

## The Snorlax Problem

### OPENING IMAGE

The Snorlax plushie glares at him from his shelf.

He still remembers why the Snorlax hurts to look at.

The first time Sam ever got invited to hang out outside of school, he went with his friend Elisa.

She let him pick the places and didn't push back on any of them.

He picks Dave and Buster's for the first stop, because it feels safe enough.

They settle into the arcade, bustling with people, too much for him, so he chooses to focus on her.

He asks: "Hey, can I take your picture in front of the Dave and Buster's logo?"

She agrees and settles in front of the logo

He takes the photo.

They spend a few hours trying to make as many tokens as they can.

They divide the tokens between themselves and he asks her what she likes.

She says she likes Pokemon.

He remembers that.

He gets her the Snorlax plushie.

He gets his dad a cup and a few fidgets for himself.

They get to the register and pay with the tokens.

Before they leave, they move aside to look at some other prizes they say they'll come back for, there's no next time.

He tells her: "Hey, I wanted to get you the Snorlax plushie because you said you liked Pokemon."

She smiles a full smile that crosses both her cheeks.

They clamber out of the arcade, walking the 18 minutes to Grand Central Terminal.

They pick the safest, most fast foody choice: Shake Shack.

He asks: "What do you want to get?"

She reads the menu. "I'm vegan, kinda limits the options."

He asks: "What's the difference between a vegan and a vegetarian?"

She answers: "A vegan can't have cheese or any dairy products, a vegetarian can."

He says: "Oh I'd miss shakes too much."

She shrugs, looking away.

They order their food.

She takes the helm and orders for them both.

He pays a beat too quickly.

They finish eating.

Sam devours his food but she savors hers, like she's trying to make it last.

They decide to get on separate trains, he just needs to rest.

He finds the good seat, puts on his headphones and as his favorite band The Mountain Goats plays he just disassociates until he sees the unremarkable Yankee Stadium and knows to be on alert for his stop.

He can finally lay down on his bed with his bags on the floor.

Back then, Sam didn't usually get invited anywhere.

Most days at their all-girls school in Highbridge blurred into routine: uniforms, study halls.

Elisa and Leila were the kind of girls teachers trusted before they spoke, walking around in perfectly ironed uniforms and raising their hands with perfectly timed answers.

Sam stayed on the honor roll too, but teachers usually had to coax him into participating.

He wore uniform pants instead of skirts and got stopped for dress code violations often enough that it started to feel like part of the routine.

He'd learned from watching his older sister that adults got easier to talk to when your grades were good.

So sophomore year, when Elisa and Leila started talking to him in study hall, it felt like something he wasn't supposed to be part of had briefly opened.

All three had ended up on the AP history track, and somehow in the same study hall hour.

"Do you want to come sit with us?" Leila asked. "Saw you in AP World. We can share study tips."

"Sure," Sam said. "Thanks."

They walked to Leila's table.

Elisa was already there, reading a worn copy of *Animal Farm*.

That's how it started.

A few weeks later Elisa asked him to hang out.

And later still, there was the arcade.

And the Snorlax.

Elisa invites Sam to run errands with her at the local Target.

She has a list of skin care and beauty supplies she wants to get, he only agrees to go because he wants to spend time with her and get some candy.

They walk in through the revolving doors and at first diverge.

He gets his candy, a quick loop through the store, and meets her at the skin care section.

She's looking at two very similar products: moisturizer.

Sam looks at her as she carries the two moisturizers in her hands and asks "Which one do you think I should get?"

Sam conceals an eyebrow raise "What's the difference?"

She replies "This one is unscented and vegan, the other one is vegan, animal-cruelty free but smells like vanilla".

He's unsure so he just says "Well both are good, unscented's probably better".

She puts the vegan, animal-cruelty free vanilla smelling moisturizer in her cart. Sam looks at the clock on his phone. She finishes up her errand running and they head to the checkout.

The line is about 5 people deep, so they have time to talk.

She tells him "I have a twin sister, she's in college, not a dual-enrollment thing either, she skipped 2 grades".

Sam doesn't know what to say.

Is it too vulnerable to ask how she feels about that?

He looks at the checkout line items and says "Oh wow, she must be really smart".

She pays for her items and he pays for his.

They head out and diverge at the train station.

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The summer before junior year, Leila asks Sam to watch a movie with her.

She picks the movie and the place, he just goes.

It's a Wes Anderson film, Asteroid City, he's never even heard of the director.

She shows up and she's put together, her dad dropped her off in his car.

Sam is sweating from taking the train with no AC.

Sam had asked what kind of candy she liked before they got there so he wouldn't have to spend extra money on snacks.

She smiles as she takes the bag, glancing through his choices.

They settle into their seats, and watch the movie.

The dialogue is very Wes Anderson, Sam can't understand any of it.

