JIGSAW

McKinney Contest 2019

Fiction Short Story, Undergraduate
The floor was flat, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t difficult terrain. At least, not to Clarissa.

Each tile was either black or white, and each black tile was surrounded by nine white tiles. Obviously, Clarissa could only step on the black ones, which was usually easy enough. After all, every black tile was at most only one diagonal tile-length away from another black tile.

The challenge was when her class took their daily trek through the hallway to the lunchroom and back. Clarissa had mastered the floors of five classrooms, from the red-browns of kindergarten to the white-blacks currently below her feet, but the hallway had always confounded her. To start with, it was composed of four different colors of tiles, and although green was the natural choice for the ‘safe’ tile—Clarissa appreciated the thematic connection to the green-colored landmasses of maps—green tiles were by far the most common of the four, and stepping on only green was far too easy. The other natural choice, then, was to step only on non-green tiles—but this, too, was unsatisfactory. Certain stretches of hallway consisted of a minimum of five green tiles across, and although crossing these chasms was doable with enough of a leap, such leaps tended to provoke a stern remark from a teacher. Clarissa did not like stern remarks from teachers.

Instead, Clarissa had come up with other ideas. Perhaps green tiles were acid, and the rare blue tiles would give her immunity for as many greens as blues she managed to step on beforehand. Frustratingly, though, the floor patterns were not consistent, and in many areas there were simply not enough blues to sustain her journey through the fields of acid. Clarissa tried adding another rule, that the white tiles (clouds) granted her the ability to fly over acid as long as she walked in a straight line to another cloud, but this still was too difficult in some areas—and worse, too easy in others.

In the last three years, Clarissa had settled on a mixed ruleset consisting of six different systems, each active in a certain area, and an additional thirty-eight addenda. This struck her as inelegant, and she still pined for the holy grail of a unified system, but these days she mostly stuck to making various small tweaks and diligently recording their strengths and weaknesses in an extra notebook she kept at her desk.
When her teacher called for the students to line up to go to lunch, Clarissa took her usual place at the very end of the line. Sometimes her peers could make interesting obstacles to avoid as she weaved from tile to tile, but today Clarissa was excited to test out a new addendum whereby blue tiles gave double immunity on rainy days. It was the first rainy day in almost three weeks, and she wanted full space to move around.

Clarissa was disappointed, therefore, when a girl she did not recognize lined up behind her. Clarissa knew most of her classmates by face, even if she had trouble connecting those faces to a name, but this new girl’s scraggly blonde hair and large, angular nose was entirely unfamiliar.

“Hi,” the girl whispered to her. Clarissa ignored her.

When the bell rang, the girl continued to be a nuisance, and took to walking next to her for some reason.

“What’s your name? My name is Laura. Are you new here too? Or have you been here a long time? My family just moved here from Rockport. Were you born here? Hey, why are you walking funny?”

At this last question, Clarissa stopped, although she did not look up. “It’s a game,” she muttered—that was usually enough to shut people up. The girl stopped walking too, and stared blankly. Clarissa was distinctly reminded of her pet fish Bobby—he always stared at the colored rocks at the bottom of his tank in the same way, right before he tried to eat one and spat it out again. He never learned. “You. Are. In. My. Way,” she added, emphasizing each word.

“Oh, sorry.” The girl moved a little. “What game is it?”

Clarissa sighed, and started forward. She would have to try again with the new rule when they came back—hopefully it would still be raining. “It’s, um, kind of complicated. So you can’t step on the green—”

“Oh! So I just lost.”
“Well, no, actually. You lost as soon as we left the classroom—you can’t step on the threshold of
the door.”

“Aww, that’s too bad. Can I come back?”

“No. You have to wait until we get back.”

“What if”—and here the girl reached forward and actually touched Clarissa on the shoulder,
making her flinch—”’you tag a friend! Then you come back to life.”

