

DIRTY JULY

By Kate Thomas

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Itaewon, South Korea. Wednesday 7.5.2000

"Just throw it in," Min-jun gestured to Chihu. Chihu stared at the bloody underwear he held in his gloved hand. Throw it in together with the blankets, the towels. He did as he was told, and then returned to the printer paper he'd laid on the hostel floor. He lifted it gingerly.

"What are you doing?" Min-jun barked.

"I can get a print this way."

"No, doesn't matter. C'mon!"

"But what about—"

"C'mon!"

Chihu could see the outline of a faint boot print. Most likely military. Tactical gear. Maybe a Sketcher. Something chunky with heavy treads. He folded the paper, afraid the crease would damage an already compromised piece of evidence. The girl did not deserve to die like this. Her face stomped in. Her chest slick with spit. The crusty gash in her head. She was young. American. Probably twenty-one. Ripe for this kind of thing. Long dark hair. Thin. He guessed brown eyes, but hoped they were green. He wanted to lift her lids to see what could have been. What kind of girl she was. What kind of woman she could have become.

He hated corpses. He hated being an officer, but he appreciated the uniform. He appreciated what it got him. Bourbon on the rocks. Respect from his parents. Women who had real jobs, who didn't rely on neon strings and stripper poles to pay rent. A gun.

"Chihu! What the hell, man? Let's go. Detectives are here."

Chihu pocketed the bloody paper, and followed Min-jun out. He could hear the sirens. The ambulance around the corner. Soon she would be in the morgue. In the hands of a depressed pathologist. *We really fucked this one*, he thought. The detectives would have all kinds of questions he wouldn't be able to answer. Except for one. Her

name was Rainey Mills. That's what her friend said through big balloon tears. Rainey Mills.

Seattle, Washington. Monday 9.25.2000

"These are for you." Meg placed the Ziploc bag on the conference table.

"Cookies," Agent Foster raised an eyebrow.

"Oatmeal Raisin."

"We can't accept these," Agent Kim said gently.

"I wanna help." An awkward pause swallowed the room as Meg focused her pool blue eyes on Kim.

"You're having nightmares?" Foster coughed.

"Ever since I got back from Seoul."

"You've been staying?"

"With my sister. Brie."

"Her husband's a lawyer?"

"Ethan. Yes."

"So you're back at school?"

Meg nodded. Everyone had been really supportive. The campus authorities had rallied, despite that Wash Light was unfamiliar with tragedy. The most shocking thing to happen there had been a few years back. A mentally ill professor had gone streaking through the school coffee house, claiming the British were coming, the British were coming! He then cut his hand open with a letter opener, and made two students watch him bleed. No one was traumatized, just deeply intrigued. It was a spectacle, fantastic gossip, but not this time. This time there was trauma. This time Wash Light offered counseling to students and teachers, a hugely public memorial, and an increase in campus security. *Talk about school spirit!* Meg chuckled aloud.

"Can you tell us about Rainey?" Kim's voice startled her. He looked disappointed. She realized she must have appeared strange, but this whole thing could make a person totally hysterical. *Get it together*, she thought. *For Rainey*.

"She was nice, but not like obviously nice, like...unexpected, smart, a good student...I'm sorry, she's hard to talk about like this, like...dead." *Goddammit. You fucking idiot.*

"Can you tell us about that night?" Foster asked.

"Don't you have my interview with the Korean detectives?"

"Of course," he almost laughed.

"...Well, that's kind of it."

"Again if you don't mind."

"It was 4th of July. We wanted to go out. Took some shots, benzos—which I don't normally take, but...we went out to that GI Bar, and danced."

"You left early."

"I felt sick."

"And Rainey stayed with Grant Buckley?"

"They were together when I left."

Foster's mouth pressed into a hard line, "He was cleared."

"Why?"

"Alibi. "

"Don't those fall apart?"

"They can." Kim replied.

"Because I think he did it." Her voice steadied.

"You do?"

"She wouldn't have slept with him." *And those guys hate it when you say no, so it's obvious, right? Maybe?*

"How come?"

"She didn't like army guys."

"Why?"

Meg shrugged. She wanted to leave. "I'm sorry, are we done for today? I don't mean to be rude, I'm just late, I was supposed to get celery, and—"

"Sure. Go. Get celery." Foster cut her off. *He hates me*, she thought.

"I'm gonna try and remember more," She said earnestly.

"You've been great." Kim smiled.

"I wanna know what happened to Rainey too." Meg smiled back. Was it weird to smile? She didn't know, so she smiled again, picked up her tote, and walked out. The cookies remained on the table. *They'll throw them out*, she thought.

