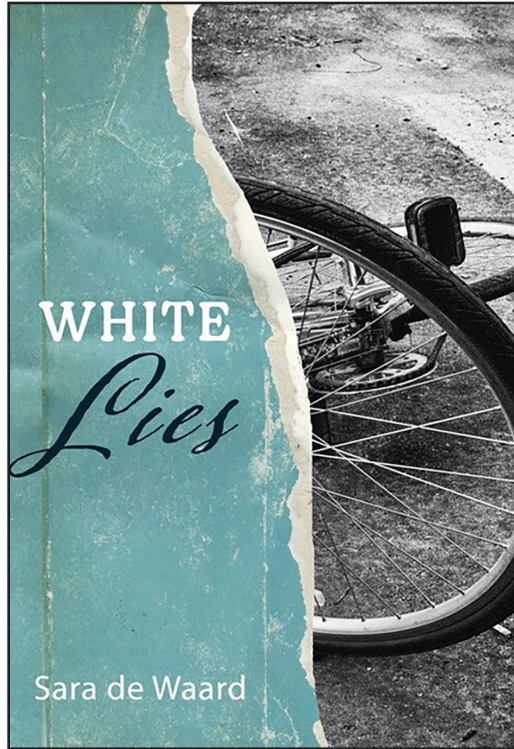


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by Sara de Waard**



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# Asking the Impossible

My legs are crossed, like a lady, apparently. The leg that crosses over my other leg sways forward and back like a Newton's Cradle. Constant. Rhythmic. Reliable; unlike my brain right now.

"Missy?" Dr. Tandalay looks at me from behind her crystal blue eyes. Clear conscience, I bet. She holds her gaze with the patience of a saint. For a moment, I engage in a staring contest. Who will blink first, I wonder?

Eventually, she blinks. I gloat, "Still the champ."

"Excuse me?" Dr. Tandalay is rightfully confused. It wasn't the answer she was looking for to this week's ice-breaker regarding how my therapy homework went.

"I used to play staring contests with my mom. Now that I'm older, I know she didn't stand a chance," I digress.

"Why?" she asks me.

"Because you blinked first."

"I mean, why didn't she stand a chance?"

I shrug. I don't dare tell a doctor — I don't care what kind of doctor she is — that my mom's bloodshot, dry, squinting eyes made her my helpless opponent. I definitely don't want to talk about how often she got high that last year she was still at home.

"Missy?"

"She blinked a lot." I end the subject.

Dr. Tandalay has this annoying tactic of waiting for my response way longer than an average person ever would. She gives me three times the "think-time" of the most well-trained teacher. So I always exercise my tactic of ... not answering.

Dr. Tandalay adjusts the lapel on her power suit and then jots something onto a paper that is clipped by a blue board with

happy-face stickers all over its back. I find it all so distracting. The blue board doesn't make sense to me because it's a sad color, making the yellow happy faces seem contrived and ironic.

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't do my task." I mean it when I say it.

"Didn't? Or couldn't? There's a big difference, Missy." Dr. Tandalay does that thing with her face where her eyebrows read familiar disappointment, but her frown kind of gets me.

"I tried," I stretch the truth. "I know you assigned me to say positive things about myself, for you, but —"

"For you," the doctor clarifies.

"I couldn't, okay? Every time I tried to think of something good to say about myself, I felt like a fraud."

"Missy, you've been coming here for almost a year. You're close to sixteen. We still have quite a ways to go. One obstacle that is holding you back is the way you see yourself —"

I'm pretty sure that's not it.

"You are too hard on yourself —"

Who isn't?

Dr. Tandalay beats a dead horse, "There are plenty of wonderful things about you. It isn't lying, per se, it's being conscious of what you believe is the truth, until you can see the actual truth, clearly." She pauses, hoping that sinks in with me.

It drowns me.

"What are your parents like, Dr. Tandalay?"

She lifts her board to jot another note. The happy faces mock me. With each stroke of her perfectly sharpened pencil, they dance.

"Do you want to talk about your parents?" she asks.

"I want to talk about your parents."

"That would be a waste of our hour," she says.

I look up at the clock. "I only have five minutes left."

"Missy, I have an idea." She reaches into a side bin of small electronic devices and pulls out something the size of a Snickers bar. "This is a personal recording device. You just press this button to start recording your voice and this one to stop. I'd like you to re-try the same assignment, but so that you don't feel like you're talking into an abyss, you can talk into this."

