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Downtown in the Dark

Kate Reynertson

I had been home from school about a day. None of us had kept in touch as much as we'd hoped to while we were gone, and Emily and I were hoping to get as caught up as possible. We were in her car driving around to nowhere in particular when my cell phone rang. It was Michael.

"Hello," I said.

"Where are you?"

"Driving around with Emily."

"I need to talk to you."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. It's important. I need to talk to you."

"Well, where are you?"

"Your house."

"My house?! Why are you at my house?"

"I need to talk to you. It's personal. Can we meet somewhere?"

"OK...yeah. Do you know where the park is in La Cañada?"

"Yeah. I'll be right there." He hung up.

I attempted to give Emily the Cliff Notes of the conversation as she turned onto Angles Crest Highway and headed toward the park.

"How is he at my house?" I asked. "He doesn't have a driver's license, let alone a car. He must be with Eric." Emily wasn't exactly convinced that this was the only explanation, though I can't imagine why. It was the only logical conclusion.

"Maybe he wants to tell you he's in love with you." I don't know where she comes up with these things.

"Yeah, Em. I'm sure that's it." We were both utterly confused.

Foothill Boulevard was as empty as it always is anytime after nine p.m. La Cañada isn't exactly known for its nightlife. The park that we were headed toward is in the center of town and built on top of a rather large free-way overpass. It consists of some assorted playground equipment, a gazebo, and a fair amount of grass. I've been there a couple times at night to go play on the swings when no one can think of anything better to do, but not recently. There is a fence, complete with a gate, that lines one of the four sides of the park. The other three sides are completely open. We parked in one of the slanted parking spaces close to the front gate and waited.

A few cars passed by as we sat listening to music from Emily's iPod. Then we noticed someone walking up the street from the See's parking lot.

He was wearing a dark baseball cap with his head hunched over and his hands were shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket.

"That has to be Michael."

"Your house is the other way though."

"Yeah, seriously. Eric has to be somewhere. Where did they park?"

We stayed in the car and watched Michael trudge toward us. He was taking his sweet time about it, clearly aware that we were watching him and wanting to make the most of it. When he reached us, he knocked on the passenger side window, which I then rolled down.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

"You've mentioned that."

"Alone."

"OK."

"Can you get out of the car?"

"I guess." I opened the door and got out. He took off for the park gate without looking back at me. I followed, glancing back at Emily with a look that said, "If he tries to kill me you better come save me." You never really know with Michael. It had been a while since either of us had seen him. For all we knew he could have gone completely insane since Christmas.

Once we were about twenty feet past the gate Michael took his hands out of his pockets and stretched them out to his sides. He started mumbling to himself. He kept walking into the ivy that lines the park near the fence. I stopped but he turned and glared at me as if to say, "Keep walking." So I kept going, wading into the leaves.

When we were surrounded by five feet of ivy on all sides he turned to face me. He was speaking in long drawn-out words and reaching toward me. "Kate!" he said. "I love you!" He kept repeating it over and over. He looked completely serious, though more than a little melodramatic. For a moment I just stared at him and then I started laughing. Uncontrollable giggles burst out of me as I watched Michael wander about like a madman.

He ran up to the fence and started reaching through it toward Emily's car. Eric appeared, as I knew he would eventually, and ran up on the other side of the fence with his video camera. Michael started climbing up the fence and waving his arms around toward the camera, all the while screaming that he was in love with me. This only made it more difficult to keep from falling to the ground in a hysterical fit. The two of them have the ability to turn everyday life into a game that I never quite understand.

Michael ran back and grabbed me, changing characters completely.

He was no longer a love-sick acrobat; he had transformed into a cold-blooded kidnapper. "Come with me, you little bitch!" he ordered, wrapping one arm around my neck and grabbing my hands behind my back. "Stop laughing!" I couldn't stop. He pulled me out of the ivy and back toward the gate, shouting at me to behave myself and listen to what he told me to do.

When we reached the gate Eric was on the other side. After making sure he had some quality kidnapping footage, he handed Michael the camera and started climbing the gate singing the attack on Rue Plumet from *Les Misérables* at the top of his lungs. This was the last straw. I started crying, I was laughing so hard.

As Eric jumped down off the top of the gate I ran back out of the park to Emily's car. She was still sitting in the driver's seat. I leaned in the driver's side window, winded and hysterical. She looked only slightly amused.

When I turned around Eric and Michael were standing behind me. "So where are we going?" Eric asked.

"I suppose I'm driving," Emily said. Eric hates driving.

He flashed her a fake smile as he and Michael climbed into the back-seat. I sat down in the front and slid my seat forward so as not to crush them. As is often the first step in any Los Angeles adventure, we got on the freeway. Michael wanted to go to the beach so we started heading west, but on our way through downtown Eric had a better idea. We got off the freeway and tried to find someplace to park. Downtown Los Angeles is a little scary at night, just because it is deserted. The streets are almost completely empty. You have this sinking feeling as you are driving around that if someone tried to kill you, there would be absolutely no one around to save you.

