

Say Cheese

Ruby Ginsburg

Inspired by the story of a toothless wonder

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INT. BATHROOM - MORNING

OTS SHOT

A teenage girl, ZOE, stands in front of a bathroom sink brushing her teeth. She is wearing a blue turtleneck with a sequined heart in the middle and purple denim pants. We see her reflection in the mirror as she bends down to rinse her mouth. She stands back up and examines her teeth in the mirror. Two of her front teeth are missing. She moves her tongue in between the gaps, then closes her mouth, lets out a heavy sigh, and walks out of the bathroom.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

WIDE SHOT

Zoe's mother, MARGARET, stands by the stove, cooking breakfast. The stairs creak and ZOE walks in. MARGARET greets her with a gleaming white smile.

MARGARET

Morning, love. I made pancakes to celebrate your big day! Hungry?

ZOE exhales while half-heartedly grinning at her mother.

MARGARET

What's that about? It's your first day of high school! Let's eat!

ZOE

Sure.

MEDIUM SHOT

ZOE sits down at the table as MARGARET slides two steaming pancakes onto the plate in front of her. She gives ZOE a kiss on the cheek, and ZOE flinches as if it hurt her.

OTS SHOTS

MARGARET

So, how do you feel about school today? Nervous? Excited?

ZOE

I dunno. I just don't want to be made fun of anymore. And high school kids are probably worse than middle schoolers.

MARGARET

Oh, darling. Anyone who makes fun of you just doesn't know how amazing you are, that's all. It'll take time.

INT. CAR - MORNING

TWO SHOT, CAMERA POSITIONED ON DASHBOARD

ZOE and MARGARET park in front of a school building. MARGARET leans over to kiss ZOE goodbye.

MARGARET

Have a great day, honey. I'll see you later.

ZOE

Thanks mom.

ZOE opens the door and gets out of the car.

OTS, LOOKING OUT THE OPEN WINDOW

MARGARET

Don't forget your lesson later! Okay bye! Love you!

MARGARET pulls away, and ZOE stands on the sidewalk for a few seconds before walking toward the looming building.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

WIDE, WITH MEDIUM INSERT SHOTS

ZOE sits at a desk in the back of a classroom, waiting for the class to start. Students file in and a tall girl, ELSIE, stands at the front of the room. She is wearing skin-tight blue jeans, a black crop top, and white Converse sneakers. Her long blond hair falls to her chest with majesty. ZOE

waves to get her attention and they make eye contact. A guy sitting toward the front of the room waves Elsie over, and she breaks eye contact with Zoe to go sit next to the guy. ZOE looks disappointed as a curly-haired boy a little taller than her sits down next to her without a word.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

(Bell rings)

OTS SHOT

ZOE walks down the hallway and stops in front of a row of lockers. She starts entering the code to her lock, but looks up to see that scratched into the paint on her locker are the words "say cheese!"

PROFILE

ZOE puts down the lock, closes her eyes, exhales, and continues to walk down the hallway.

EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON

HANDHELD, WIDE

A flood of students walks out of the doors, rejoicing at the end of the school day. ZOE sees ELSIE a few yards away and runs to catch up to her.

ZOE

Elsie! Wait up!

ELSIE

Oh hey! I wanted to talk to you after class earlier but I didn't see you.

ZOE

What's up?

ELSIE

Um. I don't know how to say this but I don't know if we should be so close anymore.

ZOE

What are you talking about? You're my best friend. Of course we should be close.

ELSIE

Yeah, but I mean, high school's kinda different. If I want any kind of status here, I'm gonna need to be careful about who I hang out with.

ZOE

What's wrong with hanging out with me? What ever happened to being best friends forever?

ELSIE

Don't worry, we can still hang out sometimes, I just wanna make other friends now.

CLOSEUP SHOT

ZOE

Whatever.

ZOE's eyes start to water as she walks away from ELSIE and toward the street. MARGARET pulls up and ZOE wipes her eyes on her sleeve before getting in the car. The car pulls away.

INT. CAR - AFTERNOON

MARGARET glances over at ZOE, who looks intently out the passenger side window at nothing in particular. MARGARET looks back at the road in front of her just as ZOE turns to look at her mom. Then both face forward.

MARGARET

What's the matter, hon?

ZOE

Nothing.

MARGARET raises her eyebrows knowingly.

MARGARET

You sure?

ZOE

Mhmm.

MARGARET

Alright, darling, but you can always tell me if there's something bothering you.

ZOE

Mmkay.

The two drive in silence until they arrive home.

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

HANDHELD

(Classical piano music playing softly)

We see Margaret's back as she stands by the stove, cooking. The camera moves from the kitchen to the dimly lit living room, where ZOE sits at a baby grand piano. The camera tilts down to show a small beagle resting its head on Zoe's feet as they rise and fall on the pedals in time with the music.

(Doorbell rings and the piano abruptly stops)

MARGARET

ZO!

ZOE

I GOT IT!

ZOE opens the door for her music teacher, a man in his 20s, JAMIE.

ZOE

Hi Jamie.

