



Runaway Dream

by Alessa

When I think about Harriet, it's not at all like reminiscing. It's like I'm looking straight at her, and she's staring back at me with those big, green eyes. She used to tell me she didn't like her eyes. She liked the shape, but she said the colour reminded her of pond water, and I agreed, but I told her that I thought ponds were beautiful, and she smiled. She also told me that green eyes were technically a genetic mutation.

"Just one more thing to add to the list of reasons why I'm screwed up."

Most of our time together was spent like that—laughing, and joking, and talking about things that normal people didn't give a second thought to. She almost made me forget about the threadbare pyjamas, the pills, and sometimes even my stuffed panda, the only toy I was allowed to keep. She made me forget that I was crazy, and that she was crazy, and that we were in the middle of one big barrel of crazy—two orphans hidden behind dirty windows and stucco walls of the state mental institution. But as much as I wanted to, I could never, ever make her forget.

"One day we're gonna run away from this nightmare," she said through a grin. "Just you and me, Nia."

"Yeah..." I replied dreamily, resting my head in the crook of her shoulder. "That would be nice..."

She'd just told me for about the fifth time that I reminded her of Hermione Granger, and as much as she was indulging me, I knew she meant what she said because, in one way or another, she said the same thing every day.

She was what the snobbish doctor folk call bipolar. I always thought of her as an eccentric. She liked to tell me that I wasn't depressed, just melancholy in a cute sort of way like Wednesday Addams, and that the seizures I suffered almost daily gave me character.

As any manic depressive will tell you, meds can be about seventy-five percent of "treatment". They will also tell you that taking said meds almost always sucks, but you get used to them. I'm not a fight-the-powers-that-be type of girl; that was Harriet's thing, so most of the time I abided.

Harriet was a different story. Sometimes, when she went too long without taking her meds, she would go into these... fits. Everything about her would change. First, she would refuse to speak. Her body would twitch, and her fists would clench. She would stutter and become angry, and sometimes hurt herself. The least bearable thing of all is that she would stop looking me in the eye, almost as though she were afraid she might hurt me, too.

When the orderlies would come, she would begin to raise her voice, and when they began to carry her off, she would fight like hell and scream to the top of her lungs.

Only then would she look at me again and reach her hands out to me, her eyes begging me for help. And all I could do was touch her and wait.

When she would return, it would be with a few bruises and a spacey smile. She would have little or no recollection of what had happened to her, as if her memory had been temporarily suspended.

"Why do you look so sad?" she would ask every time, and as I ran my hands over her face, leaving no freckle untouched, I would simply smile, knowing it was better not to tell her.

The doctors knew. They saw us together, saw us cuddling, our hugs, and sometimes our kisses, and they always wrote things down, made notes and comments to each other, but otherwise left us to ourselves. Whatever kept us under control worked for them. Being only twelve, I was always quiet and cooperative, which saved me from facing the wrath of an orderly who was having a bad day. But watching what was happening to Harriet as well as dozens of other kids in the hospital... It sickened me. For months, I would hide the sickness, dismissing Harriet's rants, however much I agreed with them, as folly for our sake. I figured the less we thought about it, the less it would matter to us. But Harriet was a rebellious teen, and she wouldn't be silenced, not even by me.

Almost all of Harriet's escape plans were half-assed. I had laughed at most of them until I realised that her stare was as serious as green death and her lips were uncurling. This was the routine of almost every evening she and I and Mr. Panda spent together in front of the Cartoon Network.

One particular night in November, as we were following our routine, Harriet turned to me with that look of deviousness, right on schedule.

"What's tomorrow?" she asked, as though she knew exactly what tomorrow was.

"It's Saturday," I replied simply.

"Oh, come on, you can do better than that, Nia," she prodded with a smile.

"November the ninth? No... we're going to the movies!"

"Yes, and guess what..." she trailed as she leaned in intimately.

"What's that?" I indulged.

"I have a plan..." she whispered with fire in her eyes, baring her teeth in an elfish grin.

"Uh huh..."

She fervently began to hiss her brainchild into my ear, waxing excitement and pride as she went on. Out of habit, I started to giggle before a wave of realisation swept over me.

