

Things September Can't Take

I'm writing this before midnight because paper is stupid.

That's what Orla says, anyway. Paper doesn't know whether something is true, so September has trouble deciding what to erase. Photographs know. Mirrors know. Phones are smug little machines that think they know everything.

Paper accepts whatever you tell it.

At 6:13 this morning, Orla broke my bedroom window with a peach.

The fruit punched through the screen, struck the glass with a wet crack, and landed beside my pillow in a spray of juice and pale green shards. I woke up with both hands over my face.

"Good," Orla called from the driveway. "You're alive."

I leaned over the edge of the mattress.

She stood below my window in a yellow raincoat and red canvas shoes. Her wings were folded under the coat, which gave her the hunched shape of someone smuggling two rolled carpets. A white feather poked out near her left hip.

"Did you throw a peach at me?"

"I knocked."

"You broke the window."

"I underestimated the peach."

She'd been on Earth for eleven weeks and still blamed objects for what she did with them.

I picked up the fruit. One side had burst open. Juice ran through my fingers and dripped onto the sheet.

"Why do you have peaches at six in the morning?"

"The grocer was putting them outside."

"So you stole it."

"He hadn't finished deciding the price."

"That's stealing."

Orla considered this.

"Then we should eat the evidence."

She smiled.

I hated that smile right then.

I knew what day it was.

Everyone did, even the people who weren't supposed to.

The last day of summer had a pressure to it, like the air before a storm. Dogs barked at empty rooms. Babies stared at ceilings. Every automatic door in town opened half a second too early.

At midnight, the planes would pull apart.

The river spirits would slip through drainage grates. The dead would return to whatever waited for them. Devils would leave through hot engines and unattended ovens. The people from the mirror plane would step backward into department-store displays.

And the angels would go up.

Not into the sky. Orla hated when people said that.

"Heaven isn't above you," she'd told me the first summer we met. "That would make mountaineers holy."

This time, she wouldn't be coming back.

I got dressed.

Orla waited in the kitchen while I taped a cereal box over the window. My mother had already left for work, which saved me from having to explain the peach. Or Orla. Mom had met her at least fourteen times, but the Summer Accord kept sanding the memories away. Each introduction started from scratch.

I found Orla eating dry pancake mix from the box.

"You have flour on your face."

"It's sweet."

"It's supposed to be cooked."

"That seems unnecessary."

I wiped the powder from her cheek with my thumb. She caught my wrist before I could pull away.

The pale blue line beneath her skin had spread.

Yesterday it had circled her wrist like a bracelet. Now it ran halfway to her elbow in thin branching threads. They glowed whenever she moved.

"How long?" I asked.

"Seventeen hours and forty-one minutes."

"You counted."

"I always count."

"You said angels don't experience time the way we do."

"We don't. It's awful."

She let go of me and closed the pancake box.

"I have plans."

"Of course you do."

"No, Kellan. These are bad plans."

She reached into her coat and produced a page torn from one of my school notebooks. Six items had been written in her cramped block letters.

1. Laundry
2. Bus
3. Pool
4. Terrible film
5. Peach
6. Nothing

I read it twice.

"This is your last day on Earth."

"Yes."

"And you want to do laundry."

"Correct."

"We could drive to the coast."

"Too far."

"The city, then. The museums are free on Sundays. There's that tower you wanted to see. We could go to the airport and watch the planes. Actual planes."

"I've seen metal tubes."

"You called them sky coffins."

"They haven't improved."

I put the list on the counter.

"You've got seventeen hours before you leave forever, and this is what you came up with?"

Orla took the paper, folded it twice, and returned it to her pocket.

"I didn't ask you to approve it."

That stung. She knew it did.

She also knew I'd follow her.

The laundromat on Cedar Street smelled of hot cotton, cheap soap, and something scorched inside the change machine.

Only three customers were there. Mrs. Dole from the bakery sat beside a plastic basket of towels, reading a murder mystery. A man with antlers hidden under a Toronto Raptors cap loaded bedsheets into a washer. In the back corner, two small thunder gods argued over a missing sock.

Nobody paid attention to Orla.

She had brought no laundry.

We sat in molded orange chairs and watched the dryers turn.

"That's it?" I asked.