We didn't really want to pay a thousand dollars a minute to park, but after seeing a couple real-live prostitutes walking down Flower with pimps in tow, we decided we would be better off in a parking structure. We parked at the Bonaventure Hotel so we could go ride the elevators. The hotel is made up of four identical cylindrical towers, each of which has its own glass elevator on the outside of the building. They're the elevators that Arnold Schwarzenegger rides the horse into in "True Lies." The movie poster is on the wall next to the escalators that you take up from the parking garage.

Emily's then-boyfriend, Jeremy, called just as we were getting into the elevators so she immediately became intensely fragile and scared of heights. While Eric, Michael, and I stood with our foreheads against the glass and watched the ground inch further and further away, Emily clung to the elevator door and refused to even glance out at the skyline. The Bonaventure is defi-

nitely not the tallest building in downtown but it nonetheless offers a view of the city at night that you don't normally see—since the everyday view pretty much consists of brake lights and smog. When you are above all that, you can see across the 110 freeway and catch a glimpse of the Staples Center to the west. And when you still find yourself looking up, you realize how much taller so many of the other buildings are and wonder what the view is like from up there if it is so amazing from down here.

We got out on the top floor of the first tower and Eric pulled out the video camera. He and Michael ran off down the hall filming one another to document the great adventure that we were all apparently undertaking. Only this time I wasn't laughing; I was madly trying to keep everyone from being too loud and getting us into trouble.

My paranoia over security and the ever-
ing meant we couldn't
similar foray up one more
towers, we left and headed to
which is a collection of



being evicted by hotel
increasing cost of park-
stay long, so after a
of the four tower eleva-
the Music Center,
three theatres on the

east end of Downtown: the Ahmanson, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, and the Mark Taper Forum. I'd been there a thousand times before, mostly to see shows at the Ahmanson, and once to see "Romeo and Juliet" danced by the perfect ballerinas of The Bolshoi Ballet from the second of six balconies at the Dorothy Chandler—but it had never been like this. Every other time I'd been to the music center I was dressed up in a skirt and heels—just another face in a crowd of well-mannered theatre goers. It is always still light out when we arrive. It's only dark when we leave, and then we just head for the car and don't look back.

Tonight all that was different. The whole plaza looked different. The buildings looked bigger and more important in the moonlight; the silence made us feel important, privileged. Not many people get to do this.

There is a big fountain that fills much of the center courtyard. It's one of those fountains that shoots jets of water straight out of the ground. I had looked at it before, but that night it was particularly beautiful. The lights made the water glow in a soft yellow as the jets rose higher and higher into the night sky and then fell unexpectedly in some rhythm that I could not predict or explain.

We walked tentatively into the empty courtyard, except for Michael, who ran full speed into the fountain and started dancing. Well, he wasn't real-

ly in the fountain, he was in front of the fountain, though he did dart in and out of the water on occasion. He knew we were watching and proceeded to make a show of sliding around on the wet pavement. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me over to him. The wet ground made my shoes slip, so I kicked them off toward Emily who watched, half-horrified, from a safe distance. He led me around, spinning, twisting, and dipping me with dexterity I didn't know he had. I barely had to follow; he just pulled me along on the wet cement and my feet came along for the ride whether I wanted them to or not.

Eric, once again, pulled out his video camera and began filming us. "This is beautiful," he said, "keep dancing." He kept talking about how amazing it all looked—the way the light glowed softly behind us and breathed life into the empty city. Emily went over and watched through the camera and I could see her anger at having been forced into a glass elevator melt away as she watched us dance. The water shot up into the darkness behind us, creating a wall of golden light and we spun in front of it, two dark shadows against a backdrop of imaginary sunlight.

I lost all track of time. My feet didn't hurt from the rocks that occasionally got in my way. The cool water licked at my toes and I kept spinning. The night was clear and warm and unbelievable. We each danced by ourselves and then together. Eric left the filming to Emily and joined in. He and Michael dashed across the fountain when the water was low and leapt in front when it rushed up to its full height. I held onto the hem of my skirt and tried to do my best impression of those ballerinas I had watched dance so effortlessly in the theatre beside me. I twirled with a combination of grace and freedom that I didn't know existed—turns I had never been taught to do or forced to practice. I felt the movements rise from within me and the water guided my feet and my body in their dance. I wasn't scared anymore, not scared I was going to be killed in the middle of downtown with no one to hear me. I felt safe and happy and free. I knew I would probably never be here again, in a place like this. You must reach an age, I thought, where you can't go dancing in fountains anymore.

Facing picture:

Stepping Foot on Roman Ruins

Chelsee Woodey, Stephen Longenecker