

PAPER TRAIL

By Ari Yovel

1. *Text Chat, 8:50am:*

(Group Thread: me, Shay-Lo, MicAAHHH)

Shay-Lo: I'm at 34th and Mason. Where the hell are you guys???? We're supposed to start in, like, ten minutes!

MicAAHHH: im on the 53 line and traffic is stupid. gimme like fifteen and I'll be there.

Shay-Lo: Okay, but please message me as soon as you're off the bus. I wanna make sure we don't end up running around chasing each other like idiots like we did at that concert this summer.

MicAAHHH: hey first of all it was a music festival shay. you don't normally see body paint and open bars at concerts.

second- the only reason that happened in the first place is because you freaked out so bad that you ran to the control booth and asked them to call my name over the loudspeakers like I was five. you know I turned 41 last week right?

Shay-Lo: Now if only you'd act like it. I'm only two years older than you, I'm not your mom (though, hey, if I looked this good at her age it might not be so bad!).

Hey, ground control to @Owen! You showing up any time soon? Micah's shown up and we're just waiting on you!

me: hey, looks like I'm not gonna be able to make it today. I'm not feeling too hot and going out sounds like way too much energy right now. Sorry for bailing last minute, but feel free to go on ahead with the scavenger hunt without me. The guy organizing it said your starter clue is four blocks down and on the right, should be pretty obvious.

Shay-Lo: Okay, suit yourself. We'll take lots of pictures for you!

MicAAHHH: thanks for the heads up owen, more treasure at the end for me ;)

2. Note: Bayview Park

“No freaking way! Dude, Shay, we haven't been here in, like, years!”

Micah perked up as soon as she saw the sandboxes and swings, grinning like a little kid at recess. Even as they smiled, too, Shay couldn't help but roll their eyes as Micah scrambled atop her old favorite perch atop the big boulder by the oak trees. Shay plopped down onto one of the swings, leaning comfortably into the seat and looking around at the mostly-empty park. It was school time right now, but come 3:30pm the place would be swarming with hordes of kids from the local elementary school.

Even though it had been, what— thirty years at least?— since the three of them first met here after school, Micah was every bit as spry and limber at forty one as she had been at eight. Save for the slightly thinner (and slightly less blond) hair and the crow’s feet, she didn’t look much different, either. That’s what she gets for having an overactive metabolism, too much energy for her own good, and a penchant for running marathons for fun. She’d always dragged the both of them out after school, no matter the weather, and the three of them would play tag and hide-and-seek and mountain climbers and King of the Rock until they had to start biking home.

Shay rocked back and forth on their heels, making the swing creak just a little as they swayed back and forth. “Hey, Micah, remember that time Owen hid by burying himself under the tanbark and we thought he’d just up and disappeared for like, thirty minutes?”

“Oh yeah! That was, like, fourth grade? I’m pretty sure we both thought we’d have to tell Mrs. Greenbaum that Owen had been kidnapped or run away or some shit like that and he only came out when you started crying about never seeing him again.” Micah giggled at that.

“Shut up! That was one time!” Shay huffed, standing up from the swing all at once. “It’s not my fault that Owen’s so good at keeping quiet. Hell, he can still sneak up on me like a damn ninja and scare the living daylights out of me. I was too used to the way you played hide and seek, and you’re too amused by your own fucking cleverness to keep from giggling for too long.”

“That’s true.”

“And you’re still a shitty hider.”

“Probably also true.” Micah stuck her tongue out at Shay and slid off the boulder. “Anyway, we have something to find, don’t we?”

“Yeah, let’s get on that. It’s the first one, so it should be pretty obvious.” Sure enough, when Shay looked at the community notice board by the park’s entrance there was a bright orange index card tacked onto it with a large #1 on it in red marker. They took it off the board and brought it back to Micah so they could read it together.

Rain or shine, day or night, this park contains a special sight. Find the spot and take a peek; the lowest point is what you seek.

Both Shay and Micah understood the clue’s meaning at the same time. “The telescope!”, the two cried, and at once started making their way to the little plaza overlooking the Bay at the edge of the park. Micah, being the more petite one, had an easier time using the little viewing stand, and she swiveled about on her tiptoes as she scanned the bay’s downtown area through the two small eyeholes.

