

AUGUST 6TH
AUGUST 6TH
AUGUST 6TH
AUGUST 6TH
AUGUST 6TH
AUGUST 6TH

Version 26

For the twenty-sixth Tuesday in a row, I sit at the kitchen table, watching my mom sprinkle blueberries into pancake batter.

In a second, she'll wipe her face with her knuckles to avoid staining her cheek purple. She'll somehow leave a trace of color on her chin anyway and, as she wipes it off, she'll tell me about the news. *Maybe today, this time loop will end and she'll talk about something different*, I lie to myself, not believing it for a second.

"I was watching the news earlier," Mom says. My chest heaves out a sigh so heavy I worry my lungs may give out. "And Sandy on Channel 5 said this year's lovebug season's going to be particularly bad."

I mutter, "That sucks," and do my best to pretend that I haven't heard her say this over twenty times already.

I could tell Mom I'm sick of hearing about those damn lovebugs. I could break her favorite vase that's always filled with

handpicked flowers from her garden. I could scream and cry. I could burn the whole kitchen down.

It wouldn't matter, because at sunrise, tomorrow will settle back into today, as seamlessly as the hardwood floors settling beneath my feet. All thanks to an agonizing irritable bowel syndrome flare-up that broke time's ability to move forward (at least, that's my theory).

I did try telling my mom once, on day three. In a fit of tears, I begged her to see reason, attempted to unlock the subconscious part of her that had lived August 6th already. *Somewhere in her brain, I thought, the memories could be buried, waiting for me to dig them up.*

If they were, they were far too deep for me to unearth them. Mom had shuffled me back to bed, insisting I get more rest. She tucked me in and gently told me that upping my therapy appointments "may be beneficial." Of course, the suggestion only lasted until sunrise, gone from her mind once the next August 6th cycled through.

It's much easier to pretend everything is fine and eat a pancake. Or rather, choke down a pancake. After twenty-five days, they taste less like fluffy goodness and more like dry cement.

When we're done eating, Mom heads out to her garden. I usually snuggle up on the couch and read a book with a plot vaguely connected to time or pay for a scholarly article on the probability of time loops, hoping that the way out is somehow woven into the text.

It never is. Every Google search leads to loose threads and dead ends. Every time loop movie I study leaves me hollow during those last five minutes, when the music swells and tomorrow

comes. At that point, I tend to shut my laptop and stare at a wall instead.

After a few hours of alternating between deep-diving and contemplating what god would curse me with an existence this mind-numbing, Dad calls. I typically pick up on the first or second ring and he says, “Hey, Bug, you up for getting your ass beat at Scrabble today?” Occasionally, I don’t pick up until the last ring. When I do, he says, “What took you so long? Your uncles got here an hour ago, we’re ready to beat you at Scrabble. Are you free?”

Today’s a “pick up on the first ring” type of day. I’m not in the mood for waiting.

As I assure Dad that *yes, I’ll be over soon; no, Mom doesn’t mind; and yes, I’ll come equipped with my extensive vocabulary*, I pull on my only clean outfit that I laid out on August 5th. It’s a baggy cream-colored T-shirt with, very ironically, an image of Garfield on the front. Every time I catch a glimpse of my reflection, his cartoonish face taunts me, reminding me that Tuesdays can be a lot worse than Mondays. At least the shirt’s a 4XL, leaving more room than my typical 3XL, so it’s extra comfortable. Small blessings.

Once I’ve dressed and been properly mocked by an animated cat, I make my way to Dad’s. The ball of nerves that makes up my brain has a bad habit of putting off my driving test “until next year,” so I’m forced to walk through the hellish Florida heat. My feet sweep aside the fallen Spanish moss that I know will trip me as I brace myself for the only text I’ll receive today. It’s from my old best friend, Bea, a picture of a refrigerator captioned: *Have you seen this?!*

Sending each other inconsequential pictures with dramatic captions is the only remnant of our fizzled-out friendship. I don't remember how the inside joke started, let alone why it's stuck around while the rest of our relationship has dwindled. I don't know why exactly our relationship dwindled to begin with, how I went from being her everything to barely anything when we got to high school.

The refrigerator photo is more than a bittersweet reminder of who Bea once was to me, though. It's a signal that I'm about to leave my neighborhood and stumble on another ghost from my past: Jess Friedman driving by in their light-blue punch buggy.

I wish this weren't the most interesting part of my day, but with a history as messy as mine and Jess's, any interaction—even one that's happened twenty-five times already—feels significant.

When Jess's family moved to Lewiston a decade ago, my dad invited them over, excited to bond with a new Jewish family in our overwhelmingly Christian town. Jess and I became fast friends. After our first dinner together, we embarked on three months of trips to the beach, pretending to be mermaids in Dad's pool, and far too many games of hide-and-seek.

