

**Friend**  
**by Becky Sayers**

## Wednesday

### Lunch

Drowning was such a beautiful thought, until I realized that it really isn't.

At first, I would imagine the rush of cold water, a weightless descent into nothingness. There would be this deep blue quiet all around me, as the sights and sounds of the world disappeared. I could float around in this serene isolation, but then the thought is choked out by the mean truth.

Drowning is horribly painful. I wouldn't slip away like some Zen master. Survival would suddenly kick in. My lungs would feel like water balloons plumped up with acid. A sharp panic would slice through my body, leaving wounds that seep fear. The enormity of the ocean would transform into a claustrophobic blanket from which I could never untangle myself.

I wouldn't say that I actually thought about killing myself. I never considered these thoughts to be real. Sure, I *might* have dipped my toe in a subtle tendency to *kind of* think about what it *could* be like to take my life, but I would never do it and I didn't think these thoughts were a problem.

In fact, I considered them productive, not destructive. Times like these snapped me into my true self. Suddenly, I got the urge to write, to paint, to quit my job, to go on a trip, etc, etc. Maybe it was awareness of my own mortality, or the spark of dark poetry that emanates from death. Whatever it was, it worked for me.

### Afternoon

Back at the office, I was bored. I had plenty of work, but was losing interest. About a year ago, the new and exciting challenges started to dwindle into extinction. Maybe I'll quit this month, this year. Maybe I'll start writing again.

My desk rumbled, kidnapping me from my bohemian artist daydreams. I thought about adjusting the vibration settings on my phone, but perhaps it was just the way sound waves travel through Formica. I sent an apologetic look to my co-worker, who was startled enough to jump at the sound. After silencing my phone, I looked at my notifications.

There was a Facebook message from a high school friend, acquaintance really. Alicia Phillips-Gordon. I groaned. Probably trying to get me to buy makeup or join some work-from-home pyramid scheme. That's usually why old "friends" reach out, isn't it? When they need something from you, but don't want to bother the people they really care about.

“Hey, Victoria. It’s Alicia Phillips (now I’m married, so my last name is hyphenated with Gordon. ha).” No shit.

“Anyway, I just wanted to catch up. We just moved up here and so I thought I’d reach out! Maybe we can do lunch?” Oh God. It was worse than I thought.

I wondered if I could turn off that thing that lets other people know you’ve read their message. It was too late now. She knew I saw it. I couldn’t just ignore her. Well, I could, but it’s hard to be *that* inconsiderate. Could I just not have a conscience, please?

I thought about drowning for another minute. People who drown don’t need to feign interest. If only I wasn’t good at faking nice, then no one would even want to have lunch with me.

I was about to respond when my boss lurched over my desk, “You ready?”

“Oh, right. Yup. On my way.” After some awkward word-stumbling, I quickly fell back into work routine.

It was 2pm... time to meet about a future meeting that will inspire more meetings. At 2:35, we’d complain that the company culture was too meeting-focused.

## Evening

My commute was spent sandwiched between a grumpy, manspreading suit and a gaggle of lemmings listening to pop music through phone speakers. The dark and quiet of my apartment was a celebration. There, I could languish in solitude. Free to eat a bag of popcorn for dinner, lounge in ugly t-shirts, spend hours writing 1 goddamn page - all without pressure for propriety.

Ages ago all this creativity bullshit came easily. I could write a novel in a week. Ok, maybe a novella. At times like these, when I sit alone under the glow of my laptop with far too few words on the screen, I would feel like a dam. I wanted to write, I really really did. I wanted to let it all flow out, but there was something blocking the words. If only I could just open the floodgates. If I hadn’t been so depressed.

In the midst of my self-loathing, Alicia Phillips-Gordon poked me again. “Hey, just checking to see if you got my message? Would really love to hang out.”

My face contorted into an uncomfortable grimace. I was suddenly slouching and my back hurt.

I typed back, “Hey. Sorry, work was busy. Good to hear from you.”

“Oh no worries! Thanks for getting back to me,” she eagerly responded.

If I didn’t move, maybe she’d go away.

“So, are you interested in getting lunch?” she persisted. “Where do you work?”