“No! Don’t do that!” Clarissa recoiled, and saw the girl’s face change from one expression to
another. That seemed to shut her up. Except…

Except maybe adding another person could take the game in entirely new directions. It would be
an entirely new class of rule. Clarissa felt her brain switch into high gear as she considered the
possibilities.

“It, uh, would make it too easy if you could come back to life just by getting tagged. Maybe, um,
if we both stand on a red tile, we can come back to life that way. But you can only do it once per trip. And
maybe that still makes it too unbalanced—there’s a lot of other rules to consider—”

“Alright!” the girl yelled. Clarissa flinched at the noise, and the girl seemed to notice, lowering
her voice. “You just stepped on that red tile there and I’m on this one, so we’re both back in! Let’s just be
more careful from now on.” She grinned.

“Yeah, okay, we can advance this rule to the accelerated testing phase, pending approval in two
weeks. But I still need to explain a few more things...”

That day, Clarissa deliberately sat with another person at lunch for the first time in her life. Not
that she cared, of course. This girl—Laura?—was just an interesting new variable.

And when Laura invited Clarissa over after school, Clarissa was not bothered by the change in
routine, and laughed with Laura at the cartoons she showed her. And when Clarissa brought Laura over in
return, Laura listened patiently as Clarissa excitedly told her all about Bobby’s species, and they both
giggled helplessly at the misshapen blobs they created when trying to paint a picture of him.

By the time she moved on to middle school, Clarissa was not looking down at the floor anymore.
She had conquered that hallway long ago—and besides, Laura was much more interesting to talk to.

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“Do they bother you?”

“Who?”

“Those girls. Like, Rachel and Evelyn. Do they bother you?”

Clarissa looked over at the girls Laura was gesturing at, their names already fleeing from her
mind. She vaguely remembered seeing them before, but they didn’t seem different from any of her other
classmates—just another group of thirteen-year-olds talking and laughing amongst themselves. Clarissa
met their eyes, and they quickly turned away. “No, they’re fine. I don’t care about them. So, what do you
think?”

“About what, again?”

“The question I asked. If you flapped your arms like this”—Clarissa retracted her arms into her
sweatshirt, and began flapping her sleeves quickly—“fast enough, with a big enough sweatshirt, do you
think you could fly?”

“Uh, I don’t think—”

“Yeah, probably not with a normal sweatshirt. Maybe if you had some kind of wingsuit, so the
sleeves were stiff, but even then you wouldn’t be able to do much more than glide.”

“Yeah, um—”
“But let’s say you are magically granted the power to fly by flapping your sweatshirt sleeves. Okay? But it comes with a catch, monkey’s paw style. Whenever you wear the sweatshirt, you can only make bird calls. Right? Like, caaaaah, caaaaaaaah. Or maybe something shriller, like tweet-tweet-twa-TWEEEEEH-TWEEEEEEH-tweeh-eeee-eeeeee. Would you take that deal?”

“Um, I’m not sure—”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’d take that deal in a heartbeat. Not enough of a penalty. Maybe if you also had the same inability to control your—”

“Hey, Clarissa, you go girl! You work that sweatshirt!” This last comment came from one of the girls (Rachel? Or maybe, Ev, Ev-something. Eve?) that Laura was talking about earlier. The group had evidently wandered over to face them, which annoyed Clarissa a little. Could they not see she was in the middle of a conversation? She thought about just ignoring them, but maybe they would be interested by the question.

“Oh, I was just trying to act like a bird.”

“Oh, you did a good job. That baggy sweatshirt must really be useful for that, good choice!” The girl who said this was smiling. Clarissa took this as a sign to keep talking.

“Haha, you think so? I think I would like being a bird. Except that they don’t live very long. It would be hard to get used to having a cloaca, though.”

“A clo-what?”

