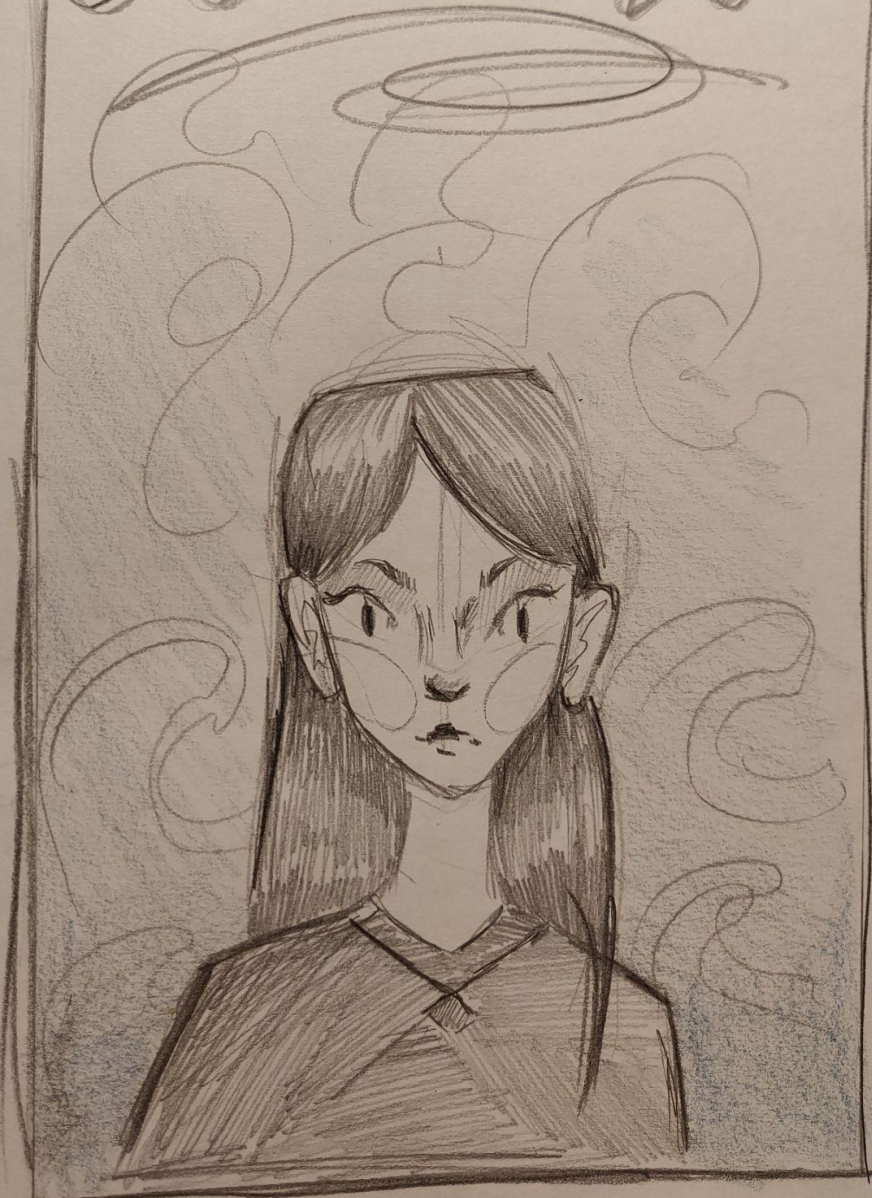
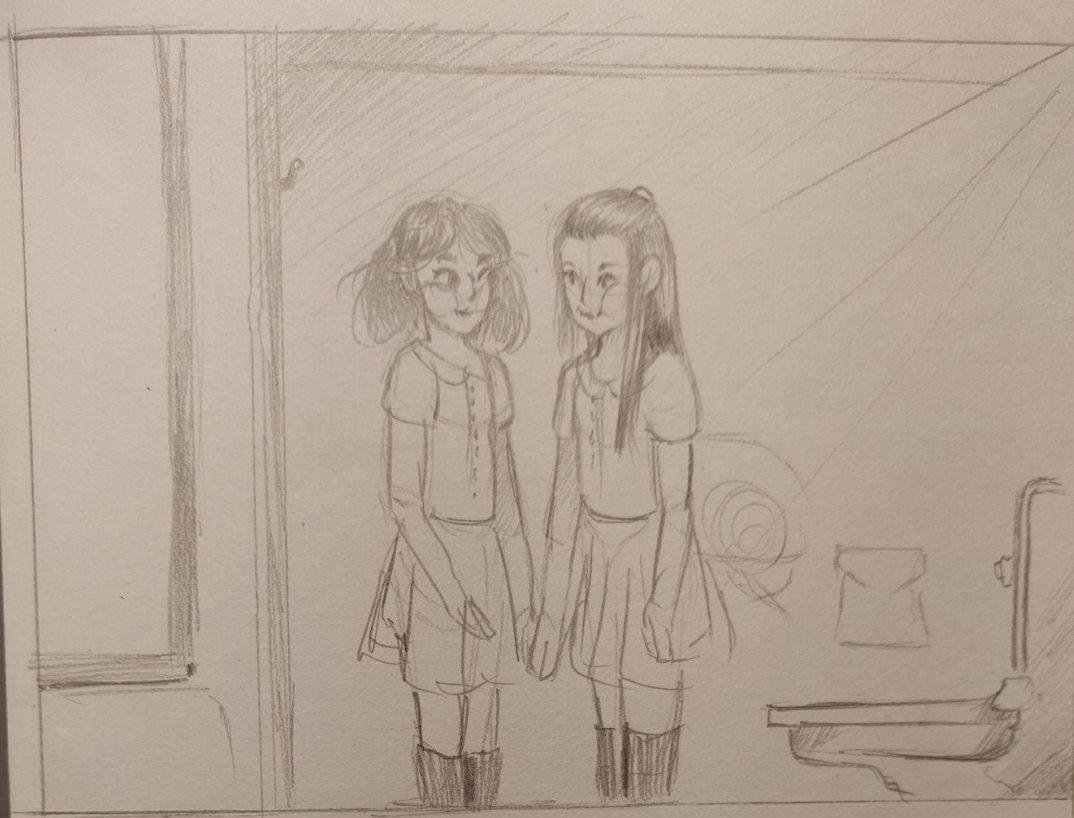


