

# School Daze - Unknowing

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Jessica pushed the half eaten bowl of cereal across the kitchen table and took the last mouth full of her juice.

Her mother looked up from where she was loading the dish washer. "You're not going to finish that?"

"No," Jessica replied, "I don't feel hungry." Thinking she needed to change the subject, she quickly added, "Dad been working through the night again?"

Her mum gave a little sigh. "Yes, he got a call at about two and didn't get back until five this morning."

"Oh," Jessica glanced at the clock on the wall. "I've gotta go, I said I'd meet Mary before school for some cheer practice."

She grabbed her backpack and headed for the door.

"Have you got your gym kit?" her mum called after.

Jessica's reply was cut off as the back door swung closed.

Mary was sat waiting on a wall as Jessica turned the last corner.

"Where have you been?" Mary asked, jumping down from the wall. "We're going to be late."

"I know, but I got up late," Jessica yawned. "I was on Myspace after I finished talking to you."

"Anything good?"

"Nah, I was listening to Rheingold's album again."

"I thought you were going to download that?" Mary said as they turned in to the school gates.

"I can't be bothered," Jessica shrugged. "Guess who was out *working* all night again?"

Mary raised her eyebrows. "He's got to be a hero. Doesn't your mum say anything?"

"You know what she's like, I bet she has no idea. Anyway, I'm going to follow him if he goes out tonight."

"Jess," Mary exclaimed, "you're not!"

"Yeah, that's why I've been trying to stay up later. I keep falling asleep, but if he goes out early enough I'll catch him."

Mary looked concerned. "Jess, it could be dangerous. I know this isn't Kings Row, but there are still gangs out there, and the Rikti."

"I'll be fine. And I've got a dad who's a superhero. He'll look after me."

"That would mean he'll have seen you following him," Mary pointed out.

"You think too much," Jessica told her friend, pushing open the main doors to the school. "Let's get to the gym and practice. I think I've got that step-turn right now."

When Jessica got home that evening her mum and dad were both in, and apparently her dad had been in to the office that afternoon. Jessica stuck her head around his living room door. Her father was sat watching the news.

"Mum said you'd been working last night. Do they ever give you any time off?" she asked him.

"Hi hon," he replied, his face lighting up with a slightly tired smile. "No, they expect their pound of flesh for the money they pay me."

Jessica pulled a face. "Well I think they shouldn't get anyone to work at those sort of times."

"One day someone will invent a computer system that only breaks in the middle of the day," he said, laughing. "Until then I don't think things are going to change."

"Well," Jessica said, "I still think it's wrong. Are you going to have to go out again tonight?"

A shadow of weariness passed across his face. "I hope not, but the way things have been today I wouldn't be surprised. That's why I only did a few hours in the office this afternoon. How was school? Did your cheerleading practice with Mary go okay?"

"Yes, but Mary still keeps making a bit of a mess of the last bit. I hope she can get it right before the weekend." Jessica decided that she wasn't going to get any more information out of him and it was time to leave the room before he started asking her about boyfriends. "I have to go look at something before dinner," she said letting the sitting room door close behind her.

He father shook his head at the retreating footsteps of his daughter. She's always rushing around, he thought, to have the energy of youth again. He turned back to watch some more of the news.

Jessica spent the evening chatting to Mary on MSN and watching behind the scenes stuff from 'You Want To Be A Star'. At 10 o'clock she kissed both her parents good night and pretended to go to bed. With just her reading lamp on and a string of socks wedged across the bottom of the door to stop any light escaping, she started to prepare in case her dad went out that night.

From under her bed she pulled out the small pile of what she thought of as essential supplies for a night of adventuring. There was a set of dark coloured clothes and a blue baseball cap along with some dark court shoes. She really wanted to wear trainers in case it rained, but she only had white and pink pairs and hadn't managed to pester her mum enough in to buying her any more. Well, not yet anyway, but she'd win out in the end, she was sure of it. Next to the collection of clothes were the things for her backpack. A torch, an umbrella, her DS with some headphones (it could get boring if she had to sit around for ages), a pair of black glove, a Quickshoot camera (the one on her phone was no good at night), binoculars and a note pad to record anything important. She had thought

about using her rollerblades when she went out rather than her bike, but if she had to climb stairs quietly it would make things difficult. There were also a couple of breakfast bars in her pile of things, because she didn't know how long she'd be out for and she might get hungry.