“Oh, a cloaca. I know a lot about birds because my Mom got me a book on birds for Christmas. They had diagrams—basically, a bird only has one hole down there. Like, they defecate and urinate and lay eggs and everything through their cloaca. It’s really interesting how differently they evolved.” At this, the girls started sniggering and looking at each other, which Clarissa took as a good sign even though she couldn’t place their facial expressions. Clarissa looked over at Laura, whose face was red for some reason.
“So, what do you think? Would you like a cloaca?”

“I think she already has one,” another girl cut in. This prompted a high-pitched sound from another one, and a laugh from a third. “That’s why she’s your only friend, right?”

“No, that’s not possible. That she has a cloaca, I mean—that’s only for birds. No, she’s my only friend because she’s my best friend and I love her and she loves me.” At this, Clarissa turned to Laura to give her a hug, and Laura kept her arms stiffly at her side. There was more laughter from the group, although by this time Clarissa saw the teacher arrive. “Oh, Ms. Bailey is here. You should get back to your seats, she is probably not happy about being late. And you know how much she hates talking during class.”

For some reason, Laura did not meet Clarissa’s eye when she looked over during class, and didn’t respond when Clarissa talked to her during the class change. After school, Clarissa waited for Laura in their usual spot, but it was only after most of the students had left that Laura finally showed.

“Hey, what took you so long? And why were you acting weird?”

“You… You really can’t tell. You really have no idea.”

“Can’t tell what?”

“Clarissa…” At this, Laura sighed, with a long sigh that seemed to shudder. “They were making fun of us. They were making fun of you for being weird, and making fun of me for hanging out with you.”

“What? You mean those girls we talked to? No, they liked us. They were laughing.”

“Clarissa, they were laughing at us. We were just a joke to them.”

Clarissa froze. Her whole body seemed to stiffen of its own accord—everything except her heart, which she could suddenly feel beating very fast. Laura took a moment, and continued.

“You… Clarissa, the things you said—the things you say are not normal. Okay? They thought it was funny.”
“But…” Clarissa tried to think back to that moment. “But they barely even talked to you! Why do you care?”

“Because I was embarrassed! I didn’t care that you were weird when we were kids, but we are in seventh grade now! And besides, they made fun of me too—they were saying I looked like a boy.”

“What? No, female birds have cloacas too. That doesn’t make sense.” Clarissa thought for a moment, and continued matter-of-factly, “But I mean, they weren’t wrong. You do have shorter hair than most girls. And your nose is pretty big. And your chest is pretty flat. I guess I can see it.”

Laura’s face changed, and Clarissa could see she had said something wrong. Laura looked angry, now—angrier than Clarissa had ever seen her. “You… I cannot believe you. You really don’t care about anyone else, do you, Clarissa. I- I’m done with this. This is over.”

Laura started to say something else, but spun on her heel and stormed off. Clarissa tried to catch up—“Wait, where are you going?”—but Laura ran faster, and Clarissa was soon out of breath. She watched as Laura turned a corner and disappeared. “I’m sorry,” she said, weakly, but no one was around her. No one heard.

The next day at school, Clarissa tried to apologize, but Laura did not so much as look at her. As Clarissa moved from class to class, she thought about what Laura had said, constantly. Clarissa started noticing things, things which she had not paid any attention to before. Things that people did. She could see them looking at her in her peripheral vision, and looked away as soon as she turned to them. She heard snickers and small laughs disguised as coughs. And as she thought about it, Clarissa realized she had been surrounded by these little things for longer than she could remember.

So, she was alone now. That was okay, right? Clarissa remembered being alone. She liked being alone, at least some of the time. This was how she was supposed to be, maybe. Other people weren’t like her, and she had trouble understanding them—maybe that was just how it was.
But as months passed, Clarissa never stopped thinking about Laura. She lied to her mother for the first time (“Oh, Laura and I hang out at the library now. You didn’t see her? She must have left through the back.”), and she threw all of the drawings they had made together in the bottom of her closet, but not thrown out. She would look across the room, and see Laura sitting and talking with—is that the girl from that day, was it Rachel? oh, that stings, let’s not look at her—and Clarissa made a decision.

