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Cereal

by

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The four kids had originally gathered around a notebook. Then a phone, then a laptop, and finally, the cabin wall, once Brett received a projector for his fourteenth birthday. After that, the calendars and pictures decorating the wall were taken down, thrown in a closet, the tacks loose in a desk. Despite the holes, scratches, and the lines detailing how tall Brett was from 2006 to 2010, the kids greedily feasted their eyes upon the wall as if it was there one true vice, like an alcoholic to whiskey.

Henry cleared his throat and called attention onto himself.

“We’re taking a trip to Gainesville, Iowa.” Purely metaphorical, much to the kids’ relief. “We’ve got sixteen victims. Murders committed across the span of five years, only occurring in June. Never solved,” he said.

A collective groan echoed throughout the cabin. Though the cases were creepy nonetheless, the kids at least slept better when the serial killer was caught, or better yet, dead. Then the killer wouldn’t escape and release havoc on them for forming the stupid Cereal Club in the first place.

Jane scoffed. *Cereal.*

She had to be the one to think of the name, of course. The others had been too young to form an intelligible thought, much less a name that captured the ambience of the club; yet, they still deemed themselves old enough to be members. While some argued that the name was blaringly obvious, Jane simply couldn’t pass up the thrill of saying it right to her father’s face.

I’m heading to Cereal Club, there’s a new Cereal we’re studying today, this week’s Cereal was sick!

Ah, the joy of homophones.

For the most part, there was zero suspicion- aside from the meeting that Brett's mother wanted to attend, her interest in her son's interests leading to the kids scrambling to hide their murder board and red yarn, citing off facts about Fruit Loops for the better part of an hour.

"First victim was found three weeks after she was murdered when her shoe washed ashore," Henry continued. "She was thrown into a lake with a fifty-pound weight attached to her ankle post-mortem-"

"So, she didn't drown?" Kayla interrupted.

Once again, Jane scoffed. As if Henry would waste his highly anticipated turn on a serial drowner. He would choose the terrifyingly weird cases as a way to prove that he isn't scared of anything. However, Jane noticed he never could choose a case in their state of Washington, or anything near the West Coast, for that matter.

"Don't interrupt, Kayla," Brett mocked. "You're the one who made that rule."

Henry liked Iowa because he had never been there and never would. And, also, because Jane was from there. An argument about how dangerous Seattle was resulted in Henry's decision to pick all of his Cereals from Iowa, simply to convince Jane that serial killers could be anywhere, in the places you'd least suspect.

"On June sixth, 2004, eighteen-year-old Gainesvillean Dina Truey wandered into a cornfield to practice her kissing on an unsuspecting scarecrow..." It was typical that the presenter would set the scene, and even more typical that Henry would bring up all the stereotypes of Iowans he could think of. "...and she was never seen again."

"You just said they found her body," Jane said.

"She was never seen *alive* again."

"And she did not go into a freaking corn field."

“It’s possible! No one saw her after she left her shift at the butter churning factory-”

“Henry!”

“I mean, after school.”

“And she did not live in Gainesville,” Jane said. She didn’t know how he knew about that town.

“Yes, she did!” Henry clicked his laptop and projected onto the wall a slide that read *Gainesville, Iowa*. “See?”

“Isn’t that where you moved from Jane?” Kayla questioned

“No!” Jane responded quickly. “That was a couple of hours away.” *But that is where my grandparents lived.*

“Okay... moving on,” Brett said, marking the first time Jane had actually been glad Brett spoke.

“The serial killer’s media-given name was the Gainesville’s Ghost because even though the police staked out the lake the bodies were found in, they kept reappearing. He couldn’t get caught,” Henry explained. He was met with looks of fascination from all but Jane.

“The Ghost would lure his victims out to an empty field and strangle them to death,” Henry continued. “The police would find their cars abandoned on the side of the road. They assumed the killer threatened the victims via cell phone since none of the victims’ phones were ever found at the scene. Overall, very isolated kills that were unlikely to be interrupted, even with the victim’s car on the road.”

“Smart. No one would stop for an empty car,” Brett murmured. Kayla hummed in agreement.

Jane had noticed from the start how their innocent interest had soon turned into a disturbed appreciation, and she didn't know why she was responsible for reminding them of it.