Willow



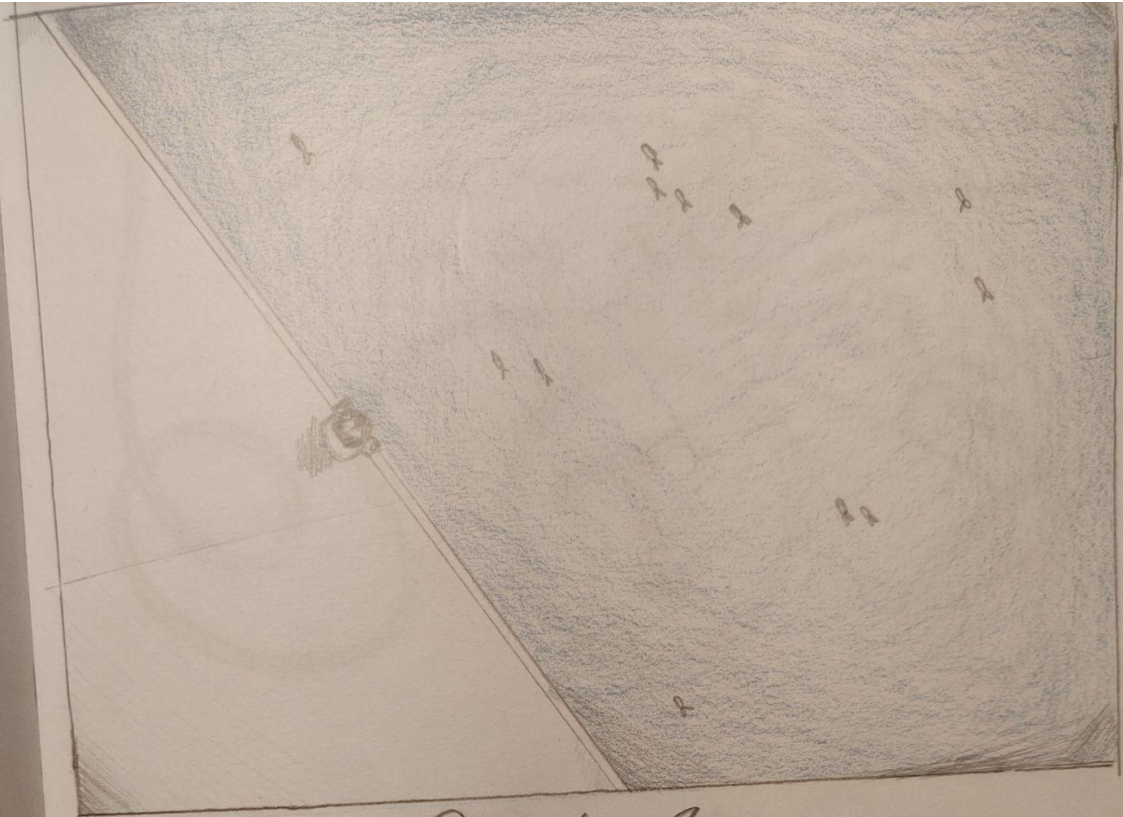


Chapter 1

Willow and I are in the bathroom. It's old, but clean, and coated in what feels like centuries of old paint. The building is only fifty years old, but at times the history of this place feels insurmountable, like you could drown beneath it. We hide in the last stall, the two of us giggling around the corner, out of sight from the teachers. We should be outside, at recess, but I was always cold at that age, I still am always cold. She holds my hand, and I think that perhaps I could never be happier, perhaps here in this moment I could stay eternally safe, and light, and finally warm.

She lets go though,

she always lets go.

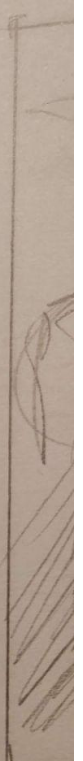


Chapter 2.