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Rule 2: Look like everyone else.

She was nervous about satisfying this one, but as she took her seat and looked around her, it seemed like she fit in. Skinny jeans? Check. Solid color shirt? Another check. Lightly applied makeup? She was less certain about this one, but she’d watched a lot of YouTube tutorials over the summer and felt mildly confident. Call it a check minus.

Rule 1: Don’t say anything.

That was the most important rule of all—the one that had proven itself to her over and over in the past year and a half. Every false start, every laugh, every weird look she got and every cringey memory she had—all of these could have been prevented by just keeping her mouth shut. Of course, this was also accompanied by Rule 1b: Not saying anything is also weird. Not to mention counterproductive. She had sat at her desk during what seemed like the entirety of eighth grade, her hands clasped together, her head facing forward, her mouth a thin line. This particular strategy was very effective at curtailing the laughs, weird looks, and other signs that had seemed to follow her everywhere she went, but it also meant no one ever talked to her. They barely even knew who she was—and many of them remembered who she used to be. No—she could not go back to that. Could not.
Of course, that left her with something of a dilemma. How do you make new friends when you never know what to say? Here she was, at a new school. High school—in middle and elementary, she was always surrounded by much the same group of people, but in high school all the different middle school classes merged into one new class, like a dozen rivers all rushing into the same bay. It was a new place, with new faces, and a new chance to make friends. To be normal. Her… last chance.

All of the work she had done, it all lead up to this. The hours spent practicing facial expressions in front of a mirror, the hours spent eavesdropping on every word she could hear her classmates say, the hours spent pruning her interests (Rule 4) and her vocabulary (Rule 5) to match everyone else’s. She looked over at the girl next to her—long, jet-black hair, fashionable-looking jacket (despite the ninety degree weather), staring idly at her phone. Should she say something to her?

As it happened, she was spared from having to make the first move. “Hey, what do you think of that?” said the girl, who put down her phone and was pointing at something on the wall.

She looked, first at the pointing hand, then at what she was pointing at, then remembering Rule 3 (Pay attention to their face and their voice) she looked back to meet the girl’s eyes (looking them in the eyes was always the hardest part) before remembering, wait, she didn’t actually see what the girl was pointing at, and looked to the wall again. Damn. She hoped that didn’t look too weird. And as for the wall… there was a tall painting of a horse.

What? What—what do you say about that? A painting of a horse? Did the girl like horses, and she should say she also likes horses? Maybe the girl liked paintings, and she should say something insightful about it. But what?

“Look at that thing. It’s huge. Our guy—Mr. Archippo, I mean—must really like horses, huh. I mean, I get wanting to decorate your room or whatever, but that thing is just distracting. Just look at those teeth. Friggin’ scary.”
Oh, okay. Right. Rule 6: The best way to bond is by disliking something together. She needed to say something now, quickly.

“Yeah, it’s, really, uh, big. And, um… it’s tall.”

_Fuck._ The girl laughed in response. “Yeah, you got that right.” She winced at the laugh—her first day, and here she was already screwing up—but then the girl continued. “So what’s your name? I’m Amanda.”

“C- Call me Claire.” Was it really that easy? Was she doing fine? Claire—yes, that was her name now, or at least what she went by ever since someone told her “Clarissa” was old-fashioned—swallowed. At any moment this new girl would figure her out, would see through her for what she really was, would laugh and leave. _I can’t do this_, Claire thought. _I need more practice._ Maybe she should run out that window— if she got lucky she would break her leg, and maybe she could postpone high school by a year. Maybe in a year, she would be good enough to befriend

—wait, what was her name again?

“Amanda!” called out a male voice from the front of the room. Another student, wearing shorts and a t-shirt with some kind of logo on it. “Check this out! He’s got horse-shaped paper clips on his desk. I mean, _paper clips_! I never knew you could bend the metal like that. It’s actually really impressive.”