"That's it."

"You dragged me out of bed to watch someone else's underwear tumble around?"

"Mostly towels."

"You could've done this any day."

"I know."

Mrs. Dole looked up from her book.

"Keep it down, please."

Orla whispered, "She murders her husband on page two hundred and eleven."

Mrs. Dole's eyes narrowed.

"Don't spoil it," I said.

"I didn't say which husband."

The dryers rolled on.

After ten minutes, my irritation became difficult to maintain. The machines made a low, steady sound. Coins clicked behind metal panels. Outside, a city bus sighed at the curb and pulled away with nobody aboard.

Orla leaned her head against my shoulder.

Her halo appeared in the dryer doors.

It never showed directly. Only in reflections. A faint white ring tilted behind her head, chipped in two places, with small dark marks along the

inside. The first time I saw it, I thought someone had drawn on the mirror.

“Do you have laundry in Heaven?” I asked.

“No.”

“What happens when your clothes get dirty?”

“They don’t.”

“That sounds convenient.”

“It’s unbearable.”

She said it softly.

I turned toward her.

Orla watched a red sock slap against the dryer glass.

“Things don’t wear out there,” she said. “Nothing stains. Nothing smells different because you slept in it. There’s no favourite shirt because every shirt is exactly as good on its ten-thousandth day.”

“That sounds like a problem angels invented because they ran out of real ones.”

“Yes.”

She smiled again, but this one lasted less than a second.

When the dryer stopped, she stood and pressed her palm to the warm glass.

“Laundry,” she said.

Then she crossed the first item off her list.

We took the number seven bus without checking where it went.

Orla paid for both of us with a handful of coins from five countries and one kingdom that had sunk beneath the Atlantic before humans invented bronze. The driver stared at the money, stared at Orla, and waved us through.

We sat near the back.

The bus travelled north past the library, the old mall, and the row of houses where every lawn ornament moved when people looked away. More passengers got off than got on. Everyone seemed to be leaving town early.

A woman made of moths occupied the priority seats. Across the aisle, a tired-looking demon held a sleeping toddler against his chest. The child had a tail curled around one leg.

At Maple Avenue, a boy climbed aboard with his grandmother.

He was five, maybe six. He wore a paper crown from a hamburger restaurant. The moment he saw Orla, he stopped.

“Your coat is moving,” he said.

His grandmother tugged his hand.

“Don’t stare.”

“She has birds.”

“I don’t have birds,” Orla said.

The boy pointed at her shoulder. “Feather.”

Orla glanced down.

A white feather had slipped from beneath her collar.

She tucked it back inside.

“Costume,” I said.

The boy didn’t believe me. Children rarely did. The Accord hadn’t finished closing their minds yet.

He dug into his pocket, walked over, and held out a sticker shaped like a green dinosaur.

“For your bird,” he said.

Orla accepted it with both hands.

“Thank you.”

“My name’s Lucas.”

The blue lines beneath Orla’s skin brightened.

She looked at me.

Names mattered to angels. Giving one freely mattered more.

“I’m Orla,” she said.

The bus lights flickered.

The boy’s grandmother pulled him away and apologized. Orla sat very still until they got off three stops later.

She placed the dinosaur sticker on the inside of her wrist, covering part of the blue light.

“You’re not supposed to tell people your name,” I said.

“He told me his.”

“He’s six.”

“That doesn’t make it worth less.”

The bus crossed the highway and entered a stretch of fields I’d never seen. Sunlight flashed through rows of corn. The sky had gone white at the edges.

“Will you remember him?” I asked.

Orla rubbed the sticker with one finger.

“No.”

“Will you remember any of this?”

She didn’t answer.

The bus reached the end of its route beside an abandoned garden centre. The driver shut off the engine and announced he’d be leaving again in twelve minutes.

Orla stepped onto the gravel shoulder.

“Bus,” she said, crossing out the second item.

We walked to the municipal pool.

It took an hour.

The heat climbed while we followed the highway back toward town. Orla took off the raincoat and carried it over one arm. Her wings were visible now, though the Accord bent people’s eyes away from them.

They weren’t the soft white wings painted on Christmas cards. Each one was taller than she was, narrow at the base and broad through the middle, with long outer feathers that caught light like scratched silver. There were gaps where feathers had already fallen. Beneath them, new ones shone blue.

