

Higher than Ten

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SHE FOUND THE three of us in the river bank, buried in the mud. Her tiny hand reached into the icy water, curling around us, lifting us free. It was so good to be held again, regardless of how small the hand was. The mud was rinsed from our white faces. Her thumbs polished us, revealing our dots. For the first time in so long, we were lifted from the water. She patted us dry on her skirt and held us up to the sunlight. We could see her clearly now; her brown curls, eyes and cheeks. She looked like such a curious little girl. She would have to be. It always took curiosity to find us.

“Hazel, away from the water please,” called a woman nearby.

Hazel pocketed us and ran off. Hours later, she arrived home. We rolled from her pocket when Hazel tossed her coat onto her bedroom floor, stepping on us on her way to the bookshelf.

Hazel must have stepped on us very badly. We hurt her so much she fell to the carpet. Rubbing her foot, she looked at us. One by one she picked us up. We were nothing interesting. Just three white dice. Three cubes of plastic with dotted faces. Hazel looked at her bookcase, then to us.

“Higher than ten, I finish *Matilda*,” she said, letting us drop. We rolled a twelve. Hazel pulled *Matilda* off her shelf and flipped it open to the last few chapters, reading through them in barely an hour.

Crashing sounds began to echo up from the floor below us. We could hear Hazel’s mother and father shouting. Hazel shut her bedroom door. She picked us up again.

“Higher than ten, I read *The Witches*.” We rolled an eight. She frowned and tried again. We rolled a six. “Higher than ten, I read *Nancy Drew*,” said Hazel. We rolled a fifteen.

Hazel curled up with an old *Nancy Drew* book for the next few hours. The shouting downstairs came and went. Her mother called her down for dinner. Hazel book marked her page. She paused, looking at the three of us. She picked us up again. “Higher than ten, my parents don’t fight tonight,” she whispered. We rolled an eleven.

From our place on the carpet that night, we could hear no shouting come from below us.

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After that day, we became a good luck charm for Hazel. She would roll us to decide which book to read next. She’d roll us to see if her parents would be happy. She rolled us to know if she’d do well at school or if she’d make any friends. She’d roll us each birthday to guess what presents she’d get.

When Hazel started high school, she would roll us every morning with the same two questions, “Higher than ten, Bonny leaves me alone today,” and, “higher than ten, Ryan talks to me today.” Our numbers were set. She couldn’t avoid them. It didn’t matter if she hid in the bathroom all day or followed Ryan around like a shadow. Things went the way they were meant to be. It began to consume her thoughts. Hazel never knew if the predictions of Bonny’s bullying meant a racist slur or a black eye. All the same, she didn’t know if Ryan’s acknowledgement would be a conversation or an “excuse me”.

Hazel began to learn. She started to ask different questions.

“Higher than ten, Ryan will be in the library at lunch.”

“Higher than ten, Bonny will sit behind me in Art.”

“Higher than ten, Ryan likes Indie music.”

“Higher than ten, Bonny will take White Street home today.”

Hazel began to plan her days in advance. It wasn’t good enough to just except fate, not when she had us. We helped her find ways to make slight changes for the better. Ryan was surprised just how often he bumped into her. It was beyond weird how they always seemed to be listening to the same bands or reading the same books. They must have had more in common than he first realised. Bonny, on the other hand, barely saw Hazel outside of class. Whenever she had a class with

her, strange, unlucky things would happen, especially to the chairs she chose to sit in. Most often the chair would break or she'd sit in a puddle of red paint, making it look like she had an 'accident'.

Hazel's hands would always slip into her pocket, clutching us, rolling us between her fingers while she smiled. She and Ryan began to date. Bonny became the 'The Red Whale' and eventually changed schools.

We were in Hazel's pocket when she walked up to accept her diploma. Her teachers had never seen someone achieve Valedictorian so easily. She made us proud, Ryan too.

Hazel wasn't quite sure what to do with herself after school. She made most of her money winning high stake bets. Every once in a while she faked a loss to avoid suspicion. Ryan thought she was unbelievable. He called her his good luck charm and would goofily rub her head, like it was Buddha's belly.

Unfortunately, Hazel didn't want to spend the rest of her life winning bets. She wanted a career.

"Higher than ten, I get into publishing." We slipped from her fingers and rolled a four. "Higher than ten, I become a lawyer." We rolled a seven. "Higher than ten, I become a detective." We rolled an eighteen.

Hazel was surprised by this. She knew we had gone from good luck charm to good luck tool, but could we go further? Could we save lives and help others?

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The news was on. Ryan was out. There was a story being reported about a serial killer. Another boy had gone missing, Sam Hawkins. We could feel Hazel's fingers trembling around us.