Okay. On the one hand, Claire knew her name now. Amanda. She should be able to remember that.

On the other hand, this other guy clearly had known Amanda for a long time. He was her real friend—not some stranger like Claire. Maybe she should quit while she was ahead.

“Damn. That’s some serious dedication to something so seriously stupid. Hey Claire, meet Kyle. He’s a nice guy, when he’s not looking through other people’s property.”

“Hey, you’re critiquing his art! That’s basically the same thing—it’s like you’re tearing into his soul.”
Okay. So she was part of the group now? This happened so suddenly, Claire didn’t know how to react, but she knew she had to say something.

Claire considered her options. She could chime in with an anecdote about the history of the term “paper clip,” but that kind of violated Rule 4 (Don’t talk about anything you like that might be weird). Painting, though—that was a normal interest, and it had potential. She couldn’t say anything too technical, though (Rule 5: Don’t use big words), and talking about the brush strokes or orientation of the horse model was probably boring anyways. So what should she say?

“Um,” Claire announced. They fell silent. She could practically feel their eyes boring holes in her face. “I, uh, I actually do a little bit of painting, and I can tell you that horse is just not right. See? Its legs are so long, they’re practically taller than its body. It’s why the horse looks so out of place. It’s like its on stilts.”

Amanda smiled. “I called it! I knew something about that horse was just not right. It’s like a horse that grew celery sticks for legs.”

Rule 6 for the rescue, again. Negativity was always a good choice. Never mind the fact that the horse was probably painted that way on purpose—Claire would gladly sacrifice the merits of abstract art in exchange for a few cheap laughs.

A man entered the classroom and began to unpack his things on the desk. “I can’t wait spend an hour learning absolutely nothing from this horse freak,” muttered Kyle, taking a seat next to Claire. Ah, right—the more difficult part of Rule 6, and the one most contrary to Claire’s nature. The best possible way to fit in was to hate school. And yet, Claire was feeling more confident, now. She had been able to make it this far (well, a lot of that was sheer luck, but still), and she was starting to feel like her plan might actually work.
As the months and year rolled by, Claire split.

She could feel it—her sinews were unraveling. Her ribs were popping out. Each one of her eyes was on one of the two halves of her body. Her heart was entirely on her left side, but its vessels and valves were attached to her right—crimson tendrils stretching out of her body, yearning for beat and blood, aorta wailing for its lost, missing heart. Her spine was little better—it was split cleanly, down the middle, but its myriad nerves were frayed and cut and screaming, always screaming, in unending pain. Only her brain seemed unaffected—was it because the left and right hemispheres were truly two independent entities, forced to be connected, like she read about in *Science News*? Or was it because whoever was doing this to her wanted her to suffer, wanted to torture her, wanted her to be fully cognizant of her pain—

At that, Claire had to laugh. (She was alone right now, so she was allowed to laugh to herself). “Whoever was doing this to her”—as if she didn’t know. As if she didn’t know that every problem, every one of the (*stupid, insignificant, teenage*) problems that plagued her were of her own doing. As if she wasn’t just trying to pin it all on some imaginary antagonist, because that was easier than facing reality.

In truth, Claire was feeling guilty. Guilty because she *liked* blunt, sarcastic Amanda, she *liked* cheerful, clever, Kyle, and she *liked* the other friends they introduced her too that she still sometimes had trouble remembering the names of. Most of all, she liked being part of the group, just like anyone else. She liked it, despite every sign and every reason that she should not. She simply could not help herself.

Not caring about school—that was the easy one. All Claire had to do was replace the time she normally spent studying with time spent being with friends. It was possibly the easiest choice she had ever had to make in her life. Disappointing her parents? That made things a little harder. They could no longer boast about their perfect daughter, with perfect grades, and a perfect future, to each of their friends doing the exact same thing—but Claire had already known she was not perfect, that she was defective and
broken and an other, for a very long time. Now her parents finally knew too, and that was a relief—even if they “knew” it for entirely the wrong reasons.