Then, one night when summer was winding down, my dad and Jess's dad got into some big fight. To this day, Dad refuses to talk about it. All I remember is shouting and doors slamming. Dad sat me down, tucked my stuffed animal frog Dr. Frogbert into my hands, and told me we wouldn't be spending time with the Friedmans anymore. I cried as he stroked my back, assuring me that one day, I would understand his decision. That *one day* still has yet to arrive.

I didn't see much of Jess after that. They lived on the other end of town and went to a different elementary school, a different middle school. When it came time for high school, they choiced into Waterford High, the school in my district.

When we saw each other again freshman year, we slowly fell back into a rhythm of friendship. We didn't hang out outside of school or anything, but we sat together in World History and would get caught up in conversations about how stifling the heat was that day, how excited we were for the TV show that was dropping eight new episodes on Friday, how annoyed we were by the many pointed looks shot in our direction whenever the Holocaust came up.

Unfortunately, we weren't rebuilt to last. Only a few months into the school year came what Dad now occasionally calls The Jess Friedman Incident and I occasionally call The Worst Non-Repeating Day of My Life.

Some seniors thought it would be fun to play a school-wide version of Assassin—a game where everyone pulls a person's name, and that person becomes your "target" who you have to "kill." When you "kill" your target, you eliminate them from the game and inherit their target.

In most versions of the game, this "kill" is committed with a shot from a Nerf gun or the flick of a laser pointer. At the ever-dramatic Waterford High, the seniors decided that only a kiss could truly kill.

It was, needless to say, a disaster. The lines of consent were scarily blurred or, really, nonexistent. It got shut down pretty quickly, administration swooping in with a weak PSA about STIs and the power of abstinence—but only after a week of utter chaos.

I had no intention of carrying out a kill. A rising MVP on the Waterford River Otters' Quiz Bowl Team, I thought I was a genius for pulling a name and ignoring it. I wasn't uncool for opting out, but I didn't have to kiss anyone either. Thomas Sinclair—the name on my slip of paper—was nice enough, but the thought of kissing a boy felt wrong to me, even if I couldn't quite place why back then. Win-win.

I very naively, however, didn't consider the fact that someone would pull *my* name. It didn't cross my mind that Jess Friedman could pull Josh Samson's name, give him a peck in the band room, and inherit a scrap of paper with *Phoebe Mendel* scrawled on it.

On my way from biology to math class (a brutal back-to-back), I shuffled along, staring at my feet, and Jess charged up to me. They stood directly in front of me, interrupting the flow of the crowded hallway traffic, stopping me in my tracks. They reached a hand up, pressing their pointer and middle finger to my cheek and their thumb to the curve of my double chin. Then they leaned in (or rather up, since I have about half a foot on them) and kissed me. As soon as I began to lean in and close my eyes, they lurched back.

"Who do you have?" they asked. I looked around to gain proof that that really happened and earned it through the hordes of people who had stopped walking to witness the scene go down.

"I . . . what." I remember I didn't say it like a question. It was one single, blankly stated: *what*.

"For Assassin. Who do I have to kiss next, Mendel?"

"Oh. Uh. Thomas," I said. And then I ran.

Jess shouted after me, asking if it was Thomas P. or Thomas S. Their question was nearly drowned out by the crowd around them laughing, the sound of it curdling in my stomach as I darted into the bathroom. I texted my parents that I wasn't feeling well and hid in the safety of a stall until my mom came to pick me up.

I'm still not entirely sure why I ran. Maybe it was the whole being-a-lesbian-even-if-I-couldn't-put-the-word-to-it-yet thing. Maybe it was being a freshman, trying to blend in, and having someone pull me out of obscurity and into something very public and gossip-worthy. Maybe it was having my first kiss taken in one of the hallways of Waterford High, which perpetually have dicks drawn on the walls and the faint scent of urine in the air.

Or maybe (and this is the option I like least) it was the fact that Jess kissed me and pulled away the instant I dared to kiss back. Maybe I found that a little (completely and utterly) gutting.

After it happened, I asked our history teacher to move me to the opposite side of the classroom, and I cut off my re-budding friendship with Jess at the knees. They tried to talk to me, cornering me between classes, begging me to hear them out. I brushed past them enough times that, by the end of the school year, they gave up completely.

Now our once-intertwined lives are reduced to this, and only this: Jess driving past me in their car and giving me a *look*.

Beyond our past, the look itself makes this part of my day so intriguing. Their expression is the only question beyond *how the hell do I get out of this time loop* that I have to mull over. Their eyes are simultaneously apathetic and curious. Sometimes, I can

almost convince myself that they're checking me out, thinking about that kiss, wondering what it would be like if it had gone down somewhere more private, like I do. Other times, I'm certain they're glaring at me.

I decide today that no, it's not a glare. It's gentler than that, but still rough. It's the gaze of a kitten—but a kitten that's sizing up a lizard, learning everything about it before it pounces.

Every repeated day, right as I think I'm finally getting a grasp on it, they swivel their head back toward the road and speed away.