

Deserted

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August caught my head before it hit the floor. Dimly, through the oncoming blackness, I could faintly hear him yelling, against the pounding sound of approaching feet.

April

I awoke to a cool breeze.

“Go away,” I groaned, pulling the sheet up past my head.

I buried my head deeper into the pillow and attempted to go back to some form of unconsciousness. Flitting between an awakened state and sleep, images of the coming day entered my mind. The anxiety they had caused returned, galloping and filling my stomach with twisted knots.

“There is no way I can do it,” I thought.

The mechanisms in my mind began working tirelessly to formulate a plan. I lay there, on my back, under the warm covers, rapidly weaving together a plan for the day ahead. After a few minutes, all sleepiness had left me; I fumbled for my phone to check the time. 7:14am. Sweet! I had time. Within fifteen minutes I had dressed and was sliding open the back door as quietly as I could. Ignoring my lazy monster’s inner protests, I stretched, started the music and jogged out the backyard.

The autumn air slapped me as I began my run. Barely anyone was out; the street was quiet. The solitude was nice. I could hear the thundering of the waves against the sandy beach. The distant sound of traffic added a melody to the song, while the steady chirp of the birds played the part of the vocals.

As my body continued to exert energy, the lethargic feeling crept back.

“No,” I told myself, “you can't stop. Keep going. It will be worth it.”

Across the streets and along the sand I ran. My breath came in ragged gasps and my calves burned from the constant pace. Yet, as I pushed down the lethargic protests, I began to smile. It *was* nice being outside, early on a Saturday morning. It *was* interesting to experience the small, seaside suburb of Brookwood waking from its late night slumber. And anyway, I would be happy once this run was over - it would be better for me long-term.

By the time I arrived home, slimy from sweat, everyone at home was up. August was in his routine spot on the patio, devotions book and Bible spread out on the outdoor table; Dad was in the kitchen, raiding the fridge for something to cook for everyone's breakfast; Mum in the garage, beginning her weekend DIY project.

“Morning,” I greeted August while walking through the back door.

“Hi,” he distantly replied, absorbed in what looked like the book of Revelation.

When I entered the kitchen, Dad discretely swept his eyes over my appearance before casually asking,

“Breakfast?”

“Uh, in a bit,” I made towards my bedroom to continue my workout. No need for everyone seeing me sweat in the backyard.

I prepared my music and timer in my bedroom. Resisting the urge to fall back onto my bed, I began low-impact cardio. My whole body resisted with tiredness as I continued to work it.

“Hang in there,” I constantly encouraged it. “You’ll thank me later.”

My mind wandered to breakfast as I did some exercises targeting the lower core. I mentally took inventory of what food was currently in the house at the moment.

“Cereal, toast, eggs,” I rattled off, beginning with upper core exercises,” er, frozen fruit, yogurt, yeah, let’s have a smoothie.”

Just when I decided my breakfast, the final ringtone sounded. I collapsed on the floor, now fully realising just how far I had pushed myself. Lying there for a few minutes, I was able to distinguish smells wafting from the kitchen. They smelled...sweet, sticky, buttery...French toast. Ugh.

“Phoebe, how many pieces of French toast do you want?” Dad knocked on my door.

“I don't want any,” I replied. “Thanks.”

Dad's footsteps faded away and I made my way to the bathroom for a refreshing, cold shower, the luminous numbers of 8:37am glowing on my bedside table.

My plan was implemented when I went out to McDonald's for Ange's birthday lunch. I purchased a grilled chicken wrap and a bottle of water (as per organised), opting out of buying dessert. Afterwards, Nick and I walked back to his house.

Nick was a tall teenager - a basketball player. He was an amazing guy, my best friend since year seven and the only Christian I could confide in.

For the entire walk back, he appeared a little molested. It wasn't until he had forced me to sit on his bed, that I discovered what was bothering him.

“I have to tell you something,” he began.

“Go.”