Wait. If you ‘know’ something, and you are correct, even if your reasons for knowing are wrong, is that a paradox? Claire was pretty sure it was, and it even had a name—but following this train of thought was against the rules. She was getting better at thought-policing, but occasionally a rogue one still slipped in.

Yeah—changing herself was harder. Claire had sculpted a mold, and was pouring herself in, but parts of herself kept spilling out, misshapen and out of place. The fear that she would be discovered for what she truly was always lurked at the back of her mind, but Claire was getting better at this. She was adapting her speech (Shorter sentences. No technical words. Swear as much as possible.), her hobbies (Pop culture. No reading, except for magazines. One unusual interest is allowed—I choose art), and her mannerisms (Nod when someone talks to you. Look them in the eye. Make your face show the emotion you should be feeling. Look them in the eye. No, don’t stare too much—look away occasionally—then look them in the eye again.) The more of her actions she changed, the more Claire changed to match them—at least, some of her did. Not all of her.

Her fear of authority, that one lingered. Claire did not talk during class—but everyone else did. Claire always wore her seatbelt in the car—but Amanda laughed at her for that. The trick, Claire eventually learned, was to leverage Rule 6. Learn to hate your teachers, and you don’t care if you annoy them. Learn to hate yourself, and you stop caring about your life. The big one, of course, was No Drinking—that was the one that every adult in her life had been warning her about since she could stand on two legs. One Friday night, Amanda picked her up and told her they were going to the woods—what? The woods? Were they going hiking or something? Amanda only laughed.
Laughs still stung, a little. Every laugh that Claire could not place might have been a laugh at her, a little sign that they knew all along, that at any moment her new friends were going to pop out with a confetti and a banner (Suprise!) and laugh at her for believing she could ever be one of them—

but Amanda brought her to a secluded spot in the woods, and there was a firepit, and fifty different faces, and then Kyle handed her a drink, and the stupid thing was that he didn’t even tell her to drink it!—she never even got a chance to stand up to the peer pressure she was warned about in every D.A.R.E. promise and every mandatory school assembly, and she wondered if by drinking this liquid, this forbidden liquid, she would suddenly spill all of her secrets to the world, if she would wake up in a ditch and Amanda and Kyle would be gone, gone just like—

—and Claire drank, and she didn’t even know why, it tasted terrible frankly, and she had another one and soon she realized that her life was surrounded by lies. They lied to her. Drinking… it felt so goddamn good. To drink, just like the rest of her peers. When she was drunk she didn’t feel it anymore, the weight of all the rules she had crafted around herself in hard armor, and everyone else was acting weird too so it was okay to let loose—

—and okay maybe the hangover part was real, yeah that isn’t fun, and her parents did not appreciate her showing up at two a.m. covered in tree brambles and smelling like gasoline (Claire thought it would hide the smell of alcohol—it did. It was also one of the stupidest things she had done in her life, second only to being driven home by Amanda while Kyle yelled that Amanda was too far gone, that he was calling his parents, please don’t get in that car—and it didn’t work anyways. The first thing Claire said when she showed up at the door was “I lub you mommy. I’m nto durnk.” Exactly like that.), but that didn’t matter because they lied to her, her parents and her teachers and every all-knowing adult had all lied to her when they told her she shouldn’t drink, and Claire felt it as her new half absorbed her old half, as she coalesced around her new identity—
but she was still split. Claire was still split. Because, as she learned, Rule 6 was even bigger than she realized. She should have realized it—Claire had direct experience, firsthand knowledge—but she never connected the dots until they were connected for her.

It was Laura. Laura, Claire realized, was something of an easy target for her fellow students that wanted to feel better than someone. Even now. Claire still stopped every time she saw her, her breath catching on her lungs and her heart beating so hard, so slowly, and so forcefully that it literally blurred her vision.