She had been dreading the interview all week, but now that it was over, she felt more weighted than before. She stepped out of the Hardwick Hotel into the Seattle mist. Had she been helpful? Seemed like a good friend? A weirdo? Did it fucking matter? She entered the nearby supermarket, and began vacantly browsing the produce section. She selected a wet bag of celery that looked somewhat more appealing than the rest. *Ninety-six percent water*. That's what Laura Adler had told her in ninth grade. *Empty calories. Eat a small bag of celery and one sugar-free Jell-O for lunch everyday, and you'll lose, like, so much weight*. And she did. Meg was ninety pounds that April. Brie had threatened to report their foster parents to the social worker if her eating wasn't addressed, but the Tanners didn't care. The social worker wouldn't have cared either. Ms. Radicchio. *What a bitch*. Luckily, for the time being, Meg snapped out of it. She fell in love with a boy named Dalton Meyers, who claimed to like a *good ass*, so Meg began eating chicken sandwiches again, and suddenly her world opened up. At least sexually.

The agents had to think she was a disaster. Unable to remember things, unable to commit to an opinion, a feeling, but that was her normal. That's how she went through life. Until she met Rainey. Rainey had been committed about everything. All in, or all out. Suddenly, the memory hit Meg like a brick in the head, knocking her sideways into the purple carrots.

Seattle, Washington. Friday 11.10.1999

Girl you're pretty reckless

In your candy necklace

Don't check me off your checklist

You don't wanna hurt me, baby

You don't wanna hurt me, baby

Rainey sang at the top of her lungs, slamming the bottle of Fireball harshly onto the marble counter.

"God, that concert was fucking amazing! I love The Bandits."

"Me too," Meg smiled.

"Only thing missing was that dick who promised us free coke." Rainey began pouring generous shots into tumblers.

"Yeah, what a dick."

"Cheers. To fucking amazing. And amazing fucking!" Rainey hollered as she thrust her shot back. She looked around the impeccable loft. Every piece of furniture artfully collected. A mix of high and low-end pieces that just worked.

"Dude, I can never get over your sister's place."

"It's ridiculous," Meg sighed.

"How long have they been married?"

"Like eight years." They exchanged cross-eyed looks.

Rainey grinned, "Your hair looks really good right now."

"Yeah?" Meg fingered a strand of her cherry mane.

"Yeah." Rainey's phone pulsed in her jeans pocket. She examined the incoming call. "One sec." She sauntered into the wood paneled bathroom, and studied her kohl-rimmed eyes. She was hungry to pick up his call, but made him wait until the last ring.

"Why hello," she dripped sex appeal.

"Rainey."

"Bad day?"

“Stop.”

Meg hummed the tune to herself. She poured another shot and sipped it cautiously. She had hated the concert, but loved the crowd. The energy. The music was shit, but catchy. She couldn't complain though. Until recently, she had spent her Saturdays listening to Brie debate the difference between pan-seared and baked salmon.

Haggling with Rainey at the local taco truck had changed everything. One last packet of cilantro lime sauce had originally seemed like a controversial divide between the two, but they had agreed to split it. They began to talk, began to realize that they hated Wash Light, and all the kids who went there. They didn't care for the college experience. They were strictly getting their degrees to make money. Something Rainey didn't need excess of. Her parents were filthy rich, but still she yearned for financial independence. She would complain about needing to *cut the chord*, but Meg couldn't relate. She would smile and nod, but she had barely had enough funds to open a checking account. She had scored a partial college scholarship by the skin of her teeth, and begrudgingly let Ethan and Brie pay the rest. She insisted she would reimburse them, but they shrugged her off. They were happy to do it. Nonetheless, Meg worked overtime at The Coffee Plant. She poured mocha lattes into Styrofoam cups, ignoring the men flirting with her at the counter, but later fucking them in the bathroom stalls of the local dive, Fish House. She stayed up all night studying, aced her papers, and slept in forgotten corners of the library. She lived in a tin can apartment cheaper than student housing, but spent most of her nights on Brie's couch. She put all her spare coins in mason jars, determined to eventually cash in with tarnished nickels and dimes.

Rainey, on the other hand, lived in a private campus suite. She had a trust she would receive at twenty-five, and despite her self-righteousness, Meg knew Rainey would enjoy every bit of it. She had houses in Nantucket, Aspen, and then of course there was the Greenwich family compound. Surprisingly, she had never been out of the states. Her parents were sheltered rich people. WASPS. Glued to their routines and insulated environment. Dry martinis, Lily Pulitzer and Ralph Lauren as spirit animals, a

deep distaste for illegal immigrants, and dresser drawers filled with Klonopin. When Rainey was a toddler, they would pay her a dollar an hour to nap. They were indulgent, but severely absent. Last semester Rainey got into a screaming match with a professor, and her father flew in from Connecticut, got the professor put on probation, bought Rainey a bottle of Belvedere, and then left on the redeye that same day. That night Rainey had made Greyhounds, and casually reminisced about losing her virginity to the family accountant. She had been fifteen, and desperately in love with him. Rainey said they hadn't slept together since her eighteenth birthday, but that didn't stop him from still groping her at cocktail parties. He now had a wife and autistic stepson, but Rainey would always be his forbidden fruit. She was juicy.