“Then, the Ghost took the body and dumped it into the lake with a weight to hold it down. The cops had to wait for the lake to be drained to even discover a body. By then, there was no way anything useful could be discovered,” Henry finished.

The questions started:

“The only marks on the body were on the neck and the ankle?”

“Did they track where the weights were purchased?”

“Who were the main suspects?”

As the onslaught of questions started, Jane felt the gravity of the situation catch up to her, her usual indifference replaced with a sickening feeling in her stomach. This one had hit too close to home, quite literally. She grabbed her things and pushed open the heavy door of the cabin to get to her car. Jane was quickly putting on her jacket when she heard the door clang open and shut once again.

“Where are you going?” Henry asked casually, as if he weren't just talking about murderers and drownings.

“You win,” Jane huffed.

“What?”

“You win! God, Henry, I'm gonna throw up.”

“I'm sorry it was Iowa again, but this case was a good one!”

“What's the good part? What could be so good about fourteen dead girls?” Jane snapped.

“They're not here, Jane. They don't care what you say about them,” Henry chuckled.

“They aren't who I'm worried about.”

Jane drove home that night, knuckles becoming white with her harsh grip on the wheel. When she arrived home, she slammed her car door, trying to rid herself of her frustrations before her dad had to become the victim of them.

“Janie?” Her father walked down the stairs, pants dusty and shirt askew. Jane glanced into the kitchen to see ten boxes stacked on the kitchen table.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“Spring cleaning.”

“In August?”

“You know how restless I get during these long days,” her father said. “Now can you go up to the attic and carry down those boxes on the left?”

Jane went upstairs to the dimly lit room. By mistake, she walked over to a neat pile of boxes on her right. After trying to lift one with no success, she looked for something smaller, finding an old shoebox hidden behind the pile, with ‘Jane 2004-2009’ written messily on the side. She picked up the box, knowing that photos of her with her late mother would soothe her irritableness. The box’s contents clanged as it rose, alerting Jane that it didn’t contain family photos. Jane squinted harder at the label once again.

Not Jane. June. ‘June 2004-2009’.

Jane opened the box to find sixteen phones, some shiny, some muddy, some broken, all old. Her father must have asked for them, to take them apart for a project or spare parts. She

picked up a smashed flip phone to see if any of its internal pieces had been removed, only to find more crusty mud caked onto its keypad.

Jane put down the shoebox and went back to the two heavy boxes.

Why are these so heavy? Jane opened the box. *Weights.* About ten fifty-pounders stacked on top of one another.

She gave up, sighed, and looked around to see another stack of boxes near the left of the attic door.

Oops, I missed that. She lifted them easily and deposited the boxes downstairs.

Afterwards, Jane followed a good smell to the kitchen and found her dad scooping a grilled cheese sandwich off a pan and onto a plate.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Very.” Jane turned on the sink to wash her hands, only to see red spread around her fingers. She jerked her hands back and examined them. The old mud flakes from the flip phone she touched had turned red under the water. *Blood?*

“Dad?” Jane felt the intense need to ask him what was on her mind.

Her dad turned away from the counter and paused when he saw her hands. “What happened, Janie?” He handed her a towel.

“Do you remember Gainesville?”

“Of course.”

Jane paused.

“Are your hands okay?” her father asked again.

Just don't think and get the words out. Once they're out, at least they've left your mind.

“Have you heard of the Gainesville Ghost?”

“No, can’t say I have.” Most killers are excellent liars. How is Jane supposed to know if he’s telling the truth?

“Really? How could you not know about a serial killer in your hometown?”

“Don’t take that tone with me,” he warned.

“Why are there sixteen cellphones in the attic with dried blood on them?”

“You should get some sleep,” he dismissed her.

“You had weights up there. A weird amount.”

“Is there an accusation here?”

“Should there be?” Jane was quickly losing her cool. Her father sighed.

“Oh, Jane,” he chuckled. “Is this the kind of crap you’ve been learning at Cereal?”

“What do you mean?” She played dumb.

“Stop lying, Jane!” he shouted. “You know, I watched your presentation on the Zodiac Killer from outside the cabin’s window back in January. Made your old man proud. But then listening to your friends critique his work? Play detective?” he sneered. “You kids think you know what it’s like to kill someone because you’ve read a case file.” Her father laughed and swept her dish off the counter, disturbing the quiet the two were familiar with all these years. “That is *nothing* like the real thing.”

