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Lindsay Friday

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## The Fence

Lindsay Friday

A fence surrounded the country club;  
a thick, iron thing that ended in *fleur de lis* shapes

at the top. It was cold and majestic, much like the life that went on within its proud confines. The country club building itself was set far back from the fence, pedicured lawn sprawling yards and yards before reaching the boundary. There were horseshoe pits, and a pond with a fountain, and even a playground for the children of members. The playground was the feature closest to the fence, being maybe five or six yards away. A short jog's distance, three seconds running from the edge of the wood chips and you're there, the final barrier before the grass cuts off for the bike trail that winds by into the neighborhoods, affluence dropping the further it goes.

Little Sammy Evans didn't care much for the activities and the idle talk that went on inside the building. Those were adult things, he supposed. Why father liked to come here so often to talk to people, he didn't think he'd ever know. He preferred to sit in the swing set on the playground and ignore the other children, watching the life outside the country club fence. There was another playground a ways down the bike trail, he could see it really well over the shrubbery if he swung high enough. Sometimes he could hear the delighted shrieks of the other children playing, their laughter rolling over the field to mix with the music and chatter coming from the building behind him.

All sorts of people came by the bike trail. Sammy liked to watch them. There were the dog people, and the walking people, and the running people, and the biking people. Every now and then, there'd be the strolling teenagers or the young couple people. And then there were the children who passed along the trail to get to the Other Playground.

On a particular afternoon in August, there was a little girl and her father who came by the trail on the way to the park. Sammy sat swinging, watching them. The girl watched back. Sammy watched her tug her father's sleeve and say something to him, looking up to him expectantly.

Her father said something back; Sammy couldn't hear either of them well enough to make out words. They continued on their way. The little girl looked back at him once, her pigtails whipping about as she turned her head. Sammy watched her until she was a speck of blonde hair moving about the playground.

He would have sat on the swing all afternoon, but his older brother Wes came up with his friends and complained that Sammy had been on the swings all day, it was their turn, so he hopped off and wandered over to the fence. Grasping the fence posts in his hands, he put his face between the bars and peered at the Other Playground. It had been a while since the pigtail girl and her father had been by, and he'd seen three dog people and several runner people pass since then, so he'd lost track of her as she played. She hadn't left, at least not this way. He searched for her.

There, going down the slide. Sammy could see her father waiting to catch her with open arms, standing guard at the bottom of the chute. Her little blonde head bumped down and was snatched up into the air as soon as she made it to the end. Sammy heard her echoing giggles. Her father returned her to the ground, and she raced back up the ladder to the top of the slide. Sammy imagined he could hear her voice, "Do it again, do it again!"

Sammy glanced behind him to the country club and back to the other playground, then back again. In a fit of decisiveness, he turned on his heel and jogged past his brother, clearing the grasses and reaching the door to the dance hall-music room. That's where his parents would be. He reached a hand up to the knob and coaxed the French door open, careful lest his youth somehow tarnish its simple, functional elegance. His mother sat playing the piano at the far end of the room, so he shied up to his father. Several moments of adult banter passed over Sammy's head until the Evans patriarch took note of his son wavering beside him. He leaned forward from his seat on the bay window.

"Hey, Sammy," he smiled, teeth even and clean. Sammy scratched his arm.

"Hi. Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"Could I play on the Other Playground?"

His father looked confused. "The other playground?"

"Yeah, the one over that way," he pointed a little hand, "by the bike trail."

His father searched through the window, straightening up to see better. It took him a moment to realize which one his son was talking about.

"You'd better stay on club grounds," came his decision. Sammy's eyes flicked from the window to the floor to people his father had been visiting with earlier, all gone back to their own conversation.

"Why?"

"There are all sorts of people out there, and your mother and I won't be able to keep an eye on you there."

"Can I go if Wes comes with me?"

His father's eyes weren't cold or hard, but they were collected, used to the idea of influence. He met his son's retreating gaze and held it. "No."

Sammy blinked. "Okay." He slipped back outside.