Sweet Jesus... this could work.

She finished with an intent smile, her eyes prodding me for an answer. I nodded. It was a simple response—the simplest thing I would do from that moment on.

She and I spent the next day exchanging knowing glances and smiling at each other. All the other kids probably figured that it was because of some inside joke. Either that or we'd just made out in some dark and deserted corner like countless times before. Either way, they were none the wiser. Even if they had their suspicions, nothing could deter us, not even the fact that we only had six dollars and thirty-two cents between us that day. We wouldn't need much. We would call Harriet's brother Lucas, and we'd crash at his place until Harriet could get a job and we could get out on our own. The previous night, she and I whispered about how I would go back to school and be a normal kid and how she would take care of me. Of course, I knew she was only fifteen and that nothing would be that easy for us, but I smiled and agreed because I loved the glow in her eyes that much.

That night at the local cinema, we were about halfway through "Kung Fu Panda" when Harriet tapped my thigh. The signal. She leaned over and whispered to Marco, one of the more pleasant orderlies, that she needed to use the bathroom. They made their way through the rows, and once I saw her exit, I began counting to one hundred and ten Mississippi.

"Ninety-nine Mississippi..." I mouthed to myself, nervously hugging my plush toy and twirling the zipper on my jacket, an old habit.

"Miss Wilson," I said, immediately turning to the nearest orderly, "may I use the bathroom, please?"

I'd hoped not to sound too anxious, but every extremity on my body was trembling. My skin felt hot. My head was spinning. She nodded, beckoning for me to follow her. I paid little attention to etiquette as I held my stuffed panda close to me and hastily skipped down the hall. I would never see any of these people again in my life. None of them mattered. Only Harriet did.

I half-ran to the bathroom, leaving Ms. Wilson at the door. By the time I arrived, a familiar pair of scruffy relaxed-fit jeans were clearly visible through the crack in the window, even from the other side of the bathroom. I ran over and tapped on it at once.

"Harriet!" I whispered.

She bent down, letting out an impatient, "C'mon, Nia, hurry up!"

I got a leg up on the sink, feeling the slippery surface shift beneath my foot. Before I lost my balance, I bent my other knee on the sill, gaining some support. The window pushed open easily enough. Getting through it, however, wasn't that simple. Something caught in the window frame, and I had to do some wiggling while Harriet pulled me through.

"Crap!" My jacket was caught.

"It's all right, honey, let it rip. It's okay. Come on."

With one hard pull from her and a push from my knees, the lycra gave way, and I was free to crawl out into the asphalt of the parking lot.

With her help, I stumbled to my feet. For an amount of time that was probably a lot shorter than it seemed, we stared into each other's eyes, and then she kissed me as if it were our last kiss ever. Then she took my hand in hers, and we ran like hell.

Cackling wildly, we ripped through the streets, our breath-clouds puffing out of our mouths like smoke from our burning lungs. We were dragons. We were invincible.

We came to a halt about seven blocks from the cinema, on the corner of a Chinese food place. I smiled windlessly at her, leaning against the concrete wall and grasping at the stuffed panda, my hair a ruffled mess. She smiled back and dropped a quarter into the pay phone, then dialled fervently.

"Lucas? It's Harriet. You'll never guess what..."

In a matter of minutes, a dusty-blue Oldsmobile pulled up in front of us. The window rolled down.

"Baby sister!" Lucas smiled at us as we crawled into the back seat together.

"You better step on that gas," Harriet said with a crooked smile. She reached over the driver's seat to ruffle the sandy hair of the lanky, brown-eyed version of herself, then settled back in the seat to wrap her arms around me. "You all right, kiddo?"

"Mmhmm," I smiled, laying my head against her.

Lucas's place was small, but comfortable, and Harriet and I were happy there. We both had some meds left with us from the hospital, and they'd keep us functioning for a while. Harriet even got a job at a coffee place within a couple of weeks, and we'd even begun thinking about enrolling me in school.

"We'll make it, Nia," she would say to me in the evenings when we were alone. "Slowly, we'll make it, and then we'll be together, just you and me."