“So, what, is this your confession? You’re a murderer?” Jane sniffed, teary eyed. She stood stoic, pressed against the kitchen counter. She could feel the heat of the stove behind her, trying to melt her frozen stature.

“Don’t act so repulsed, Jane, you’re the one who started that club. And from what I saw, you’re *very* into it,” he laughed. “I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

He leaned in close to Jane and reached for something near the cutting board. Jane saw the glint of a knife being held by a disturbingly steady hand. She leaned back even more over the counter and felt the handle of a pan nudge her elbow.

“Not my usual weapon of choice, but it’ll do,” her father chuckled.

“Wait! If you know about Cereal, then you should know what I’ve learned,” Jane said slowly, as she reached her hand behind her.

“And what is that, sweetie?”

“You leave a mark.” She grabbed the handle of the hot pan and smashed it against his head as hard as she could. Jane ran to the front door and flung it open, only she didn’t run outside, knowing she couldn’t escape him. Instead, she positioned herself behind the door, pushing against the wall and making herself as flat as possible.

Her father ran through the living room, curses leaving his lips as he saw the front door wide open. He quickly ran out of the house, without sparing Jane’s hiding spot a second glance.

Jane quietly closed and locked their door. Knowing it wouldn’t keep him out for long, she grabbed her phone from her discarded purse and ran towards her dad’s bedroom.

“Call Henry,” she spoke into her phone. She knew calling the police might have been a better option, but she didn’t want the last voice she heard to be a 911 operator.

Jane looked for a weapon in her father’s belongings. She searched the most likely places: drawers, high shelves, safes. Nothing. She started knocking off the pictures hanging on the walls.

“Jane?” Finally, Henry had picked up.

“Call 911 and send them to my house. My dad, he’s the Gainesville Ghost. He’s trying to kill me.” Jane whispered. She heard a window shatter.

“Everything is okay,” Henry chuckled. “You’re just shaken up about tonight. It’s all in your head.”

“He told me himself! He is trying to kill me!” Jane knocked another ugly painting off the wall, relief flooding through her as she finally found a wall safe which required a four-digit code.

“Are you being serious?” Henry asked.

“Dead serious! Do it, now!” Jane hung up the phone and tried all possible combinations.

1-2-3-4, 0-0-0-0, J-A-N-E, his birthday, my birthday, mom’s birthday.

Nothing worked.

Think, Jane, think! If you’re a serial killer, what’s most important to you?

Footsteps thudded up the stairs, getting louder and louder.

His victims? Yes, his first victim. Dina something. If only she had paid better attention to Henry’s presentation. It was in June, obviously. The first kill was in 2004. Oh, what was the day?

She heard a door bang open down the hall.

6-4-06? Wrong. 6-5-06? Wrong. 6-6-04?

The safe swung open. Photos, envelopes, files, flash drive. Gun.

Jane grabbed the gun, clicked off the safety and aimed at the door.

Her father was getting closer to her. Jane took deep breaths as she focused her eyes on the door. She could hear another being slammed opened. And another. Until finally-

Her father swung the door open so hard the wall dented. He looked up at Jane with eyes she recognized from Cereal. The eyes of a killer.

“One step,” Jane commanded, “and I’ll shoot.”

It was fifteen minutes in total before the police arrived. Jane didn’t move an inch. But the killer before her did.

The kids returned to the still cabin for the first time in over a month.

As Brett, Kayla and Henry replaced their murder board with a scenic calendar, Jane got out four cereal bowls. *Lucky Charms, Apple Jacks, Frosted Flakes, Cheerios.*

“These are our competitors for this week. The cereal with the most votes will continue to the next round. Single elimination. Once it’s out, it’s out,” Jane announced.

“Come on, we can’t pretend the old Cereal Club never happened,” Kayla said. “How about one last case for old times’ sake?”

The rest immediately disagreed, but Kayla ignored them and dragged Jane over to the wall.

“We’ve got sixteen victims. Murders committed across the span of five years, only occurring in June. This case was solved, and killer apprehended by our very own Jane Welsh...”