“Where’s the lowest point in the Bay?” Shay mused from a nearby bench, twisting a strand of their long hair absentmindedly.

“Well, the whole city’s built on hills, isn’t it? It’s why it takes so long to get anywhere around here; half your trip is just fighting the altitude!” Micah had turned the telescope so that she could get a better view of the dog park and was cooing excitedly at a terrier and its frisbee.

“Yeah, I suppose, but we’re near the ocean so by definition the lowest altitude would also be closest to the water.”

“So I guess we’re headed towards the piers next,” Shay announced. They stood up, walked over to Micah and gently prodded her shoulder. “You’re gonna need to stop peeping on the puppies for now. I promise we can come back here, if you want, once this whole hunt thing is done with. Ready to go?”

3. Note: Pier 72

There’s a reason that both Micah and Shay had been subconsciously avoiding this part of town for the last few decades at least. Even in early fall, with tourist season over and done with, the downtown area was still positively swarming with people, local and visitor alike. The two got off the bus at Shoreline and Okerley, but it still took them a whopping 45 minutes just to make it the full six blocks to the waterfront. By the time they’d gotten to the piers themselves, it was definitely lunchtime, and Shay’s own hunger was starting to make them cranky.

“Ugh, how are we supposed to work with this clue?” Shay grumbled as they looked around at the hordes of boating enthusiasts, foodies, pensioners, and office workers on lunch break. “The clue

didn't bother to specify where exactly in this area our next clue is. What should we do, Micah-Mouse?"

Micah hummed and hawed for a few short moments, looking longingly all the while at the massive cloud of candy corn that a nearby child was devouring. "Well, Shaylord, maybe it's a number reference of some kind. Have you actually been in any of these boating hangars?"

Shay stepped out of the way of some oncoming bicycles, temporary leaving the sidewalk to let them pass by. "Not exactly. I've never been a huge splashy-splashy ocean breeze kind of person. But there was that one time after we picked up Owen from his first 5150, remember?"

Micah's face lit up with recognition. "Oh yeah, you're right! He was supposed to go right home from the ward, but I'm pretty sure he would've killed us both if we made him stay indoors, so we all came out here together."

"Didn't we all end up sleeping in a dogpile on a blanket at the beach that night?"

"I'm not sure, but that sounds pretty right to me. I can't imagine that after all the ice cream and burgers we'd plowed through that we'd be super keen on climbing back up the hill to get home."

"I think you might be onto something here, Micah. Any chance you remember what number the pier was that we ended up hanging out at?"

Micah furrowed her brow for a moment. “I want to say it was 72. Or was it 27? No, there’s only even-numbered piers, so it’s got to be 72. That’s the one where stuff is usually open late. Plus, it’s the last one, so it’s the furthest out into the water!”

It turned out that Micah was right. When they arrived at Pier 72, they scoured the main plaza and found another orange note taped to the back of the welcome sign, labeled with a red #2. Micah clambered up the sign’s pole in order to bring the note back down.

The pier without peer is a fun place to be, but none of its pleasures can be had for free. When money is tight and you need a fun time, where can you find a good drink on a dime?

Shay snorted, plopping down onto a nearby bench. “In this economy? Pretty much nowhere. Hell, I may even shell out the thirty bucks for a burger right now just so I don’t collapse.”

“Yeah right,” Micah scoffed, “there’s no way you hate yourself enough to give money to those tourist traps. But it doesn’t matter, because I’m pretty sure I know where we’re headed next.” She grabbed Shay’s hand and started off towards the bus stop. “Don’t worry- there’s food there, too.”

4. Note: Rusty Ike’s Pub

Out on the far edge of town, where the college students, artists, and other folks who can’t afford to live in the city tend to congregate in old apartment buildings and tiny cramped studios, there

isn't much by way of basically anything whatsoever to do. While the bus stop gives folks a lifeline to and from the city proper, you're screwed if you want to do stuff in the small hours after everything's shut down for the night. When your paper isn't writing itself, when your three gigs aren't enough to cover the rent, and when you can feel your mother's disappointment weighing on you like a ton of bricks, there's only one place in the neighborhood that you can go to take a load off.

