

## Conspiracies in Aisle 7

“Your prescription won’t be ready for an hour, ma’am. You’re welcome to wait if you’d like,” the young woman said. She had traces of teenage acne which stood out against her white lab coat. She looked too young to be a pharmacist and for a moment I wondered if she only worked here to supply a habit.

“I have some shopping to do,” I said.

“We’ll call you when it’s ready.”

I dug into my purse in search of the list I made for Mrs. Hendel.

“Grace?”

I looked up at the mention of my name. He seemed taller than the last time I had seen him. His white tee shirt was crumpled and his hair disheveled in a way that almost looked intentional. Time treated him kindly, allowing his features to grow more rugged and handsome. I silently scolded myself for not washing my face every night, eating processed foods, and clearly not doing whatever he’d been doing that allowed him to age so well.

“Brandon!” My voice was creaky. It sounded fake. I sounded fake. “What are you doing here?”

“Well,” he laughed. “There’s nothing to eat at my house.”

“That’s a good reason,” I said. I always said the dumbest things when nervous. In junior high, during an oral presentation on Nancy Reagan and the war on drugs, I randomly told the entire class that I only felt safe when sleeping with a Care Bear my grandma had given me. There was no direct correlation between drugs and that bear, it was just nervous rambling.

He smiled and laughed politely. He told me he had seen my mother one day at the farmer’s market. He raised bees in his spare time and sold his honey there, something I found incredibly frustrating.

“Of course you would do your part to save a dying species,” I said.

He nodded, pointed to my scrubs and said, “You too.”

My mother must have told him about my Hospice career over his honey. Knowing that woman she probably also mentioned the divorce, my anxiety, and how often I attend movies alone.

“Well,” I shrugged after an awkward beat of silence. “I have quite a bit to pick up for Mrs. Hendel.” I began to push my cart away from him.

I didn’t want to do this. This walk down memory lane. This awkward conversation where we talk about things going on in our lives as if we really care. If we cared, we would’ve kept in touch. The people that wanted to be in my life were in it and for once I felt content with my lot in life.

“Can I join you?” He asked.

“You want to shop with me?” It seemed an odd request and while I wanted to say no, I’d been in town for weeks now and only spoken to my mother and Mrs. Hendel. Besides, I was curious, with almost ten years of silence and no social media presence, Brandon was a mystery.

“I want to see what grown up Grace Spencer buys,” he said, grinning.

His smile eased something in me and I was brought back to the night we sat in folding chairs on his parent’s deck. It was late summer before our senior year of high school. We talked honestly about our friendship and the inevitable expiration date. We both would go on to college, but we wouldn’t put pressure on one another to keep in touch. We watched the wind push ripples through the water of his parent’s pool and talked about how high school friendships were never long lasting. It was unrealistic. “What do you think adult us will be like?” He’d asked that night. In response, I quoted something I overheard my father say about being overworked and underpaid. It seemed so foreign and far away to think about grown up bills and stresses. We couldn’t possibly imagine the stressors of committing to a 401k or voluntarily eating green vegetables. We were children on the brink of change but that night, we seemed mature beyond our years.

“Okay,” I said, handing him the list. I pushed the cart slowly as he read aloud the items Mrs. Hendel needed.

“Is she bad?” He suddenly asked. I told him most of the food she eats needed to be blended. He knew Mrs. Hendel was dying. Get well cards crowded her mantel. Everyone in town knew she was dying.

“Yes,” I said.

“Has she mentioned Mitchell?” A half-grin on his face.

“She doesn’t talk much, Brandon,” I said as I read the back of a rolled oats container. “I’m not going to indulge in your Hendel conspiracy theories. It’s an urban legend.”

“So she hasn’t mentioned him?”

“No,” I said putting the oats back on the shelf. I turned to him and smiled, “While on her death bed, she has not mentioned her dead husband.”

“Missing husband,” he corrected. He was pointing at me now, as if I knew better. “His body was never found.”

“There was a funeral and everything.” I was reaching for a box of Cream of Wheat, my fingers barely touching the shelf. I sighed and looked at him, admitting defeat and begging for help with a crinkled forehead and sad eyes.

“Closed casket.” He reached up, grabbed the box of Cream of Wheat, and tossed it in the cart. “Grace, that casket was empty.”

The morning of Mitchell’s funeral my mother made me sit at the kitchen table as she french braided my hair. My mother loved Mitchell. After her father left, Mitchell would take her and her brother out on his fishing boat. I called him Grandpa for the nine years I knew him. For the funeral, she bought me a black dress with embroidered yellow flowers from Goodwill. It was a size too small. The collar itched and the seams dug into my armpits. I pitched a fit about going but only because that dress was miserable. Brandon and I had been talking about seeing a dead body all week, I just hadn’t imagined having to dress up for the occasion.