Nick turned his gaze away from me. “I'm moving.”

“WHAT?!” I sprung up from my sitting position, tears forming in my eyes. “Why?”

“Mum got a job in Brisbane. We’re leaving in August.” Nick still hadn't looked at me.

I gaped at the wall, no comments forming in my mouth. Suddenly, the news was too much for me to cope with. Tears erupted from my eyes, washing silently down my face.

“Phoebe,” Nick pleaded. He seemed to sense my emotions. “I *don't* want to, but Mum needed a job and this was where she got it. She’s been praying about this for three years. She’s finally got her answer.”

“It’s not a very nice answer,” I grumbled like some spoiled brat. Deep down, I understood where Nick was coming from. I chose to neglect that understanding, however. If God really loved me, he wouldn't steal Nick away from me.

“You’re my best friend,” I managed through the tears.

“And we’ll still be best friends,” Nick assured to my turned back. “We just won't see each other everyday.”

I pushed my palms to my eyes. This was the last thing I needed. The one friend who acted like a second brother, the friend I had become immensely close to, was moving out of the area, out of the region and out of the state.

September

“Phoebe? Hello?” August proceeded to tap his knuckles on my desk. “Did you hear me?”

“Uh, no. What did you say?”

“I said, are you coming to Youth Group tonight?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m exhausted.”

“Ok.” August began to walk out of my bedroom, but he halted mid-stride. Turning back towards me he asked, “Is Nick the cause for all of this?”

“This?” I prompted, developing a hunch that I knew what he meant.

August leaned against the door frame. “Moments when you zone out, loss of appetite, always active, ditching Youth Group, exhaustion...”

“Oh,” I considered his query. “Don’t know. Maybe. Why?”

“You’re different,” August announced bluntly. “You act different, you look different, you even talk different. I just wanted to know if you wanted to talk because... Nick’s not around to do it for you.”
Emotion exploded inside me.

“No,” I hurriedly answered, hopefully communicating that I wanted August to leave.

“Ok,” he replied, feigning nonchalance and walking out of the room. “By the way Phoebe,” August peered around the door, “I’m praying for you.” My older brother left my bedroom, leaving me to very contemplative thoughts.

A short weekend came and went. It consisted of long walks along the beach, a FaceTime call with Nick and a Netflix marathon in the later part of Saturday night. Despite my sleepiness, Mum insisted that I go to church on Sunday night; lending me her spare Bible because I’d misplaced mine.

Monday morning was routinely bereft of interest. Nick’s absence was even more prominent, especially with Ange and her futile attempts to supposedly, quote, “make you yourself again,” unquote.

I missed him heaps.

Additionally, all the comments about my state of being were causing me to experience ‘great moments of self-reflection.’ I was trying in vain to see how I had changed. True, I had stopped eating as much and had cut out junk food, but, that was a good thing. It was showing in my appearance. I could actually rock my jeans now. As for my “moments of zoning out”, as August had explained it, they were a result of just needing to avoid the busy nature of life.

On Wednesday morning, I was walking back from the school office, when Miss Camden approached me.

“Hi Phoebe,” the young counsellor greeted me. “Can you come to my office period five? I need to discuss some matters with you.”

“Sure.” I stared at her as she marched back to the office.

Why would the school counsellor want to talk to me? However, just as she had requested, I showed up at Miss Camden’s office at the beginning of period five. It was the size of a small bedroom, emphasising the colour purple. A desk was on the right of the door, cluttered with files, a laptop (enveloped in a purple case) and its charger cord. On the other side of the the room was a purple couch, with white cushions and a zebra Pillow Pet. Even Miss Camden’s coat, which she had draped over her desk chair, was boasting a light shade of purple.

Miss Camden motioned me to sit on the couch, while she sat down in her desk chair. She studied me as I made myself comfortable. I waited for her to begin the session, apprehensively. “Phoebe,” she said, “I want you to explain everything that has happened over the last twelve months.”