*Wait, Claire, are you being literal? That’s a sign of low blood pressure. You would know that if you still wasted as much time on wikipedia as you used too.*

*I mean, don’t get me wrong, it's not serious. It's completely inconsequential, in fact. I’m just surprised you don’t remember.*

“Look at her hair! She’s trying to grow it out but she has no idea how to take care of it.” That was Amanda.

“Yeah, for a natural blonde she still somehow looks like she has a dye job. Must be all the dirt.” That was Claire. Part of her was proud of that comment—it was so perfectly mean, so pointlessly cruel, so totally *normal*—and another part of her cried out in pain at hearing her own voice say those words.

*That part is me. I’m still here, Claire. I’m listening.*

That was the biggest truth—and the biggest lie—that Claire discovered and/or created. If she felt guilty—and she did feel guilty—Claire could just tell herself that it was okay because Laura was out of earshot. It was okay because it was Amanda, not Claire, who started it, and Claire was just a mirror, reflecting those same thoughts that would have existed without her presence back. It was okay, because Claire discovered that every children’s cartoon, every fable, even the lady her teacher made her see when she was in the second grade that was supposed to teach her social skills, had lied when they said that the
best thing to do was to just be nice to everyone. They were lying, or maybe they were just wrong. It was far easier, and far better for Claire personally, to be cruel. To cause pain.

And so too, was this the lie that Claire told herself.

See the duality? Pretty cool right? No? Think about it.

And then Claire saw, they were three.

Technically, there were more than three at the party, but at this particular moment there were three people in the group.

Amanda was there—she was drunk, and spiteful about her recent breakup. (Rule 4c, addendum 3: When you talk to girls, talk about boys. When you talk to boys, talk about fast food.)

Claire was there, and she was thinking about a lot. And thinking to herself in the second person and third person, apparently. That’s a sign of sanity. Hey, is that sarcasm? Leaking in from the other half? Maybe this whole “half” thing is just another self-delusion.

And Laura was there, and she was feeling alone despite being surrounded by people.

Does that sound familiar, Claire? Do you remember what I was saying about delusions?

And Amanda said, something. Something predictable.

Your friendship is a delusion.

Something that Claire heard, and Laura heard.

You still hold onto this idea—this thought that you are still a good person. Well, I have news for you, Claire. It doesn’t matter what you think you are. Reality is separate from your delusions.

Laura started crying, at this. She’s been having kind of a rough time with high school. She may also have been a little tipsy.

You are so deluded you won’t even tell yourself what your supposed best friend Amanda just said to your real best friend? The one who you really care about?

Claire let herself think a little more than she has been letting herself think lately.
I’ll tell you what Amanda just said. She called Amanda too poor to afford hair conditioner, too stupid to know what everyone thinks of her, and too weird to have any friends.

And Claire…

is most of all, deluding herself into thinking she can be something she is not. Deluding herself into thinking she is not broken. A broken human being. Worthy of nothing. No love. No friends. No parental approval. None of this is something she deserves. She is despicable.

…slapped Amanda in the face.

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Claire’s first reaction, when she got home, was to realize that she was all alone again.

She had slapped Amanda in the face, who proceeded to scream at Claire and grabbed Claire’s arm, so Claire scratched Amanda, and Amanda pulled Claire’s hair, and it was around at that point that someone had stepped in—not Laura, Laura was nowhere to be seen by this point—and pulled them apart.

Everything after that point was a blur, but Claire was more focused on the future. She could imagine it already. She was finally revealed—and not even as someone who said things that were a little weird. No, she would be revealed as someone who was batshit insane, who started fights and scratched people and was someone to be avoided.

Laura, obviously, would still hate Claire. Claire knew that. This changed nothing.

So she was all alone, for good this time. It was actually a little freeing, Claire thought.