JAMIE

Hey kiddo, you ready?

ZOE

Mhm.

JAMIE follows ZOE back into the living room.

MARGARET (FROM THE OTHER ROOM)  
Hi Jamie!

JAMIE  
Hi Ms. Nelson!

JAMIE and ZOE sit down next to each other on the piano bench. ZOE resumes her playing and the camera zooms out slowly.

CROSS DISSOLVE

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

(Classical music continues to play  
in the background)

MEDIUM SHOT

ZOE sits down on her bed, the dog sitting next to her.

CLOSEUP SHOT

The camera follows her eyes to a framed photograph on her nightstand. The image is of Zoe, Elsie, and two other girls, all wearing royal blue graduation gowns, all joyous. She reaches over to pick it up and takes the picture out of its frame.

The dog follows her actions closely with his eyes but keeps his head low.

After some time, a teardrop falls from Zoe's face and onto the picture as she rips the picture down its center.

The dog picks its head up at the ripping sound, and goes and snuggles up against Zoe on the bed. They sit like that for several seconds before ZOE speaks.

ZOE  
Oh Amadeus, I don't know what I'm  
supposed to do.

The dog raises his eyebrows, and yawns at the sight of Zoe crying.

ZOE

I don't wanna be that one kid at school that doesn't have any friends, but I already am.

ZOE falls back on her bed.

AERIAL SHOT

ZOE stares up at her ceiling sprawled out on her bed, with Amadeus curled up next to her.

INT. SCHOOL - DAY

ZOE goes into school the next day and walks over to her locker. This time she ignores the graffiti and unlocks the lock. When she opens the door, a small piece of yellow notepad paper flutters to the floor. She stoops to pick it up and studies the graphite streaks forming the words "i like u." Confused, she closes her locker and heads to class.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

ZOE walks into class and sees ELSIE sitting at the front of the room laughing with a group of other kids, mostly guys. She walks past them and goes to sit at the same desk at the back of the room.

PROFILE SHOT

Just as she sits down, the same boy from the day before sits down next to her, again without saying a word.

TWO SHOT

They awkwardly look at each other and give weak smiles before quickly looking away from each other, as if trying to hide the fact that they had made eye contact.

The teacher, MR. HOLLAND, a middle-aged man wearing a grey sweater vest, enters the room.

MR. HOLLAND

Good morning everyone. Today we'll be doing a brief mini-lesson on African geography.



The boy sitting next to Elsie rolls his eyes, and Elsie lets out a poorly-timed giggle. Mr. Holland clears his throat.

MR. HOLLAND

So, if you would please take out your notebooks and complete the warmup on the board.

Zoe takes out a purple composition book and opens it to the first page. She looks up at the board, where the words "Draw Africa" appear. The boy next to Zoe pulls out a yellow pad of paper.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

ZOE stands at her locker to collect her things at the end of the day. Inside her locker, she finds another piece of yellow paper, but this time a full page, folded up. She pockets the paper without opening it, puts her books in her backpack, closes her locker, and walks toward the door.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

WIDE SHOT

ZOE walks up the steps to her house and opens the door.

CUT TO INSIDE HOUSE

ZOE takes her shoes off and goes into the kitchen, where MARGARET is sitting at the table, sewing a pair of pants. When she sees Zoe, she puts her glasses on her head and lowers her sewing.

MARGARET

Hi honey, how was your day?

ZOE

Good.

MARGARET

Good? Good! That's better than yesterday!

Zoe puts her bag down on the chair across from Margaret, and opens the refrigerator. She pulls out an apple and a block of cheese.

MARGARET

We're having dinner later, so don't overdo it, okay?

ZOE

K.

ZOE grabs her bag and her snack and leaves the room, the dog following her. MARGARET puts her glasses back on and continues her sewing.

(Stairs creak in the background)

INT. BEDROOM - AFTERNOON

MEDIUM, PROFILE, STILL

ZOE puts her backpack down and sits at a small wooden vanity desk, Amadeus sitting on the bed behind her. Her room is lit by sunlight and string lights. She takes a bite of the apple and then a bite of cheese, and takes the yellow-paper note out of her pocket.

CLOSEUP SHOT

She unfolds it. On the paper is a sketch of Africa and in small letters, "how come you don't seem to have a lot of friends? can i be ur friend? xo"

OTS SHOT

ZOE looks up at herself, beaming in the mirror of her vanity. She covers her mouth with her hand as if attempting to contain her excitement. She gets up and joins her dog on the bed.

ZOE

Amadeus! Do you see this?!

ZOE shows her dog the piece of paper. He looks at her and barks.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

ZOE stands at her locker with a new small piece of yellow paper in her hand. It read, "i think your smile is cute. wish i could see it more."

The curly-haired boy walks toward her and stops behind her. ZOE absentmindedly turns around as she grins at the paper. Her back now leans against her locker, and she realizes he is standing directly in front of her, smiling. She looks up and realizes that he, too, is missing his teeth, and ZOE breaks into a beaming smile.

ABRUPT CUT TO BLACK