

## *Open File*

She pushes the heavy mahogany door open, accompanied by the unsettling creak of age. *Click. Clack. Click. Clack.* A businesswoman in a clean-cut suit stands in the middle of a moth-eaten living room. She leans her glossy leather briefcase onto the stairs and steps out of her red bottom stilettos. The black camera bag is shrugged off, and she takes the camera out of its padded case. She takes a seat on the rasping wooden panels of the floor after gently swiping the surface to clear any visible dust. A hazy cloud erupts and further encases whatever it can. She lightly coughs and raises her forearm up to shield her eyes. With a small vurring and the satisfaction of a mechanical click, the memory card begins to process in the computer resting on her wrinkly lap. From her camera bag, she sets the black frame glasses on the bridge of her nose, not completely pushed to press against her eyebrow structure, but enough to label it a comfortable seating.

Click. Tap. Open file. File name: 2009 HS Grads Char and Lil. Two girls, arms draped over each other, throw their navy grad caps into the air, almost like if Atlas could relinquish the weight of the world for just a moment. Huge, beaming smiles that could almost be heard through the grained pixels of the 2000s. The infectious giddiness of excitement. A crowd clutters behind the duo, smiling, jumping, hugging, laughing. On the left stands a Chinese girl with the hair of raven feathers framing her face. She wears a fitted suit set and simple black flats. On the right, a blonde, lanky girl wearing a floral dress decorated with unidentifiable petals of red. She'd say, *"We did it Char! We made it!"* She'd nestle her head into the dark locks of Charity as they both gleam with disbelief.

*Indeed, we'd made it.*

Close. Double tap. Open file. File name: 2006 First Day Freshmen C & L. Charity stands in the center piggybacking Lily. They face their parents and Lily carries two matching backpacks, one draped on each shoulder. They wave towards the camera in unison, standing in front of the Arial lettering, *Chicago High School for the Arts*. Smiling from ear to ear. Shimmering eyes of hope and potential.

Next file. Open. File name: 1998 C & L First Graders Already? White button up shirts and navy blue shorts on the two. Charity on the right waves to Lily in the distance, tardy as usual. Lily, tangled hair and Dole fruit cup in hand, runs to the gate and Charity. *Wait for me Char! I'm coming!*

Scroll. Next file. Open. File name: 1995 Char & Lil - Preschool?! *KinderCare*. Wrapped tightly in matching purple Rapunzel fuzzy zip-up jackets. Running around the red brick entrance of preschool, resembling mostly of fuzzy purple caterpillars before cocooning. They play tag and circle each other. Beaming as always. If you looked close enough, you could see a smudge of applesauce crusts onto each girl's lower left lip, and the abandoned GoGo Squeez lies on the wet concrete in the front.

Open file. *2014: NYC*. They hold each others shoulders in front of the terminal at JFK with a silver suitcase and floppy bag at each of their sides. It's the smiling of youth.

For a certain time after college, after Lily and Charity took on opposite corners of the country independently, they decided they needed some sort of structure. They weren't going to let the friendship die because of a little miscommunication. And so from then on, every

two years, they'd meet at a bar in either Chicago or LA, each with the globe keychains they'd bought on the last day of highschool. At some point they set it in stone, they'd alternate between "three dots and a dash" in Chicago or "the luggage room" in LA. They spun the tiny globe, so small you could hardly read what country was what. Wherever their finger landed, they went. Because for a period of time in between youth and adulthood, the world was at their disposal. The mountains were small bumps to step over, the oceans were a pinky toe dipped in a cold puddle. Nothing was greater except for the duet themselves.

*We had to start small of course. Two broke college students. New York City was a fever dream, but we'd get bigger.*

Close file. Open. 2016: *Alaska*.

Close. Open. 2018: *Spain*.

Close. Click. Open. 2020: *Paris*.

Charity shut the computer. The same thought that had echoed for all citizens of the world made its way through Charity's: *freaking pandemic*.

She looked to her left at her briefcase before picking it up. She dug through the papers, the pens, the gum wrappers, the tissues; she plucked a small circular blue and green keychain out. The paint had started to rub off, exposing the yellowed mystery wood underneath.

What you don't know is that Charity showed up in Chicago two years later post pandemic. Same bar as always. Same stool in fact. And in 2024, two years after that she showed up in LA. After four years of slow dancing by herself, she'd eventually stop too.

Because what could excuse delivered texts and missed calls in the age of technology?

Four years later, here Charity sat.

She eventually got up from the step, keychain in hand. She picked up a lighter that'd erupted from her briefcase. Once she was through the crumbling French doors and surrounded by the overgrown shrubbery, she let go of the keychain. Her knees made a cracking sound as she bent down and set a small flame to the exposed wood. Could paint hold off fire? She stared for a while too, there's something about fire that might never be captured by the lens of a camera. The shuttering shades of blue and orange. There was an odd stillness in the Chicago afternoon, even if she was in the suburbs.

Once she was back inside, she sat back down on the floor again. She made a final choice as she picked up her phone and clicked Lily's contact.

*"1858 S Millard Ave. I was in LA last time. I thought it'd be nice to see you again where it all started."*

The bubble turned blue and moved up above "delivered". There was that moment of partial regret after it'd sent, but what could you do?

Soon the sun disappeared underneath the horizon; it hadn't become completely dark, the sun's last ambitious rays needed a pat on the back and a 'job well done'. Charity picked up her stuff and drove away in her car.

What she didn't hear is the screeching of a rusty car's brakes maybe two feet behind Charity's moving car. In the luminance of the sun's last rays, she drove off into the dark, the golden blonde locks shrinking in the rear view mirror, the last lingering flame blown out. That was the closest they ever got.