As soon as my family walked in, I broke free from my mother’s grip and made my way around the funeral home in search of Brandon. I found him in the back of the room by a plate of stale cookies. His two older brothers were shoving cookies in their pockets. I cringed at the thought of eating in the same room as a dead body. “He isn’t in there,” he whispered when he saw me. I called him a liar, but his brothers nodded simultaneously and said Mitch Hendel wasn’t in that casket. They said he was too tall. Unless dead bodies shrink, they claimed he wouldn’t fit. My arms were crossed in pure skepticism, but Brandon took my hand and said he’d show me. He led me through a maze of adult legs and soft sobs until we reached the front of the room. Mitchell’s casket was a highly polished white but the dim lights made it look jaundiced.

“Darren tried to peek, but Mrs. Hendel tattled to my mom,” Brandon said. We stared at the casket and slowly inched our way towards it. His brothers were right, the thing seemed too small for Mitch. Brandon pretended to cry, resting his head directly on the casket. I swallowed my gum trying not to laugh. My mother had been watching and grabbed both Brandon and I and led us back to the cookies telling us not to move. I don’t remember anyone talking about

Mitchell being absent from the box that day, only Brandon and his brothers. But I don't remember hearing anyone say he was in there either.

"Hendel. Hendel, can you please see the pharmacist," the voice screeched over the loud speaker, echoing down the aisles. Brandon and I both looked up at the ceiling out of instinct.

"Mitchell heard us," he said. I punched his arm playfully and we laughed as he navigated the cart towards the pharmacy.

"We're having an issue with the dosage. We're trying to get ahold of Mrs. Hendel's doctor," the teenage pharmacist said. She was definitely trying to steal pain killers. "It could take a bit longer."

I assured her it was correct and agreed to wait in the store while she called. I found Brandon playing with the blood pressure machine.

"I can't move yet," he said through semi-closed lips. He sounded like the Tin Man. I smashed my hand against the buttons on the display until one of them deflated the cuff around his arm. "That thing almost killed me," he said as he stood.

"Don't you have food to pick up as well?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I like to do my shopping on the outskirts of the store. Ya know, to avoid the processed stuff."

I knew it. The lack of preservatives in his body did wonders for his skin. Brandon was always the funny kid in school, but not the funny kid who had to be funny because his parents were poor and he wasn't much to look at. He was gifted with both humor and good looks. And his parents made decent money. He was the only kid in our class with a pool, also the only kid in class with a real life stay-at-home mom. She was at all of our class parties and field trips keeping tabs on Brandon. As a result, he didn't date often, claiming his mom hovered too much for him to ever speak to a girl let alone take one out. This made me question what I was to him. A friend? A playmate? Or just some poor girl whose parents worked long hours for thrift store clothes and frozen dinners?

"How do you know when a cantaloupe is ripe?" Brandon asked. We had wandered over to his side of the store, but he still had put nothing of his own in the cart.

"You smell its belly button," I said, showing him the small circular indentation at the top of the cantaloupe.

“How do you know its the belly button and not the butthole?” He was trying to keep a straight face, but the edges cracked. His laugh was deep and contagious. In a matter of minutes we were both in tears and gasping for air. “Do you have to puree this for her?”

“No,” I said, wiping my eyes. “The melon is for me.”

“What?!” He gasped. “Does Mrs. Hendel know you’re buying personal groceries with her blood money?”

“Stop it.” I took the cantaloupe from him, placed it in the cart, and walked over to the apples. “You can’t possibly be serious about this, Brandon.”

“I’m very serious.” He looked at me intently and for a moment I felt an unravelling. Like pieces of me were about to scatter amongst the apples, spill down the edges of the display, and onto the polished floor. Pieces I hadn’t even known were tangled.

“No,” I shook my head breaking free of the brief moment. “Impossible. Mrs. Hendel weighed, maybe, 100 lbs at the time of Mitchell’s disappearance.”

“Ha!” He shouted. “So you agree he disappeared?!”

It had been on the evening news three times in one week. It was crowded at the lake when the police narrowed their search and took boats and divers out to look. After a time of fruitless searching, only the newspapers continued to follow the story of Mitch Hendel. Brandon’s mom kept a close eye on us then. We had repeatedly tried to ride our bikes down to the lake thinking we were better detectives than any professional on the case. She would catch us every time, load our bikes into the back of her shiny SUV, and escort us back to the house. With her keeping a watchful eye on the two of us, it was easy for Brandon’s two brothers to go to the lake unnoticed. Every evening for weeks, they came back and told us stories of the lake dredging. “They found Mitch’s shoes,” they’d say. “His toenails were dug in the soles,” they’d lie. Brandon soaked up every word. I thought it impossible to lose your toenails in your shoes.

“I will not take part in this,” I said as he tied my apples up in a bag.

“Because of HIPPA?”

“No. I just don’t buy it. When the police wanted to give up at the lake, she funded her own investigation. She really wanted to find him, Brandon.”