And when even that place is closed, you go to Rusty Ike's.

Shay and Micah strolled through their former neighborhood, feeling right at home. Even though it had been some fifteen years since any of them had lived there, to them it felt as if only yesterday they'd been roommates down on Marston Street. One of the strange advantages of a neighborhood that the city doesn't care about is that, for all the time that had passed, nothing much had changed. There were still the same clusters of bleary-eyed students typing away on laptops in small cafes and the same corner stores with ten kinds of energy drinks (and one kind that you can only buy under the table). Sure enough, on the corner of Sorkin Street and Fisk Road, there it was- the same shitty little dive bar that everyone in this neighborhood ended visiting at at least once or twice a month because life was going to hell in a handbasket and nowhere else would sell you a beer and a bucket of fries at 3:00am.

"Thank fuck this place is still open," Shay groaned as they stepped into the mostly empty bar. Rusty Ike's had just opened up for the day at some fifteen minutes before they arrived, and they could hear the distant hiss and clatter of the kitchen slowly coming to life. Their trip over had

taken a full forty-five minutes by bus— much longer than usual. There had apparently been some major delays due to traffic being held up at the main intersections to let some police cars and an ambulance get through. Shay was about ready to start eating their transit card. Micah had snatched it away just to make sure they weren't tempted.

“I keep telling you, you've got to start keeping a water bottle on you so you don't totally fall apart any time you're not within arm's reach of a fridge.” Shay rolled their eyes in response, which Micah took as a sign that they were at least thinking about the idea.

They slid into a booth and server came by and handed them menus before moving to resume his mop's futile circuit around the perpetually grimy floor. “It's okay,” Shay caught the young man before he left their table. “We already know what we want. Can we please get a stout for me, a pale ale for my friend here, and a large serving of fries to share?”

“Umm. Well.” The server, whose upside-down nametag most likely read “Dane”, was still definitely in the process of waking up. “We can't do fries right now. Fryer broke down last night. D'you want anything else?”

Micah glanced over nervously at Shay, who was staring at this poor waiter as if he had just kicked a puppy right in front of them, before jumping in to intervene. “Let's get some baked potatoes instead, then.”

Fortunately, the beers and the potatoes arrived quickly, steaming hot and overflowing with melting cheese and sour cream. Micah couldn't help but giggle a little as Shay devoured their dish with the exact same gusto they'd had as a 25-year-old graduate student some twenty years prior. They had always been meticulous and exacting as a matter of principle, as one can expect from a top-tier architect (and certified anxious mess, Micah noted mentally). But somehow, all those mannerisms went right out the window when it came to food: Shay ate as if their food would jump off the plate and run away at the first sign of slowing down or pausing for breath. If there was anything in this world that Shay hated, it was distractions- the moment they decided that something merited their attention, everything else became the enemy.

A full stomach, however, went a long way in helping Shay mellow out somewhat. "I didn't realize how much I missed this place," they sighed contentedly, leaning back into their seat and stretching a little. "Remember how we basically lived here for all of midterms and finals our senior year?"

Micah looked up, pausing her own potato excavation. "Which one- undergrad or graduate?"

"Umm, yes."

She grinned at that. "Yeah. I'm pretty sure that we were there so often that Bartender Joe had our drinks orders memorized by the end of Reading Days."

“BJ was the always most popular guy in town around finals time. I think I remember hearing that it was because he sold Adderall under the table for \$15 a pop, but that was probably just a rumor.”

Shay chuckled and sipped their beer. “Nope. I was a regular customer. I personally owe my A- in Analytic Calculus to that hero. Unless my memory’s failing me, Owen had the same setup for Organic Chemistry, and it got him an A.”

“It seems like I’m about twenty years too late to be mad at either of you,” Micah sighed. “In any case, I hope you guys didn’t keep that up for the whole decade we lived out here.”

“Obviously not,” Shay retorted. “Or at least, I didn’t. Owen, well... he got into other stuff. You remember.”