"I can just use my phone." I hold up my cracked, ancient iPhone.

She pretends not to hear me. "Use this and try for one self-compliment per day. Do you think you can do that for me ... err ... for you, this week?"

I stare at her, without blinking and play out our last four minutes with some think-time.

## Trick or Treat

Mondays are my least favorite day of the week, but not for the reasons one might assume. It's because I see Dr. Tandalay every one of them and by the time the session is over, it's too late for me to head to the store.

So I have to head home.

I pop open the so-called childproof lid of my amber pill bottle. There's no need to read the label; I've been taking these suckers for about ten months now. I know the drill: "may cause drowsiness" (which is why I take them at night), "may cause dizziness" (which is why I don't like taking them), and "do not skip a dose" (which is why I set a reminder in my phone). You'd think I'd remember, but it's harder than it seems. Implicit memory — the kind you're just supposed to be good at, like knowing your left from your right — isn't my thing.

On Mondays I go to bed super early. Therapy exhausts me. Can I even still call it therapy since I have graduated from a therapist to a psychiatrist? I don't know if there's a new term? Psychoanalysis, maybe? I think I heard someone use that word before.

Almost a year ago, on my fifteenth birthday, I thought I'd entered The Twilight Zone. Trick woke me up at the crack of dawn with a gentle stroke of my light brown hair. He leaned in and whispered "Happy Birthday" to me. I was sure I was dreaming. His touches weren't usually soft. He was more of a tugger, a nudger, never a hugger, for example.

Trick is my father. His real name is Tim. Out loud, I call him the traditional "Dad" but in my head, I've reserved my right to call him "Trick" or "Treat." I developed this code as far back as I can remember — my first Halloween.

Like all youngsters, I didn't really understand what Halloween was aside from seeming like my universe flipped on its scary head for a day only to return to normal the next. It was the one time when suddenly no one was supposed to be afraid of monsters or aliens or zombies or blood, and if you were, people would just laugh and say, "It's Halloween."

Okay?

My father likes Halloween more than any other occasion. He revels in finding a costume and prancing around in it. His eyes light up when the pop-up costume vendors rent vacant spaces in the malls. I don't have a personal favorite costume of his, because I really don't like any of them, but I definitely have a least favorite.

I was four, and I was getting the hang of the whole unholy night. I looked at myself in the mirror, but could barely see out from behind my *My Little Pony* mask. I kept adjusting it for fear that I wouldn't be able to see cars, like I'd been warned about on our school's morning announcements ... and don't even get me started on how petrified I was of potentially poisoned lollipops.

In the mirror-image, over my shoulder, a strange man snuck into my bedroom. His hat was brown and fancy, but he had burned, leathery, rippled skin. His teeth missing, *rotting*. His green-and-red-striped sweater. His sharp, far-reaching fingernail blades. To add insult to my mental injury, a scent floored me; a toxic mix of stale cigarettes and aged alcohol reached me before this monster did. I froze; hoping the creep would believe I was just an innocent pony and get the hell out of my room.

Instead, he snuck closer. One of his long, stinky nails tapped my shoulder. Bravery fled; I started to cry.

He laughed a maniacal laugh and tumbled off what little balance he had, onto me. We both fell to the floor. His cackling and stench suffocated me. I couldn't breathe; I didn't want to breathe.

He was so heavy. I screamed for my mom as he laughed harder. Then when I screamed for my dad, he laughed so hard he couldn't talk.

The monster proceeded to tear off his face to reveal ... my father. "I'm Freddy Krueger!" he said so matter-of-factly, like I was supposed to know who — or what — that was.

Through terrified tears I uttered, "You tricked me!"

"That's what it's all about!" he laughed. Bits of his spit freckled my mask.

"I didn't know it was you," I cried.

"That's the point silly bird!"

Pony.

"You pretend you're someone you're really not for a while, just like you're doing!"

Nothing about me felt like a magical, rainbow-colored baby horse.

"You're so damn serious." He laughed and laughed at me until he puked a brownish-orange sludge all over my pristine, cloud-white costume.