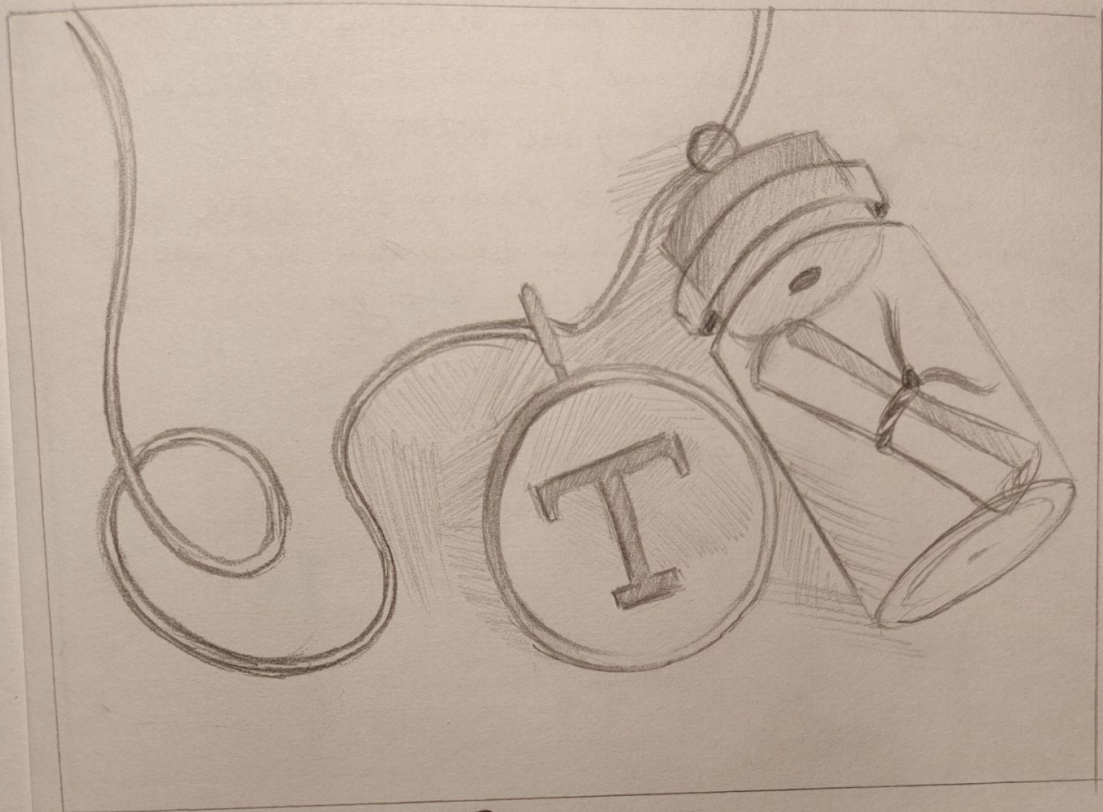
When we were five Willow would talk on and on about a cruise ship she had spent a summer on with her grandparents. I can't remember it well, but she would leap about the playground talking about the water slides and the games you could play. I clearly remember the way her eyes would alight though the smile that would dance across her face. She would tell me, she would lean over the railing that separated the ocean from the ship, and that she could just watch the water pass for eternity. That it was so blue and clear and never ending. She would spend her time creating stories of creatures that lived beneath the waves and that every time she blinked it was almost like they were there before her.