“It’s a sleight of hand, Grace.” He began wiggling the fingers of his left hand. “She has them looking over here,” he started. “Meanwhile,” with his other hand he pretended to stab me in the abdomen. “She is gutting him in her basement and hiding him in the freezer.” His knuckles

grazing my stomach sent tremors to my toes. I took a sudden step back and knocked into a poorly placed pyramid of lemons, sending a few of them rolling down like an avalanche.

As we picked up the rogue lemons, under my breath, I said, “I just don’t believe everything I hear.”

Summer before college, some of Brandon’s friends from select soccer had a huge graduation party down by that same lake. The kid’s parents were the kind who planned trips over the summer leaving behind their offspring to do whatever God willed. That summer God willed a party. It took Brandon nearly an hour to convince me to come with him. His brothers had horrible fake IDs they managed to use successfully to score us some cheap beer and a bottle of vodka. I sipped the liquor from the bottle nervously as Brandon talked to his friends. I wandered around the massive house letting my fingers graze things I’d never be able to afford. It was during my wanderings that I happened upon a group of girls. They saw me come in with Brandon and were curious about our relationship. As they talked about how cute he was and giggled incessantly, I assured them we were only friends. Their tanned faces lit up and they took turns saying things like, “We didn’t think so” and, “Not his type” and finally, “No offense.” I took a swig from the bottle and excused myself to find Brandon.

He was sitting outside on a picnic table looking at the water. A couple guys were on the dock relieving themselves and shouting obscenities across the lake. I hiccuped as I sat down next to him. He smiled and asked if I was enjoying myself. I shrugged and he said, “Yeah, me neither.” He told me then how scared he was about college, about growing up, and about leaving me. It felt as if something in me had shifted, spawned by alcohol or the conversation with the blondes, whatever it was, I felt empowered. I got up from the table, stepped in close, and kissed him. He let me for a brief moment before he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me away. “Wait,” He said. He looked confused and my stomach dropped. I turned, ran to the lake, and puked. I pretended to sleep on the way home. The days following I lied saying I didn’t remember a thing from that night.

Now, old pop music drifted down the aisles accompanied by the squeak of a loose wheel on someone’s cart. Brandon opened a bag of almonds and crunched loudly as I searched the shelves for unscented soap.

“Hey,” he said. “This is actually a lot of fun. Most fun I’ve had grocery shopping.”

“Yeah,” I said as I put the soap into the cart. “This is nice.”

“You know, there’s been two unanswered questions in my life,” he said.

“More conspiracies?”

“No,” he laughed. “I’ve genuinely always wondered what happened to Mitchell Hendel.” He kept on while I rolled my eyes. “Hear me out, Grace. You’re right, Mrs. Hendel was too small to carry out a murder. But women are sensitive, and if he hurt her, you know, like embarrassed her or made her feel a certain way, she could very well be capable of anything. Like the way you left for college without even saying goodbye.”

The cart had stopped moving. At some point, I don’t know when or where, we stopped pushing and stood stationary in the toiletries aisle. I looked at him and seeing his vulnerability, I felt shame. I wanted to tell him I was immature. I wanted to tell him I was hurt and confused and found it easier to just run away without speaking. But mostly, I wanted to tell him I was sorry.

Instead, I said, “And the other unanswered question?”

“What would’ve happened had we given us a shot.”

Just then the overheard speaker loudly blared Hendel’s name again. Her prescription was ready. Things turned cordial as I gathered the prescription and paid for the groceries. He quietly helped me unload them into the car then nervously hovered by my car door. It seemed fitting to end things here, with him, this way, to just get in the car and drive off. But again, I felt emboldened, only this time I was sober. I kissed him softly. He stood unmoving, but inviting. I pulled away first then asked if I could call him next time I needed to pick up a few items.

That evening, as I fed Mrs. Hendel her applesauce, I talked to her about Mitchell, something about how funny he was and how much my mother loved him. My words gained no reaction. I pressed on with things like, “You must miss him,” and “He was such a great fisherman.” Her unresponsiveness pushed me further. “You would think someone would’ve seen something.”

As I wiped the corners of her mouth with a napkin, I saw a single tear slide down her wrinkled cheek. I scolded myself for letting Brandon’s theories go to my head. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t — you must miss him so much.”

She shook her head slowly, and with closed eyes she grabbed my hand. I leaned in, waiting.

“Mitchell is always here,” she said, her voice hoarse. I smiled at the thought of a love so timeless you never forget, always feeling them with you. She squeezed my hand tighter and opened her eyes, “Mitchell, he’s always in the garden.”

After Mrs. Hendel fell asleep, I cleaned the kitchen while letting her words replay in my mind. Was the garden his memorial? It was a wild flower garden that seemed to bloom year round, did she look at it and think of him? I went out to the back porch, and looked at the blooms under the moonlight. I can’t remember how long I sat there, staring and thinking, wondering about all the things I’ve misinterpreted and what my life could’ve looked like had I just asked questions.

Eventually, I pulled my phone out and found Brandon’s number. He answered on the second ring with an enthusiastic tone.

“Brandon,” I said, watching a yellow flower sway in the evening wind. “Do you own a shovel?”