

Ships That Pass

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ACT 1

Alden and his cousin Janelle are in a family room. Janelle is clicking/typing. Alden paces, lost in his thoughts:

ARIA

ALDEN

It's not getting easier, garbage bags every day
Heaped on the curb until Tuesday's trash.

In the crosshairs of cleaning out, not enough time to check
Each book for tucked-away photographs.

Between her front door and the growing trash pile
My steps wear a trail of dirt in the grass.

I guess, if I'd started sooner
I guess, if I'd had more time
But death doesn't wait until you're good and ready,
It sneaks up behind you and covers your eyes.

I sat by her bed and still I didn't tell her
Who I'd left behind in a waiting room chair.

We had agreed that if anyone asked
He'd tell them that he had just driven me there.

Back in the waiting room, I scanned each face
Before letting him run his hand through my hair.

I really thought I'd tell her
I thought I'd have more time
When I tried to summon everything I'd rehearsed
It felt so much easier to let the words die.

RECITATIVE

JANELLE

Alden... Alden! Earth to Alden?

ALDEN

What?

JANELLE

(grinning) I have an extremely important question. Is it... or is it not true... that you were...

Double-click.

JANELLE

Paul Revere for Halloween??

ALDEN

C'mon, we need a photo for the obituary, not, like—

JANELLE

Twice!

ALDEN

—Halloween stuff from forever and a half ago. And it's not my fault, my mom didn't let me watch TV.

JANELLE

Okay, but I'm copying these as a finder's fee. Or, you know, in case I ever need to blackmail you.

ALDEN

When you're done, see if you can hack into her subscriptions? We should deactivate as many as we can before the next billing cycle.

JANELLE

Don't worry, your mom's data is safe in my hands.

ALDEN

Stay out of her accounting stuff, though, okay? That's other people's private info.

JANELLE

No promises.

ALDEN

Oh my god. Okay. (beat) I'm gonna go outside and make a few calls.

JANELLE

(teasing) You gonna call your boyfriend?

ALDEN
Uh, yeah.

JANELLE
(serious) Is he coming to the funeral?

ALDEN
No, I'm not outing myself to the family literally over my mother's dead body.

JANELLE
(remembering) Oh! Can you text my mom—tell her I posted on your mom's Facebook page about the wake.

ALDEN
Um, maybe next time you can ask me before posting on my mom's accounts? I'd kind of like to, you know, read it first?

JANELLE
Don't worry, I kept it simple. Only one skull emoji.

ALDEN
Um...

JANELLE
Jesus, you're gullible. (somewhere between mock and actual hurt) I can't believe you actually think I'd do that.

ALDEN
Sorry, you're right. (beat) Okay, I'm gonna—

JANELLE
Wait, hang on! I just got into her email. Look at these notifications—kudos!

ALDEN
What are kudos?

JANELLE
From fanfiction.net!

ALDEN
She probably thought fanfiction was, like, book reviews.

JANELLE

WAIT. She's excellentelementary?

ALDEN

What?

JANELLE

I've read this. When we were in high school. It was kind of a big deal in the fandom. Look.

ARIA

MOM

Sherlock sees everything,
And that is the very thing
That makes John Watson nervous.

Entering chem class,
John's suddenly side-tracked
by his piercing, dark laser-focus.

"You must be Watson."
John wants to respond,
But suddenly finds himself breathless.

RECITATIVE

ALDEN

So what, she was reading it?

JANELLE

No, Alden. She wrote it.

ALDEN

She WHAT.

ACT 2

ARIA

MOM

Sherlock strolls into class, sits in the back,
A tumbler of coffee clasped in each hand.

John sneaks a glance. Sherlock's eyebrows raise slightly.
John looks away too quickly and kicks himself inwardly.
Hopefully it looked like he was staring at the coffee.

RECITATIVE

JANELLE

I remember this now! Agh, high school, what a time: Friday nights reading Johnlock on my mom's laptop.

ALDEN

Like the philosopher?