The return was growing inside her.

Cars passed. Nobody stopped.

Orla found half a chocolate bar in the ditch and tried to eat it.

I slapped it from her hand.

“What?”

“It was in the ditch.”

“It was wrapped.”

“It was melted.”

“Everything is melted today.”

“You’re going to miss food poisoning, apparently.”

“I can’t get food poisoning.”

“Then stop acting like you’re brave.”

She laughed so hard she had to fold one wing across her stomach.

I hadn’t meant to be funny.

That made it worse.

The pool was crowded with children, teenagers, and parents roasting under striped umbrellas. The lifeguard at the gate didn’t notice Orla’s wings. She charged us six dollars each and stamped the backs of our hands.

Orla stared at the purple ink.

“What is this?”

“Proof we paid.”

“I have a receipt.”

“People lose receipts.”

“I could lose my hand.”

“That would be harder.”

She held her stamped hand at eye level all the way to the changing rooms.

We left our clothes in a locker. Orla wore the blue swimsuit she’d bought in June, when she learned that humans became upset if you entered public water wearing underwear.

Her wings drew inward until they lay flat against her back. Even folded, they reached past her knees.

“What if someone sees?” I asked.

“They’ll decide I’m wearing something expensive.”

She was right.

People glanced at her, frowned, and looked away. One woman took a photo. On her phone screen, Orla appeared as a blonde girl carrying an inflatable swan.

The Accord had a sense of humour. A mean one.

Orla walked straight to the high diving board.

“No,” I said.

“You agreed to the list.”

“The list said pool.”

“I was abbreviating.”

“You can fly.”

“I won’t.”

“That isn’t how reflexes work.”

“For you.”

She climbed.

I followed her as far as the ladder before the lifeguard blew his whistle and shouted that only one person was allowed on the board at a time.

Orla stood at the end.

The pool looked much farther down from there. Sunlight jumped across the water. Children shrieked beneath us, their voices sharp and distant.

Orla’s toes curled over the edge.

She was afraid.

I had seen her walk into a burning house. I had watched her put her hand inside a dead man’s chest and hold his soul in place until the ambulance arrived. Once, during a thunderstorm, she shouted at the sky until the lightning went somewhere else.

Now her knees shook.

“You don’t have to,” I called.

“I do.”

“Why?”

She looked down at me.

“Because falling is different when nobody threw you.”

Then she bound her wings around her body.

The board bent.

Orla jumped.

For one second, she dropped cleanly. No light. No miracle. Just a thin girl falling badly, arms windmilling, mouth open in a scream she’d deny later.

She hit the water feet first.

The splash soaked two parents and a lifeguard.

I waited for her to surface.

Five seconds.

Six.

At seven, I climbed over the railing.

Orla burst from the water laughing.

Not graceful laughter. She choked, spat water, flailed, and laughed again. One wing slapped the surface hard enough to drench half the shallow end.

The lifeguards blew every whistle they had.

We were banned from the pool.

Orla crossed off item three while we sat on the curb in wet clothes.

“Worth it?” I asked.

She squeezed water from her hair.

“I’d do it again.”

“You can’t. We’re banned.”

“That makes it better.”

The terrible film was called *Blood Harvest Seven*, even though there had only been four previous *Blood Harvest* movies.

The theatre smelled of old carpet and burned popcorn. We were the only people at the afternoon showing except for a sleeping man in the front row.

Orla bought the largest popcorn they sold. She poured pickle seasoning over it, then chocolate candies, then enough salt to preserve a body.

The film was awful.

A group of attractive adults pretended to be teenagers while making terrible decisions near farm equipment. The monster wore a scarecrow mask and walked at the speed of a tired grandfather, yet nobody could escape him.

Orla loved it.

She shouted warnings at the screen. She threw popcorn when the characters ignored her. At one point, the monster was struck by a tractor, and she stood to applaud.

Near the end, one of the actors died.

It wasn't a good performance. He clutched his stomach, whispered something about his mother, and collapsed onto a hay bale.

Orla stopped eating.

"You know he isn't dead," I whispered.

"I know."

"He probably filmed another scene five minutes later."

"I know."