I hadn't had the chance to be on my own that much. When school let out for the summer holidays, my meds started running low. Depression set in, and seizures returned. The thing is, up until that point in my life, I had always been under someone's care. Someone was always responsible for me. With Harriet being only three years older than me, I had to take care of myself, and it was hard. Harriet's seven dollars and thirty-five cents an hour wasn't doing very much, and at twelve, I was too young to work. After buying food and helping Lucas with the bills, we had almost nothing.

Then one evening, while I was waiting outside the coffee place for Harriet to finish her shift, it happened. The world before my eyes turned upside-down, and as I was falling down in a spell of dizziness that would result in a seizure, my head hit the footpath, and everything turned black.

The first thing I heard was my name. "Nia! Nia!" Harriet was bending over me with her hands under my shoulders and tears in her eyes. I couldn't understand why she was crying, but as I tried to work things out, the headache hit me like a runaway truck. There was blood, and my hair was damp and sticky with it, and I felt like I was going to throw up.

I'm not sure how we got home. I remember being carried and washed, and through the fog in my eyes, Harriet was always there beside me with my name on her lips.

We were both devastated. Under different circumstances, I think we would have been quite happy if we had our own place, Harriet had a nice job, and I went to school without a care in the world. But we had

none of that. We were dirt poor, hiding from social workers, and living in a one-bedroom apartment with Harriet's brother. Having no essential meds to keep me safe was a disaster waiting to happen.

I spent the rest of my summer holidays sleeping and counting the hours between my increasingly devastating seizures. It was either that or risk another outdoor accident and its consequences.

Until one morning, Harriet shook me gently from my sleep. "Wake up, Nia; I've got something to show you."

My eyes cracked open as she reached behind her.

"Oh, my God! Get that thing away from me!" I shouted.

She pulled the trigger, squirting water in my face. "Relax, it's a water gun."

"Oh," I said wryly before thumping the side of her head several times, "what is wrong with you?"

She only smiled. "Are you ready to say goodbye to our money problems?"

I just stared at her. "You're not serious."

"Nia, I am. I'm not gonna watch you waste away before my eyes and do nothing about it. Don't worry, Lucas is coming with me, and we're gonna split the money."

"No, Harriet! No, no, NO! You're not robbing anyone!"

I'm not sure how long our argument lasted, or everything that was said, but it wasn't long enough. Harriet was the most stubborn person I'd ever met. There was no way I was going to beat her. No way. So all I could do was join her.

"I can't let you do that, Nia."

"I'm going with you, Harriet!"

"It's too dangerous as it is, and you might have another accident. Besides, you can't even drive yet. What are you gonna do other than be an extra person to worry about?"

"Harriet, either you do this with me or you won't find me at home when you get back. I'm getting in that car with you, and you're gonna have to carry my butt out of there if you want me to stay."

With a sigh and a roll of her eyes, she digressed.

The ride over was completely silent. Lucas was driving, and Harriet was beside me in the back seat, clenching my hand the entire way, neither of us minding the dampness of the other's palm.

We pulled up outside a small convenience store. No patrons. Lucas and Harriet gave each other a nod of confirmation before charging in. I prayed to Jesus, Buddha, Allah, and Oprah that nothing would go wrong. I squeezed Mr. Panda to my chest and clenched my eyes shut while rocking back and forth, concentrating on wanting this nightmare to go as smoothly as humanly possible.

My eyes sprung open at a loud, ugly, gut-wrenching *POP!*

Before I could bring myself to look into the store, the car doors had already opened and slammed closed.

"Fuck!" Lucas shouted, and we took off.

"What happened? What happened?!" I urged and turned to look at Harriet, who was clenching her chest, tendrils of wet shine running down her black jacket.

It took us about twelve minutes to get to the ER after Lucas ran several red lights. We told the doctors that two men had been arguing outside while we were coming from the store, and Harriet had been caught in the crossfire. They put her on the gurney and wheeled her away. Unable to speak, she reached out her hand to me, and all I could do was touch her and wait.

I've been waiting for three years. I'll be waiting for the rest of my life. All I have left is my stuffed panda to keep me company while I wait. His name is Harry. It's just a plush toy with beady glass eyes. And every time I look at them, I think of pond water.

The End