Unsure of her motive, I recounted the past year. I told her how I changed my diet, favouring the more healthy alternative. I explained how I became interested in cardio and adopted it as a regular part of my exercise. I narrated the events of the youth group camp I attended in the summer, how I read the *Harry Potter* series for the first time, the beginning of Year 10 and finally, finishing with Nick and his move to Brisbane.

Throughout the whole speech, Miss Camden was scribbling all over a pad of paper. After a while, I gave up trying to make eye contact with her and just caressed the zebra Pillow Pet I was now holding in my lap. She continued to scribble for about an additional minute after I had finished speaking.

“And have all those events caused some anxiety?” she questioned, now looking at me.

“Yeah,” I replied, still unsure of why she wanted me to tell her all this. “I guess some have.”

“Ok.” Miss Camden resumed her scribbling.

“Why?” I asked, slightly defensive.

“We just wanted to check up on you,” she stood up and walked over to her filing cabinet, stowing her scribbled notes inside the first drawer. “You can go back to class now. I'll keep in touch.” The counsellor showed me out the office. As I progressed through the building and out onto the school grounds, I was still bewildered at her sudden appointment.

“Why?” I mused, “just why?”

October

I unearthed the answer soon enough. I discovered that, my parents - concerned about my change - had contacted Miss Camden and requested that an appointment with her, for me, be made.

They never should have done that. That appointment was the catalyst for something bigger.

As a result of Miss Camden's diagnosis and at her advice, despite my screams of refusal, my parents enforced an 'eating plan.'

"Essentially," Mum explained bluntly, "we choose all your food."

I needed Nick now more than ever, in person. He'd understand. He would be able to sympathise with me. No one likes to be dictated the way I was beginning to be. I was completely deprived of choice and freedom.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?" I whisper-screamed at God after the first day on this new plan. "HOW COULD YOU TAKE NICK AWAY AND THEN TAKE AWAY MY LIFE?! I was happy!" I fell on my bed, resolve drained from the day and yelling at God.

My lazy monster, the only part of me who really knew what was happening, tried to comfort me, but I shoved it away.

"It's not for the best," I declared to my empty bedroom. "This is going to ruin me."

Filled with a fuel tank of new resolve, I strutted over to my wardrobe mirror and glared at my reflection. Pride gurgled inside me; my basilisk stare told me that I could continue with the new life I had created for myself.

Standing as though prepared for a fist-fight, I promised: “Phoebe Gabes, don't give up! Continue in this new and better life. I believe in you!”

“I want you to reflect on this question,” Matt, my youth leader, said as he clicked to the next slide.

The question: ‘is God always there?’ materialised on the screen.

“Think about it for about three minutes and then we’ll discuss it.”

It was a Friday night. I was sitting in a small auditorium at church. This was the first Youth Group night I'd attended in weeks. I pondered the question, struggling to keep my mind from wandering to other exciting matters. My logical, Christian reasoning automatically jumped to ‘yes.’ I had been taught this since preschool. My Kid’s Church leaders had repeatedly used the story of Jonah and the Big Fish to illustrate how you can never escape God. However, my secular mind resulted to ‘no.’

“Since when have you felt that God was with you?” it contradicted. “Surely not since the beginning of this year. Which makes, what?” it continued mockingly. “Eight months? Eight months of silence?” I considered this fact. Maybe, just maybe, Jonah was wrong. Maybe you can get away from God. “Or maybe,” I mouthed, “God *can* desert you.”

Dumbfounded at my new revelation, I began to think through my faith.

November

“Oh my gosh August!” I exclaimed accusingly. “Of course I'm ok! When are you going to get it into you little Jesus-head that I DON'T WANT TO talk to you?!?!”

I could tell I hit a nerve. Looking dejected, August silently left my room.

“Gosh!” I growled.

Suddenly, Dad yelled from the kitchen. “Dinner kids!”

“Coming,” I yelled back.

