

A Place to Belong

Congratulations to Abigail Cordell of Year 11 whose short story “A Place to Belong” entered in the Sale College House Cup Short Story Competition for 2018 was awarded 1st Place.

Abigail has earned 100 Points for Grainger House.

A Place to Belong

All my life, I felt like I never belonged. That I was a single thing, floating around in everything, but nothing at the same time. Like a single particle of dust, lost in the vacuum of space, with nothing remotely nearby.

Lost... without sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. That’s what it always felt like as I barely lived before now... lived away from others, disconnecting myself from reality.

Then I saw a beacon of hope.

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I sat down at table furthest from other customers in the café. Picking up my menu, I scan through all the items until I find what I want.

‘Ready to order?’

I look up and smile at the waiter.

‘Yes, can I take a large Chai tea with the Eggs Benedict?’

I hand her my closed menu.

‘Is that all for today, sir?’ She asks, as she jots down my order. I see her eye the other seat at the table.

‘It is, thanks.’

‘Alright, it should be out in ten.’

I sit back in my corner of the café, and pull out a book. I’ve never dealt well in social settings. I’ve always closed myself off, to avoid the hurt. I never got hurt myself, but my therapist from when I was a teen, decided that it was from seeing my older sister be hurt by all the people in her life.

With ten years between us, I remember a lot of the drama from her high school years.

I had always been credited on my memory.

I remember my sister, at age fifteen, as she got hurt by all the people she let into her life. I remember her crying almost every night, as she received messages that hurt her... she did one stupid thing and had to deal with the consequences for so long, yet it wasn't fair as it wasn't even her fault.

After her death, when I was thirteen, I had to go see a therapist. I had already been a closed off person since her teen years, so it was no surprise I hadn't let anyone in. In all the time I spent by myself, I had decided my entire future. I knew I'd never belong, especially seeing as I alienated myself, but I was content. I stuck to my studies and I accelerated through school. I ended up graduating a year early, while I was sixteen.

When I was sixteen, I also realised something important about my identity, something which didn't help me feel like I belonged. Society had this thing back then, about people who felt different; people who loved differently.

'Is this seat taken?'

I look up and see him.

His eye's drew me in first; dark chocolate brown. Then it was his dark complexion, the way it made his freckles seem invisible, and his acne scars. Next, I saw his hair; shaggy and black, but in a neat way, like James Potter meet Theo James. I noticed his smile next, anxious and waiting...

I realise I was almost staring, as he was waiting for a response. Playing it cool, I shrugged my shoulders.

'Yeah, you can take it. I've ordered already though, so you'll have to go to the counter and add it to the table.'

'Thanks mate.'

I kept looking at him as he went to place his order. He seemed tall, but anyone is tall next to my five foot height.

I see him turn around to walk back to my table, so I make it look like I'm reading again.

'Good book?'

I hear him get into his chair and move it close to the table.

Looking up, I play it cool.

'Yeah, it's decent. It's about a librarian who gets stuck inside a murder mystery novel.'

'That's... different.' He smiles, 'Anyway, my name is JD, and no, its not James Dean or anything, just John Darren. My friends call me JD as it sounds sexier.'

JD extends his hand. Laughing, I place mine in his and shake.

'You can call me Jean.'

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Socialising... not something I'd seen myself doing at any point. When you realise you'll never belong anywhere, it makes sense. Yet here I was, out with JD, catching a movie.

Sitting in the cinema, *Clerks* running on the screen, I think about how I ended up here. JD, the guy who just wanted a seat in the crowded café, got me, the anti-social bookworm, to see a movie from the mind of Kevin Smith, with him.

The one conclusion I can draw, is that it's because I think JD is really hot.

It could also be that he seemed to be the kind of guy to make any person comfortable in a situation, and during conversation, I found I quite liked talking to him. Most of the time, I only talk to my therapist and my doctors.

Working in a library, I rarely have to talk to others, and when I do it has nothing to do with personal life. Libraries are probably the only place I ever felt I belonged. During university, I spent a fair bit of my time in here, getting a part time job alongside my studying. Once I finished my degree for teaching history, I became a full time employee here, because despite the low pay, it worked for my lifestyle.

Somehow, JD made me question where else could I belong? We've known each other for just over a week, and we seem to be spending a fair bit of time together.

Looking at the movie, I have a peek out of my peripheral to see JD looking at my profile.

