

I Have Trouble

by Christopher Morris

Trouble.

It was the nickname my mother gave me last summer because I had befriended Ashley Tate. More specifically, it was because Ashley and I had snuck into my mother's bedroom one afternoon while she was out at the shops. Her room smelled of lilies, and it opened onto a small wooden porch that overlooked the hill sweeping down to the woods almost a half-mile away. Even where I'm from, it's uncommon to own so much land; my mother was proud of the view.

It's not like we did nothing: I was practically wetting myself from being in there at all, spent most of the time standing by the door and quaking in my socked feet. I felt almost sick, a feeling that my mother nauseatingly referred to as "guilty tummy." Like I was a little kid.

Ashley, however, was standing in front of my mother's vanity and admiring herself, twirling a single lock of snappy red hair around her finger in a way that made it feel peculiarly like she was cocking a gun. "Come here," she told me, not turning from her reflection. I'm not a lesbian or nothing, but she was pretty. Pretty enough to envy—if I'd been the envious type.

"I really shouldn't," I murmured. "We shouldn't even *be* in here."

"But we are." Ashley put an arm out and caught my reflection's eye in the vanity mirror. "Come on, Liza."

I groaned but idled up to her anyway, let her drape her arm around my shoulders and tilt me slightly to the side.

"Hmm," she said, putting her other hand on her hip and smiling as if for a photographer. "I want us to remember this moment."

"What? Why?"

She didn't answer. Just winked at the mirror like a camera lens clicking a picture.

Honestly, I don't know how my mother found out that we'd been in there. When she returned, she found Ashley and me on the tire swing out back with the neighbor boys. We were playing an intense game of tic-tac-toe with our toes in the dirt, and I was winning against Bill when I felt my mother's eyes on the back of my neck. Swinging the tire around to face the house, I saw her standing on her porch, dressed in a pale pink sundress and drying her hands on it.

"Uh-oh," Bobby said. He was twelve and comically chubby. "You're in trouble, Liars."

"Liars?" Ashley asked. She had a lollipop sticking out of the corner of her mouth in a way that made me believe she smoked cigarettes. To my knowledge, though, she didn't.

"Yeah," Bill said. "We call her that cause of how bad she is at lying. You know. Irony."

“Thanks,” Ashley said, her voice so dismissive that it was like a high heel stepping on a beetle. “I think I know what irony is.”

“She knows.” I watched my mother turn and go slowly back inside. “She knows we went in her room.”

“So what?” Ashley examined her bright pink fingernails. “Just lie. *Liars.*”

That night, I sat at the dinner table and watched my peas glint in the light of the chandelier overhead. My mother sat opposite my father, and I sat opposite Ashley.

“So,” my father said, slicing neatly through his steak. “Your family’s new here, Ashley?”

“Yes,” she said proudly, sitting erect. “My daddy works at the slaughterhouse.”

I winced at the way she said it: like it was making her hungry or something. She’d eaten her dinner—a sizeable chunk of steak, a cheeseburger, and a large cob of corn—in probably about ten minutes, something that had made my mother frown and that had left me worried she would barf. If anything, though, it had just made her look even more confident. Proud, even.

“And where did y’all live before this?” my father asked in his easy monotone.

“Texas.” Ashley folded her hands in her lap and smiled at me. “But I like it better here.”

By the way my mother sipped from her sparkling water and set the glass down again, I could tell that she was about to be mean. “You should invite your parents to our place this weekend, Ashley. We’re hosting the block’s annual barbeque, and it would be a good chance for them to get to know the other parents. And for you to get to know some of the other kids.”

I knew what she meant: *Some of the other kids other than Liza.*

Ashley seemed to have picked up on it too, which surprised me. “Oh,” she said, her voice lilting with mild surprise. “That’d be nice. But I think I’ve already found my *best* friend.”

My mother raised a sardonic eyebrow. “You wouldn’t want to limit yourself. A nice, pleasant young girl like you?”

“*Mom*,” I said, but she didn’t even look at me.

My mother leaned back in her chair with a slight creak of the wicker. “Eliza doesn’t bring many friends home, but the ones she does bring are rarely so . . . at ease.”

Momma, I wanted to say, but I’d already used up my store of bravado for the evening.

“Would you like seconds?” My mother made as if to get up. “I don’t know what you girls did to work up such an appetite, but there’re more than enough leftovers in the kitchen.”

I held my breath and crossed my ankles. I looked to my father for help, but he had one ear turned to the radio in the living room, and he was deaf in the other.

Ashley touched her fingertip to the prongs of her fork and laughed to herself. “Pardon me for asking, Miss Deacon,” she said. “But are you trying to embarrass me?”

My father turned sharply to her. “What’s that now?”