I angrily clomped into the kitchen and sat down at the table, right in front of a plate dressed with a homemade burger. Ugh. The remainder of my family joined me at the table. We all held hands and Dad said grace.

“How were your days? Dad asked of all of us, once he had prayed and we began eating.

“Great!” replied Mum. “I spent two hours shopping in Bunnings, had a soccer tournament and went out for milkshakes with the team afterwards.”

Dad smiled and shook his head humorously. Only Mum would have the attention span to stay in Bunnings for two, full hours. “Kids?” he asked.

“It was ok,” I said, only to provide him with an answer.

“Yeah, it was fine,” August echoed, purposely not making eye contact with me.

I fiddled with my burger as I ate. Conversation was scarce tonight; August and I weren't speaking at all.

“How are you still eating that thing?!” He finally spoke at the end of the meal. Everyone else had finished their dinner; I was the only one still nibbling my burger.

“I'm a bit full.” It wasn't a complete lie, I was beginning to feel full.

“Just finish it,” Dad told me, shrugging.

“Don't want to.”

Dad stared at me in surprise. “What?”

“I don't want to,” I repeated, more sincerity in my tone this time. “I'm full and if I don't want to finish it, I don't have to.”

My family turned all their heads towards me, drenched in befuddlement. Never, in all the fifteen years of my life, had I uttered a retort to my parents in this way. Yet, the promise I had made a few weeks ago was a scar on my memory. I would fight back, even if that meant temporary rudeness to my authorities.

“Phoebe.” Mum spoke calmly on the surface, but I could identify frustration mounting. “It’s no big deal. Just finish your dinner like everyone else does. And I don't think God would appreciate your rudeness in the future.”

“I don't really care what God thinks,” I grumbled, savagely tearing off a piece of bread, stuffing it in my mouth and sauntering towards the bin, dumping the rest of my dinner in with the other rubbish. I placed my plate in the dishwasher and humphed towards my bedroom. Once inside, I closed the door and grinned at myself in the mirror. “Awesome job,” I commended myself, “it’s working.”

My promise continued to be upheld over the proceeding weeks. While minimised the rudeness (I discovered that I didn't have it in me to be rude constantly), I did manage to manipulate my eating plan. It is so fascinating how parents actually trust their children to the extent that they honestly believe their children won't dispose of their uneaten food at school. I still ate some of it. I do understand that humans have to eat at some point.

Ange, Lucy and I decided to go on a shopping spree before the pressure of exams abruptly leapt upon us. We all concurred that our wardrobes were in desperate need of summer clothes and Ange was itching for a new swimsuit.

So, we made our way to the mall on Saturday, purchasing some gorgeous new spaghetti-strap shirts in the process. It felt incredible. I didn't have to worry about anything. My body, selecting modest clothes or

deactivating the gossip that always arose at the mall was all neglected. For the first time in my life, Godly things didn't matter. For once I was happy and satisfied with myself. I was achieving perfection.

I decided to redesign my room that very same day. I removed the bible verses from my wardrobe mirror; replacing them with *Harry Potter* quotes. I stored away my devotion books and journals to vacate additional room for my novels. I added the new shirts to my dresser drawers. Satisfied with the newer appearance of my bedroom, I went to the laundry to retrieve the vacuum cleaner. On my way back to my bedroom, I overheard Mum and Dad frantically conversing in low voices in their bedroom. Intrigued as to what they could be discussing, I darted into the bathroom and listened through the wall.

“Can't you see what's happening?” Dad sounded panicked.

“Yes, of course I can see it,” Mum replied, exasperated. “But I think you're going about this the wrong way. You need to be sensitive about it and just let her open up when she wants to.”

“Great,” I thought sarcastically. “They're talking about me.”

“George,” now Dad was sounding impatient, “this isn't a random girl problem which can resolved with girl talk. It's a real issue, covering her mental, physical *and* spiritual health.”

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘spiritual’?”

“You haven't noticed!?! Phoebe's been disregarding God less and less. She doesn't seem to care about being obedient or Godly. I popped into her room this afternoon and she had taken down all her bible

verses and replaced them with secular quotes! I saw her boxing up her devotions books. Don't you think that sounds a little off?"

"Maybe they were used devotions books," Mum sounded as though she was trying to find every reason to not accept what Dad was saying as truth.

Because that's what it was: truth.

"Honey, you know that they were current ones. The top one was for November."

"Oh," Mum took a deep breath. "Yeah, ok, I get what you're saying now. I guess we probably should crack down on this eating plan then, shouldn't we? She eats what we give her, arguments or not."

I heard Dad agree, just before he began to complain that his shirts always came back wrinkled from the laundry.

I felt as if I had just been attached to a drip and it had drained all my energy away. I couldn't even comprehend what was about to happen. Now *all* my freedom had been abducted.

Yearly exams arrived promptly. Like a leech, it sucked out all my remaining energy, leaving me depleted. I was on the cliff of collapse. Life felt like a circus act, juggling erasers and tennis balls and apples all at once. I was studying, exercising, doing my best at resisting the eating plan. Sleep was a luxury I felt I had little time for. I yearned for something or someone to take everything off my shoulders.

My wish came in a form that was highly unexpected.

“Phoebe?” August rapped on my bedroom door as I threw my pencil down in frustration.

“What?!” I growled aggressively.

“Do you need any help?”

“Yeah.” I flung the door open, my eyes on fire. “I want you to show me how to get *out* of exams.”

“Sorry, no can do.”

I screamed, then sat in my bed, the adrenaline fading as quickly as it had arrived.

“I think you need a rest,” August speculated.

“I DO NOT NEED A REST!” I screamed. “I NEED TO KNOW HOW TO FACTORISE QUADRATIC TRINOMIAL EXPRESSIONS!”

The stress of the past ten months had finally penetrated my armour-like resolve. The lazy monster inside me insisted to take a break; my body obliged. I collapsed to the floor, welcoming the unconsciousness.

All I heard before I blacked out was August’s yells and a thousand feet running in my direction.

Heaven - one week later, December

God observed August pacing outside the hospital ward, tossing and catching his phone. “Call him,” the Lord Almighty muttered.

Nudged by the Holy Spirit, August dialed a number on his phone.

“Whassup August?” the receiving end greeted.

“Nick!” August acknowledged, sounding relieved. “Did you hear what happened?”

“N-o.” Nick sounded cautious. “What happened?”

“Phoebe collapsed.”

Nick made a strangled sound.

“Peace,” God instructed.

“Can I talk to her?”

“Yes. That's why I called you.” August exhaled deeply. “Phoebe's in a dark spot at the moment. She's been ignoring God for about a month. I thought it was just a phase, but I was wrong. On top of that she's incredibly stressed, mentally unstable and is hospitalised. I'll put you on,” August hurriedly said, wanting

to avoid Nick's reaction as to why he hadn't been informed of Phoebe's condition before. He walked into the hospital room and handed the phone to Phoebe, who was just sitting on the bed. "It's Nick," he said.

"What happened?! Tell me everything," Nick demanded when Phoebe took the phone.

"Fine, ok. So, I was studying, I collapsed, was rushed to hospital, deemed unfit to be discharged, had exams cancelled and was told to stay in here for a fortnight." Phoebe let everything out, with an aura of wanting to get the recount over with as quickly as possible. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"I guess that's fine," Nick relented. "I just want to know one thing: have you prayed at all?"

Phoebe rolled her eyes. "Why would I have prayed?!" she couldn't believe Nick actually thought that would help. "God has proved that he isn't even there and doesn't care about my life at all. He completely stuffed it up. So, why would I turn to him?"

The God of the Universe looked sadly upon His creation. "I *am* there Phoebe. You just need to see the big picture. Give it time. You will see me there."

