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## Rae Loves Roni

The lady behind them in the checkout line had maroon hair, orange at the roots. Good intent spilled from her smile. “Twins?” she said.

Rae’s hand tightened on the grid of the cart.

Roni stayed squatted at the gum shelves and didn’t look up.

“Two years apart,” Mom said. “Twelve and ten.”

The lady’s smile strained. “Oh. Wow. Beautiful.” Her eyes fixed on Roni when she said it.

Roni stood, holding a pack of gum.

“Nope,” Mom said.

Roni put the gum back. Humming, she joined Rae at the nose of the cart and started unloading.

Rae widened her stance and dropped the bag of apples on the belt.

“Easy,” Mom said.

The lady behind them cackled. “They’ll be teenagers soon,” she said. Her face displayed the nostalgia of someone whose long-suffering is done.

Mom confided her own struggle with a roll of her eyes.

The lady laughed again and stuck her gaze on Roni until Roni looked over at her. “Take care of your little sister, honey,” the lady said.

Rae thumped a can of chicken stock on the belt. She strode to the lottery machine and pretended to read its instructions. A hurt part of her whispered that distance from Roni made the two inches of height her little sister had on her less obvious.

Mom offered a brittle smile to the lady with the maroon hair. She didn't set the lady straight by telling her Rae was the older of the two. A tired part of her knew it would just make things worse.

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Mom had mowed the lawn the day before. The shorn grass showcased a dog turd by the porch steps. Grocery bags in both arms, Mom pointed with her chin. "Watch it, girls."

Roni stooped over the turd. "Morris," she said. "The Colonel needs to fix his gate."

Rae brushed past her and into the house. She set her bags on the counter and went up to change for soccer.

Mom wasn't in the kitchen when Rae came down. The bathroom door off the laundry nook was closed. "We're gonna be late," Rae said, loud enough for Mom to hear.

She marched out the front door and tossed her ball into the yard. At the bottom of the porch steps, she paused to study the grainy relic the Colonel's Labrador had left. Her interest expired quickly.

Her ball lay gleaming in the grass. She strode to it and tapped it with the bottom of her cleat. Gently, deliberately, she dug her toe under it and stared down at one of its hexagons.

*Juggling.*

Her teammates were getting to be experts. Rae had tried for weeks, but hadn't yet gotten it. Maybe today.

She flicked her foot to get the ball in the air.

It spun away lamely and landed by the curb.

A juniper swallowed the next try. She reached into the bush, and her arm came out roped with spider webs.

"Whatcha doin'?" It was Roni, resting her elbows on the porch rail.

Rae pretended to fix the tongue of her cleat, but out of the corner of her eye she was watching Roni snapping her fingers and swaying on the porch. Rae didn't want to heed her sister's weirdness any more than it deserved. She ran her finger along a seam of the ball to scrape grit out of it.

"You guys should have helmets on!" Roni's sudden assertion made no sense.

Rae looked up at the porch, then followed her sister's gaze down the street.

Nick and Gianni, last year's sixth grade agitators, cruising near on their scooters.

Rae ripped out a handful of grass.

Scooter brakes squealed. The boys halted at the curb. Gianni held the loop of his chain pinched in his grin. Nick tossed his head to get his mushroom mane out of his eyes. His earrings glittered.

"Rae, right?"

She didn't quite believe she'd heard her name come out of Nick. Her cheeks went warm in the flustered silence she offered. The boys' faces conveyed their waning interest until something made their eyes leap beyond her to the yard.

Rae turned. Her jaw clenched.

Roni was skipping across the grass, still snapping her fingers. She drew up next to Rae, her eyes traveling back and forth between the boys until they snagged on Nick's earrings. Her brow wrinkled. "Did it hurt?" she said.

Rae spun the ball in her palm, stifling the urge to hurl it at Roni's head.

Nick twisted an earring. "They put a cream to numb it," he said.

Roni made a pained face. "My mom won't let us get ours pierced until we're thirteen."

Rae felt the boys' eyes pin to her earlobes. Her shoulders rose. She forced them back down. The gazes slid down her lengthened neck and appraised her chest with interest too hot to hide.

"Is middle school fun?" Roni said.

"It's okay," Nick said.

"Are the teachers nice?"

They boys traded amused looks.

"Too strict," Gianni said.

Roni hopped off the edge of the curb. “My mom says the girls don’t wear enough clothes. Their shorts show their butts.”

The boys scoffed.

Rae spun the ball in her hand again. “You should be able to wear whatever you want without people judging you,” she said.

