glance around the playground, he answered her with a simple nod. Dahlia’s sticky fingers latched onto his arm as she pulled Henry under the slide.

Her pigtails bounced as she shifted from foot to foot, her grin uncontained. Henry felt a smaller smile crawl onto his face as he stared at her, waiting. The bright sun snuck through the craters of the makeshift ceiling above. Little circles of sunlight danced across her nose. Her excited smirk faded into a thin line. Henry leaned closer, his curiosity getting the better of him. Though her lips presented an air of solemnity, her bright eyes betrayed her.

“You want to know my secret?” She asked again. Henry bobbed his head. Dahlia moved towards him, her voice dropping even lower. “I’m a princess.”

Henry’s mouth froze open in a perfect O. He supposed it made some sense. Her dull yellow sundress turned into a grand sunflower-yellow ball gown, with billowing skirts and elegant gloves. He pictured a golden tiara balanced atop her head. She made a fine princess, he decided. Her grin returned and she crossed her arms, her gown swaying as she moved.

“You know what Henry? I like you. Want to play pirates and princesses?” He said nothing, but he didn’t have to, Dahlia was already dragging him out behind her. Henry felt the world shift, he now found himself in a black pirate’s hat, sword in hand. He chased Dahlia through the playground, kicking up wood chips and swinging his imaginary sword. He followed her without a second thought, and he swore every step she took made the world’s colors brighter.

After four years they met in the same spot. Now twelve, they no longer lived in a world of pirates and princesses, but instead pre-teen gossip and changing classes. She was already waiting beneath the slide when Henry showed up. Though she had long since ditched the elaborate ball gown, Henry felt the invisible presence of the crown placed on her head, and the sword balanced by his waist. Shrugging his

backpack off his shoulder, he reached for the small blue container. Henry pulled out two yellow-frosted cupcakes, then a box of matches and a candle. He brought the flame towards the candle with great care, and offered the treat to her.

“Happy Birthday Dahl.” She smiled, and accepted the gift, before pursing her lips and blowing out the light. They sat in comfortable silence until the sun shrunk down beyond the horizon and Dahlia at last asked him, “Can you keep a secret?”

His eyes traveled to the thick bandages on her arm, his brow furrowed. She poked the crease it made across his forehead. “Now, we don’t need that.”

Dahlia repeated her question and Henry answered, “Anything.”

“Want to know what I wished?” He gave a simple nod. She glanced at him before responding, a brief smile flickering across her lips “I wished I was a princess.”

The next time they returned, it was past dark. Their spot had since grown too small and, as Henry approached, he recognized Dahlia waiting. Her car keys dangled from her pocket and her fingers were busy picking at the slide’s chipping green paint. He waved his hand in greeting. She smiled but it didn’t reach her eyes. Her dark hair spilled out in princess curls, as she laid back on the slide and looked upwards. The stars glittered far away.

“Hey Henry?” She asked, her voice the quietest he’d ever heard it. “Can you keep a secret?”

He startled at the way her voice shook and stole another glimpse at Dahlia. This time he noticed the tear tracks spread across her cheeks like a bolt of lightning, and the dark bruise along her neck. Her gaze was distant, and her once emerald eyes now seemed more like a pale stamped-down jade. He opened his mouth to respond, but she spoke before he could. “I wish you were a Pirate, and I was a Princess, and we could sail far from here.”

Four more years came and went, until one dreary gray day, when Henry grabbed his bike and went for a ride. He went by the deli, through the main street, and down a small neighborhood road, then

leaned his bike against the fence, and stepped onto the soft grass. He gathered his belongings from the small bike basket and without thought his feet brought him to her. He set down the flowers, a mix of pink and orange dahlias, on top of the headstone. The petals and leaves intertwined into a ring, one last crown, for his real life princess.

He pictured her. The wild grin. The bright eyes. The golden tiara resting against her dark curly hair. His mind walked through that playground again. A gust of wind swept the swing in a slow back and forth, the seesaw shifted before settling back down against the wood chips. In the center of it all, an old green slide, a small cubby and two kids playing make-believe.

He stood there for a moment and remembered it all. He kneeled down and opened the small container he'd brought, and placed a yellow frosted cupcake against the gravestone. His voice was quiet and deep, "Hey Dahl, happy birthday."

A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees. Henry sat down and closed his eyes.

"Hey Dahl?" He called out again, his voice thick with emotion. "Can you keep a secret?"

There was quiet, but Henry could practically hear her laughter scattered in the winds. Henry took a deep breath then he spoke. He spoke until the birds stopped chirping and the crickets started up. He spoke until the moon overtook the sun. He spoke until he ran out words. He spoke until he'd told her everything.