“Might I be excused?” I asked, popping to my feet and banging my knee against the table. “Ash, I think we should—”

“I really don’t appreciate that,” Ashley said, looking right at my mother. “I think girls have enough reasons to feel embarrassed about their bodies without their friends’ mothers insinuating that they’re fat.”

In the foyer, my grandmamma’s grandfather clock dinged eight times.

“What’s going on?” my father asked, more urgently now.

My mother smiled like she’d just heard an unsavory but still amusing joke.

“Ashley,” I said, gathering up my plate. “Let’s go.”

I walked her down the street to her parents' house, the night air vibrating with cicadas and crickets. Most of the streets in my town aren't well-lit, so we carried flashlights if we ever went out after dusk, aimed their beams down at the hard-packed earth and watched for the slithering shapes of snakes.

Mostly, Ashley and I didn't speak. At the time, me not knowing what she was, I took it as a sign of embarrassment at what my mother had said—even though that didn't match up with her boldness in then confronting my mother. Regardless, though, I felt bad for her, and that's probably why I continued to hang out with her after that night when, in reality, I didn't much like her. In fact, she made me feel uneasy.

"Liars?" she asked.

I kicked a small rock into the tall grass bordering the road. "Hmm?"

"Is your momma ever nice to you?"

Not really, I wanted to say, but I didn't. There're a lot of reasons maybe why. Maybe I didn't want her to pity me. Maybe I didn't want to get my mother in trouble. Maybe I just didn't think anybody would care. After all, it wasn't like she was hitting me or nothing.

"Well?" Ashley repeated. "Is she?"

"She's alright," I said.

Ashley shook her head. "Alright then. Liars."

Trouble. Trouble and Liars.

By all indications, there were no good things in my future.

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I didn't see Ashley again for a couple of weeks after that. Sometimes, while I was sitting on my windowsill with the screen popped out so that I could slingshot little rocks I'd gathered

from the backyard at the tree shading our driveway, I'd see her walking past with another girl from our street, a girl with a curious name. Wavy. And seeing them together like that, laughing and jostling one another like a couple of boys, I assumed that Ashley had decided to cut me and my disturbed parents out of her life. Lord knows I wouldn't have blamed her.

That's why it surprised me when, one day, while I was on my way to meet Bobby and Bill at their place further on down the street, I heard the ring of a bicycle bell and turned to see Ashley peddling around the turn that led towards town.

"Hey, Liars," she said, skidding to a dusty stop beside me. She had a beach towel slung over one shoulder, and she was wearing only a bright red bikini and bug-eyed sunglasses. It made her look old, a good four or five years older than fourteen. She slid her sunglasses down her nose a little. "Something wrong, Liars? You look like you're scared of me."

"I'm not," I said.

She leaned forward onto her handlebars, causing her flat belly to fold up a little. "Wanna come to Wavy's house? We're going swimming."

"Um—"

"Invite the neighbor boys." She popped her sunglasses back into place and braced her bare feet against her bike pedals. "See you soon."

I went, of course, brought just Bill along with me so that I wouldn't feel quite so out of place. Bill was my age, and since I didn't know Wavy all that well, I needed someone who could pass for a love interest. Just in case Wavy was one of 'em that, for whatever reason, thought I was a lesbian. There were more people who thought that than I was comfortable with—and certainly more than my mother was comfortable with.

Wavy's parents had a blow-up pool in their backyard and lots of those doughnut floats. They also had one that was shaped like a giant purple armchair. Wavy sat in it, trying to look regal, but she was too ugly for that. Crooked teeth. Tangled brown hair. Skinny but in a way that just suggested she didn't eat enough.

"Hey," I said to Ashley, floating over to her side of the pool on my back. "I'm sorry we haven't talked in a while. It's not like I've been avoiding you."

"That's okay," she said simply. She was sitting at the edge of the pool with her legs in the water, using a magnifying glass to laser the sun onto a frantic, erupting ant hill like a schoolyard bully. I hadn't thought that people actually did that, and yet here was the proof: ants spilling out like crowds of screaming people.

But then something had changed between us by dinner because, while we were all standing on Wavy's back porch and eating hotdogs, Ashley kept herself aimed firmly away from me and towards everyone else.

"You know," she said. "Eliza's mother called me fat."

"What?" Wavy looked at me as if she were the wounded party. "Why?"

"No," I said, a cold sweat starting at the back of my neck. "You don't understand—"

"I'm not saying you said it," Ashley said without looking at me. "I'm saying it was said."

"Wow," Bill said. "Even for Miss Deacon, that's fucked up."

"Yeah," Wavy agreed. "What's your mom's problem, Liza?"

