

METRO

A Mammoth Companion Story

By

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I don't usually go to Metro without Natalie. It's her place more than mine. It feels like her, which sounds like an insult because Metro's a dive, but I mean it as a compliment.

It's summer and we're supposed to be hanging out at Metro when we're not working, but Natalie's out of town and I miss her even though I'm also pissed off at her. So here I am, sweating on a sidewalk at 9:56 AM in downtown Palmetto Crossing, Florida, wishing Dylan, the grumpy daytime barista, would give me a break and open a few minutes early. My short red hair is already so damp with sweat that I probably look like I just got out of the shower, and my tank top is stuck to my back.

At least I'm pretty low maintenance, unlike my best friend. She'd be out here wilting in a belted dress with several layers underneath. I don't know how she survives most of the year in Florida.

Dylan unlocks the door at exactly ten o'clock. Of course. It's not like we come here for the overwhelmingly friendly service. Or for the atmosphere, which is a strange, run-down amalgamation of indie coffee shop and dive bar lit by neon beer signs and hanging lamps with cracked stained-glass shades. We come for the coffee—they brew it *strong*, and refills are free—and we come because Natalie's a regular.

Ever since I started hanging out here with her—ever since she showed me exactly how to slide into our favorite booth to keep its broken bench from flipping over and landing me on the scuffed industrial tile floor—I've been a regular too. I like being a regular; it's like being part of a secret club where they know your order before you even show up. By the time I

drop off my things at our booth, Dylan's already got my coffee ready at the bar. I always drink Hurricane Warning, which is what Metro calls its dark roast.

"Your friend still at that internship thing?" Dylan asks, and I'm so surprised that I almost drop my mug. He usually just sort of grunts amicably.

"Um, yeah. She'll be in Texas for another couple of weeks."

"Cool. Science stuff, right?"

"Paleontology. She's working at a dig site."

"Nice. Judy told me about it." He does this squinty thing that might actually be related to a smile, and he turns away to organize the beer fridge. I'm still stunned. I don't think he's ever said so many words to me at once before. I'm almost too surprised to bristle at the mention of Natalie's aunt.

Almost.

Taking care not to slosh hot coffee everywhere, I take my mug back to the booth. Its table is covered in graffiti, most of

which is carved into the rough wood. I put the mug down over **USE A COASTER** and glance at my personal favorite, **VANDALISM'S MORE FUN WHEN YOU KNOW WHAT TO WRITE**. It's true. I've always wanted to add my own words to the collection on the table, but I've never been able to come up with anything worth carving.

I told myself I was coming here to work on editing a little of my latest digital animation project, but I leave my laptop closed on top of **DON'T GROW UP, IT'S A TRAP** and **WITHOUT MONEY WE'D ALL BE RICH** and stare at my phone instead, scrolling through the argument Natalie and I had last night.

I love my best friend. I do. For her, I'd stand up to any bully, any enemy, any jerk who dares to give her a hard time.

It gets tricky when the bully giving Natalie garbage is . . . Natalie.

She should be having the best summer ever. She wanted this internship so badly, and yesterday she even got to work with that dude with the podcast she's always squealing about. (I've never understood his appeal, but don't tell her I said that.) She deserves this, but instead of enjoying it, last night she was beating herself up. *Again*. When she gets like that, she always tells me I don't understand. I guess I don't. Listening to her put herself down when I know just how talented and smart and gorgeous she is gets kind of exhausting.

Natalie and I have been texting each other ever since our parents first let us borrow their phones. We were ten, and we tried to sound cool with all kinds of nonsense chatspeak that we'd never use six years later, except with each other. Some of it just . . . stuck.

I can't deal with u when ur like this, I told her last night. I'd been urging her to pursue this guy she likes from the internship, but she kept insisting she couldn't measure up, she

wasn't good enough. *Stop being so fucking rough on yourself*, I added. The conversation was becoming too serious for silly abbreviations.

She responded *Whatever*, and I didn't hear from her again for the rest of the night. I haven't heard from her today, either, which feels so weird because we usually message each other all the time.

"Charli?"

The voice startles me. I look up and the first thing I see is a pair of red lips that curve into a small, friendly smile. The woman wears a thin scarf twisted in her hair, just like Natalie often does, and the similarity makes my stomach tighten. Thick-outlined tattoos of birds and cherries and pin-up girls decorate the woman's arms, and her cap-sleeved dress looks like something out of the 1940s. Natalie's Aunt Judy. She's carrying a sketchbook and a tablet, and I realize she was probably heading for this booth. She introduced Natalie to

Metro before Natalie introduced me. Judy's been coming here since the booth's bench wasn't even broken yet.