Claire also considered that she apparently had a lot of angst. Not only that, but so did everyone else around her. Maybe she was not as alone as she thought she was.
Claire was just in the middle of, very calmly, trying to decide whether to evaluate her life as a
continuum of mistakes or a continuum of lessons learned, when Laura texted her. Laura wanted to meet
up and talk, apparently.

Claire went.

“When I said it before, I didn’t really mean it. But I get it now. Laura, I’m sorry. I said something
hurtful to you, and even before that, I never cared enough about you to even notice how I made you feel.”

“No. Claire…” Laura sighed. “I’ve known you for years, Claire. I mean, I appreciate your
apology and all, but always I knew that you never meant to hurt me. It was me that hurt you. It was
always me.”

“I’m not done yet.” Claire took a deep breath. “I’m sorry I hung out with Amanda, even though I
knew she hated you. I just… I was all alone before you came, Laura. I didn’t know what it was like to
have friends. How…good it feels. And I- I’m sorry I couldn’t be a good friend for you. Before. And now.
I’m sorry I’m a weirdo.”

“Clarissa. Please. Don’t ever be sorry for who you are. You being you… it’s why I liked you.”

“Wait, what? Really?”

“Yes, really! Is it really that hard to understand? When I arrived I was new and I didn’t know
anyone, but you… you were different. And I talked to you, and you were so interesting, and everything
we did together was so fun. My family, we used to move around a lot, so I had to get used to meeting new
people, but I mean it when I say you were the best friend I ever had. I was so happy when I learned I
would stay here in this town with you.”

“But… I remember. They would always laugh at us—Rachel and Evelyn and the like. I never
cared, but you always did. And then you went off and became their friends instead.”

Laura snorted. “Yeah, that did not last long. Let’s say I hated them for a reason. Honestly, I made
a huge mistake. I don’t know why you came here to apologize to me—I wanted to say sorry to you. I
never should have abandoned you like that. It was the stupidest and meanest thing I did in my life. And then, even after all that…” Laura grinned. “I can’t believe you would stand up for me like that. After everything.”

Claire and Laura laughed. A few minutes passed, until Claire broke the silence.

“So, if by being different I make people uncomfortable, and by trying to fit in I betray myself, then what am I supposed to do?”

“Clarissa, you aren’t ‘supposed’ to do anything. All this stuff about betraying yourself… I don’t buy it. You can be anyone you want to be. Other people be damned”

“Then maybe… Maybe I can be a little different? Enough that I feel like myself, but enough like everyone else that I can still relate to people. But I… I’ve been trying so hard to fit in, I barely even remember what I used to be like anymore.”

Laura looked Claire in the eye. “I remember.”

After school, Claire met Laura in the lobby. Hardly anyone was around, but after a few minutes, Kyle showed up.

“Hey, I got your text. No worries about the whole fight thing with Amanda. I get it, things happen.” He looked over at Laura. “Who is this?”

“Kyle, meet Laura. She and I were inseparable back in the day. Laura, meet Kyle. I met him in Mr. Archippo’s history class.”

Laura had a twinkle in her eye. “You mean… horse-tory class?”

“Oh god, that’s terrible. ” Kyle laughed. “Anyways, it’s cool to meet you. What do you want to do?”

“Well…” Laura pointed down at the floor. “See how the tiles are shaped like puzzle pieces? Some of the sides of each piece are straight, so they form neat lines. Others have little nubs or divots where the pieces connect. The game is, we each have to make it from one corner to the other by only
stepping on one tile at a time, and only crossing from nub to divot, never from divot to nub or across a straightedge. And we can’t both stand on the same tile. Make sense?”

“I guess, but…” Kyle furrowed his brow. “It seems a little, well, I don’t know…”

“Trust me, it’s fun. Laura and I used to do this kind of stuff all the time.” Claire hesitated a moment, and added, “Loser has to buy winner an ice cream.”

“All right, I’m in!”

That day, laughter could be heard echoing down the hall. And Claire never even noticed she didn’t flinch.