The boys seemed not to hear. Their postures were suddenly furtive, their gazes beyond the girls and on the porch.

Mom was locking the door with one hand and hugging the girls’ water bottles to her chest with the other.

“Let’s go,” Nick said.

The boys stepped onto their scooters and throttled down the street.

The Kia beeped. Its locks knocked.

It was Rae’s week for the front seat. She claimed it without relish.

Mom started the car. The radio came on blaring, and she dialed it down. “Buckle up, Roni,” she said. “We’re late.” She was backing up before Roni’s seatbelt clicked. “I’m gonna have you jump out when we get there, Rae,” Mom said. “I need to run to the bank.”

“Can I stay too?” Roni implored from the back seat.

Mom lifted her phone from the cupholder and checked the time. The battery line was a red sliver.

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Two of Rae’s teammates stepped back to widen the warmup circle for her.

Coach Carlos buried his hands in his sweatshirt pockets, making his gut look even bigger. “Punctuality,” he said. “One of our team agreements.” He swept a bulging Nike at a patch of clover. “We’re running today.”

None of Rae’s teammates looked at her. But she knew where she stood. She flushed at the unfairness.

Ire in their voices, the team counted off jumping jacks and burpees. They were gleaming with sweat when Carlos blew his whistle and pointed to the goal line. The girls spread out along the faded paint stripe.

“One whistle, you sprint,” Carlos barked. “Two, you run in place. All the way down, all the way back.”

The whistle sounded. Rae lunged off the line, leading the charge down the field. Twenty yards in, the whistle's harsh chirp stalled the rush.

"Knees up!" Carlos yelled.

By midfield, Rae's lungs were burning. By the far goal line, she'd lost ten yards on the leaders.

Down and back. Three times. Carlos's hoarse shouts decrying their lack of guts.

Rae lumbered the final twenty yards and dropped to one knee at the goal line. Her winded team stung her with glares.

"Get water!" Carlos bellowed, and began pacing out cones for a drill.

"Asshole," Rae said, keeping the word close to herself. She shuffled to her water bottle and gulped until something in her periphery made her drool half a swallow down the front of her jersey.

Roni. Juggling Rae's ball. Making it float and bob with just her feet. Eight touches before Rae quit watching. She chucked her bottle down and made a divot in the turf.

"Line it up!" Carlos bellowed.

Again, the sadistic whistle.

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For the rest of practice, Rae went through the motions. Nobody passed to her in the scrimmage, and she was quick to get rid of anything incidental that bounced her way.

The dusk roused mosquitos that feasted at her joints. She knew better than to scratch but did anyway. By the time Carlos waved everyone in, she was constellated with welts.

The huddle formed, and Carlos held his fist out in the middle of it. Hands piled up. Rae didn't have the will to shove her way in, so she lay her wrist on someone's unwelcoming shoulder.

"Gotta remember," Carlos said. "We're *family*. We win together, we lose together. Someone scores, we all score. If someone's late—" his gaze plowed into Rae.

A mosquito whined in her ear. She swatted.

"*Family* on three," Carlos said. "1-2-3—"

"FAMILY," everyone cried. Except Rae.

The huddle broke. The girls milled toward the sideline where parents were folding their chairs. Carlos waddled into the parking lot, cones hugged to his hip and a mesh bag stuffed with balls slung over his shoulder.

Rae's eyes combed the lot for Mom's Kia. It wasn't there. She swigged the last of her water, depleting that particular gesture of aloofness.

None of the other girls said bye to her. Her teammates Mitzi and Alyssa were kicking a ball around, while their moms chatted, nodding at each other with widened eyes. Meanwhile, Roni was using the heel of her shoe to dig a shallow trough in the grass.

Rae wanted to stay unseen, but after a few minutes, the moms strolled over. "Is your ride coming?" Alyssa's mom said, swirling the pink dregs in her Starbucks cup.

"She's on her way," Rae said.

"You texted her?" Mitzi's mom said. Her look of forced concern didn't match the impatience in her voice.

Rae shook her head. "I don't have a phone." It was hard to gauge how the fact might be stored against her.

Mitzi's mom held out her own phone. The glittery case flashed the orange of the dropping sun.

Rae cupped the fragile weight and tapped out her mom's number, the flat tones a fitting score for the scrutiny landing on her.

The call went straight to voice mail.

Rae handed the phone back. "I think her battery's dead," she said.

The moms shared glances tinged with disdain.

"Well, we can wait," Mitzi's mom said.

"She was just going to the bank," Rae said.