JANELLE

No, you nerd—John Watson slash Sherlock Holmes.

ALDEN

Right.

JANELLE

This was a good one too! It's a high school AU where Watson, Sherlock, Irene Adler, and Lestrade are on the school newspaper together.

ALDEN

AU?

JANELLE

Alternate universe. Like the characters are all the same, but they're teenagers, doing high school stuff—prom, cutting class to smoke behind the school, playing dodgeball...

ARIA

MOM

Now it's down to the two of them
On opposite sides of the gym,
Studying each other intensely.
Each flex and flick of the eye
An excuse to stare yet agony.

John meets Sherlock's eyes.
They feel way too close.
It's like being touched,
Like a palm on John's chest,

Feeling his pulse.

When John regains focus,
He's unconsciously spun
His kickball, it—

Out of sync with the music, the aggressive sound of a paper shredder.

RECITATIVE

JANELLE

What are you doing?

Another grating blast of the shredder. Shuffling around papers.

ALDEN

These are all from 1996. (reads name on the paper) Arkana Aquarium's not gonna need their 1996 taxes. (beat) You're still reading that?

JANELLE

Yeah, I mean... you don't wanna read it?

Another shred.

ALDEN

No. I don't.

Another shred. He switches the shredder off.

ALDEN

Do you know what high school was like for me?

JANELLE

You mean other than math league?

ALDEN

My mom used to always say, "Alden, you just don't have time for girls." (pause) You know, like, when someone gets your name wrong, and the longer it happens, it's harder and harder to correct them? It was like that. For four years, or... I guess longer.

JANELLE

I'm sorry.

ALDEN

It wasn't just that.

ARIA

ALDEN

It was Friday night, and I was tired of being me.
I scraped my way down the roof, somehow landed on my feet.
My sneaker toes were soaked as I trailed through the grass.
It didn't matter, I knew where in the woods they'd be.

A bonfire limned the faces of people I usually hated.
But there was the boy I'd been mooning over, illuminated.
We sat on the log, his toes pointed toward mine.
I didn't think he'd kiss me, but maybe I'd ask anyway.

But then she burst into the party and dragged me to her Camry.
As she drove me home, I watched the moon become blurry
I wished I could become the moon: impassive, looking down,
Being a stupid sky rock seemed better than being me.

I wondered if she knew what I was up to. And sure,
It's great she's less closed-minded than I gave her credit for.
But it's also not fair, that she wrote these boys with empathy
She never showed me, or thought I would care.

RECITATIVE

A brief pause.

JANELLE

Alden, I really think you should read this.

ALDEN

Why?

JANELLE

Just listen:

ARIA

MOM

John slams his locker.

Sherlock looks stunned.
 “I hope you’re happy Sherlock,
 Pretending to like me—
 I hope using me for your case was worth it.”

“Watson,” Sherlock stammers.
 But John is furious—

JANELLE
 Okay, maybe this isn’t the best passage to choose, but—

ALDEN (simul.)
 Stop dancing around the point.

MOM (simul.)
 “Stop dancing around the point,” John says.

A beat, then:

JANELLE
 It doesn’t take a genius to see it: you and John have a strong resemblance.

ACT 3

RECITATIVE

ALDEN
 I don’t sound like that!

JANELLE
 Watson uses all your turns of phrase. Like, “forever and a half ago” appears... (typing) six times—all John Watson dialogue.

ALDEN
 It’s a thing! I didn’t, like, make it up.

JANELLE
 You also both say “like” a lot.

ALDEN
 So does everyone!

JANELLE
 But here’s what I’m saying: in the original stories, Watson has the personality of a cinder block. But this Watson is sweet, complex, anxious, principled. He honestly reminds me of you.

ALDEN

(has never accepted a compliment in his life) I'm not—

JANELLE

And Sherlock is kind of a pretentious piece of shit. But Watson sees the good in him, he makes him likeable. (beat) Plus he has it really, really bad for Sherlock.

ALDEN

Uh...