Once she had swapped out all her school books in her backpack for the night time supplies, she made sure her bedroom window was open just a crack – she didn't want it creaking as she used it to leave by – and settled down with her laptop. She really wanted to put her iPod on as well, but the last few nights the sound of music playing quietly in her ears had caused her to fall asleep and she did not want to risk that when she was pretty sure her dad would be going out tonight.

At about 11 o'clock she heard her mum and dad go to bed. For about twenty minutes she just lay on her bed listening to them use the bathroom and lock up the house. Her bedroom was next to theirs and she didn't even want to press the keys on her laptop in case they heard them. She also turned off her mobile phone not only because if it vibrated it could rattle against the laptop, but also because she had positioned a phone key ring on her dresser against the wall where her parent's bed was. Her dad's mobile phone was how he got the call when he needed to go out and even though he had it on vibrate she was sure that the key ring would pick up the signal and flash when he was called.

The waiting around for something to happen seemed far longer than it was. By 12:15 she was ready to give it all up, but after eating one of the snack bars she felt like sticking it out for another hour and so settled down to finding cute boys her friends had in their profiles on Myspace.

At 12:50 the key ring started flashing and Jessica held her breath. After a very long minute she heard her father start moving about. Being as quiet as she could manage, Jessica closed the top on the laptop, picked up her back pack and moved over to her bedroom door. As soon as she heard her dad go in to the bathroom she crept across her bedroom and opened the window the rest of the way. It was simple enough to step out of her window and on to the sloping roof over the kitchen extension, the more difficult bit was the drop from the roof on to the patio, and then it was a quick run around to where she had left the bike at the side of the garage.

She was in two minds as to whether to wait next to the garage for her dad to leave or go further down the street, but if he could fly he might take off from the back garden, so she decided to wait, camera in hand and see what he did.

There was some disappointment when Jessica heard the garage door open and watched as her dad's car rolled out on to the drive. She put away the camera and sat poised on her bike as the garage door closed again. Maybe, she thought, he'll be taking the car off somewhere so that he can get changed and stop her mum from realising what he's up to.

Their house was at the end of a cul-de-sac so there was only one way he could leave, the question was which way would he turn at the end of the road. If he went left there was an alley only a few houses further down from where she was that would allow Jessica to cut through and keep up with him. Going right would mean she would have to cycle all the way to the end of the road and hope she didn't miss him turning off anywhere else. With this in mind she edged the bike out on to the

pavement where the trees gave her a bit of cover and moved down to wait at the entrance to the alley.

She was given a slight head start thanks to her dad's need to use indicators even in the middle of the night, and as soon as she saw the left hand signal blink on she started peddling down the alley. It was then a headlong race, zigzagging across the roads and through the various alleys that linked them. Her pursuit was helped by the fact that the alley went gradually downhill and that her dad would never think of speeding no matter how clear the roads were. As she crossed each road she would get a glimpse of his car's lights, each time getting slightly further ahead of her.

Where the houses came to an end the main road began to drop down steeply towards the city. Jessica had thought this bit of the route through and had decided that rather than try to follow the car, she would use the higher ground at the edge of the park that looked down over the city. She cycled through the last alley as fast as she dared, avoiding the railing that marked the edge of the park by cutting off to the right and jumping through a gap in the trees. Her landing on the park's path was harder than when she had tried out the route and she nearly fell of the bike, but a quick touch of the brakes slowed her enough to stay upright and she was peddling hard again through the trees.

As the edge of the park loomed up out of the darkness she pulled on the back brake and slid to a halt just short of the railings. Not caring to lay the bike on the ground properly she dropped it and ran to the railings, swinging her backpack off at the same time. She had kept the binoculars in the front zipper section so was able to pull them out without any digging around. Then she started scouring the roads below.

As she had expected there weren't many cars on the roads and after a quick look around she managed to find two that were heading in to the city having come from down the hill from the housing estate. It was then only a matter of checking the number plates on both before they got too far away to read. Her dad's car was the first one she checked and to her disappointment it was heading to the low lying office blocks, not too far away, where the offices he worked at were situated.

Realising he must be intending to drop the car off at the car park around the back of his office building, where there wouldn't be too many people watching, Jessica decided it would be best to wait in the park rather than try to get down there before he left. From here she could use the binoculars to watch for him flying away and then she would have plenty of time to cycle to where he'd parked the car and wait to get some pictures when he came back.