Willow was always talented like that.
A disasterously wonderful liar, a
fabricator of epic proportions.
It couldn't always be her fault though.

I was always the one
that believed her.



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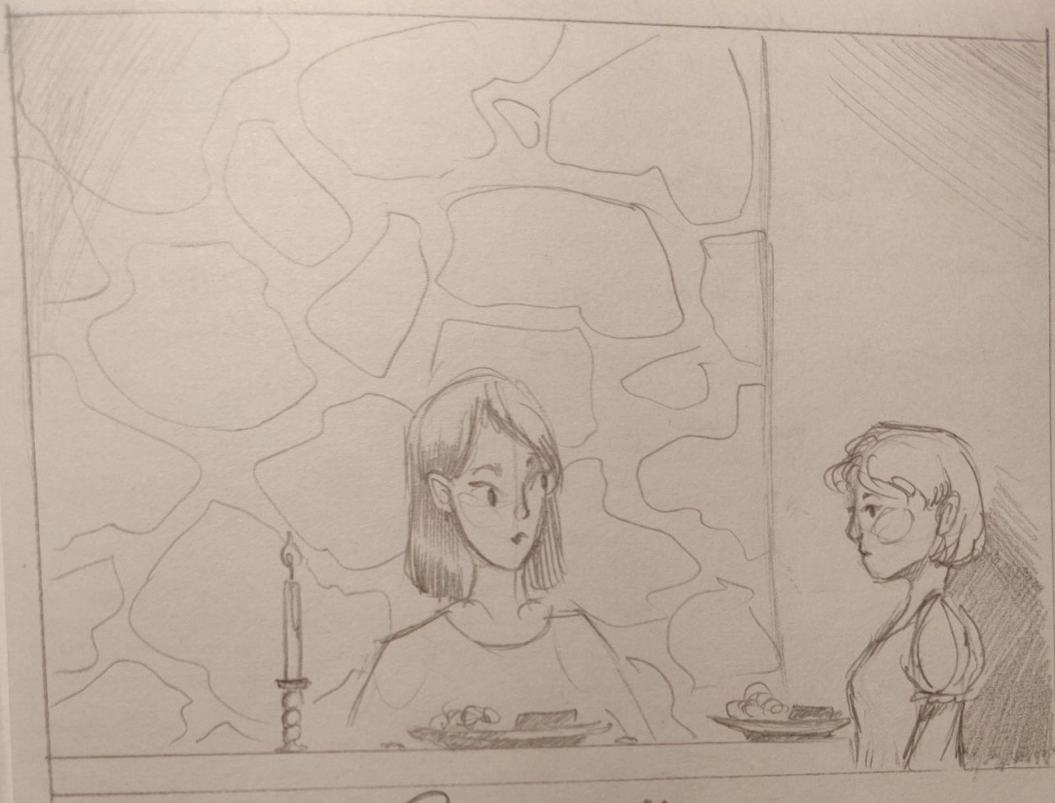
Chapter 3

When I was 11 Willow gave me a necklace with the little charm of a message in a bottle. The little bottle suited Willow and I well, our shared childhood of creating stories and dropping ourselves into the strangest of adventures was often marked in an ideological sense by the message in a bottle. It symbolized our dreams, our hopes, the fantasy that we could runaway together and be okay.