“Of course I remember, you doofus. Who do you think set up the intervention and persuaded him to go to rehab?”

Suddenly, their conversation was halted by a shrill chirping sound. Shay’s phone had started ringing, and they glanced down at the screen. “It’s my brother. Sorry about that, I’ll get back to him later.”

The waiter came by to clear their plates, and returned momentarily with a plate of cookies and the check. “Sir, we didn’t order these,” Micah noted, scanning the bill.

“I know,” the waiter replied. “Someone else paid for those last night. They told us to expect you two.” He put down the plate, took their credit cards, and went back to the register.

They looked down at the plate. Hidden under the snickerdoodles and chocolate chip cookies was a neon orange card with a red #3. Micah and Shay looked up at one another with wide eyes.

“Well, this just got weird.”

“No shit, Shay. And did you notice he said ‘you two’? If this was something from the scavenger hunt, it would have been three, right?”

“You’re right. We were planning to be three people and that only changed this morning. That’s definitely strange.”

Shay carefully slid the orange note out from under the cookies and flipped it over.

You’ve had a nice break to rest and recharge, but it’s time to get back to the mission at large. To take the next step in solving this mystery, just think through your past— and the rest is history.

“O-kay, then. This just got more personal.”

Micah frowned, her brow furrowing as she considered the card. “Mysteries, past, history... what do we know about any of those?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m thinking that these locations aren’t just random- they’re about us. So it’s not just the past in general, but our past in particular. Everywhere we’ve gone, it’s places we’ve been before.”

“That’s true, so what does this clue have to do with our pasts? Neither of us works in any field that has anything to do with those words, unless you want to count my teaching children as a kind of mystery.”

“Well, kindergarteners are a mystery to us all.” After a short pause, Shay suddenly perked up. “Wait, didn’t Owen use to work as a night watchman at the Central History Museum?”

“Yeah, a couple years ago. He ended up quitting because he said he was getting bored to death and had run out of ways to play ‘I Spy’ against himself.”

“Okay, I think that that’s our heading, then.” Shay checked their wristwatch. “It’s 4:00pm now, and the museum closes at 6:00pm. If we take the 18 line from a few blocks from here, we should make it by 5:00, if not sooner.”

“Sounds good to me,” Micah confirmed. “As soon as we get our cards back, let’s get going. I have a gut feeling that time is of the essence.”

5. Note: Central History Museum

When Shay and Micah finally arrived at the museum, it was mostly empty. By now, all the school groups and dissertation students that had come to visit were gone for the day, and so the halls were mostly populated either by museum employees or truly committed visitors. That meant that they had the advantage of being able to access much of the museum without having to worry about lines or crowds— even exhibits like the touring chunk of the Titanic, which was so popular that it required an additional, separate ticket. When it was this close to closing, though, everywhere from the cave drawing room to the dinosaur hall was free for them to explore.

Owen had never spoken much about his job at the museum. It seemed fairly straightforward— come in after the closing crew had finished their cleanup and stay until the morning setup crew arrived. He said that he took the job largely because it meant that he could spend the daylight hours working on his novel. Micah and Shay, however, had long suspected that he had gone for the graveyard shift because the structure and scheduling helped keep his sleep paralysis and night terrors at bay. They'd both wake up on a regular basis to whole short stories that Owen had written the night before on the adventures of the figurines in the Ancient Rome exhibit or about the secret lives and societies of taxidermied raccoons. The hours were strange and the job requirements were odd, yes, but he seemed happier there than he had been in some time.

Owen stayed at the museum job for about two years without incident. In the meantime, he had continued going to therapy, attending NA meetings, publishing stories in a local journal, and generally keeping his life together. He had even celebrated five years of sobriety and his 45th

birthday in the same week. Then, about three months ago, he suddenly quit: gave his two weeks notice without any particular explanation beyond a casual shrug. He didn't look or act any different, though, so his other friends had assumed that he had caught the bug for a writing project and wanted to focus his time and energy on that. Micah and Shay, on the other hand, were less easily convinced.