Onscreen, the surviving characters ran into the night.

Orla wiped her face with the back of her wrist.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because he gets to stand up."

The credits rolled.

She stayed until the last name passed.

Outside, evening had begun creeping into the streets. The air smelled like hot pavement and fryer grease. Store owners were pulling summer displays from their windows. A clerk at the pharmacy replaced sunscreen with notebooks and packages of pens.

September waited in cardboard boxes.

Orla crossed off the film.

"Peach next," she said.

"You already stole one."

"That was yours."

"You threw it through my window."

"Gifts can arrive violently."

We bought two peaches from the market.

Orla paid this time.

We carried them behind my old elementary school, where the baseball field backed onto a strip of neglected land. The grass reached our knees. Crickets rattled in the heat.

Orla sat beneath the fence and ate her peach slowly.

Juice ran down her wrist, beneath the dinosaur sticker, and into the blue light under her skin.

I took out my phone.

The picture showed an empty field.

“Stop,” she said.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You’ve been taking pictures all day.”

“So?”

“They won’t remain.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t know, Orla.”

My voice came out louder than I intended.

A flock of starlings lifted from the school roof.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. You want to watch dryers and ride buses while the clock runs out. Fine. I did it. I’m here. But don’t expect me to act like this is a normal Sunday.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re treating it like one.”

“That’s the point.”

I threw my peach into the grass.

It struck the ground and rolled beneath the fence.

Orla looked at it.

“I wanted to go somewhere,” I said. “I wanted us to do something I’d remember.”

“You won’t.”

“I know.”

The word cracked.

Orla lowered her head.

At midnight, the Accord would remove her from photographs, messages, school attendance records, and every mind that had held her. By dawn, my mother would think the broken window had been caused by a bird. The laundromat cameras would show me sitting alone. The bus driver would remember one fare.

And I would forget why Sundays had once been my favourite day.

“Why did you ask me to come?” I said. “You could’ve done all this alone.”

“No.”

“You could.”

“I could perform the actions alone.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“It isn’t.”

She pressed her thumb into the peach pit.

“September takes events first,” she said. “Faces next. Names are last.”

“I don’t care how it works.”

“But it doesn’t take everything.”

I looked at her.

“The Accord was made by people who think memory is a library,” she said. “They remove the books. They empty the shelves. Very clean.”

Her fingernail split the peach skin.

“They forget about the dents in the carpet.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You’ll lose the laundromat,” she continued. “But warm towels will make you sad for a while. You’ll forget the bus, but once or twice a year you’ll ride to the end of the route without knowing why. You’ll watch bad films after everyone else leaves the theatre.”

She picked at the dinosaur sticker.

“And you’ll buy peaches when they’re almost too ripe.”

“You planned that?”

“Yes.”

“You decided what would be left in my head?”

“I tried.”

I stood.

“That isn’t friendship.”

Orla flinched.

Good, I thought. Let it hurt.

“You decided what version of grief I get. You didn’t ask me.”

“If I asked, you would’ve said no.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know you.”

“For another six hours.”

She looked away.

That was the cruelest thing I'd ever said to her.

I wanted to take it back at once. Instead, I climbed through a gap in the fence and retrieved the peach from the grass. It was bruised and dirty.

Orla watched me wipe it on my shirt.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You should be."

"I wanted to leave something."

"You are leaving something."

"What?"

"A broken window."

She laughed once, against her will.

I sat beside her.

We finished the peaches.

Then Orla dug a hole with her hands.

The ground was dry and packed with stones. Dirt worked beneath her fingernails. She had to pull twice as long as I did because soil didn't yield to her the way clouds and fire did.

We buried both pits.

"They won't grow," I said.

"Probably not."

"Wrong climate. Bad soil. That wall blocks the morning sun."

"I know."

"You knew before we planted them."

"Yes."

"Then why?"

Orla pressed the dirt flat.

"I wanted to do something without knowing what would happen."

She crossed peach off the list.

One item remained.

Nothing.

We climbed onto the roof of the elementary school.

The access ladder had rusted away years ago, so Orla carried me. She complained the entire time, even though she could've lifted a car.

We lay on the warm gravel near the gymnasium vents.

