



art by Seth Alan Bareiss

## Just Today

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

\*\*\*Editor's Note: One incident of mature language in the following tale\*\*\*

My best friend, Ben, is dead. We still hang. Not too many other people can see or hear him—just little kids and animals, and an occasional weirdo, so Ben is kind of stuck with me, which works for me. We do most things together.

I was walking to middle school on a brilliant blue fall day, the kind where the light was so sharp it almost cut, and the orange, red, and yellow leaves flamed like stained glass with the sun behind them.

In the grassy, tree-dotted park to my left, people played Frisbee golf. Chains clinked as they sunk their putts. On the road to my right, cars growled and snorted past. I crunched acorns under my feet on the sidewalk, like popping bubble wrap, and kicked up the spicy smell of downed leaves whenever I came to a wind-driven drift of them. I loved autumn.

But today was Halloween. Halloween, the one-year anniversary of Ben's death, when I'd held him in my arms after the hit-and-run driver drove away, leaving us in the dark in the middle of the street, candy scattered on the pavement, and Ben's body too smashed up to survive.

Today, Ben drifted from treetop to treetop, startling rafts of birds into flight. "Hey, I feel like I'm on a pirate ship," he called from the top of a bright yellow sycamore. "In the crow's nest!" Three black crows flapped away from him. "Everywhere I look there's an ocean of leaves, all colors. I wish you could see this, Rissa."

My nemesis, Ethan Arlen, jumped out from behind a white-trunked tree and grabbed my shoulders. "Aaaiiee!" I jerked.

Usually, Ben kept a lookout for Ethan and warned me to hide before I got caught. But not today. Today Ben was distracted by pirate ship trees.

"Gotcha," Ethan said, employing his masterful power of overstating the obvious.

I'd never been able to figure out why Ethan hated me. My fatness? My thrift store clothes? My loud mouth? My tortoise-shell cat's-eye glasses? There were lots of other kids he could torture more easily--I was no lightweight, and I knew how to punch.

Mom said Ethan was secretly in love with me. Gag.

I brought my fists up. Ethan was a hulking, shambling monster of an eighth grader. I was big, but he was twice my size. His face was close to mine as he breathed his swoon-inducing garlic breath into my face to weaken me. Usually his shaggy, dirt-brown hair hung down to hide his face, but I had seen what was under it, and that was one of the creepy things about Ethan. He was actually handsome.

Ethan dropped his hands from my shoulders to my wrists, squeezing them so hard I thought my hands would fall off.

"Whatcha want?" I said. The sun was too bright. The birds sang too loudly. My wrists ached, and I felt the deadness settle in me, the knowledge that if I fought, Ethan would just hurt me worse, so why bother. Been there, done that, got the I HATE BULLIES T-shirt.

"Whatcha got?" he asked. He gripped both my wrists in one of his giant hands, and pawed at my backpack with the other.

"I'm sorry, Rissa, I forgot to watch." Ben danced around both of us.

Ethan pulled my lunch out of my pack and stuffed it in his coat pocket. He dug deeper and found the bag of chocolate pumpkin muffins I'd packed for Mrs. Larrabee's art class, my favorite class. It was hard for Ethan to open the bag one-handed, but he managed it, and took a deep sniff. "What is this shit?" he asked. He dropped the bag on the ground and stomped on it.

I screeched. I couldn't help it. I'd spent a lot of time last night making those, and skipped some of my homework to do it.

Ethan shoved his face right up close to mine. "Quiet!" he said. "Shut up, or I'll give you something to cry about!"

I had a sense of *deja vu*. I'd heard Ethan's big brother Kyle say the same thing to him a couple years earlier, when Ethan and I were both smaller. Kyle was even bigger than Ethan was now, and he used to fall on top of Ethan during recess. It always looked like an accident, but sometimes Ethan ended up with a broken bone. Ethan was more relaxed now than Kyle, after flunking eighth grade once, had finally moved on to high school.

I shut up.

Ben jumped on Ethan's back, grabbed his head, and tried to shake it. He'd done this before and it never worked, but unlike me, he kept trying things that didn't work.

This time something was different.

"Huh?" Ethan said. He shook his head and looked around.

"Hey, it's working!" Ben tugged on Ethan's hair. His hands didn't really grab handfuls, but some of the hair stuck up in weird, staticky tufts.

"What?" said Ethan, eyes wide, face pale.

Ben and I had spent hours watching ghost movies and experimenting to see if he could improve his grasp on reality. Nothing helped. When he tried to grab anything, his hands went through it. He couldn't move stuff with his mind. He could barely make a cold spot for me to walk through. This was the first time he'd succeeded in affecting matter.

"Take that, you giant jerk!" Ben yelled, squeezing at Ethan's huge neck.

"What? That tickles!" Ethan said. He let go of me to scratch his neck. I punched him in the stomach, then turned and ran.

I thought maybe I got away, but after a pause, he came. "Rissa, hey, wait. Rissa, wait," he yelled as I neared the school. "Wait! It's me, Ben!" he called just as I veered past the Girl Club, the queens of eighth grade, who always gave me a hard time if I let them. I slowed, safe among chattering kids, figuring the presence of others was some protection.

Ethan puffed up to me and brushed the hair out of his face. He smiled. I'd never seen Ethan smile, though I'd seen him sneer plenty of times. "It's me," he said. "Ben. I kind of slipped inside him." He didn't sound like Ethan. He dug my lunch out of his pocket and handed it back to me, something else Ethan had never done before.

I stared into his eyes. His eyes looked the same, iced-tea brown, not green like Ben's. But he wasn't hurting me, so I tried a smile of my own.

"Maybe it's just today," he said.

"Today's good," I said.

## The End

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