I produced a sigh so loud I thought she could hear it. “Near the waterfront. Off 5th.”

“Oh cool! I’m not too far from there. Do you like Greek food? I know a good place.”

“Sure. This week is kind of crazy at work though.” Your move, Alicia Phillips-Gordon.

“How about Monday next week then?”

“Ok.” It seemed cold, so I added a “sounds good” and a smiley face. Emoticons, the best way to amend tone after the fact.

And like that... Suddenly I had lunch plans with someone who I never had any interest in seeing ever again. And like that... I closed my laptop and retreated into unproductivity via Netflix.

## **Monday**

### **Morning**

I had spent far too much time dreading my lunch date with Alicia Phillips-Gordon (I couldn’t call her just Alicia for whatever reason). Few things made me want to collapse inside myself more than the thought of small talk with a person I had nothing in common with. Some people have bad dreams about zombies or walking down the street naked. Ask me about the weather? Nightmare fuel.

I plowed through my tasks at work far too quickly, leaving nearly an hour before I needed to leave for lunch. I started to get anxious, which was ridiculous. What were we going to talk about? How was I going to avoid talking about my life?

I pulled up her Facebook profile. Married. No kids, but maybe trying? A total guess based on the deluge of comments about other people’s babies. I promised myself that I would really try not to be judgemental. I couldn’t figure out where she worked, but I could tell that she really liked popular network TV shows, popular country music, and popular workout routines. Great.

### **Lunch**

She was already seated when I arrived at the trying-too-hard-to-be-authentic Greek restaurant. I scanned the place a couple of times, not identifying her in the crowd, but thankfully she recognized me and stood up to wave. She was taller than I remembered. Her features seemed sharper too.

After a painful hug, we both sat.. To my pleasure, the server interrupted us each time we started the conversation, bringing us menus, talking about the special, taking our drink order, etc.

“Do you like your job?” she asked. “I saw that you’re doing some sort of marketing work?”

“It’s not bad. It’s a pretty good company,” I lied. “What about you? What do you do?” I diverted.

“Oh, a little bit of everything, here and there.”

I had no idea what to make of this. Her expressions are so unfamiliar. My face must have contorted because she identified my confusion.

She explained, "I've bounced around a lot, but I'm not currently employed."

There it was. That was why she wanted to meet.

Just as I was struggling to find words, the server returned for our meal order. I went first. She asked for the same thing. She actually said, "I'll have what she's having." This irked me.

"So have you lived here long?" She asked.

"Pretty much right after college."

"I was in a tiny town before this. It's crazy here."

"Oh?" I feigned interest.

"So many people. So many opportunities. I'm trying to figure out who I want to be."

I mumbled, "Mmm. Yeah."

"How did you figure it out?"

"What?"

"Who you want to be?"

I wasn't prepared for this, so I stammered, "I guess I just fell into it."

"What do you mean? You don't make decisions about what you do?"

"I do. It's just... I'm sorry. Your question threw me off."

She laughed and I really didn't like her in that moment. She continued, "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Just trying to get to know you better after all these years."

## **Evening**

I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't belong in my own skin. When I blinked, I saw her stupid smile. I was afraid to sleep, for fear of awkward small talk nightmares.

What was her deal? What was my deal?

There was no writing that night. Instead, I retreated to the kitchen for beer and ice cream. I was revolted at myself, but it was somehow the perfect nightcap.

I would have liked to say that her question about who I wanted to be hadn't bothered me, but I kept mulling it over in my head. Back and forth. Like a pinball machine with endless lives. Did I actually make any decisions about my life? Or did I just do whatever comes next? Here, take this job. Transfer to this open position. It pays more. Wasn't this what all the great writers detested? All this comfort? But then again, maybe I wasn't really a creative person. Maybe I was just pretending to be, like I pretended to enjoy chatting with strangers in the elevator.

Before I truly decided that I hated myself, I had to stop the dark parade of inquiry. Then came the drowning fantasy again. Only this time Alicia Phillips-Gordon was pulling me under.