JANELLE

Look, I get it, it's kinda weird. And who knows, maybe it wasn't a conscious association on her part. I'm just saying, on some level, she knew. She knew, and she didn't care, and maybe she didn't know how to tell you it was okay.

ALDEN

She wrote a novel's worth of queer content but couldn't say, 'Hey, Alden, it's okay to not be straight'?

JANELLE

Well, how would you have reacted?

ALDEN

(rubs face) Okay, well, I guess... maybe this is similar, when she tried to give me the talk one morning, I pretended to roll over and fall back asleep.

JANELLE

Yeah.

ALDEN

Yeah. (beat) To be fair, I don't think she was going to cover, uh, the stuff I wanted to know.

JANELLE

So if she'd said, "Hey Alden, I'm writing a slash fiction set in high school..."

ALDEN

Okay, yes, I would have been mortified.

JANELLE

Both of you were so afraid.

ARIA

JANELLE

Nights in high school, I'd sit in the dark,
Clicking through fanfics and shoveling chips.
I read these stories, and I bet my friends did too.
 But we didn't talk about what we did alone in dark rooms.

Then in college, I dropped some hints
About how Donna Pearlbottom and Missy should totally kiss.
My roommate said, "I think they should kiss too!"
 It was 2pm on a Tuesday, the sun shone through.

When I think of your mom, I see her at this desk:
The white square of her screen in a pitch-black room.
Then I see you upstairs, queer angst-consumed—
 Things each of you'd think alone in dark rooms.

People tell me I'm too outspoken to be liked
Or have poor taste in the media I consume,
But fuck them! If they make you feel shame, they've won.
 They can sulk in their dark rooms. I'll take the sun.

RECITATIVE

Alden sighs. Janelle scrolls quickly then twists around in her chair.

JANELLE

When did your mom drag you out of that party?

ALDEN

Junior year, maybe? I think it was around Halloween. There were leaves on the ground.

JANELLE

Did she seem... different after that?

ALDEN

I tried to talk to her as little as possible afterwards. I guess, maybe she seemed kinda sad?

JANELLE

Huh.

ALDEN

What?

JANELLE

She stopped updating it in November of that year.

ALDEN

Oh.

JANELLE

I'm not saying that's on you, just... damn, I can't believe she didn't finish it.

A pause while they both digest this.

JANELLE

Should we?

ALDEN

What?

JANELLE

Finish it. They cracked the case—thank god, I'd have no idea how to wrap that up—but John and Sherlock never reconciled.

ALDEN

I mean, if you want to, you're the expert, I'll just—

JANELLE

If anyone's the expert on being a queer teenage boy, it's you.

ALDEN

I don't—

JANELLE

C'monnnnnn.

ALDEN

(slight laugh) Okay, ummm...

DUET

JANELLE

The key to slow-burn romance
Is miscommunication,

ALDEN

So it hinges on willful
Misinterpretation.

Yes!

John guesses Sherlock's thoughts
And that's what he acts on

Instead of trusting
His intuition.

Exactly. So:

Sherlock is on John's doorstep,
And this time John begins,

He says:

"You've got one tumbler of coffee
Instead of your usual two.

Your boots were tied hastily—
The laces are loose.

If I didn't know better, I'd deduce

You were in a hurry to see me."

Sherlock says:

"A good detective doesn't let bias
Skew his interpretation of clues.

I've been biased against thinking you cared
Because it seemed too good to be true."

John says:

"I know you, every wink and clue—

I notice everything,
Just like you."

"Well, I wanted this time
To make it obvious, so,"

"You could try to hide it, and I'd still know
from the look you're giving me."

And they kiss! Finally!

Not bad, and maybe
what she would have wanted.

RECITATIVE

JANELLE

I'll tell you what: when you talk to the family, if you ever need backup, just say the word "Johnlock." I'll pull up your mom's story and start reading aloud. That'll shut them up.

ALDEN

Thanks, Janelle. You're a good cousin. And friend.

JANELLE

I love you too, Alden. (beat) Now go call your boyfriend.