'It's almost over, Jean,' he whispers while he looks at his digital watch, 'feel like heading to a bar afterwards? I know this great one down the road.'

'Yeah, sure,' I smile, despite the fact he wouldn't be able to see it all too well, 'If we get too intoxicated, my place is nearby too.'

Both of us turn back to the movie, and as I reach for the popcorn, my hand brushes his. I feel tingles run up my arm, something I've never quite experienced.

JD is a new experience.

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'Left, left, left my wife in New Orleans, forty-five cents and a... a... ant's go marching one-by-one hurrah.'

I laugh at JD as we walk down the streets of Melbourne, the cool breeze mixing with the thermal's from the road. I feel like JD is a *little* bit drunk. It was around midnight, so the city traffic was light.

We had one block left of walking before JD had to spew into a bin.

'Are we there yet, Jean?'

'Almost, JD. One more block, then I'll make you some coffee or something, and a toastie. I'll get you cleaned up and you can go to sleep.'

I pull his arm, making him follow close behind me.

'Thanks so much, Jean,' he slurs his word as he tries to get himself to walk along side me, 'Jean, have I told you that you are the bestest friend I've ever had? No, well you are.'

I try not to gag at the smell, as JD decides to leave a really sloppy kiss on my cheek.

'Come on, JD, we're here.'

'We are? YAY! It'll be like a sleep over, except we're already drunk.'

I nod at my doorman as we enter.

'Only you're drunk, JD. And you'll be on the couch.'

I support his entire weight as we ride the elevator up two floors. When the doors open, I guide him into the hallway, and to my door. I fumble for the key's so I don't let JD slip onto the ground.

Once inside, I sit JD on the couch, getting him some ibuprofen, water and a bucket. I go to the kitchen and get everything ready to make him a sandwich. But by the time I get back to him, he's asleep. Leaving him with a blanket over the top, I go to bed myself.

Sleep and I struggle often, so it's no surprise I find myself screaming after what seems like no time at all. But for the first time, I wake to see someone over me, trying to calm me down.

'Are you okay?'

'JD, I'm sorry you had to witness this.'

'Jean, you can't help nightmares. They just happen. Are you okay now?'

'I'll be okay. They are always centred on my sisters suicide. Thank you.'

'Wish to talk about it?'

'It'd be nice, actually.'

I tell him everything. I told him how when I was five, my memories were distinct. I told him that I knew she'd leaked someone's personal photos, and that she got so much backlash. I told him I've been seeing a therapist since I was thirteen, after I came across my sister's lifeless body in our kitchen. I told him that I had always felt on the outside, alone with nowhere to belong.

He listened.

'I'm here for you, no matter what, Jean.'

I wipe the tear away that's rolling down my cheek.

'Thank you JD. I think I'll try to sleep again now.'

He goes to leave, and something clicks.

'JD?'

'Yeah?'

'Can you stay with me, here in my room, my bed? I've always felt most alone after a nightmare.'

'I can stay.'

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My beacon of hope came out of nowhere, on what seemed like a normal Autumn day, in 1994. He asked me if he could sit at my table. Ever since then, he wouldn't leave me alone, and I'm glad.

The fact that he's been by my side for the last twenty-four years means a fair bit to me. It's taken us twenty-four years of protest and arguing with the government to get here today, and yet here he is, John Daniel Martin still thinks he's in love with me, and I am so thankful.

I never had social interactions, and he pulled me out of the dark place I had been in since I was five. I was twenty-nine, had no friends, and spent my days in the library. He was thirty-one, worked in a corporate office, and chose to sit by me.

JD is the first person to have ever made me feel like I belonged, and has shown me what it's like to live past the trauma.

JD, I love you to the ends of the earth, and I am so happy that we get to stand here today.

I look up from the cue cards in my hand, and I hear the crowd sigh in happiness. I see a tear in JD's eye and smile. I really lucked out.

'John Daniel Henry Martin, do you take Jean Arron Foster to be you're husband, to have and to hold, 'till death do you part?'

'I do.'

'And do you, Jean Arron Foster, take John Daniel Henry Martin to be you're husband, to have and to hold, 'till death do you part?'

'I do.'

'Then without further ado, thanks to the Australian Marriage Act of 2018, I now pronounce you husband and husband. You may now kiss your husband.'

In our twenty-four years of being together, no kiss has ever been greater. I have a place in society, and I now belong.