She started with the obvious questions. "Higher than ten, the killer is male." "Higher than ten, he moves the bodies." "Higher than ten, he works alone." Then moved onto ones with more detail. "Higher than ten, he's over six foot." "Higher than ten, he lives in the city." "Higher than ten, he knows the kids before he takes them." If our predictions were right, then Hazel knew more about the killer than the police did. The problem was, she wouldn't know we were one hundred percent correct until the police solved the case first and that meant more victims. Hazel tossed us from one hand to another nervously. She started to ask more questions. "Higher than ten, Sam Hawkins is still alive." We rolled a twelve. "Higher than ten, Sam is in the same room

as the killer.” We rolled a fourteen. “Higher than ten, he can’t move.” We rolled a five. “Higher than ten, he can reach a nearby weapon.” We rolled a seventeen. “Higher than ten, he uses that weapon.” We roll an eleven. “Higher than ten, he attacks the killer.” We roll an eighteen. Hazel hesitates. “Higher than ten, Sam kills him.” We roll a ten.

Hazel stared at us. We sat patiently, letting the paranoia run through her. She turned off the television and walked away.

Hazel played happy when Ryan came home. He rushed for the remote control. It was all over the radio. The serial killer had been murdered by his own potential victim. Hazel cried. She said it was from relief. They watched the news for an hour. She drank in every detail they reported about the killer, knowing them already.

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It took Hazel a while to pick us up again. She started using us for small questions here and there, then started planning her days again. At the end of the year, she applied for the police academy.

Hazel was a natural. We were in her pocket the whole time. She graduated with ease and climbed the ranks in the precinct quickly. Money was abundant. Ryan was happy. Criminals were messing up, falling into her custody easily. Everyone was in awe of her. Every day was so simple, so perfect.

One morning, Ryan did the laundry. We were still in Hazel’s coat pocket. The water rose. We started to spin and slipped free. Soon, Hazel’s screams shook the walls of the machine. We heard Ryan hit the floor before the lid was thrown open.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ryan shouted. Hazel reached in for us while the water spun. “Are you crazy? Stop!” Ryan tried to pull Hazel away. He quickly turned off the machine before she could hurt herself. Hazel threw armfuls of sopping wet clothing onto the floor. She saw us. Hazel scooped us from the water, like she had done from the river bed.

“This was about those dice?” Ryan said. “Hazel, they’re only—”

“Don’t touch them! Don’t you ever touch them!” she shouted.

They had their first fight. Ryan stormed out. Hazel sat on the wet laundry floor. “Higher than ten, Ryan forgives me.” We rolled a twelve. She smiled and carried on with her day. He came back eventually. They talked. Hazel didn’t seem to mind it took a fortnight.

Years went by. Hazel led the harder cases at work. Killers were stopped in their tracks. She was a hero. Ryan came home some nights to find her on the floor, rolling us again and again. She didn't even ask questions. So much power was in her hands. She liked the fact that every roll had so much potential. She loved that she could waste a few.

Hazel was at the precinct when she got the call. Ryan had been in a car crash. They wouldn't let her see him when she got to the hospital. His condition was too critical. The other driver was doing fine. They didn't tell Hazel his name, but she recognised his face. Sam Hawkins was an alcoholic now. It's a common addiction for people living with trauma. Hazel clutched us so tightly our corners bruised her palm.

In her pocket, we could feel Hazel swaying as she walked. She locked herself in a bathroom cubical and slid down to the white square tiles. She drew us up to her lips. "Higher than ten, Ryan survives." She dropped us. We rolled a nine. "Higher than ten, Ryan survives." We rolled an eight. "Higher than ten, Ryan survives." We rolled a seven. She rolled again. Six. Again. Five. Again. Four. Again. Three. Hazel screamed.

Locked in her cubical, on the white square tiles, Hazel broke down, cursing us. Down the hall, doctors tried to resuscitate Ryan. He wasn't responding.

Hazel didn't return to work. She stayed at home with the lights off, glaring at our white faces. The criminals she had helped catch were going to court. Their lawyers were claiming there was a lack of evidence. They were curious how Hazel knew so much with such little proof. There was talk that the criminals would walk free.

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Hazel was staring at our white, dotted faces when her mother called. She wanted to know why she wasn't at Ryan's funeral. Hazel kept staring. The news reported Sam Hawkins had hung himself. He wrote in his note that he wished the killer had finished the job.

After weeks, Hazel picked us up. "Higher than ten, it was all for nothing." We rolled a sixteen. She took a deep breath and retrieved us. "Higher than ten, I was never in control." We rolled an eighteen. Hazel stared at us, silent in the darkness.

We fell out of her coat pocket when we hit the water, just like we had in the washing machine. We met the water together, us, her

pocket and Hazel. She sunk. We didn't. The river carried us back to its banks, mud gripping and planting us like a seed.

There, the three of us sat, waiting beneath the water. We knew it wouldn't be long, it never is. Soon, two curious eyes would roll around, they'd see us and another game could begin.