I felt tears pricking the backs of my eyes. "But I didn't—"

"Lucky for Miss Deacon, I've got a thick skin. Honestly, I'm more worried for Liars here." I flinched with surprise as Ashley threw her arm tightly around my waist and shook her head. "Cause if she'd say that to me? I don't even want to know what she'd say to her own kid."

Those words stayed there, plastered to the inside of my brain, all the way through the rest of the evening. That night, I laid in bed, sweating through my one pale sheet, and listened to the night buzzing outside.

I knew then that I definitely didn't like Ashley. I didn't like how she made me feel, I didn't like how she talked, and I didn't like how I couldn't figure out whether she was good or not. I didn't like that I felt betrayed, that I'd invited her over for dinner that one night just to welcome her to the neighborhood, and she'd repaid me by taunting me with my mother's cruelty.

The thing, though, was that she was right about my mother. And unlike me, she had the courage to say something about it. She had the courage to say something about it *to me*.

And that's why, despite the sick feeling in my belly, I assumed that I still needed her.

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One boiling July afternoon, I heard a knock on my living room window and went over to it to find Ashley standing in the blueberry bushes bordering the sides of our house.

"Hi," she said. "What're you doing right now?"

"Um." I made a mental note of her baggy overalls; they had specks of what looked like berry juice on them. "Nothing much."

"Relax. Your momma's not gonna see me." She leaned in close to the screen separating us. "Do you wanna see something cool?"

I shifted my weight to one foot. "Like what?"

She smiled conspiratorially. "Well, I can't *tell* you. It'd spoil the surprise."

"Ash—"

"I'm sorry I was mean to you," she said abruptly, and I felt my resolve soften. "It's just that I'm not so good at talking to people sometimes."

I didn't know what to say.

She put her hands in her overall pockets. It felt put-on. "I tend to say mean things."

I shifted my weight to the other foot. I could feel something not good coming of this little adventure, and yet I was simple enough to believe that she'd meant what she'd just said. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say I was just stupid enough to push away my doubt.

Five minutes later, I was following Ashley up the street and then out across the fields at the edge of the Wilson property towards the woods. I was sweating like a stuck pig, but Ashley seemed impossibly dry and energetic, skipping backwards and chattering about Texas weather.

"Much hotter than this," she summarized, stopping to throw her arms out and inhale. There was a particularly large stain of berry juice right next to a tear in the belly button area of her overalls, a stain the size of someone taking a handful of berries and mashing them up on her.

I wiped my brow and lifted my twiggy arm to smell my armpit. "Are we almost there?"

"Huh?" For a second, she looked genuinely confused. "Oh. Yes. Follow me, Liars."

She took me a few paces into the woods, the relentless blast of the sun fading mercifully to a dull splotching of gold through the gaps in the leaves overhead. The air cooled. Ashley led me to a bundle of pricker bushes and pointed.

"See?" she asked. She had that hungry look in her eyes again—like when she'd told my dad that her father was working at the slaughterhouse.

At first, I didn't even really understand what I was seeing. Even now, I don't know if I would have immediately gotten it. It was so mangled up that it was barely recognizable as a squirrel, but that's what it was. Its entire head was crushed to pulp, bits of skin and unzipped flesh lying in the grass beside a bloodied rock. It had been cut open down the length of its spine

like a fish, and its tail was lying a foot or so away as if it had been ripped clean off. There was an empty net on the ground also, which meant that someone had set a trap for it. Someone . . .

I looked at Ashley, standing there with her hands clasped primly behind her back. That juice on her overalls, of course, wasn't juice.

"Well?" She swayed expectantly from side to side. "What do you think? Neat, huh?"

"Um." I took a step back from the squirrel. "I, uh . . ."

"Liza." She frowned. "It's not like I did it to a person. It was just some stupid squirrel."

I was feeling dizzy, and this made me trip over a tree root and land hard on my butt. I felt a centipede crawl onto my hand and hurriedly whipped it off. My whole body tingled.

Ashley came and stood over me, her narrow shape suddenly tall and imposing when, in reality, she was shorter than me. She held out her hand, her palm still faintly discolored as if she'd tried scrubbing red Sharpie off her skin.

"Come on," she said sadly. "Let's go back."

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"Trouble, huh?" Ashley asked. We were maybe halfway across the Wilson property, and I could see the road, wavering and warping in the heat. "That's some bullshit."

"Yeah." I swallowed hard. "I guess. But it's just a nickname."

A look came over Ashley's face then, something unlike anything I'd ever seen before. She reached out and put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "I can be Trouble too."

There's a word for what Ashley is. Sociopath. Sociopathic. I wonder if there's a word for whatever I am: the person who a sociopath sees enough of herself in to befriend.

Our feet crunched in the dirt and the tall grass, and in the distance, I saw my house. I imagined my mother sitting out on the back porch and drinking something cold from a sweating glass, and I felt my stomach turn.