Meg had yearned for a family accountant to lose her virginity to. Instead she had settled for Dalton *good ass* Meyers. *What a luxury*, she imagined. *To spread your legs over a mahogany desk during the accountant's lunch hour, while his wiry secretary manned the phones. To grasp his muscular shoulders, and inhale him. A mix of sage, mint, and ink. To make him hard at the mere thought of your Vaseline laced lips, and day of the week underwear. What power.* Perhaps that's why she relished her friendship with Rainey. Rainey made her feel more compelling. More powerful. Like a dark exotic flower. Not a limp carnation or sad, weedy dandelion.

Meg tore the Fireball label off the bottle, and plastered it to her cheek. She heard the bathroom door click open, and assumed a demented pose in the shadowed corner of the kitchen. One of Meg's talents was creeping up on people. *I'm gonna get her*, she grinned. Rainey emerged, and Meg launched herself towards her back.

"CRACKWHORE!" she screamed at a deafening pitch.

Rainey jumped, and the two toppled over. They rolled and laughed, their limbs tangling up. It had been a perfect assault. Meg peeled the sticky label off her face, and as she stamped it to Rainey's, she saw the wet corners of her eyes.

"Shit, did I hurt you?"

"No, you fuck, I'm just laughing." She wiped away the tears.

"Rainey—"

"Plus your fat ass is crushing me."

"You're such a bitch."

"You attacked me!" They hugged goofily, and let their bodies stretch further out onto the cold tiles, while the last hints of laughter dried up.

"I want us to do a summer abroad," Rainey said finally.

"What?"

"In South Korea."

"Rainey."

"We'll get credit. It's genius."

"You're a communications major."

"Exactly. I want to communicate. In Asia."

"South Korea."

"Yes, come on! I thought you'd be all over this!"

"Why?"

"You're always saying you want some sort of random, epic thing—like Asia? That's pretty fucking epic!"

"I don't have the money," Meg shrugged.

"What about Brie and Ethan?"

"They do too much for me already."

"Fine, I'll pay for you." Meg cringed. It was just like Rainey to throw out the *I have rich parents* card in order to get what she wanted.

"It'll be our last summer before senior year," Meg replied.

"Which is why it can't be forgettable."

Meg thought about senior year. Fast approaching and filled with nothing but internship applications, shifts at The Coffee Plant, and suffocating underneath Brie's expectations. She was majoring in social work, and Brie was thrilled. *Now you can help all those kids like us, all those kids that have no one*, she would say. Brie of course simply planned to procreate. That's how she would help. She would dress her children in seersucker. They would eat organic croutons. They would have holidays, and two

married parents without drug problems. She would pamper her biological brood, and Meg would advocate for all the orphans across America. *That's how we'll pay it forward*, Brie would nod vigorously while basting some sort of baby bird, usually a quail. She drove Meg crazy. Maybe Meg did need an experience. A trip. A big one. Something that would give her air that wasn't swallowed up by Brie, or the future, or any of the other bullshit bouncing around in her brain.

"What's even out there?" she asked, "I mean all I know is it's the less scary Korea."

"That's all you need to know," Rainey smirked.

Meg took a deep breath, "You really don't mind paying for me?"

"I really don't."

"Okay," Meg smiled.

"We're going?"

"We're going," Meg sighed.

"Yes, bitch! Alright, alright, alright! Asia!" Rainey squealed, and gleefully doled out the remaining Fireball.

The girls toasted, and Rainey skipped over to her purse, "Now you can have this." She reached inside, and pulled out a candy necklace. *Girl you're pretty reckless*.

"You're crazy," Meg cackled, looping the sugarcoated jewelry over her head. She loved it.

"Don't say I never gave you anything." Rainey's eyes glowed.

Seattle, Washington. Monday 9.25.2000

They were the greenest and saddest they'd ever been, Meg remembered. At the time, she hadn't noticed. They had been too deep in euphoria, but now, Rainey's eyes from that Saturday night haunted her. *Don't say I never gave you anything*. Was that all she had planned to give? Was she saying goodbye and didn't know it? Goodbye to all

the possibilities? She had been in the bathroom for so long. Meg shook her head and grabbed three purple carrots. She couldn't just buy celery. It was too miserable.