The necklace itself broke years down the line, it was drearily made, picked by a child for a child. But there was always a strange endurance in the charm itself, dingy around my neck fickle in its perfection.

It's lasted longer now than Willow ever did,
it's lasted plane rides and swims in flat sea she
once spent hours telling me tales of.

I wonder now if that means she still thinks
of me, if it's still whole because she also
wishes she had never let go.



Chapter 4

My Mother brought Willow up in conversation recently. She asked me if I knew how she was doing. It was strange to have to stutter through amicable lies of our separation, like thinking of her didn't make me want to scream into her tales of a bottomless sea.

"She's doing well." I told my Mother.

"She's moved away." I said, like I had any right knowing anything about her. Willow was like a ghost in that way, her branches always hanging in my periphery. I could look in any direction and always find someone whispering about her, side eyeing me like perceived quiet somehow made me less aware that Willow's name and my name always danced together in murmurs.

I think she liked it that way. I think the fact that Willow and I would forever be linked by the naive acceptance that humanity is more so truthful than liars made her proud as can be.

Willow wanted our youths to be tied this way, that for once I would have to be the liar not her.



Chapter 5

Willow shaped so much of what I was that sometimes drawing the line where she ended and I began was impossible. Part of me wanted to hate her for that, but I found that anger grew tiring and a melancholy acceptance was often easier to reach.

I blamed myself, you know? I blamed the fact that my personality bled too thoroughly into hers, like I should've known that defining ourselves based on the lives we lead around each other would cut so deep later down the road.

Here's the thing about being a child vs marked from the wisdom of now being an adult, you simultaneously know everything.

and nothing at all.

I was blind in my youth whilst never having
seen the world any clearer.

Willow gave me the greatest memories of
my childhood, while at the same time
drugging me into a stupor that loving her
was the same as living.

She was hell, I know that now,
but hell has a funny way
of keeping you warm when
you're cold.



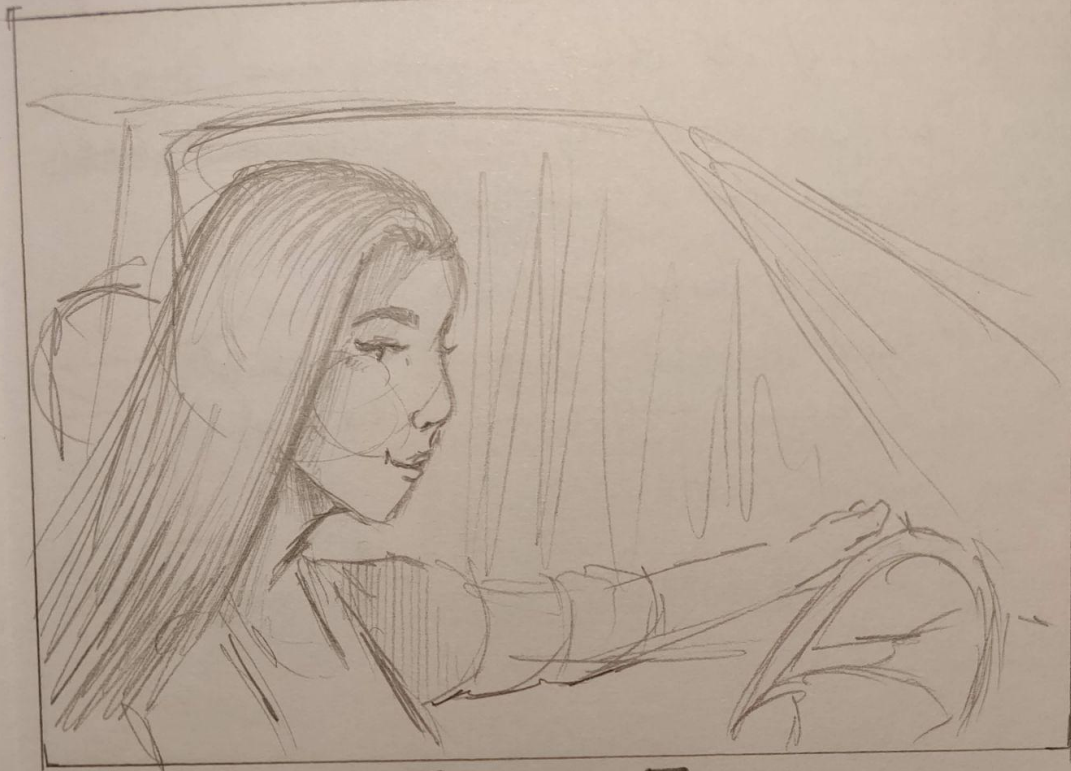
Chapter 6

I thought of Willow just the other day as I walked past her apartment. It was strange because I didn't know if the emotion I was feeling was fear or longing.