Wes and his friends were still on the swings, so he trudged back to the fence, resuming his post between the iron bars. To his surprise when he looked down the trail to the Other Playground, Pigtail Girl and her father were coming back. He stayed rooted to the spot, too prideful to run away and hide in the bushes- she'd see. His fingers fidgeted around the metal spires as she came closer. She noticed him when she was about two yards away, and she changed direction sharply, towards him. Sammy felt his heart swell to stuff up his chest in something like panic, thumping in his throat and making him light-headed. He couldn't look away as she approached, her green eyes coming into focus as they fixated on him. Sammy recognized something in them: there was confidence in those eyes, like his father's, like his brother's. She stood before him with that smoldering softness, searching his face. He shrunk back almost imperceptibly.

"Hi!" she said, cheer permeating her voice. She didn't smile per se, but her face was friendly.

"Hi."

"My name's Emma. What's yours?"

"Sammy." Classic first-day-of-school routine. He felt strange running through it with a girl who just happened to walk by one afternoon. What was he supposed to do now? He didn't know what to expect.

Emma broke the script. "What are you doing in there?"

"In where?"

"In that fence." She pointed, tracing the perimeter as far as she could see. Sammy's eyes followed her finger before giving his answer.

"I'm playing." Her brow furrowed in consternation.

"You don't look like you're having much fun standing there." Sammy couldn't argue with her. He shrugged, kicked at some grass. Emma piped up again, "Can I play with you?"

Emma's father came over and laid a hand on his daughter's head. "We can't go in there, honey," he said. Emma looked up at him, her pigtails flipped and bounced from the motion.

"Why not?"

"That's the country club. It's members only."

As long as he'd been coming here, Sammy had never heard that before, and the thought disoriented him. There had always been the fence, but it had never occurred to him that the fence's job was to keep others out. He searched the Other Playground. No, there was no fence around it. His grasp on the bars tightened.

"Does that mean we aren't members," Emma was asking.

Her father smiled.

"Yeah, we aren't members. That's my smart little Emma."

"So that means they won't let us in...?" She was testing the waters of this strange rule, eyeing her father as if to gauge the truthfulness of his response- sometimes parents won't let you do things for stupid, nonsense reasons. Her father shook his head. Emma put her hands on her hips, racking her brain for a solution.

"You should come play with me, then," she told Sammy.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not supposed to leave."

Emma looked him in the eye, that confidence redoubled. Sammy was a little scared under it. "Then we'll play here."

They made a little game of passing sticks through the bars that developed into a castle siege, complete with spies. A slew of sticks made up the cast, the one with the most leaves was the king, and this one with berries was the queen. The sticks held up on the bars of the fence were the knights, and that was where most of the battles took place. Spy sticks fell onto the country club turf, storming the castle. Then somehow there was tag through the fence, running along its length and poking at each other through the slots. Exhilaration tore through their chests as high-pitched squeals and giggles.

They had maybe twenty minutes together, until the twilight swelled around them, turning the sky to orange and gold. Emma's father, who had been sitting under a nearby tree, stood up. "Emma, sweetie, we need to go home. Mama's waiting for us with dinner."

Emma stopped, letting Sammy stand before her, only this close to losing the game of tag.

"Okay," she said, obedient at the mention of food. She turned to Sammy. "I have to go." Sammy nodded, his heart returning to that packed-away place inside of him. Emma met her father on the sidewalk and they began their trek down the bike path. A biking person whizzed past them. Sammy followed a step behind on his side of the fence, searching for his voice.

"Do you come to that playground a lot, Emma?"

"Sometimes. Do you go to the fence-playground a lot?"

"Sometimes."

"Then I'll see you some time."

"Okay."

Emma smiled goodbye, taking her father's hand. Her pigtailed flopped once more as she let her gaze slide off of Sammy to look forward. Sammy continued to follow along the fence until it made a corner around the edge of the property. He stood at the junction. The bike trail wound on, taking Emma and her father with it. Sammy pressed himself against the fence, only just now feeling the separation of it.

## Visiting the Sistine

M.J. Dolan

Struggling to keep the guide in sight,  
I surged with my group  
through a narrowing door. It was  
like giving birth in reverse.

The entrance was disappointing, dark and dingy;  
the walls echoed with the babble  
of multi-linguaged guides competing to explain  
in loud whispers, soft shouts.  
Their words counterpointed  
by the clicks and whirs  
of legions of cameras erupting.

I leaned against the wall and stared up.  
The noise faded and all distractions fled.  
Eternally, Adam, naked, reaches out  
while God the Father reaches  
toward his son.

My mind reeled when I first looked down  
and I was dizzy until  
the flow of blood to my brain  
resumed its usual course.