Phoebe refused to see it. God sent sign after sign to bring her back to Him. He sent Nick and his caring Christian character. He snuck Bible verses into Phoebe's daily conversations. God even sent Matt to visit Phoebe and encourage her about His continual presence. But Phoebe didn't want to see it. She was so

hardened by what God had willed over the previous months, that she adamant against His sovereignty and comfort.

“Phoebe, the answer is right there,” God insisted as Phoebe was discharged from hospital and taken home.

“*I'm* right here.”

She still didn't see.

As the end of term bled into the summer holidays, Phoebe slid into a depressing state of torpor. She was fixed in a cycle. Wake up, mope around, exercise, eat when told to, resist, go to bed. She did not want to acknowledge that God was bringing her back to Him.

“It's time,” God decided near Christmas. “August, I have a job for you.”

Using the Holy Spirit, God sent a message to August. Instantly, he understood what God was saying.

“God, I can't! She - I - that's personal! You know how embarrassing that would be if everyone found out?

I'd get all the attention; I don't want those sort Jesus-things to be made *public*! These instructions are SCARY,” he added, as a freakish afterthought.

God replied, speaking through the Holy Spirit. “I make things happen for a reason. One of the multiple reasons for that was to bring Phoebe back to Me. You could lose a sister in Heaven if you disobey.”

August agreed, not wanting to disappoint his God. He crossed the hall to Phoebe's closed bedroom door and apprehensively knocked.

“Come in,” Phoebe’s voice sounded like a car tyre that had been flat for years.

August entered her room. Phoebe looked...inhuman.

Her once bright face was now pale, with a little bit of added fat added to the gaunt picture. Her collar bones were sticking out of her chest and her ribcage was visible through her tight shirt as she breathed. All the sparkle had been extinguished from her eyes; they were dark and uninhabited.

“Do it,” God encouraged, creating the scene.

“What do you want August?” She asked, swinging her legs on the side of the bed.

“I need to tell you about a dream I had.”

Phoebe looked perplexed. “Weird but, ok.”

August began. “All of us, including Nick, were standing in the church. It was filled with dazzlingly, white light. We were wearing white robes and holding palm branches. And you,” August hesitated, “you weren’t wearing or holding anything. You were just standing there. You asked why we weren’t wearing any robes. Nick said it was because you didn’t want to.” August left the room and came back within a few seconds, gingerly holding his well-worn Bible. “I think the dream was referencing this.” August flicked towards the very end of the book and presented Revelation 7:9 to his sister. “Read the whole verse,” August instructed.

Phoebe accepted the bible and recited, “ ‘After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.’ ”

Realisation gathered in Phoebe’s expression. “So, does that mean that, because I wasn't wearing the robes or holding a palm branch, I won't be standing before the Lamb?” The realisation hit entirely. “I won't be standing before God?”

“In Heaven, yes,” August confirmed. “You will stand before Him, on Judgement Day, but if you continue to ignore Him like you have been doing, God will sentence you straight to Hell.”

Phoebe’s eyes fogged over.

“Did He send you that dream?”

“Yes. I think He really wanted you back.”

“Come on Phoebe, see it,” her Heavenly Father softened His daughter’s heart.

August scrutinised Phoebe’s expression as she considered what he had just said. “He was there,” August reasoned, as his little sister’s expression went from dull to hopeful. “He was there all the time. Here, read this.” August rifled back through his Bible, resting on Isaiah 41:10.

“ ‘So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.’ ”

“See?” August said when she'd finished reading. “God’s always there. He was there when you got into that mess; He was there when you ignored Him. But, better yet, He was going to and will uphold you. I get that we still have a lot of work to do. You're still pretty sick, but...I think it will make this whole thing easier with God on your side.”

“I think you might be right,” Phoebe sighed, her eyes growing increasingly foggy. “Can we-”

“YES!” August ardently agreed.

Watching the scene, up in Heaven, God smiled. “I’m always with you. Hey, angels!” He bellowed two minutes later. “It's time for another welcome home party!”