I think I am forever cursed to see the places we most spent our time in a shadowed sort of light. There is no darkness, there is no brightness, it merely is or it isn't, shaded just a little bit.

I am afraid of these places because what I wish for most in the whole world is to see her, what I wish for is what I know would be the worst for me.

There is no logic in it, and as I looked up at her apartment I yearned to just be with her as we once were and not as we now are.



Chapter 7

Some time ago, not long before we stopped speaking, we went on a trip. Willow and I drove South across the border, and further and further until I think we would've been lost had it not been for the old paper maps. Her Mom had insisted we store in the glove compartment.

God, we had laughed at that, the bitter irony that when it came down to it, all the technology in the world had forsaken us and all that had remained was Maps older than either one of us.

Willow had looked at me, mirth in her eyes, and had made me promise we never let her Mother know that she had been right about the maps. Willow would never live it down.

"I swear." I had said, and I don't think I had ever wanted to kiss her more than in that moment.

I wonder now what would have happened
if I had, if all that yearning and longing
I kept bottled up in my pinky had ever been
able to see the light of day.

But it was for the better
and dreaming of what we could've
been only burns in the end.

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Chapter 8

The last time I saw Willow wasn't good, the fallout of over 15 years of friendship is never clean, it's messy and it hurts more than you could ever expect. They say that losing a lover breaks you in a way you can never recover from, but at least in that situation the lines are drawn, the colour is bright and you can tell what side you want to be on. Losing Willow had no direction, no distinction, it ached because here stood a decade of history and before you a decade of possibilities, and every time you would pick one up to admire it, it would shatter in your palms.

Willow was the calmest storm I have ever experienced. She sat at the deepest depths of her oceans and shook everything until it was impossible to ignore her. She screamed in every silent look, and wished me dead with her cold shoulder. I know now it wasn't my fault, but then was different.

Willow let go, I think in anger at the time,
but now all I can see is the jealousy
in her actions, the resentment aimed at
my person.

Knowing Willow did me no favours
and that was, and that
was all the more evident by the
manner with which she left me.

But sometimes I look back still,
clinging to that stupid charm, and

I wonder

if she ever loved me?

I wonder

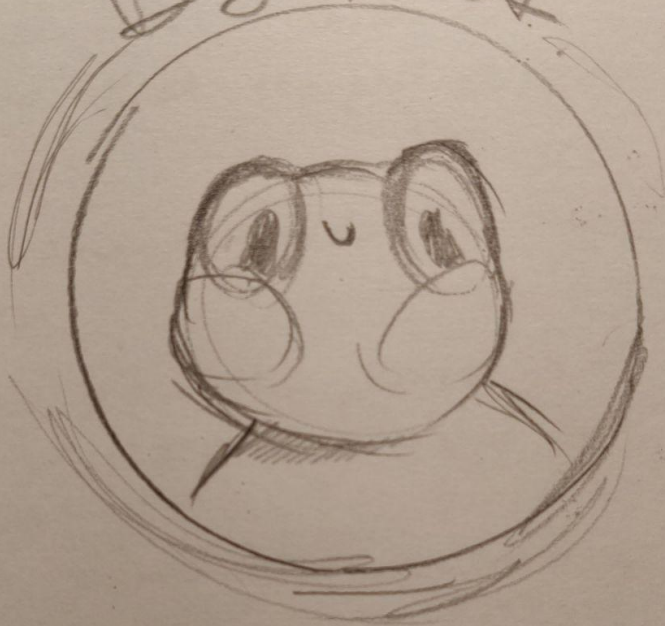
where did the little girl who
would hold my hand in
secret go?

I can't have the answers
and I can't understand where
she went,

but Willow, Oh Willow,

I miss you so.

By Tas



2022