The sun went down behind the grocery store. Streetlights flickered awake. Somewhere near the centre of town, church bells began ringing though none of the churches had scheduled services.

The departures had started.

Shapes moved through the sky that most people would mistake for migrating birds. A column of smoke pulled itself into a storm drain. Every mirror in the school flashed silver at once.

Orla's blue lines had reached her shoulders.

We did nothing.

For almost three hours, we spoke only when one of us had to.

Orla pointed out a cloud shaped like a dog's head.

I said it looked like a fist.

She said that explained a lot about me.

Later, I told her I was afraid of graduating. She admitted she'd thought high school graduation was a public execution until July.

I asked whether angels had schools.

She said they had instructions.

"That sounds worse," I said.

"It is."

She told me she had once been assigned to watch a glacier for four hundred years. I asked what happened.

"It moved."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Did you like it?"

"I loved it."

The church bells stopped at eleven forty-seven.

The silence afterward felt heavy enough to touch.

Orla sat up.

Her wings opened behind her. Several old feathers came loose and drifted across the roof. They faded before landing.

"It's time," she said.

"No."

"Kellan."

"We still have thirteen minutes."

"Twelve."

"You said seventeen hours and forty-one minutes."

"I rounded."

"Angels don't round."

"I learned it here."

She handed me the folded list.

All six items had been crossed out.

On the back, she had written three words.

TELL IT WRONG.

"What does that mean?"

"Paper is stupid."

"You've said that."

"September can erase a record. It can't erase a mistake because it doesn't know what the mistake refers to."

I looked at the blank pages in my notebook.

"Write today down," she said. "Change things. Say it rained. Give me black hair. Put the laundromat on Birch Street instead of Cedar."

"And that'll work?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

Her smile trembled.

"I wanted to do something without knowing what would happen."

Light gathered beneath her feet.

It came through the roof, through the school, through every locked classroom and forgotten desk. Her halo appeared in the dark windows below us. The cracks had sealed. The little marks along its inner edge shone like letters.

I grabbed her hand.

The blue light was hot.

"Tell me your real name," I said.

"You couldn't pronounce it."

"Try me."

“It would hurt you.”

“I don’t care.”

“I do.”

The air tightened around us.

Her wings spread until they filled half the roof. They had become too bright to look at directly, so I watched her face.

I tried to memorize it.

The small scar near her eyebrow. The crooked front tooth she’d grown after deciding perfect teeth were suspicious. The faint line on her nose from sunglasses she didn’t need.

Peach juice still marked her wrist.

“Kellan,” she said. “You have to let go.”

“No.”

“It’ll take you too.”

“Then I’ll visit.”

“You’d hate Heaven.”

“You hate Heaven.”

“That’s different. It’s mine.”

The light climbed her throat.

She pulled me close.

Orla had hugged me before, but angels are careful with humans. They know exactly how much pressure bones can take.

This time, she wasn’t careful.

Her wings closed around us. The feathers smelled of rain, dust, chlorine, and the terrible popcorn seasoning.

“I don’t want to forget you,” she whispered.

There it was.

The selfish thing.

The human thing.

The best thing she’d ever said.

“Then don’t.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Start with the bad parts.”

She laughed into my shoulder.

Below us, every clock in the school clicked to eleven fifty-nine.

Orla stepped back.

I held on until the light burned my palms.

Then her fingers slipped through mine.

Not away.

Through.

The roof vanished beneath her. For one second, I saw somewhere else: a place with no distance, crowded with wings and wheels and burning mouths. Thousands of voices spoke in one long note.

Orla looked small against it.

She looked terrified.

I shouted her name.

The clocks struck midnight.

She was gone.

The roof went dark.

I'm writing this at 12:18 a.m.

I remember a girl with wings. I remember a yellow coat. I remember that she lied badly and stole food whenever prices offended her.

Her face is already becoming difficult.

The photographs are empty. My messages have turned into conversations with myself. The purple pool stamp is gone from my hand.

But the dinosaur sticker is stuck to the last page of this notebook.

And there's dirt beneath my fingernails.

So I'm writing it wrong.

It rained today.

Orla had black hair.

The laundromat was on Birch Street.

She hated peaches.

She left at 12:01.

Her name was Orla.

Her name is Orla.

Her name is O...

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