From that day on, this would be a recurring thing in my life. Since I'd so frequently be unable to trust which side of my dad I was dealing with, Sober Tim became "Trick" to keep my heart on guard. Drunk Tim was a real "Treat," but at least I didn't have to wonder what was lurking around the corner.

And that stuck.

So then, back to my fifteenth birthday, when Trick woke me up with unprecedented ... I don't even know what to call it ... adoration? ... I was scared to open my eyes because if it were a dream, it was a pleasant one and I didn't want to bring it to a halt.

"Wake up, Melissa."

Melissa? No one had called me that in ages.

“Your mom and I want you to come to the kitchen. We have a big surprise for you.”

About ninety-nine-point-nine-percent sure that it was a dream, on account of Trick saying that he and my mother would be in the same room, I opted to only half-open my eyes, hoping I could convince my brain that I was still asleep long enough to suck the marrow out of this fantasy.

I stumbled into the kitchen where my mother threw her arms around me and rocked me powerfully side to side, reciting a Marilyn Monroe-esque version of “Happy Birthday” in my ear. The husky, slow-tempo rendition was inappropriately sexy, but I let it go. Dreams can’t be perfect.

I laughed, unexpectedly. Mom laughed. Trick laughed. What the hell was happening?

Mom led me to the table that was cleared off, for once. I glanced around for the rolling papers and pipes that I’d grown so accustomed to seeing in there for the last two years. I peeked under the table for empty bottles inconspicuously. Nope. Nothing around except for —

A homemade, lopsided birthday cake that was plunked down in front of me. It was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. I just wanted to sit there all day and look at it. I wished I could take a picture of it. I wanted to Insta it; to show everyone that THIS year, my birthday was about ME again —

Not Jeremy.

My view of the cake was soon blocked by a massive, wrapped gift. I ignored the fact that it was clearly wedding paper, its silver bells glistened in the artificial light of our windowless kitchen.

“I wrapped it!” Trick boasted.



I nudged the gift to the side gently. “Did you make the cake too, Dad?” I knew he hadn’t, but I wanted my mom to say she did. I needed to hear the words, to make this the sweetest dream ever.

“I made it,” she said. Her words cascaded through me like pitch-perfect violin notes — interrupted by bangs on the front door.

My mom and my father exchanged glances.

“Open it!” Mom jumped.

“The door?” I asked.

“The present. Hurry up and open it!”

“Someone’s at the door,” I called out the elephant in the room.

Trick laughed nervously.

Mom folded her arms and shouted, “Open it, Missy!”

I reached for the gift. The bangs on the front door intensified; I retracted. “I’ll go get it.” I stood up.

My father pushed me back into my chair as Mom insisted, “This is your day, Missy. Open it!”

She was right. This was my day. Whoever was at the door could wait.

I pulled the gift onto my lap. In true form, I started to shake. Gift-opening adrenaline, no matter how infrequent, never ceased to consume me. I smiled again, despite myself. I took hold of a teeny piece of the paper and eased it back.

“Rip it!” Mom yelled, more playful than I’d expected.

I ripped it.

The front door tore open and two police officers barged into my kitchen. Just as I freed a MacBook from its silver-belled wrapping confines, one of the officers clawed it from my hands.

He tossed it to his partner. “Match its serial number.”

“Give it back to her!” Mom screeched.

“Susanna —” Trick locked my mom into a tight hold to keep her from attacking the officer — which wouldn’t have been her first time. This only made it easier for the officer to cuff Mom. She tried to wiggle free, but it was futile.

“It’s time, Susanna.” The officer said her name like he was family.

“What did she do?” I was no stranger to visits from the police for domestic altercations, but I had never seen my mom arrested.

“Officer, it’s a special day, please —” Trick chimed in.

“I know, Tim.” This officer was softer. “I know it’s the anniversary of Jeremy’s ... it’s been two years since your son ...” He lost his grip on my new MacBook and it slipped smack into the middle of the cake, destroying the chocolatey bliss.

I mourned for my cake. I couldn’t look at my mom; she wouldn’t have met my eyes anyway.

This was definitely not a dream.

I should have known better.

Since then, almost a year ago now, Mom has been in jail. All because of a stolen laptop? My father and I never once talked about that morning. In fact, I’ve never talked about it with anyone. He has flopped from Trick to Treat over the past many months as I’ve tried to shut it all up with mandatory therapy and the meds that I just popped into my exhausted self.