Neither mom gave a sign that she'd heard. Their thumbs were writhing in the light of their screens.

"I have to use the restroom," Rae said. She backpedaled the first few steps toward the bathrooms until Mitzi's mom granted her a distracted nod.

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Dust-caked drinking fountains jutted from the bathroom cinderblocks. Someone had spray-painted inscrutable characters on the wall outside the women's entrance. Rae slowed her march, resolve draining from her stride.

Footfalls pounded behind her. Rae turned, stiff-limbed, and saw Roni, her ponytail swinging.

"I need to go too," Roni said, and trailed Rae around the right angles of the door blind and into the grimey bathroom light.

Stink filled the air like a conjured presence, chemicals far outmatched by foulness.

"Echo!" Roni called. Then again, louder.

"Quiet," Rae said.

The girls peeked into the nearest stall. An empty iced tea can lay half-smashed on the tiles. The water in the bowl looked like *maybe* it was where the tea went. The girls backed out and checked the other five stalls. Only one looked okay.

Rae edged inside. The latch tongue barely reached the bracket—a nudge from outside would be enough to force the door in on her. Resigning to the facts, she lay strips of toilet paper onto the seat and lowered her shorts.

On the other side of the door, Roni's shoes squeaked on the concrete. She was humming and studying her motions in the scratched rectangle of stainless that served for a mirror.

The acoustics of the bathroom were kind to the imperfect melody. Roni's humming rose to open song. She had the chorus down by memory but took liberties with the verses.

Approaching voices swelled into the reverberance. Roni went on singing. Rae shifted her hips on the seat to quiet the chime of her peeing. She tried to peer through the thin gap between the door and the hinge panel but couldn't see anyone.

"What are you *doing*?" Mitzi's voice. Its mocking note coaxed a cruel giggle from whoever was out there with her.

"It sounds good in here," Roni said. "Like the shower."

More snickering. One of the other stall doors banged open.

"Oh, God! Disgusting!" Mitzi's voice had a note of glee in it, as if complaining sustained her.

Her companion laughed. “Worse than Camp Liberty.” It was Alyssa’s voice, of course. “They need to fire the janitor.”

The wall of Rae’s stall shivered. Her door would be next, and the latch wouldn’t help. “I’m in here,” she said, hands up to buffer the inward swing of the door.

The door stayed closed.

Rae rushed to finish up and flushed with her foot. She pulled open the door.

Her sister slid by her and into the stall. The hinges squeaked, the latch rattled.

Rae strode to the sink and risked a glance over her shoulder as she pumped the soap dispenser. Mitzi and Alyssa had their heads together, braces bared. Something on Mitzi’s phone was stoking their amusement.

Rae hesitated at the door, saturated with a kind of stupor. She tossed her damp wad of paper towel in the can by the exit and walked out.

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The breeze was sweet after the stagnant reek of the bathroom. And it was quiet, the openness of the field muting everything. Rae skirted a rank pile of clippings that hadn’t been sucked up in the last mowing.

A car bounced over the transition from street to parking lot, the headlights spraying the dusk. Their mom’s Kia. It slid into a parking space, and the lights died.

Rae’s steps lagged. Something wasn’t right. Maybe it was just the ebbing light, but it looked like the front bumper of Mom’s car was crumpled.

A shriek spilled out of the bathroom, wrenching Rae’s attention away from the parking lot. She stood frozen in the middle of the field, poised against confusion.

Roni lurched out from around the door blind. Her face was twisted in an effort not to cry. Tears were coming anyway. She crossed the grass and stalled a few yards from Rae, then wiped her cheeks with her forearm.

“Why’s your shirt all wet?” Rae said.

Roni blew a ragged sigh. The sound of needing to bawl but fighting it. Her hand swiped at little wads of wet toilet paper that were clinging to her neck and shoulder.



Rae's lower jaw worked back and forth. "Mom's here," she said. "Tell her what happened." She started back toward the bathroom, tightening the drawstring of her shorts. At the door blind, she looked back where her sister was still rooted. "Go tell Mom," Rae said. She plunged back into the weak incandescence.

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Her cleats pattered the concrete.

Alyssa was leaning on a sink and leering at her screen. She killed the display and drew the phone close to her chest.

Mitzi's feet shifted below the hem of the stall. "Who's out there?" she said.

"It's Rae," Alyssa said, tossing the fact over the door with her voice.

Rae's name decayed and was buried by the squawk of audio slicing its way out of Mitzi's stall. Despite the loose acoustics, Rae could make out the recorded wash of her sister's singing.

Alyssa scoffed. A flash of braces split her smirk.