## **Tuesday**

### **Morning**

I was halfway through my commute when I saw a new message from her. I couldn't look at it then. All I wanted was to revel in the last chapter of the good book I was reading, pulling the pages of the book over my face like a child hiding under the covers.

## **Lunch**

My phone kept buzzing. Somehow I knew it was her. Regretfully, I looked through my inbox.

"Hey, Vic! Just wanted to say lunch was awesome. Let's do it again sometime." No thanks.

"Oh, Victoria, I forgot to mention. I'll be near your office tomorrow. Maybe we can grab coffee? I'm sorry, but I won't have time for lunch again."

"Could you get back to me today?"

"Sorry to be a pest, but I would just like to know."

I typed back, "It was a nice lunch. I am crazy busy at work right now. Maybe another time."

Seconds after I hit enter, she came back with, "Ok. Maybe another time."

I think she got the hint.

## **Evening**

In my sweatpants and eating sugary cereal, I sat with my laptop balanced on crisscrossed knees. I could have been a college student, if it weren't for the extra 20 pounds and strands of gray that dared to decorate my scalp.

Ten minutes into my time-sucking routine of brainless social media scrolling, my face melted. High school friends were devastated by the news that Alicia Phillips-Gordon had been murdered. I might have said "What the fuck?" out loud to myself.

I poked around and eventually uncovered a news article. Body found on the East Side Monday morning. Family in shock. Recently divorced husband, Jon Gordon, was questioned. Not an official suspect.

My cereal grew soggy. Before slurping the rest up, I went back to the article again, "The body of local woman, identified as Alicia Phillips-Gordon, was found under abandoned farming equipment in a highly wooded area on Monday at approximately 10 AM."

I checked the date on my computer. It was Tuesday. Alicia Phillips-Gordon had messaged me 4 times today.

My chest was an angry mess of white hot adrenaline. I began chasing logic, like a mangy, drunk cat. Maybe? What if? How could? None of it made any sense. Each of my questions fell to pieces before it could find its form.

I closed my laptop and wandered through my apartment. It suddenly felt very dark. After flipping on some lights, I pulled up my phone to discover that I had new messages on Facebook. I knew then what people meant when they say their heart dropped. I had to look.

3 messages from Alicia Phillips-Gordon 15 minutes ago:

“Hey, girl! I got you a little something; don’t worry it’s a good surprise. I stopped by your office, but you had already left for the day.”

“I met your co-workers. They are super nice. They told me you lived in the glass apartments on 5th and Vine.”

“Hoping to catch you at home. Will be there in a few. See ya soon! :)”

Before I collapsed into a fetal-shaped panic center, I found the number for the local police from the news article. Circling the kitchen island like an OCD shark, my phone was pressed against my already-too-hot ear. They made me hold for 4 minutes, which felt like 40.

I told them my story was met by a long silence. They probably thought I was nuts.

“Are you there?” I asked.

“Yes, sorry.”

“Look, I know my story sounds—”

“I need you to go to the nearest police station. ”

“Why? Is Alicia dangerous? Is she really dead? I don’t understand. Please. I’m getting scared.”

Another overly-pregnant pause. I was almost relieved when I heard the start of a line delivery, until I began to comprehend the meaning behind the words: “Please listen carefully. Alicia Phillips-Gordon was murdered about a week ago. The woman you had lunch with was not Alicia. ”

In an instant, all the itching, not-quite-right feelings that had been lurking inside became real, as opposed to imagined, problems. My clarity was confronted with a couple taps on the door - the knock of an old friend, someone pretending to be anyway.

## **Later**

A cold darkness, stinging every pore, shocked my body into a motionless panic. The 30 pound weight attached to the bottom of my left foot was doing its job quickly. Thousands of tiny bubbles rushed upward, opposing my direction. I was like a reverse rocket, sinking into the wet earth below.

There was just enough time to catch the look on her face, barely visible through the black ocean water. A vignette formed around her head, which offered a simple smile - not one of masochism, but oddly one of unfeigned empathy. Funny. All I could think was that I wished someone other than my murderer had looked at me with that smile. Or maybe, I wished it was me who smiled at others with that easy grace of a person who genuinely cared. Maybe in another life.