They exit the showing and Leila begins a conversation with him about the film before her dad shows up.

She knows so much about the film, he can't keep up.

She offers to have her dad drive them back, but Sam politely refuses.

He doesn't want to owe her anything, so he takes the train back home.

On the train, he realizes he's left his dad's earbuds behind and is crushed.

How will he explain it to him?

As the train surfaces and his connection comes back, she texts him: she has his earbuds

He thanks her profusely.

She invites him to meet at her house the next day.

He shows up more dressed up than the day before.

She chuckles at the difference.

She hands him the earbuds at her building's door.

He leaves, recognizing everything his family lacked.

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Sam decides he doesn't want to head home just yet.

It's a Friday, half day.

His mom forced him to pack an umbrella because it was going to storm, he begrudgingly let her.

He walks toward Moshulu Parkway, maybe he'll walk until he reaches the Botanical Garden.

He tells Elisa his plans when he runs into her, she asks if she can come with him.

He says "Of course".

They decide to start off by walking to the park and start feeling rain splatter on their hands.

He takes out the umbrella and covers them, unsure if that's too dramatic for a breeze, but then the wind blows and the umbrella contorts, with the top sinking into the pole and they decide to head into the park.

The playground is surprisingly quiet, he's already put the contorted umbrella away.

They sit on their backpacks rather than the wet benches.

They talk, idle chit chat, she smiles at him and chuckles at his jokes but she looks everywhere but at him.

They walk to Lehman College, it's only about 5 minutes from the playground, with its leafy exterior touching the electrical fences.

They clamber to see the view of Lehman's soccer fields and imagine their college paths.

Elisa talks about pursuing environmental science or pre-med at Barnard.

The two diplomas, Barnard and Columbia both, make her smile her biggest smile.

Sam isn't so sure, but he also knows his own path.

RPI comes to mind the way it always does when he thinks about leaving, already spoken for, already guaranteed .

He begins wondering though what will happen when she's gone and they're on separate paths: will they lose touch?

He ignores the feeling in his stomach, and they walk until they land on a train parking lot.

She doesn't care to see it, but they stop because Sam is curious.

Sam isn't fascinated by trains exactly, but by the parking lot itself: how they got there, why they stop, when they diverge.

Do they leave at the same time? Do they reach different stations all at once?

Sam doesn't remember how or when but before he knows it, Elisa's gone.

He heads to the train station and just sits there as he thinks.

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His parents and sister have set up his 16th birthday party in the living room of their tiny apartment.

There's a cake and a banner up with hand-blown balloons lying around.

He'll be forced to take a photo in front of the cake, smiling.

He's invited his mom's best friend and her daughter, they give the most cash.

His aunt and his favorite cousins will arrive too.

He thinks Elisa looks a lot like his younger cousin.

There's only enough space for Elisa to find a small spot on the floor by the time she arrives.

It would be even more crowded if Leila had come.

Sam sits next to Elisa on the floor.

They play a game of Loteria, the beans getting lost on the uneven floor is the best part.

Then they exchange gifts, Elisa gives hers over first, but he doesn't open any of the gifts yet.

Elisa has to leave early, so they rush through the cutting of the cake and the snacks getting left out.

Before she gets the chance to leave, his mom gets her favorite Tupperware and serves her some of the cake and his favorite taquitos.

She leaves with a soft smile.

He continues the party, until everyone leaves feeling a bit disappointed she couldn't stay later.

Either way, he finally gets a chance to open the gifts and of course he has to open Elisa's gift first.

He opens it to find a Snorlax.

He lays on top of his bed.

Why?

It couldn't be the same one, right.

It'll all be resolved in the morning.

So Monday rolls around, they had to celebrate his birthday the day before for festivities.

He asks Leila if she knows what day it is, she's rather quiet but it should be fine.

Probably just because class is starting soon.

Edelia comes around and they talk but it's in short replies and abruptly ends.

He feels taken aback by the strangeness of the day but surely it's nothing.

After class is over and he doesn't have any more classes with the group, he takes a minute and thinks back to the day before.

It's starting to feel like it might have been the same Snorlax.

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It's been 1.5 years since they all last talked.

Elisa ghosted him, but he's still forced to run into her every now and then.

Leila tried on numerous occasions to strike up a conversation with Sam, and eventually it led him to take the internship he was offered at the Department of Sanitation.

He didn't want to at first, out of fear of falling out with the group, but by then it felt like it had already happened.

Leila still attempted to get him to sit with her in class.

He chose to sit at another table, the safe option where at the very least he could have a sociable break.

He made new friends, the internship group, a friend he made after taking a trip to Italy and Greece.

He always started those friendships off by mentioning the odd breakup between him and the group.

Sometimes because they would ask first, and on most occasions because he would vent about it.

Most times they would ask further questions, offer rumors as possible answers, or they would seem visibly taken aback and scared to dig deeper.