"Hey." I don't know her well, and she's not someone I feel like talking to today, but I nod toward the other side of the booth anyway because doing otherwise would be like snubbing Metro royalty. "Want to sit?"

"If I'm not bothering you."

"Nah." I shove my laptop farther away, until it covers the **FIGHT APATHY . . . OR DON'T** graffiti Natalie always laughs at.

"Thanks. Just for a minute while I wait for my coffee. I'm supposed to be signing off on the last of this year's winter line, but I couldn't concentrate." She puts her sketchbook on top of **I DON'T REMEMBER BEING ABSENT-MINDED**. "It's ninety-three degrees out and I'm trying to look at wool swing coats and faux fur trim."

"Ninety-three degrees and one hundred percent humidity," I specify because I'm helpful that way.

“Tell me about it.” She pulls a vintage compact from her purse and checks her reflection. “At least my face hasn’t melted off. This new primer is amazing. I can’t wait to get Natalie to try it.”

I don’t realize I’m tensing up until I feel a prickly sensation dance across my shoulders, the way it always does when I’m stressed out.

“I should’ve sent a tube of it with her to Texas,” Judy goes on. “It’s even hotter out there than it is here. Can you imagine?”

Until she started helping out with her aunt’s indie clothing company and following Judy’s example in every way, Natalie had never even heard of make-up primer. Or shirtwaist dresses, or body shapers, or this or that popular vintage label. Natalie says Judy’s guidance saved her life, or at least her social life. And it’s true that she doesn’t get bullied anymore, for her weight or her appearance, or for being anything other than what society insists we should all be.

But I don't think Judy saved Natalie. I think she taught Natalie to hide. It might be in plain sight, but it's still hiding.

I knew the real Natalie, the one who couldn't apply winged eyeliner or design a dress if her existence depended on it. I mean, sure, she was a tremendous dork, but so was I. Back then we nerded out together over our favorite YouTube channels. We slept over at each other's houses and scared ourselves sleepless with horror movies we weren't supposed to watch. And of course, Natalie was always freaking out at me over paleontology news. Now she's usually all, "Look at this vintage purse I got on eBay!" or, "Hey, can you help me take pics of this new cardigan for *Fossilista*?"

Right now I miss my best friend because she's a thousand miles away, but sometimes I miss her even when she's right here in town, sitting across from me in our regular booth.

"My office isn't the same without Natalie around." Judy taps her impossibly shiny red nails on a hastily scratched **THIS**

TABLE WAS BORING. “I thought maybe if I came here for a little while . . .”

“I know what you mean.” What I want to say is that, no, you miss the version of Natalie you made up, the one you created when you started telling her she had to *be awesome* all the time.

Judy meant well. She wanted to protect Natalie from her bullies, just like I always did. I got a week of detention for punching Fred Parkmore when he harassed Natalie at a sixth-grade dance. I got three days of in-school suspension for breaking Vic Baldwin’s phone after he used it to tweet a humiliating photo of her to everyone in our class.

I went after anyone who hurt my friend. I’d fight the world for her. I’d punch our entire weight-obsessed society if I could. Judy’s tactic was different. Instead of dissuading the bullies, she disguised their target.

She changed my best friend. After that first summer Natalie spent working at Savage Swallow, even I barely recognized her.

I run my fingers over the graffiti in front of me. **BE AWESOME.** Carved there by Natalie herself.

From behind the bar, Dylan grunts Judy's name.

"Got something to add?" Judy points at the table as she gets up and gathers her things.

"Maybe."

"Use this." She pulls a small Swiss Army knife from her purse and points down the line of booths. "I'll be back there when you're done." Then she fetches her coffee and heads to another table.

I choose a blade and glance around guiltily even though no one at Metro really seems to care if people carve up their booths. Then I scoot over to where Natalie usually sits, and I add my own words.

YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL. IT'S SOCIETY THAT'S UGLY.

In less than a month, my best friend will be home. We'll come here for coffee.

Maybe she'll notice the new words.

Maybe she'll believe them.

Author's note: While Natalie's Metro is based on Metro in downtown Augusta, Georgia, where I wrote a lot of Mammoth, the real Metro wasn't nearly this much of a dive, even before its 2018 remodel. Natalie's Metro is the dive-bar-slash-coffee-shop of my dreams. The trick booth with the loose bench, however, actually existed.