Ten minutes went by and she started to wonder if she'd missed him taking to the sky. Another five minutes and she started to wonder if maybe he couldn't fly at all. She didn't think he would have super speed as she was sure he would have had difficulty keeping that one a secret. In an interview of Synapse she'd watched he had said it was real hard to not to do everything fast. That would just leave teleport and super jump. If he had super jump she would have seen him leaving the same as if he'd flown away, so that must mean he had teleport. Giving the railings a little kick out of annoyance she put the binoculars away again and got back on her bike.

Jessica slowed down as she got closer to the group of low buildings that made up the office complex, and she started looking around for a good place to watch from. Her first thought was to wait across the road from the offices, but that would mean she wouldn't be able to see her dad return and if he did have teleportation he would appear right next to his car. What she really wanted to do was get as close to the car as possible, although there was always the problem of security cameras and the last thing she wanted was to have the police turn up thinking she was trying to break in somewhere.

The answer presented itself as she cycled around the group of buildings. At the back of the complex was a service road that led to another set of buildings. A high wire fence separated the road from the buildings where her dad worked, but it ran parallel with the car park at the back of her dad's offices. As she peddled down the service road she noticed there were only a few cars parked up. Probably just the night staff and security, she guessed. Once she had found her dad's car it was just a matter of waiting the other side of the fence.

There was an industrial waste bin set back in an alcove of one of the buildings on the service road Jessica was on and after giving it a bit of a shove she managed to make enough room to slot her bike in and sit down in front of it. Now it was just a matter of waiting. She turned her iPod on and started playing games on her DS, all the time keeping an eye out on her dad's car.

At 4 o'clock in the morning a small group of Skulls turned down the service road. They were on their way back from a night of clubbing and none of them were entirely sober. As they passed one of the alleys that ran between the buildings on their side of the fence a quiet voice called out to them.

"I don't think you want to be going down that way."

The group stopped and peered in to the darkness unsure who had spoken.

"Who are you to be telling us what we can and can't do?" one of them said, finally getting up the nerve to talk. "We're Skulls and we go where we want."

A pair of eyes flared in the darkness, the faint light they cast illuminated the outline of a body, a cape flowing out behind it. Electricity suddenly danced across the hands of the figure.

"I'm trying to give you boys a chance, so don't push me." The voice sounded slightly distorted. "Now go back the way you came."

The gang members glanced at each other. The one who had spoken up was clearly thinking about getting in to a fight, but the looks between the others showed they were in no mood to help him. Slowly they all began to turn around, glancing over their shoulders as they walked out of the service road and back on to the street.

In the alley where the hero had stood discarded paper and sweet wrappers settled back again having been whipped up into the air. Further down the service road Jessica was curled up in her coat. One earphone had fallen out and her DS lay discarded in her lap. Floating just above the bin a figure studied her for a moment then followed the direction she had been staring to the parking lot. The car she had been watching had already departed leaving an empty space under the lamp light.

"Time for you to go home, baby," the hero said. "I don't want you getting in to any trouble."

There was the tiniest of flashes and a few snowflakes appeared over Jessica's head. They floated down in the still night air and by the time they had landed on her face the hero was gone.

Jessica woke up with a start and brushed away the moisture on her cheek. She looked up to see if it had started raining, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Then, remembering why she was there, she looked over to the fence and noticed that her dad's car had left.

"Damn," she said to herself then looked down at her phone to check the time. "I'd better get back home."

Retrieving her bike from behind the large bin she coaxed her cold, tired muscles in to life and started peddling home. Half an hour later she was climbing back up on to the kitchen roof and heading for her bedroom window.

"Jess, if you don't get up you're going to be late for school!"

Rolling over in her covers Jessica glanced at the clock by the side of her bed. Then, summoning up what small amount of will power she had, she kicked off the covers and started searching for her school uniform. Fifteen minutes later she was running down the stairs, her hair tied back as she hadn't had time to wash it.

"Are you going to have any breakfast?" her mum asked as Jessica crashed through the kitchen door.

"No, mum. I don't have time."

"I didn't think you would," her mum told her with knowing smile, "so I've packed you an extra banana and a cereal bar. Make sure you don't eat them too fast."

"Thanks mum," Jessica said, reaching up and giving her mother a kiss on the cheek. "You're the best."

"Well you just be careful, don't run and fall," her mum told the departing back of her daughter. A smile touched her lips and she added, "I can't watch over you all the time."