By the time senior year rolled around, his college plans had been derailed.

Sam gets a text message on the way to his internship with a friend from Leila asking to meet up and have a one on one conversation, it's winter break so she assumes he must have time.

He's conflicted and asks the friend if she should go and the friend tries to egg him in on going, saying it'll give him an answer, but whenever he thinks about Leila he imagines Elisa sitting right next to her.

He never responds to the message.

Later, during college app season, it becomes vividly obvious that Elisa is getting close to some of his friends, including one friend in the internship group.

He starts feeling like the second fiddle, she gets chosen over him.

He's already explained the situation to her.

She tells him to talk to Elisa directly.

He asks a further question "Has she ever said anything about it?", she replies "No.", that's enough to give him his answer.

He cuts off the entire friend group and finds another group to hang around.

That group has gym class together, the type that prefers to stand on the sidelines.

In the gym group, he gravitates toward one person in particular, a girl who is always talking, always moving between interests, always half-defined by whatever she is into that week.

He doesn't know how to join her directly, so he follows instead.

When she talks about SpongeBob, he starts noticing it everywhere. In stores, in small objects, in things he wouldn't normally care about. He buys her a SpongeBob bag he already owned but never used.

She says she'd been eyeing the bag for a while, waiting for it to go on sale.

At Six Flags, when she stops to look at a bubble blower, he follows her into the store and ends up buying it for her instead of himself.

A Tweety Bird one. Something he thinks she will like more than he would.

He doesn't say it like a gift. He just hands it over when it feels appropriate.

She smiles when they get back to the group, still messing around with the bubble blower.

So, he gets back up during application season when they're all in the same study hall.

He applied everywhere including RPI, he knows he has a small chance when he gets invited to apply through a special form.

It doesn't necessarily increase chances, but it shows they see his eager interest.

So he applies for early admission.

He hopes his mentor's reference letter and a note from the guidance counselor about why his academic path looks off helps him.

Either way, he starts applying to Questbridge.

Surprisingly, he becomes a finalist, one of two.

Elisa and Leila also applied but got rejected.

So he has a chance to get into a good school like Tufts or Case Western even if RPI rejects him.

The joy is cut short when he doesn't get matched and he receives a rejection letter from RPI.

But he did get an email from Macalester not long after inviting him to attend the Lealtad Scholar's Weekend and gets to visit campus before committing.

He's already decided.

Something about how pretty it is.

How far away it is.

How pretty it is that it's so far away.

But he keeps getting asked why Macalester, so he borrows answers that already exist in the world: Minnesota, names like Tim Walz, anything that sounds like it belongs to someone more certain than him.

Elisa gets into Barnard, her dream school and Leila gets into Swarthmore and it's announced she's valedictorian while he's at Mac.

Getting into Macalester feels like something.

But Barnard.

But Swarthmore.

But valedictorian.

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He spends the summer with his best friend and his cousin, before leaving for college.

During a trip to the beach, he gets caught in the waves and pulls himself back to shore using jagged rocks.

His leg is cut up, and his glasses are lost in the ocean.

He doesn't leave immediately. He doesn't want to disappoint either of them.

He returns home with his vision blurred, everything slightly out of focus.

At the bus stop, he practices dapping his friend up, repeating it until it feels usable, something that will pass in college spaces.

Before leaving for school, he decides to come out, because otherwise his roommate threatens to leave.

The conversation is awkward.

His roommate initially thinks he's his cousin.

The situation resolves itself, but it leaves him even more self-conscious.

At college, the first semester is mostly manageable.

He spends a lot of time in his room.

His roommate eventually moves out, citing traffic noise as the reason. Sam tells himself it's fine.

He finishes the semester with a 3.8 GPA.

The second semester is different.

He arrives in a city already tense and loud, with protests and instability in the background.

His window faces the Free Palestine protestors who gather every Friday.

He reads about people being killed during ICE protests in their own neighborhoods.

He doesn't go outside alone.

His dark skin, the news, the noise outside his window, it all sits on him.

He experiences moments of being read in ways that make him uncomfortable.

He gets catcalled during winter break.

He's seventeen.

He makes sure they know that.

It might have been fine except for his voice, his body, the way it never quite matches what he knows is there.

Around the same time, he loses a long friendship he had once thought would last.

His coursework becomes heavier: computer science, statistical modeling, geography that triggers anxiety, and a theater tech lab that feels harder than expected.

He reaches a breaking point: panic attacks, crying in front of professors.

A sense that something in him is no longer holding itself together.

In the middle of this, he starts thinking back to Elisa and Leila.

He tries to understand what happened.

He starts writing it down.

But he runs into a problem:

He can't remember what happened to the Snorlax.

He takes a shower, letting everything blur together for a moment.

Then he calls his mom and asks her about it.

She answers in a matter of fact tone: she threw it away.

He smiles.