"I'm not sure where we should look now," Micah whispered, not wanting to disturb the organic and omnipresent silence one normally finds in museums. "Did Owen ever mention any particular places or exhibits that he liked?"

"Not that I can think of," said Shay. "He'd go on walks all throughout the museum every night as part of his rounds, and I don't think that he tended to focus on any one part in particular."

As they walked deeper into the museum, and the rooms got emptier and darker, they saw a large and illuminated sign shaped like a coral reef directing them towards the Ocean Hall. "I remember Owen mentioning that Central is famous for its marine biology wing," Shay noticed. "Since we're so close to the ocean itself, they have a big underwater window where you can sit and watch the fish go by."

"Sounds like Owen's cup of tea. Why use a noise generator of waves or whale noises to help you calm down when you can go experience the real thing?" Micah looked hopeful, and searched the signage for directions to the steps that would lead them downstairs.

The viewing room, or as it was often nicknamed, “The Wall”, had a floor-to-ceiling glass window that opened out into the depths of the bay itself. Depending on the time of year and even the time of day, visitors could spot schools of tuna, sea turtles, or even sharks and whales. Micah and Shay entered the room and were immediately taken in by the peaceful green-blue glow that permeated from beyond the glass and gently painted the amphitheater-style seating in ocean hues.

“Wow.”

“I know, right?”

“I can see why he’d like hanging out here. Shame he didn’t invite us over while he still had after-hours access. We could’ve hung out here, had a sleepover together.”

“Don’t they already do that for kids at museums like this?”

“Yeah. Shame. All the cool stuff is wasted on the young.”

They were so entranced that, for a few long minutes, they forgot entirely about their mission in the museum, their fears and their anxieties, and just watched the shoals of cod and snappers swim slowly by, their silvery scales glinting even in the dim light.

“Shay, look behind you.”

Micah's voice snapped them out of their reverie. When they turned around to join Micah, they saw a single orange notecard balanced perfectly on the first row of the seats behind them, sporting a neatly written #4 in the middle.

"Micah, I don't know if I want to read that. I'm getting a really bad feeling about this."

"Me too. But I don't think we have a choice if we've come this far."

She walked over, grabbed the note, and read it out loud.

*From high in the hills to deep down below, you've followed the path where your memories go.
Head up to the crown of this dear little town; you'll find the last note and watch the sun go
down.*

"Prince's Peak, right? That's where we're going." Micah looked to Shay without quite meeting their eyes.

They nodded, but only slightly. "Highest hill in the city, well-known lookout point with a good view. Yeah. I think that's our final destination."

6. Letter: Prince's Peak

By the time they made it to the lookout point at Prince's Peak, the setting sun had dyed everything in sight the same bright shade of orange as the notecards they had been finding all day. In a way, Micah and Shay were grateful for the delay; for a reason neither of them could name, they wanted to find this one as slowly as possible.

"Do you think Owen had been planning this stunt for a while?" Shay asked, as they inspected the underside of a drinking fountain.

"Could be," Micah shrugged, examining the notice board by the fence marking the borders of the lookout spot. "He never really needed a whole lot of time for planning. Don't forget that this is the guy who pulled your baby shower together on two days' notice with a fifty-dollar budget. Always managed to make things work last minute, right?"

"Speaking of last minute, Micah— found it." Micah turned and saw Shay gesturing to an envelope, taped to the bench overlooking the whole town below and the ocean beyond.

For a long minute, the two of them just stared at the envelope on the bench, as if merely looking at it would cause the contents of the envelope to magically appear in their heads. Eventually, with a huff, Micah stepped forward and sat on the bench, pulling the taped envelope off the seat and looking behind her. "I'm not opening it 'till you sit with me, Shay. Please. It's addressed to both of us."

They plopped down beside her and gently pried the envelope out of her too-tight hands. “Let me do the honors, okay?”

With a slight cough, they opened the envelope and read the letter aloud.

Dear Micah and Shay,

Let me cut to the chase: if you've found this, I'm dead.