Rae took a few steps forward. "Did I leave my other hair tie in here?" she said. She made her voice sound apologetic, deferential.

Alyssa swept a bored look down the line of sinks. "Nope."

Rae put her hands on her hips. "Weird." She frowned into the mirror, turning her head to inspect her ponytail.

Alyssa defaulted to the indolent grip with which she liked to flaunt her phone.

Rae retied her hair. She tugged the front of her jersey to free some static. And then in a move as deft as it was unexpected, her hand flashed out and snatched the phone from Alyssa's grasp.

"Hey!" Alyssa cried.

Rae darted into the nearest stall and latched it shut.

Alyssa banged her palms on the door. The latch rattled, but held. "Open it!" she shrieked.

"What's going on?" Mitzi yelled from the adjacent stall.

Rae looked down into the toilet. A cigarette butt and a membrane of toilet paper floated in water tinted a yellow just shy of brown.

Alyssa was still slapping the door, her pleas and insults growing more frantic.

“What’s going *on*?” Mitzi yelled from her stall again.

Rae studied the swill in the toilet for another second. The dropped Alyssa’s phone into it.

The toilet paper dispenser was improbably well-stocked. Rae exploited the abundance and spooled off several yards, balling as she pulled, until the bulk was the size of a cantaloupe. She severed it from the roll and compacted it in her palms.

The air was ringing with Alyssa’s clumsy threats and obscenities. An edge of her phone peeked out from under the gauzy tissue in the toilet. Rae steeped her ball of paper next to it, keeping her fingers just out of the water.

She rose and unlatched the door, holding the dripping mass away from her jersey.

Alyssa’s hysterics muted for a moment. She took a step back to grant Rae passage out of the stall.

“Where’s my phone?” Alyssa said, eyeing the sodden clump in Rae’s hand.

Rae tossed her head back at the toilet.

Realization lit Alyssa’s face. Then dismay. She flew to the bowl, gibbering something about personal property.

Still careful not to douse herself, Rae paced to Mitzi’s stall and dealt the door a kick with the bottom of her cleat.

Mitzi was on her feet shimmying her shorts up over her hips. “You’re—!” That’s all she got out before the sopping wad splatted against her face. Foulness breached her nose and open mouth. She spluttered. Gagged.

Rae strode to the sink. Washed her hands. Walked outside.

Across the field, Mom was hugging Roni’s head to her chest and rubbing her back.

Mitzi and Alyssa’s moms were hovering near, making an effort to look aghast. Very soon they wouldn’t have to pretend.

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The dented Kia’s headlights made shadows topple and flee in the driveway. Mom killed the engine. All three of them kept their seatbelts on until after the dome light faded.

But there was dinner to heat. Homework to start.

“Let’s go girls,” Mom finally said. She opened the door and willed her legs out from under the steering wheel.

Roni slid out of the back seat and followed Mom into the house.

The dome light faded again, leaving Rae in the dark. She didn’t know if she was in trouble. She didn’t know if she was still on the team. She didn’t know if tonight’s phone flurry would leave her with any friends.

She told herself she didn’t care. And opened the car door.

The grass absorbed the press of her cleats. She’d probably never need these shoes again.

She didn’t care.

Moth husks freckled the panes of the porchlight. The glow barely reached the lawn. Rae trudged along the shrub line, her arm loose around her ball. An urge struck her in the gloom. To veer out to the curb and bowl her ball down the street and let it be claimed by weather. Or the tire of a car. Or some other kid.

But Roni would notice the ball was missing. She’d mention it in front of Mom, and Mom would press about it. There’d be no explanation. No, Rae had to lug it inside and put it somewhere everyone could see it.

She told herself she didn’t care and continued toward the porch.

Her foot slid oddly at the base of the stairs. She halted. Lifted her shoe. The sharp pong of Labrador shit wafted up at her face.

“Morris,” she said without emotion.

Rae set her ball on the bottom step and reached for a nearby shrub. She snapped off a thin, leafless wand, slumped next to her ball, and angled her foot to appraise the soiling of her cleat.

The front third of the sole was caked. She peeled off the shoe and started scraping. The stink shrank her other senses. Some liberated flecks of the grunge leapt onto her exposed sock.

She didn’t care.

An evening beetle careened near her face. Under other circumstances, Rae might have flinched, but not tonight. She kept carving, prodding. Coaxing the cleat studs back out of the mess molded around them. A slow, maybe pointless restoration.

The door rattled open behind her. The porch boards flexed.

“Whatcha doin’?” Roni said.