I'm so sorry that I had to lie to you about this: you know that I wouldn't do that unless I had no other choice, and I really didn't. You're both too kind for your own good, and if I had told you what was going on you would surely have tried to stop me. That's why I needed to distract you and send you out on this hunt- to make sure you had an alibi and some plausible deniability. The last thing I'd want is for the two of you to get dragged into some kind of weird lawsuit around assisted suicide or aiding and abetting for not being able to stop me or anything else like that. If I've timed this all correctly, then by the time you're reading this I've been gone for about six hours. I tried to make sure that you got to visit some of our favorite spots and revisit some of our special memories. Those were really good times, and I am grateful for them. Most importantly, though, I'm grateful to you.

I'm sure you hate my guts right about now, and that you may never forgive me for this.

Nevertheless, I want you to know that you were both the best and truest of friends, and it was a privilege to get to grow up and grow old(er) with you. I was so lucky to have you in my life. You

two are the only reason I made it as long as I did. Except for the nightmares and the drugs and the depression and all that jazz, it really was a good life, because being with you made it that way. I just got tired of having to deal with everything else in order to live it.

Believe me, I tried to make it work. You both know that I gave it my best shot— several best shots, in fact, over the years. I really wanted it to succeed. No one who has a say in the matter wants to live their life with a brain that's riddled with constant struggle and pain. But I'm tired of trying. I'm tired of scraping by. I've honestly had enough, and I wanted to make sure that I end things on my own terms: not in some crazed fit of rage and desperation, but in a way that's organized and hurts as few other people as possible.

Please know that this is not your fault. It isn't anyone's fault. You didn't fail me, or let me down, or not love me hard enough. There really was nothing either of you could do to change this. If you get nothing else from this message, know this: thanks to you, I got to live so much longer than I would have if I was doing this on my own. I don't think I would have made it to fifteen, much less forty-five, without you two. You are both brilliant and beautiful people, and if there is any justice in this world then you will continue to have brilliant and beautiful lives.

(On that note, my will's in the second envelope underneath the one where you found this. Everything's going to the both of you, to spend or split up or dispose of however you see fit. Make sure at least some of it goes to Ike's, though- that place could really use some TLC, plus I may have forgotten to tip there when I was setting things up.)

Goodbye, Micah. Goodbye, Shay. Goodbye for now, just in case there's some great beyond where I can continue to heckle you from the great peanut gallery in the sky. Thank you for going on this journey with me— the long one and this short one, too. Thank you for making it the best it could be. I love you both, and will be with you always.

Yours affectionately,

Owen

They sat together in silence for an eternity that lasted roughly five minutes. Micah stared at the letter. Shay stared at the ocean. Neither felt like they were really seeing what they saw, or like it even particularly mattered.

Micah finally turned and joined Shay in looking at the ocean. “Is he right?” she whispered.

“About us being mad?”

“I don’t know,” Shay sighed. “I wish I knew, but, to be honest...I don’t. It’s not like this is the first time he tried, and he wouldn’t have gone through all this trouble if he thought it wasn’t going to work this time. Fair enough about the whole plausible deniability thing, but it’s still frustrating as hell. I just wish he’d given us a chance to say goodbye in person, y’know? It’s not like we would stop him if he was really serious about it this time.”

“You don’t know that for sure, and you know that you don’t know that.” Micah ran her fingers absentmindedly along Owen’s scribbled signature at the bottom of the letter. “But I get what you

mean. I want to be mad at him. I feel like I should be really upset, but somehow I'm not. We got to say goodbye, in a way— going to all of our favorite places, eating good food. I guess this whole day was his goodbye to us.”

“After three decades together?” Shay raised an eyebrow. “Come on. It's not much to work with.”

Micah nodded. “True.” Then, out of nowhere, she gave Shay a small, wistful smile. “But we did get three decades together. That's a lot of time for almost anything. So maybe, somehow, this one day was enough for him, and we have the rest of the time for us to say goodbye.” She scooted over and pulled Shay into a hug, who instinctively slung their arm around Micah's slender frame and held her close. They sat together, watching the sun melt into the watery horizon, not feeling the need to say much else. Today, Owen had gotten his final word, and that was enough. Tomorrow, they could begin talking back.